

War Propaganda Today – The Outsourcing of Propaganda and the Consequences for Democratic Accountability¹

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Abstract

All wars are accompanied by propaganda. For example, the US and UK governments worked with intelligence services to promote the 2003 invasion of Iraq through deceptive claims regarding a ›current‹ and ›threatening‹ Iraqi WMD programme. Since then, an important development relates to the way in which ›influence‹ operations, otherwise identifiable as propaganda, have been out-sourced to contractors some of which maintain the outward appearance of being neutral or of grassroots origin. The case of the 2011-present Syrian war is instructive here and includes a number of organisations and actors that can be traced back to UK government ›stratcom‹ and ›influence‹ initiatives. In addition, and in relation to the chemical weapons attack issues, a number of outsourced activities can be identified including a former UK British military officer, Bellingcat and the White Helmets: together these actors play an influential role in terms of shaping the information environment. Overall, these various activities can be understood as well-resourced and highly organized approaches to ›shaping the information environment‹ that involve action in the real world, so called ›propaganda of the deed‹. They involve the creation of propagandistic and deceptive narratives that serve one particular side in the Syrian war whilst maintaining the outward appearance that eclipses the role of former British military personnel and the original funding sources of these entities. As such, accountability is diminished

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because of the opaqueness of funding arrangements and involvement of former UK British military personnel which enable these entities to give the outward appearance of being neutral and independent with respect to the Syrian War. Moreover, the potential for strategies of deception to be employed is increased by these arrangements.

Introduction

It is well understood across the scholarly literature that wars involve extensive propaganda activities and that, to a very large extent, mainstream/corporate media function as key elements with respect to its dissemination (Knightley 2003; Robinson, Goddard, Parry, Murray and Taylor 2010; Taylor 1992). This was as true in the time of the Crimean War as it is today (Knightley 2003). Enemies are demonized, lies are told, military prowess and progress are exaggerated, and the so-called 'fog of war' descends across public awareness and understanding. Indeed, a tantalizing question is whether, despite all the developments in communication technology and the accumulated wisdom of decades of scholarship, war propaganda is as effective today as it has ever been, perhaps even more so? During World Wars I and II it was the institutions of the state that undertook the lion's share of propaganda activities through dedicated bureaucracies such as the Ministry of Information in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the importance of state-led information activities can be seen throughout the 20th century wars including Vietnam (50s, 60s, and 70s), the Falklands conflict (1981), as well as the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars (Robinson et al 2010). Gulf War One (1991), in particular, became famous for its dramatic military press briefings during which imagery of smart weapons guiding to their targets provided the backdrop for official briefers (Taylor 1992).

Over the last fifteen years, however, new and less well understood mechanisms have emerged through which war propaganda is generated and disseminated. Through 'outsourcing' and 'consultancy' it is now the case that ostensibly non-state and independent actors play an important role in terms of influencing 'hearts and minds' (Kinross 2020). Focusing upon this development, this paper explores in detail some of the ways in which non-state actors have come to play an important role in terms of influencing the 'information environment' with respect to the 2011-present war in Syria. The discussion proceeds as follows: Section 1) introduces the concepts of propaganda and outsourcing before providing a brief summation of the current

12-year war in Syria. Section 2) starts by detailing what is now known about a UK-led information operation in Syria involving former British military contractors operating private companies before then focusing on a specific issue area, that of the alleged chemical weapons attacks in Syria. Section 3) concludes the paper by discussing the implications of these forms of ›outsourced‹ propaganda for democratic accountability and the public’s ability to discern truth from propaganda during wartime.

Concepts: Propaganda and Outsourcing Propaganda

Over time the term *propaganda* has come to be understood to mean highly manipulative and deceptive persuasive communication that occurs mainly in authoritarian political systems or, in a democracy, during the exceptional conditions of war. The academic study of propaganda reflects this understanding with a large volume of literature exploring propaganda during wartime (especially World War I and II and now, increasingly, the Cold War era) or exploring propaganda in non-democratic states. As argued elsewhere (Bakir, Herring, Miller and Robinson 2019) this perception is incorrect. In fact, propaganda has been an integral feature of democratic political systems since the early 20th century both in times of war and peace.

Propaganda, or ›non-consensual organized persuasive communication‹ (Bakir et al 2019), involves coordinated attempts to promote particular agendas through a complex array of communicative techniques which are principally manipulative in nature and involve various forms of deception as well as incentivization and coercion. For example, deception can occur through straightforward lying and, in the realm of international politics, Mearsheimer has described the significance of strategic deceptions in *Why Leaders Lie* (2010). Importantly, deception frequently occurs through omission, distortion of facts and misdirection (Bakir et al 2019). As such, the promotion of one-sided interpretations of an issue can be profoundly deceptive via omissions and distortions. At the same time when propaganda sources present themselves as independent and neutral, whilst actually being funded and supported by particular political actors, this is also a form of deception. Propaganda can also include incentivization and coercion. An example of the former is the promise of tax cuts during election campaigns. An example of the latter is the dropping of surrender leaflets in battle zones whereby the threat of lethal force is part of persuading combatants to surrender (Bakir et al 2019). The latter two propaganda tactics also highlight the fact that pro-

paganda is about more than just messaging via linguistic and visual communication but also involves action in the ›real‹ world and so-called ›propaganda of the deed‹. Indeed, a good example of awareness within military circles as to the importance of real-world action with respect to what are sometimes referred to as ›influence operations‹ can be found in Mackay and Tatham's 2011 *Behavioural Conflict: Why understanding people and their motivation will prove decisive in future conflict*. They note that:

... in a conflict environment it (attitude) will have more to do with deeds matching actions than with a clever marketing campaign. For example, messages of peace and security will not resonate if the local government offices are corrupt and if Coalition air strikes accidentally kill civilians. (Mackay and Tatham 2011, 107; see also Robinson 2015)

In sum, the common thread throughout all of these persuasive communication techniques is that they involve a *non-consensual* process of persuasion: people are persuaded to believe something or to act in a particular way either through deception or because they have been incentivized or coerced. In short, their beliefs or actions are not freely chosen. Propaganda, then, is primarily manipulative in nature and, in general terms, incompatible with democratic requirements pertaining to an informed and free citizenry.

Outsourcing

In his recent study *Information Warriors: the Battle for Hearts and Minds in the Middle East*, Kinross discusses the emergence of the ›twin gods of outsourcing and consultancy‹ whereby now almost one hundred ›private companies could currently be engaged at any one time in promoting separate aspects of Britain's informational output‹ (2020 p. 191). According to Kinross, the total global outsourcing industry, as of 2016, was worth \$76 billion (2020 p.192). The development of privatized information operations mirrors developments across other spheres such as the use of private military contractors (PMCs) (Leander 2005) as well as the panoply of private intelligence companies now in existence. Of course, whilst notionally independent companies, these contractors work for their clients and are obviously reliant upon funding, via contracts, for their existence. As such their activities and output must necessarily align with the interests and agendas of the governments and actors who fund them.

The extent to which these activities have replaced, or even supplanted, more traditional methods of influencing ›the information space‹ is not known. They do, however, represent a phenomenon distinct from the relatively well-documented propaganda activities witnessed during war time, noted in the introduction, whereby official military briefers and public relations officials play a major role in terms of generating and disseminating propaganda. It is also unknown exactly why they appear to have emerged, or at least expanded as argued by Kinross (2020), in the last couple of decades. One possibility is that the debacle over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) back in 2002–2004, in which intelligence agencies and government officials became implicated in the manipulation of intelligence reports that deceptively presented Iraq as a current WMD threat (Mearsheimer, 2010; Herring and Robinson, 2014), led to a desire to deliver propaganda messages at arms-length from governments both in order to be more persuasive but also to shield government officials from culpability for lying and deception. At the same time, there has been a shift from overt warfighting in the early stages of the 9/11 global ›war on terror‹, witness the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, toward covert proxy wars in countries such as Syria, discussed shortly, and Ukraine. This shift might have incentivized governments to outsource influence operations in order to better disguise the existence of these proxy wars.

The 2011-Present War in Syria

Civil disturbances and violence started in Syria in 2011 and occurred against the backdrop of the so-called ›Arab Spring‹. By 2012, violence had escalated and a leaked US Department of Defense report stated that the conflict was taking a ›clear sectarian direction‹, that ›the Salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood, and AGI are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria‹, and that multiple external actors were involved: ›The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the opposition; while Russia, China, and Iran support the regime‹ (US Department of Defense, 2012). One important element of the war, at least from the perspective of understanding the position of Western governments, is the US-Saudi covert operation *Timber Sycamore*. The operation was described by the *New York Times* as a ›\$1 Billion Secret C.I.A war in Syria‹ (Mazzetti, Goldman and Schmidt 2017) and involved an agreement between the CIA and Saudi Arabia aimed at supporting groups seeking to overthrow the Syrian government (see also Berger 2016 and Porter 2017).

Recent work published by investigative journalist Maxime Chaix (2019) claims that Operation Timber Sycamore can actually be traced as far back as October 2011 when the CIA was operating via the UK's MI6 intelligence service in order to avoid having to seek Congressional approval. The US, UK and France have also carried out direct military action against the Syrian government, for example following alleged chemical weapons attacks in Khan Shaykhun, 2017, and Douma, 2018. Today, after 12 years of war, the Syrian government has regained control of most of its territory and has been invited back into the Arab League, an indication of a move toward normalization of relations with its neighbors. At the same time, the north west territory of Idlib remains under the control of Turkish-backed opposition groups whilst US forces and US-backed groups occupy the oil fields in the north east. The US is maintaining a rigorous sanctions regime against Syria which serves to continue the destabilization of the country.

In broad terms, Western politicians and mainstream/corporate media have almost without exclusion presented the war as a simple struggle between pro-democratic rebels and a ruthless regime. This representation of the war has emphasized allegations of war crimes against the Syrian government (alleged use of chemical weapons against civilians and torture) and downplayed both the sectarian nature of opposition groups and the extensive involvement of external actors, other than Russia and Iran. Other perspectives have remained marginalized across Western media. For example, Syrian, Russian and Iranian claims that the Syrian government has been engaged in a legitimate fight against domestic and foreign-backed ›terrorists‹ have been well within the ›sphere of deviance‹ (Hallin 1986), rarely articulated in Western mainstream media and political debate. A large study (Frohlich 2018), based upon an extensive analysis of media reporting, government ›public relations‹ and NGO communications across a series of conflicts including Syria, confirmed that Western media reporting tended to reinforce government positions (Frohlich and Jungblot 2018: 103). One chapter in this study noted the absence of Russian media and Russian perspectives from European parliamentary debates responding to the alleged use of a chemical weapon in Ghouta 2013 (Berganza, Herrero-Jimnez and Carratala 2018). Another recent study about war correspondents noted how coverage of the death of journalist Marie Colvin by CNN focused heavily on the apparently ahistorical evil of the Assad regime, glossing over any tough questions about the international politics that may have contributed to the war in Syria (Palmer 2018: p. 152). Palmer also notes the political bias in Colvin's own reporting: ›Colvin herself was also aligned with western political sentiments

in this report ... Rather than serving as an objective eyewitness, then, in death Colvin was linked to a very distinctive political perspective' (Palmer 2018: 154 & 157).

That Western media have aligned themselves with those of Western governments should come as no surprise. Academic works have repeatedly and consistently evidenced the close proximity between media and government positions especially during war (Bennett and Paletz 1994; Hallin 1986; Robinson et al 2010) as well as the prevalence of war propaganda (Taylor 2002) in which conflicts are cast in simplistic and dichotomous terms, good vs. evil. It would be very surprising if future studies of the Syrian war find any evidence that significantly diverges from the two studies described above.

Outsourcing Pro War Narratives

The UK approach to managing communication and influence activities in relation to the war in Syria (Robinson 2022) has included the outsourcing of operations to contractors. For example, during the second half of 2012 two media reports described an opposition media outlet named Basma (Mcelroy 2012) which was linked to an organisation called ARK (Vela 2012) that had, in turn, been established by a former British diplomat, Alistair Harris (ARK 2021; Norton 2020). Slides from an ARK presentation (circa 2012) listed Basma's three lines of effort as aimed to »decrease support for the regime – increase support for the opposition – train a cadre of independent media«. It is now known through leaked documents that ARK played a major role with respect to the war in Syria. As Norton (2020) reports:

In a leaked document it filed with the British government, ARK said its »focus since 2012 has been delivering highly effective, politically- and conflict-sensitive Syria programming for the governments of the United Kingdom, United States, Denmark, Canada, Japan and the European Union.« ARK boasted of overseeing \$66 million of contracts to support pro-opposition efforts in Syria.

ARK also played an important role with respect to the establishment of the *Commission for International Justice and Accountability*. The former British diplomat Alistair Harris (ARK) describes how he developed this new NGO:

Back in 2011 the first project we undertook in Syria was to support the documentation of human rights violations with my very good friend Dr William Wiley ... When Bill and I set out to train and support Syrian investigators to bring back from Syria (by routes [that] are [as] various as they were hazardous) contemporaneous documentation with a view to supporting the prosecution of all those responsible for war crimes in Syria. (Ark, undated)

Emerging from this proposal was the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA), established in 2014. It has since become a central component of drives to investigate and prosecute war crimes related to the war in Syria.

Another related component concerns the establishment in 2012 of a strategic communication programme in the Targeting and Information Operations unit of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) (McKeigue et al 2019a). A 2014 contract for the provision of strategic communication support to »moderate armed opposition« was awarded to a former Lieutenant-Colonel who had worked in the Targeting and Information Operations unit of the Ministry of Defence until 2012, through a company called InCoStrat (McKeigue et al. 2019a). A co-founder of InCoStrat was Emma Winberg, a former »member of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office,« who described her work as being in the »fields of strategic communications and community resilience« (McKeigue et al. 2019b). Activities included production of »videos, photos, military reports, radio broadcasts, print products and social media posts branded with the logos of fighting groups, and effectively run a press office for opposition fighters« (Cobain et al. 2016). According to Cobain et al. (2016), these activities occurred in close cooperation with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK FCO).

A third component of the information and influence operation are the so-called White Helmets. According to the BBC (2021), former UK diplomat Alistair Harris (ARK) invited the late James le Mesurier, a former British army officer, to »move to Turkey and manage civil society projects across the border in Syria«. Le Mesurier worked for ARK between 2011 and 2014 and established the »Syria Civil Defence« (SCD) also known as the White Helmets (le Mesurier's SCD is not the internationally recognized Syria Civil Defence, which operates within the structure of the existing Syrian state). As is known to those following the Syrian war, the White Helmets have become (in)famous: some argue they are a genuinely independent humanitarian organisation established in order to protect and save civilians (Di Giovanni

2018), whilst others argue that they are closely aligned with militant opposition groups and serve a key role in terms of generating messages that are favourable to the Western official narrative (Beeley 2015). As is the case with InCoStrat and opposition ›PR‹ operations, the activities were contracted out and, in this case, USAID and the UK government's Conflict Security and Stability Fund (CSSF) provided resources through, respectively, the NGOs Mayday Rescue established by le Mesurier in 2014 (UK Government 2017) and Chemonics (USAID 2017; White Helmets 2016). Winberg, who as noted above had co-founded InCoStrat, joined Mayday Rescue as chief impact officer in 2017 (she also became engaged and then married to le Mesurier).

Broadly, these outsourced operations perform an important role in terms of promoting Western official narratives regarding Syria (Robinson 2022: 85–89). The work of CIJA helps to underpin allegations of war crimes and torture attributable to the Syrian government and ISIS-linked groups but does not engage with the legality of the actions of either Western governments, their Gulf State allies or Israel with respect to the war. InCoStrat provided straight-forward public relations support for Western-backed opposition groups, whilst the White Helmets at the very least help to convey a partial view of the war and one which is in line with the perspective of the UK government and its allies (Robinson 2022: 85–89).

Alleged Chemical Weapons Attacks

An important narrative throughout the Syrian War has concerned allegations about the use of chemical weapons. The USA, UK, and France have led charges that the Syrian government has systematically deployed chemical weapons against civilians. The Syrian government and the Russian Federation have consistently refuted these allegations and accused opposition groups of staging alleged attacks. A well-known early instance of use was the sarin attack in Ghouta in 2013 and this led to the Syrian government acceding to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and dismantling its stockpiles of CW. The authorship of the Ghouta attack continues to be disputed. The UN/OPCW investigation of the attack concluded that it had occurred but did not attribute responsibility (UN 2013) whilst the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, as of 2021, has not attributed responsibility. Some analysts claim that the Syrian government launched the attack (e.g., Warrick 2021) whilst others indicate that opposition groups were responsible (e.g., Hersh 2014). Recent review and analysis by William Van

Wagenen (2022) concluded opposition forces were behind the attack whilst a recent open-source investigation correlates the launch site of the sarin rockets with opposition-held territory (Kobbs, Kabusk and Larson 2021).

Following Syria's accession to the CWC in 2013, reports started to emerge in 2014 of chemical attacks using chlorine (McKeigue, Mason, Robinson and Miller 2018). Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact Finding Mission (FFM) reports, in tandem with the Joint Investigative Mission (JIM) and now the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), have led to the attribution of responsibility for some of these alleged chemical attacks to the Syrian government (see Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic 2021). The Syrian government and the Russian Federation dispute these reports, as well as the probity of the JIM and IIT mechanisms established in order to attribute responsibility for any chemical attacks identified by the FFMs. More broadly, the OPCW FFMs (and therefore the JIM and IIT attribution mechanisms which depend upon the FFM reports) are primarily reliant upon information supplied by groups operating alongside opposition groups, some of which have been funded and supported by Western governments (McKeigue et al 2018). As with Ghouta 2013, all of these events have been contested along predictable geo-political lines – USA and its allies blaming the Syrian government whilst Russia and Syria accuse opposition groups of carrying out or staging attacks – but also by analysts in the West (e. g., McKeigue et al 2018; Ritter 2019; Kobbs, Kabusk and Larson 2021). Most prominently the alleged chemical attacks in Khan Shaykhun in 2017 and Douma in 2018 attracted significant media attention and were swiftly followed with military action by the USA and its allies.

Shaping the Information Space on Chemical Weapons

Whilst the aforementioned operations – CIJA, InCoStrat and the White Helmets – can be traced back to UK-initiated ›stratcomm‹ and influence operations, it is not known whether there was a similar initiative regarding the promotion of the chemical weapons issue that can also be traceable to the UK government in such a direct manner. However, as will now be demonstrated, it is the case that actors funded directly or indirectly by the UK and other western governments have been key in terms of influencing the information environment with respect to chemical weapons.

Hamish de Bretton-Gordon

Hamish de Bretton-Gordon is a former British military officer who established a company called Secure Bio in 2011. As set out in a biography for a talk given by de Bretton-Gordon, its role is described as follows:

SecureBio have been working in Syria and around with the international media since Feb 12. Hamish has travelled there often and has reported with the BBC on some of the very high-profile chemical attacks. He has also worked with US networks and British newspapers to smuggle chemical samples out of Syria for verification in UK and France. SecureBio continue to support and advise the media in Syria and Hamish is supporting the UK government and International community to remove chemical weapons from Syria. (de Bretton-Gordon, undated)

During 2013, prior to the Ghouta chemical weapons attack in August 2013, de Bretton-Gordon was involved in the gathering of samples in Syria. Specifically, during this period two British newspapers reported the existence of an MI6 sample-gathering operation in Syria (Coughlan and Michael 2013, Hughes 2013) whilst de Bretton-Gordon states he was involved with a *Times* newspaper journalist, Anthony Lloyd, in gathering samples from the 13 April 2013 incident at Sheik Maqsood (de Bretton-Gordon 2014). The British Prime Minister later, it is reported, referred to these alleged incidents noting that samples had been tested at the UK's Porton Down laboratory from Sheikh Maqsood and that ›[w]e believe the scale of the use is sanctioned by the Assad regime, ... [t]hat is the picture described to me by the joint intelligence committee‹ (Wintour, Elder and Norton-Taylor 2013).

It was also during this period that de Bretton-Gordon helped to establish a CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear) task force (Reliefweb 2016) and which would later play a role in supplying information to OPCW FFM missions (OPCW 2014: 3–4). With respect to his activities in 2014, de Bretton-Gordon stated during a 2016 presentation at the UK Houses of Parliament that:

I have covertly been in Syria collecting evidence of chemical weapons attacks and have been giving it to the OPCW and the UN. They cannot get to the places the chemical weapons attacks have happened because they're in rebel held areas. When I present evidence with our

teams from UOSSM [Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations], we are not an international body etcetera etcetera. We provided the evidence of the chemical weapons attack in a town called Talmenes in April 2014, on the 29th of April 2014, three weeks after the attack; two weeks ago, two years later, the UN Security Council announced to the world that they had conclusive evidence that the regime had attacked Talmenes in April 2014 with chemical weapons. (de Bretton-Gordon 2016)

Bellingcat

During the early stages of the war in Syria an independent researcher, Eliot Higgins, published a blog under the pseudonym Brown Moses and established a reputation for analysing open-source material with respect to alleged chemical weapons incidents in Syria. By 2014 the organisation *Bellingcat* had emerged from these activities and has since grown to prominence. Higgins has held a position at the NATO aligned think tank the *Atlantic Council* as a non-resident fellow at their 'DFR lab', whilst Bellingcat has been in receipt of grants from organisations such as the National Endowment for Democracy which has been described as 'a largely state-sponsored arm of the United States government' (Hitchens 2019). It has also been documented that a significant proportion of *Bellingcat* staff are former military and intelligence personnel (MacLeod 2021). Broadly speaking, *Bellingcat* has played an important role in terms of working to underpin, through its open-source investigations, official Western narratives that the Syrian government is systematically using chemical weapons.

The White Helmets

The White Helmets, described earlier, have also come to play an important role with respect to alleged chemical weapons attacks, particularly with respect to supplying information to OPCW FFM. Specifically, in 2018 Emma Winberg, chief impact officer at the the Mayday Rescue Foundation underpinning the White Helmets, explained that in 2015 training and equipment was provided to OPCW standards regarding collecting samples from the scenes of alleged uses of chemical weapons and she refers to 'in terms of the physical capture of evidence ... some of the more high-profile work that

they have done in support of the OPCW and in collecting evidence around chlorine and sarin» (Winberg 2018). By 2017 a White Helmets/SCD »chemical sampling unit« was being referred to in OPCW FFM reports (OPCW 2017). It is also now known that the White Helmets, including its ex British military founder James le Mesurier, played an important role with respect to supplying witnesses to the OPCW (Syria) FFM, for example with respect to the alleged chemical weapon attack in Khan Shaykhun in 2017, as well as in Douma 2018 (BBC 2020).

Opaque Vested Interests

Objectively, the question of alleged chemical weapons attacks in Syria raises a number of possibilities. It might be that the Syrian government is indeed systematically deploying such weapons. It is also logically possible that opposition groups are using such weapons. And it is, furthermore, plausible that either side might be staging so-called »false flags« in order to implicate or frame the other side. In terms of getting to the truth of the matter, however, a number of problems are evident. The existence of western-backed actors (Hamish de Bretton Gordon) and organisations (*Bellingcat*, *White Helmets*), all with demonstrable ties back to Western military and all receiving substantial mainstream/legacy media coverage, means that a substantial amount of the »information space« is being influenced by actors that are not independent of countries that are belligerents to the war in Syria. In one sense, this can be understood as a form of conflict of interest: the need for objective, neutral, balanced and accurate analysis and actions by these actors might conflict with the imperatives of their funders and supporters, the governments seeking to overthrow the Syrian government. Arising from these conflicting imperatives is the possibility of information being distorted, or even for false information to be communicated. It should come as no surprise to scholars of media, propaganda and war that suitably incentivized actors will work to promote or push certain narratives and eclipse inconvenient truths. Perhaps most importantly, these actors and organisations also play a role in influencing a notionally independent UN organization, the OPCW. As such, what is understood to be a gold standard international organisation, that should be providing an objective input regarding the issue of the alleged chemical weapons attacks, potentially becomes a source of distorted and partisan information.

That these conflicts of interest have indeed led to significant manipulations and distortions is evidenced by the emergence of whistleblowers from

within the OPCW who have testified to the manipulation of one particular OPCW FFM. In 2019, following the 2018 alleged chemical weapons (chlorine gas) attack in Douma, Syria, it emerged that at least two senior OPCW scientists were protesting that the investigation into that alleged attack was flawed (Berlin Group 21/Bustani, Falk, Robinson and Sponeck 2023). For example, testimony and leaked documentation showed that an original investigation report had been substituted, without the knowledge of the investigation team, with one that made false claims suggesting the alleged attack had occurred, a US delegation had been allowed to brief and potentially influence the investigation team, and the inspectors who deployed to Douma were sidelined and then locked out of the investigation. The consequences of these ›procedural flaws‹ (Berlin Group 21/Bustani, Falk, Robinson and Sponeck 2023) included suppression of toxicology evidence showing the deceased civilians were not killed by chlorine gas, repeated exaggeration of the evidence for chlorine gas release, suppression of witness testimony contradicting the allegation an attack had occurred, and failure to demonstrate that two chlorine cylinders, alleged to be the source of chlorine gas, had actually been dropped from a Syrian Air Force helicopter (Berlin Group 21/Bustani, Falk, Robinson and Sponeck 2023).

Notably, all of the actors listed above – Hamish de Bretton Gordon, Bellingcat and the White Helmets – played important and influential roles with respect to the Douma FFM. For example, de Bretton-Gordon frequently promoted and supported the official line held by the British government and publicly condemned anyone questioning the probity of the OPCW FFM or the alleged chemical weapons attacks as ›useful idiots‹ (de Bretton-Gordon 2020). In 2019 he used social media to ask the UK government to investigate UK-based academics researching the issue: ›Amazing some British Academics ›Assad’s Useful Idiots‹ continue to deny this atrocity and teach at UK universities – I trust we are looking into this @DowningStreet twitter.com/UKforSyria‹.

Bellingcat, in addition to promoting the official narrative on the alleged Douma attack, have been involved in the dissemination of false information aimed at discrediting the dissenting scientists. Specifically, when it emerged that some senior OPCW scientists were questioning the accuracy of one of the organisations Syria FFMs, *Bellingcat* first published articles that sought to discredit the scientific arguments being made by them (Bellingcat 2020 a&b). Then, later, they published a letter they claimed had been sent to one of the dissenting scientists – Dr Brendan Whelan – by the OPCW’s Director General which purportedly resolved the issues that had been raised by

him: *Bellingcat* were seeking to discredit the inspector by presenting him as being dishonest by withholding this letter from the public, and giving the misleading impression that all the concerns raised by him had been addressed by the Director General (Bellingcat 2020c). In fact, Whelan had never seen the letter published by *Bellingcat*. The Director General had sent him an entirely different letter in response to his April 25 letter of complaint which had not addressed any of the concerns raised (Maté 2020a). A subsequent fact emerged showing that *Bellingcat* had been co-ordinating with the online news media outlet *Huffington Post* to discredit Whelan over the fake letter (Maté 2020b).

Finally, and most importantly, the White Helmets were closely involved with the alleged incident in Douma (Berlin Group 21/Bustani, Falk, Robinson and Sponeck 2023). As the first responders they were recorded both in the hospital scenes associated with the incident and entering an apartment building where up to 43 deceased civilians were filmed and photographed. Regarding the hospital scenes, it is of note that BBC producer Riam Dalati is stating publicly that '[a]fter almost 6 months of investigations, I can prove without a doubt that the Douma Hospital scene was staged. No fatalities occurred in the hospital. All the #WH [White Helmets], activists and people I spoke to are either in #Idlib or #EuphratesShield areas. Only one person was in Damascus' (Dalati 2019). Furthermore, the White Helmets helped to supply witnesses to the FFM and, indeed, actually acted as witnesses for the FFM investigation. Here, again as noted above, the White Helmets founder James le Mesurier is reported to have played a direct role in terms of helping coordinate the supply of witnesses to the FFM. Significant contradictions and inconsistencies with respect to some of this witness testimony is documented in a recent review conducted by the author (Berlin Group 21/Bustani, Falk, Robinson and Sponeck 2023).

Discussion and Conclusion

It is well understood that the existence of opaque vested interests and conflicts of interest can generate biased and inaccurate information and knowledge. That is why society, across multiple spheres of activity, recognizes them as an issue. Such problems, potential and actual, are manifest in the case of the OPCW FFMs whereby state-backed actors variously interact with the FFMs either directly or otherwise through helping to maintain the official narrative promoted to Western publics. With respect to alleged chemical

weapons attacks and the ›information space‹, there is a significant imbalance whereby actors funded and supported by one side in the conflict play an influential role in the public's perception of reality. This ability to ›shape the narrative‹ even extends as far as influencing an international UN-linked organization, the OPCW. The fact that these arrangements have indeed impacted negatively on the work of that organisation is evidenced by the fact that two of its most senior scientists have testified to manipulation and censorship (Berlin Group 21/Bustani, Falk, Robinson and Sponeck 2023). Set against this is the backdrop of a strategic communications/influence operation instigated by the UK government and delivered by former British military officers, which offered PR support, via InCoStrat, to opposition groups whilst contributing to narratives, via CIJA and the White Helmets, that cast the Syrian government in an unfavourable light whilst eclipsing Western efforts at ›regime change‹.

Three problems arise from involvement of outsourced communication and influence activities. First, because most members of the public remain unaware of the history and funding behind these organisations and actors, it is more difficult for them to use their own media literacy and critical thinking skills when evaluating the probity of the information they receive via these actors. Put simply, knowing that the White Helmets, for example, were established by a former British military officer and received significant financial support from the UK government would suggest some degree of caution is justified with respect to any claims they might make. Equally, knowing that de Bretton-Gordon was involved with an MI6 sample gathering operation in Syria might warrant greater due diligence in terms of assessing the accuracy of any claims he makes. Because, the public-facing presentation of organisations such as the White Helmets and Bellingcat suggest they are neutral and independent actors, which is not actually the case, audiences probably place more trust in them than they would otherwise do.

Second, outsourcing weakens accountability. If organisations and actors such as the White Helmets and Bellingcat do indeed generate output that, broadly speaking, aligns with the interests of the governments and actors that fund them, responsibility becomes blurred. Should those funding be held accountable for their informational output or should the outsourced organisations be held responsible for any given action or communication? To make this point more clearly, if some combination of the White Helmets and the CBRN task force ended up delivering false information to the OPCW, who then declare a chemical attack has occurred, does the blame lie with the outsourced actors on the ground, or does it lie with the governments who

originally helped established these organisations? The answer is not clear, or rather certainly far less clear than in the Iraqi WMD case where intelligence agencies and governments were, ultimately, recognized as having misled Western publics (Butler Inquiry 2004; Chilcot Inquiry 2016).

Third, and because of points one and two, strategic deceptions (Mearsheimer 2010) become easier to implement and, therefore, more likely. The risks to governments are reduced because accountability mechanisms are weakened and thus blame, if caught out, can always be passed on to the outsourced organisations. At the same time, the effectiveness of a strategic deception is enhanced precisely because the lie is being delivered by what appear to be neutral and independent actors. In short, the deception is made more believable.

In the final analysis, and for the purposes of the argument in this paper, we can set to one side the question of how far various influence operations might have strayed into the territory of outright deception through lies and falsifications. What this paper does demonstrate, however, is 1) the extent to which the information space on Syria has been influenced by a variety of outsourced organisations and actors and 2) why this should be considered a problem. Kinross (2020: 223–224) notes in his work that:

The facts that are now known about the methodologies used by the West in its successive wars in the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan lead to the conclusion that nothing in the projection of warfare beyond its immediate context in combat zones can ever be as simple as it seems or taken at face value; evidence shows that perception and reality have in some respects become distorted through the prism of the professional propagandists in a way that now makes it hard to distinguish between the reality of events and a managed perception of them.

Put succinctly, and at the very least, these arrangements are not conducive to well-informed publics and democratic accountability. Further investigation of, and research about, these outsourcing activities is urgently needed.

Returning to a question raised at the start of this paper – whether war propaganda today is just as, or even more, effective as that of over one hundred years ago – at the time of writing, the West is edging toward ever greater confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. The possibility of a full-blown conflagration clearly exists, and, sadly, we might well find that events provide an answer to this question quicker than academia.

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