

Tim Hayward

Academic Freedom And Setting An Example

Posted on [April 20, 2018](#)

This post is based on a letter I wrote in reply to someone who has known me as a teacher. I have responded to her as one concerned citizen to another, but with her student experience in mind. We agreed it would be an idea to make the response available to anyone else who shared similar concerns.

On Saturday 14 April 2018, *The Times* newspaper took the extraordinary – and I think unprecedented – step of publishing, on its front page, in its leader column, and in a further two-page spread, a sustained attack on what it denounces as “Apologists for Assad working in universities”.

You might wonder *why* *The Times* was doing this, and also perhaps why *now*. But first you might like to know: am I an Apologist for Assad? Simple answer: “No, and nor are any others in the group that is being attacked”.^[1] Still, you may wonder, “what about these tweets that have been mentioned?” Well, one was misreported^[2] and one was misinterpreted,^[3] but it is true that a certain hashtag appeared in a brief cluster of tweets a year ago, like [this one](#) from 17 April 2017: ‘More questions need to be asked about alleged evidence of sarin in #SyriaHoax debate’.

The tweets do seem to be the sum total of evidence presented for alleged apologetics. The tweets, I would further point out, are a personal matter. No allegations concern any of the group’s professional activities of research work or teaching. They do not even touch on my quite numerous personal blogposts on Syria. (So one might seriously wonder how on earth a handful of obscure year-old tweets of mine came to be more important for *The Times* to share with its readership on 14 April 2018 than the fact that France, US and UK were in the process of bombing Syria.)

As for the hashtag [#syriaHoax](#), as you see from the example above, this, for me, was intended to highlight a *topic*, a *question*, a *debate*.^[4]

As *The Times* is clearly aware, the question is topical again, a year on. If you have seen the recent video and images from Douma circulating in the Western media, you could be forgiven for regarding as an established fact that, on 7 April 2018, President Assad of Syria had committed an appalling war crime by using a chemical weapon against his own people.^[5] The press and TV news channels suggested that Theresa May and presidents Trump and Macron had sufficient evidence to justify bombing Syria. To ask questions about this would make you, at least according to *The Times*, a ‘useful idiot’ echoing Russian propaganda.

When a group of respected academics starts to affirm it reasonable to ask questions, and even sets about doing so – as the [working group](#) has – we find ourselves branded as “Apologists for Assad!”

But it is not only academics asking questions.

[Lord Alan West](#), former First Sea Lord of the Royal Navy, this week expressed [deep scepticism about the alleged chemical attack in Douma](#). Would that make him an “Apologist for Assad”? Well, the BBC interviewer did appear to caution him about expressing such scepticism in public. (*Perhaps it’s worth reflecting why a journalist is seeking to discourage a member of the House of Lords asking questions? Aren’t journalists supposed to be interested in asking questions?*)

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A key point that both those senior military figures made was that while Assad had a strong reason not to throw away his advantageous military position by bringing the wrath of NATO down upon him, the armed militant groups in control of Douma had a very strong motive to accomplish exactly that.

Scepticism has been heard in public from others too. They include former weapons inspectors, former ambassadors, established journalists, filmmakers, US senators, and even Fox News's Carlson Tucker.[\[6\]](#)

But if the 'rebels' had a motive, is there any evidence they had the means and opportunity to be responsible for the event in Douma? Independent journalists like Vanessa Beeley, who, as I write, is on the ground in Douma, have uncovered potentially significant evidence, but since she is also criticised in *The Times*, I don't just now want to occasion any accusation of being a 'useful idiot' by citing her evidence. (I do happen to have great respect for her, however, so this bracketing is simply for the present purpose.) It is now not just independent journalists who are presenting evidence. With Douma back under the control of government, several more mainstream correspondents have been interviewing witnesses on the ground. Numerous citizens who live around the site of the alleged bombing have been telling them they were aware of no gas attack.[\[7\]](#) Doctors interviewed at the clinic say they had no patients presenting with symptoms of a chemical attack. The patients were suffering from breathing difficulties due to the thick dust of living in sheltered quarters, they say, exacerbated by the impact of an explosion. The doctors telling us this have apparently been identified by name and position,[\[8\]](#) and some of them are identifiable on screen in the official media video of the event.

It is not only doctors from the official video that can now be heard. In [this interview](#), a little boy, clearly recognizable from that video, explains how he and other kids (who were in perfect health) had been herded from outside into the hospital whereupon they started having water splashed over them. They had no clue what was going on, he says. You can watch the child as he now recounts this and decide what you think for yourself.[\[9\]](#)

Yet maybe all of this evidence of a possible fake has somehow been constructed as part of an elaborate propaganda exercise? That would be a reasonable question to ask. But is it any less reasonable to ask questions about the mainstream Western media's account of the evidence? That is all I have ever tried to do, as have the others who belong to the working group on [Syria, Propaganda and Media](#) (SPM). To ask questions about what we are being told is not to 'apologise' for anyone.

I shall sign off with a personal thought. Students in higher education have a special opportunity, and encouragement, to think critically about the world and its ways. Their confidence in doing so could be compromised by having the reputation of their teachers called into question. So I want to emphasise that SPM members, notwithstanding the attempt to smear them, face no allegation of having failed their students, nor their research community, nor their institutions.[\[10\]](#) *The Times* appears to have wanted to *make an example* of SPM group members for challenging the version of contemporary history the paper is ready to authorise. The group members, by contrast, want to *set an example*, by trying to ensure that the record of contemporary knowledge is as faithful as one might hope in a democratic society. After all, if academics don't do that, will anyone? If we – the profession with the greatest freedom of thought and expression – are intimidated into restricting our attention to 'authorised' questions, what kind of society do you think we are heading for?



Syrian Students, Tishreen University, Lattakia (15 April 2018)

Notes

[1] The working group's current membership:

[Louis Allday](#) (PhD candidate, SOAS University of London)

[Professor Emeritus Oliver Boyd-Barrett](#) (Bowling Green State University, United States of America)

Dr T.J. Coles ([Plymouth Institute for Peace Research](#))

[Professor Tim Hayward](#) (University of Edinburgh)

[Divya Jha](#) (PhD candidate, Communication, Media and Journalism research group, University of Sheffield)

Adam Larson (Independent Researcher)

[Jake Mason](#) (PhD candidate, Communication, Media and Journalism research group, University of Sheffield)

[Dr Tara McCormack](#) (University of Leicester)

[Professor Paul McKeigue](#) (University of Edinburgh)

[Professor David Miller](#) (University of Bath)

[Professor Piers Robinson](#) (University of Sheffield) *Working Group Convenor*

Simone Rudolphi (Sunderland, MA student)

[Dr Greg Simons](#) (Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University)

[Dr Florian Zollmann](#) (Newcastle University)

The International advisory Board (currently under development):

Christopher C.Black (International criminal lawyer)

[Dr Nathan Coombs](#) (University of Edinburgh)

[Dr Christopher Davidson](#) (Durham University, United Kingdom)

[Professor Philip Hammond](#) (London South Bank University)

[Professor Richard Jackson](#) (University of Otago, New Zealand)

Professor Richard Keeble (University of Lincoln)

Jan Oberg [Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research](#)

Dr Sonia Mansour Robaey (Independent Researcher)

[Professor Mark Crispin Miller](#) (New York University)

Dr Sami Ramadani (Retired Academic)

[2] I explained this in [my initial response](#) posted on the day The Times attack occurred:

‘I don’t think The Times article has been scrupulously fair on its front page when it refers to some claims I retweeted, because it fails to mention that they were being quoted as the reference for [the following words of my own](#):

“Witness statements from civilians and officials in Ghouta raise very disturbing questions about the conduct of ‘rebel’ factions who had been in control. Questions also concern who and what has been supported by UK FCO.”

I have not claimed to verify the witness statements that prompted the questions, but since the witnesses are due a degree of respect, I believe, those questions arising from them can reasonably be aired, without prejudice to the question of their truth.’

[3] This tweet, from a year ago, was given an unintended interpretation by the journalist who contacted me, so I simply deleted it, as is my practice when unclarity is pointed out to me. (The tweet had received 23 engagements, including any at The Times office, when I deleted it. Those who engaged at the time, I presume, being followers of my account, would have been unlikely to mistake my intention.)

[4] More generally, I have never made claims to knowledge about controversial events in Syria. I have just tried to assess the basis of claims – the evidence, assumptions, methods, and so on – that appear in reports of events. That is something academics do, and I do it in my blogposts as a concerned citizen. It all started when I found myself unsure, as explained in this link, [‘Who to believe about Syria?’](#)

[5] I am aware that it will be said “not only in Douma!” It will be said he has a record of such allegations being made against him. That is true, but similar questions apply to all of them, and meanwhile we have a specific incident at hand that has been used as a specific justification for bombing Syria. (For extensive discussion of critical questions concerning all of the allegations over the years, see the comprehensive resource [A Closer Look On Syria](#).)

[6] For a list of sceptics who have been heard in the mainstream media, along with other relevant materials, see my blog post [Chemical Attack in Douma: a false pretext for escalating war against Syria?](#) As new reports are coming in daily just now, I am updating it regularly.