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The Applied Epistemology of Official Stories

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ABSTRACT

Is it generally rational to defer to official stories? On the affirmative view exemplified by Neil Levy, grounds for scepticism cannot outweigh the epistemic authority of the *experts* presumed to generate them. Yet sociological studies of how expertise is mediated into official communications reveal the epistemic potential of citizens' collaboratives. These may include, or advocate hearing, dissident experts. Such groups' epistemic position is arguably analogous to that of the 'other institutions of civil society' that Levy sees as underwriting the authority of official stories. An added advantage is that they are able to adhere to deliberative methods of inquiry. By contrast, an official story presupposes that deliberations have concluded, and what remains is to promote the agreed story. This is achieved by *strategic* communication, which can involve extensive coordination by organisations committed primarily to persuasion rather than truth-seeking. Sometimes it includes *blocking* dissidents' deliberative challenges. A case study highlights how even an organisation of indisputable epistemic authority can be politically influenced to block the testimony of *its own scientific experts*, while uncritical support for its official story is maintained by other institutions of civil society. Hence, an appropriate attitude towards official stories is critical receptiveness rather than automatic deference.



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The category of 'official stories' plays a distinctive role in contemporary discussions of social epistemology. It is invoked as a standard of comparison for the assessment of 'conspiracy theories' and other 'contrarian' views concerning controversial issues of public concern. On one influential view, when an official story and a contrarian analysis conflict, it is generally rational to defer to the former. This view is commonly held by people who have made no special study of the matter, but it is also held, in qualified form, by some who have, and notably by the social epistemologist Neil Levy. Because Levy has set out with particular clarity the rationale for what we might call the official story about official stories, his account will provide a recurrent point of reference for the argument to be unfolded here. An important qualification he highlights is that the official story is presumptively worthy of deference only if it is backed by an institution socially acknowledged to have *epistemic authority*. For mere *officialness*, as Dentith (2018) cautions, 'only tells us that the theory has been endorsed by some influential institution', which is not necessarily any *epistemic* guarantee, since we know that officials sometimes endorse stories that are unreliable. In an ideal society, observes David Coady, it might be the case that 'official stories would carry an epistemic authority such that it would almost always be rational to believe them. But that is not our society, nor I suspect, is it any society that has ever been or ever will be' (2007, 199). Coady takes a less sanguine view than Levy of the

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integrity of the institutions of contemporary societies like Britain or Australia. What social epistemologists nevertheless generally agree is that claims to *epistemic* authority are to be distinguished from the demands of *political* authority, and that it is the latter which are more inherently tied to the idea of *officialness*. They also recognise that political actors may sometimes, or even quite habitually, communicate on the basis of expediency rather than a quest for truth. In fact, the very use of the concept of an *official story* might be said to have its roots in suspicion, for in practice a story only generally gets referred to as 'official' when it is overtly noticed that endorsement by officials gives it peremptory authority. Use of phrases like 'that's the *official* story' generally implies awareness of another, unofficial, and potentially truer, one. So a question for those who broadly share Levy's view is *why allow presumptive deference to something presumptively dodgy?* The most direct response would be to claim that a *general* presumption of dodginess is simply unwarranted, because a more reasonable general presumption is that an official story will have been produced by the work of competent and appropriately qualified investigators whose own professionalism, as well as the procedures of their organisation, tend to assure their reporting will be better and more fully informed than anything suspicious lay members of the public can muster. Yet Levy's caveat is important: whatever might be the more reasonable general presumption, one cannot simply presume, for any actual given case, that the official story has genuine epistemic authority – or that suspicions are ill-informed – without begging the question raised by its challengers.

The argument to be developed in [Section 1](#) grants Levy's premise that serious challenges to the epistemic authority of an institution are exceptional in relation to the total amount of information published by all such institutions which is never seriously challenged. The significance of this general observation, however, need not tell in favour of general deference to those official stories that *are* seriously contested. For a further presumption is not irrational to entertain: on those rare occasions when members of the public are concerned enough to challenge a particular report from a particular institution – while not challenging any of the very many other reports from other institutions – it could be that those people have detected something particular that could be amiss. Their suspicions still might be misplaced, but not on the grounds that it is irrational to challenge official stories in general, since that is not what they are doing. The fact of serious public concern about a relatively limited set of instances could be taken to establish a principle of exception that would suspend the default applicability of the general rule of deference. So my claim is that there is no good general reason to allow a presumption in favour of a particular official story when it is subject to serious challenge by sections of the public. Epistemic diligence is always due in such a case. The reasoning here is consonant with that offered by philosophers who advocate a particularist approach to conspiracy theories that challenge official stories (see e.g. Basham 2018; Dentith 2019; Hagen 2022).

Given that official stories are not necessarily all of a piece, epistemologically considered, it would be a mistake to assume that every particular story has as clear a claim to epistemic authority as the best may have. It would certainly be mistaken to assume, without closely examining the case, that any particular story manifests the sort of authority attributable to a consensus of relevant scientific experts. The point emphasised in [Section 2](#) is that when assessing the epistemic authority of a story, one has to be careful to avoid conflating the distinct ideas of science, expertise and officialness. For the general concept of *expertise* has quite a range of distinct meanings, and what counts as expertise within the practice of a science can in important respects be the antithesis of expertise that is accorded a status of officialness. The process of identifying *official* experts differs from the actual practices of recognition of expertise within peer groups. Accordingly, there is no good general reason to presume that an official story has unassailable expert backing when a reasonable challenge to it is advanced.

Along with caution about presuming too much about the reliability of official stories, there is a place also for recognising the potential for meaningful challenge from other quarters. Indeed, once we start distinguishing varieties of expertise we are brought to challenge another premise of Levy's position, namely, that citizen investigations are typically a matter of individuals pursuing substantive knowledge claims in fields beyond their expertise. The reality, as discussed in [Section 3](#), is that citizen

investigations can often involve variegated groups of investigators working collaboratively; and they may focus on advocating a hearing for the claims of competing experts rather than attempting to assert any direct substantive expertise themselves.

In fact, this ability of serious and diligent non-experts in a subject matter to form reasonable views about the reliability of acknowledged experts' reports is actually assumed by Levy as the basis for his account of what makes an official story epistemically authoritative. For he argues that an official story should be presumed reliable when the epistemic authority of the body presenting it is accepted by 'the other institutions of civil society' (Levy 2022, 356). The question to be considered in [Section 4](#), accordingly, is what is thought to give these institutions the general credibility that citizen investigators necessarily lack? In Levy's thinking, there is an evident presumption that those institutions operate independently and with epistemic integrity. The regrettable reality, however, is that institutions can be captured by representatives of special interest groups who press them into the service of their own agendas. And here it is relevant to signal an important feature about the communication of an official story as such, namely, that it is taken to be authoritatively *settled* and ready for *public promotion*. An official story is not communicated as a contribution to an ongoing process of deliberation; it is advanced on the basis that the relevant deliberative communications have been concluded, and what remains is to advise – and, where appropriate, persuade. In this respect, an official story can be regarded as a *strategic communication*. Strategic communications can involve significant and complex coordination by organisations that in some cases can enlist the services of exactly the civil society institutions that Levy would have us trust to underwrite official stories independently. Once one is aware of this real possibility and of the variety of tools of coordinated persuasion it can involve, the case for deferring by default to an official story is brought seriously into question.

However, an anticipated response to this argument is that it depends on an unreasonable degree of suspicion, perhaps sounding more like 'conspiracy theory' than social science. Recognising that without presenting some concrete evidence it certainly appears somewhat speculative, [Section 5](#) presents an actual case study to illustrate a degree of cooperation and cooptation of respected organisations that will be found surprising by anyone starting from Levy's general assumptions – as, indeed, it was by the present author. Of course, one should not think to generalise too much from a single case, but the case does illustrate unsuspected possibilities that could apply also in other cases without being noticed by those not alert to them. For the study relates to an organisation that appears to be the epitome of epistemic authority and yet has succumbed to political influence to maintain an official story that is challenged by its own scientific experts. The case illustrates how support for the cooptation of that organisation is provided by a surprising range of actors – including civil society institutions.

In conclusion, it is acknowledged that sometimes, perhaps often, official stories may represent good faith efforts of diligent officials to convey reliable information while contrarians will be unreasonably suspicious. But it does not follow that an appropriate general attitude towards official stories is one of deference rather than of critical receptivity, which is the attitude Hayward (2022) has commended with regard to those reasoned challenges to official stories referred to as *serious* conspiracy theories. Any presumption of deference to official stories must be regarded as defeasible.

1. The General Idea of an Official Story and the Questions it Gives Rise to

The general idea of 'official stories' appears to refer to a distinct social epistemological category, one which is invoked, particularly, to draw a contrast with – and often to propose a corrective to – 'conspiracy theories'. It is therefore noteworthy that whereas 'conspiracy theories' are currently the object of considerable critical attention by academic researchers, the contrasting category – 'official stories' – has received little analysis.¹ Yet for the contrast to be meaningful and enlightening, and especially if we are expected to allow a presumption in favour of the reliability of official stories, then not only the question of what makes a story *official* but also what makes it epistemically authoritative is important to be clear on.

First, then, what does it mean for a story to be 'official'? The relevant general concept of *office* and cognate terms have to do with the assigning of a place, role and function within some organisation, which can include the governing institutions of society. The meaning of the epithet 'official' is tantamount to 'authoritative' in that context, since a due degree of authority is bestowed on the office in order that it can fulfil its function in the organisation, which is why officials are also sometimes called functionaries. By 'authority' here is understood the legitimate source of definitive pronouncements as to status, rights and responsibilities that will be upheld by the organisation or institution. An 'official story', then, is a narrative about some aspect of the circumstances of society that is treated as authoritative by the institutions of that society.

There is no inherent reason why an official story should be presumed reliable, judged according to epistemological standards that might reasonably be applied. It should be borne in mind that institutions of various societies have maintained order by invoking all manner of mythological stories, ideological stories, or blatantly discriminatory stories. Sometimes this has meant denying, suppressing or persecuting people engaged in science or rigorous intellectual inquiry which, according to the official standards there prevailing, involves *heresy*. So we know that an official story might simply be the manifestation of a political authority imposing the orthodoxy of a worldview against the resistance, which may be more epistemologically rigorous, of sceptics or *heretics*.

Nevertheless, it is still possible for an official story to be epistemically reliable if the institutions of society that warrant it have a character that is conducive to ensuring this. Broadly speaking, this would mean the institutions are integrally respectful of the basic principles of honest inquiry. Indicatively, for instance, they would be so constituted as to preclude the possibility of dominance by special interests or the persecution of any particular groups; political institutions would be broadly transparent with effective and appropriate constitutional checks and balances; there would be a robustly free press; and institutions of civil society would allow for the participation on fair and equal terms of all sections of society, all of whose members robustly enjoy a full range of civil and political rights. In a society whose institutions are well-ordered – as judged by those kinds of standards – and whose officials operate diligently and in good faith, the official stories would likely be as reliable as is reasonably possible.

On this last point, I believe, social epistemologists are in broad agreement. Where there is divergence is over the question of how closely the actual society being referred to in their applied epistemological arguments approximates the ideal. Nobody suggests that in contemporary Western societies the situation is exactly as depicted in that ideal. But views vary regarding the question whether it is an imperfect but fair approximation to the ideal or a more decisive departure from it. Those who tend towards the former view will be ready to presume that the situation in reality is on balance favourable to viewing official stories in general as presumptively more reliable than alternatives. It should also be recognised that even those who are more radically critical of the institutions of their society will not necessarily presume that *all* official stories are unreliable. In any complex society there will be great numbers of institutions with myriad functions that need to communicate to the public, and if all these communications are regarded as 'official stories', then a great many of them will be reliable, certainly within their own terms of reference. Or if we assume a more moderately capacious application of the designation, we will still recognise that pretty much all public policy that aims to provide benefits to society – across any of the spheres of safety, health, happiness, prosperity and so on – will have a rationale that could be called an official story.

In actual usage, however, that is not how the term 'official story' normally occurs. We don't regard it as an 'official story' that to get a passport you need to submit an authenticated photograph of yourself; we don't regard it as an 'official story' that in UK cars are to be driven on the left; and nor do we these days regard it as an 'official story' that smoking is bad for our health. By far the greater part of public pronouncements, like these, simply state how matters stand. When the distinctive term 'official story' occurs, it is invariably in contexts where a public pronouncement has met with scepticism. For instance, often at issue will be the soundness of a rationale for a policy decision.

So, whereas we seldom nowadays hear the rationale for mandating wearing seatbelts in cars referred to as an ‘official story’, because there is now no serious dissent, recent claims that the rationale for mandating mRNA injections against SARS-CoV2 was substantially comparable to that for seatbelts (see e.g. Levy and Savulescu 2021, 130) encountered resistance: the ‘official story’ about the benefits and safety of the mRNA injections has been subject to criticism from some sections of medical and scientific communities. Another prominent category of ‘official stories’ consists of explanations offered by authorities for a momentous historical event – as provided for instance by the Warren Report on John F. Kennedy’s assassination or the Report of the 9/11 Commission – which significant sections of the public have greeted with scepticism. Then there is the category of official story that serves as the justification of a momentous historical decision, but may sometimes be flawed, such as the reported intelligence that was used to justify the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

So, I believe we can say that it is in virtue of being contested that an ‘official story’ exists as a distinctly designated epistemic object. It is for this reason that there has to be particularly careful scrutiny of the suggestion that it is generally rational to defer to official stories.

Of course, the mere fact of scepticism in some quarters does not by itself mean that a given official story is necessarily problematic by more generally agreed epistemic standards. Levy, in fact, is careful to specify that it is rational to defer to an official story only insofar as it is reported by an institution that has a socially recognised claim to epistemic authority. His position, more exactly, is that ‘we ought to defer to those institutions who identify themselves as the institutions to defer to, when (and only when) the other institutions of civil society accept this claim’. It will be noted, then, that this view, just like the sceptical one, predicates officialness as a ‘secondary quality’ of a story rather than a ‘primary quality’: that is to say, both positions agree that a story is distinguished as an official one only in virtue of the process making it so, not because of any inherent qualities of the story itself. Furthermore, the principles underlying both views are the same: a story – whether designated official or otherwise – is worthy of epistemic deference when it is supported by a reliable epistemic authority.

The focus of contention when an official story is contested, then, is not on epistemological principles but on whether the specific story actually has reliable epistemic support. The rationality of trusting an official story that is under challenge depends on the rationality of trusting the network of institutions that effectively stand as guarantors of the body issuing it. In Levy’s view, to mistrust that wider network would be irrational. This view rests on the consideration that we rely on myriad communications from a wide range of institutions in so many ways that to doubt their general dependability would contradict the tacit assumptions that get us through life and would render inexplicable how even a tolerably well-ordered society could ever be possible.

The force of that consideration, I shall suggest, is strong but not absolute. A generalised trustiness does not need to be entirely indiscriminate. Trust by default is only rational up to the point where it is betrayed or good reason is encountered for suspending it or putting it in abeyance, pending further inquiry. One can appreciate that plenty of official pronouncements are generally accepted in a tolerably well-ordered society, mainly without question, by the public. Relatively speaking, only a few become the focus of sceptics, or the so-called conspiracy theorists and contrarians. But if only a few official stories, relatively speaking, are contested, this means they can be regarded as exceptions to the posited general rule; and if one knows that a rule is liable to certain exceptions, it is rational to seek to understand the specificity of those exceptions. It would not be rational to insist that the rule holds good even for the exceptions to it. So in the situation where a significant section of the public resists an official story, it is rational to seek assurance that the issuing institution has not been compromised; and under certain circumstances it may be rational to check also that the guarantor institutions really do endorse the issuing institution as explicitly and unreservedly as required; it may even be rational, in more extreme circumstances, to check that those guarantor institutions themselves are as reliable as a deferential view of them assumes.

Before considering the possibility of extreme cases, however, there is some further clarification to make with regard to what Levy presents as the standard case. His argument for deference itself

applies only to a subset of official stories, namely, those advanced by *epistemic authorities*, which he defines as ‘those people socially acknowledged as the relevant experts on a topic’. Accordingly, what needs to be examined at this stage is how it is established who relevant experts are.

2. The Varieties of Expertise and Different Claims to Epistemic Authority

The idea that official stories should generally be deferred to rests on an assumption that they derive from expert analysis and opinion. Correspondingly, a central theme in the characterisation of an ‘epistemic crisis’ surrounding ‘fake news’, ‘mis/disinformation’ and ‘conspiracy theories’ is that there is a widespread ‘rejection of *experts*’. So it is worth attending to what is understood by the term *expert* and how perceptions of expertise are mediated in public communications.

Five quite distinct kinds of expert have been differentiated by Stephen Turner (2014) according to what we might describe as their different audiences or user constituencies:

- (1) Experts whose expertise is generally acknowledged by everyone in a society (doctors, physicists);
- (2) Experts whose personal expertise is acknowledged by certain individuals (like authors of self-help books, consultants, etc.);
- (3) Experts who are members of groups that are the only ones who acknowledge their expertise (theologians whose authority is recognised only by the members of the same sect);
- (4) Experts whose audience is the public, but who are supported by influential parties interested in the acceptance of their opinions (members of think tanks, researchers paid by private foundations with a political agenda);
- (5) Experts whose audience are bureaucracies with discretionary powers, who appoint themselves the experts on a specific administrative question and then implement the proposed solutions by selecting them through criteria and procedures that are typical of the bureaucratic decision making system. (from summary by Origgi 2015, 161)

Gloria Origgi points out that there are obvious reasons why the general public should be cautious about accepting the authority of experts in categories (4) and (5). A good deal of ‘contrarian’ argument indeed does home in on the various conflicts of interest and institutional biases that can compromise ‘expert’ pronouncements. Experts of categories (2) and (3), on the other hand, do not generally have or seek a wider societal impact. It is experts of category (1) – which could include, along with scientists and doctors, credentialed academics, professionals and tradespersons – who are generally regarded as having the socially compelling sort of authority that it is rational to defer to.

Certainly, Levy’s argument for the rationality of generally deferring to official stories, which he makes in several places (e.g. Levy 2007, 2019, 2022) appears to depend on assuming that these do have the backing of experts of type (1). Yet, in instances where an official story is subject to serious challenge, it is not irrational to want to *ascertain* that the story has the clear backing of scientists or comparable specialist experts, rather than simply *assume* that to be the case. But even this would be only a necessary rather than sufficient condition for accrediting a disputed official story. Another necessary condition, and one Levy tacitly assumes to be generally operative, is that a definite *consensus* – i.e. with no significant expert dissent – supports the story, which itself is sufficiently clear and complete to be unequivocally commended to the public. Yet there are good general reasons for wanting to assess the warrant for this presumption in any given situation rather than unquestioningly grant it.

In assessing whether there is in fact an authoritative consensus of relevant experts, there are several considerations to keep in mind, as scholars in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) have amply shown (see e.g. Grundmann 2017). One is that all science – of its nature as open, collective, progressive inquiry – has a *provisional* status, with all scientific statements being in principle *corrigible*. Indeed, scientific knowledge is almost always subject

to uncertainty and disagreement. This means that a scientific adviser's confidence – to the extent it is epistemically justified – can never be completely unconstrained or unhedged. As a corollary of this point, members of the public, while valuing clear scientific advice, have reason to be alert to the possibility of being issued with over-confident advice. In this connection, Zeynep Panuk (2021) refers to 'The Paradox of Scientific Advice' that arises from the difficulties of basing decisions on scientific knowledge that is almost always uncertain and subject to disagreement. Panuk cites experience of how overconfident scientists in advisory committees may suppress dissent so as to present a consensus view, only to find that its implementation had unfortunate consequences. Recent experiences of overconfident pronouncements on 'The Science' during the Covid pandemic have furnished further examples (Miller 2022; Nelson 2022).

So, the expert consensus appealed to in support of an official story may hold only among a part of the relevant expert peer group (see also Dentith 2018). Even if the dissenting experts constitute only a small minority, epistemological authority does not rest on a simple majoritarian principle. Appropriate acknowledgement ought to be made of the margin of uncertainty. Relatedly, appeal to an expert consensus can be epistemically risky if the composition of the group of designated experts appealed to is selective on a challengeable basis. This can be the case for two different sorts of reason. One is similar to the problem with experts of types (4) and (5) in that they could have been strategically selected on the basis that promoters of the official story have confidence that these experts' findings will support a desired conclusion. But even where there is no such agenda or conflict of interest, the other sort of reason a designated expert group might face reasonable contestation is that the nature of the case to be investigated just does not neatly fall under the clear purview of any established specialism or collaboration. There may simply be no particular designated expert group that is uniquely or fully authoritative with respect to the matter at hand.

But even when the experts consulted are clearly as qualified and collectively competent for the task as any could be, one more point to be aware of is that the application of scientific expertise does not necessarily produce accurate and complete findings that are unequivocally reliable in the kinds of situation that are the typical focus of official stories. One factor here, that Levy himself highlights, but without drawing its full implications, is that the expertise of a scientist is significantly *bounded* in its scope. The expertise of a scientist applies over a typically narrow subdisciplinary field of inquiry; certainly, within the periphery of that field the scientist is likely to have a solid degree of competence; but across the greater part of human inquiry there is no reason to suppose that any particular scientist has greater relevant expertise than any other epistemically conscientious lay person. This matters because the kind of controversy for which an 'official story' comes into play will not normally be some specialist detail of basic science, or even a collection of these, but a situation involving many factors – including those pertaining to social organisation, human action and decision-making. It is likely also to involve various communications whose significance and integrity require critical examination. The limitations here are similar to those identified for basing policy on advice of scientific experts as outlined by SAPEA (2019, Ch. 2) (see also Martin et al. 2020 and the literature surveyed by Grundmann 2017). Official stories do not normally, if ever, issue from within a specialist field in which there are acknowledged experts. More typically, it will be governments or high-level advisory bodies that establish the story. These organisations should aim to employ an optimal range of specialists who together can formulate expert views on complex interdisciplinary questions. But even when done in full good faith, this can lead to views that equally competent alternative groupings might judge differently.

To sum up, then, official stories are seldom if ever straightforward statements of scientific opinion on a single well-defined scientific research question: official stories typically relate to situations where many interacting variables may not all be clearly disaggregable. There is in principle no necessary reason why an independent and unofficial grouping of investigators might not be as well-suited to an inquiry as an official grouping. In fact, challenges to official stories can sometimes draw on impressive constellations of expertise. Accordingly, if Levy overstates what can be said in favour

of official expertise, it may also be that he underestimates what can be achieved by unofficial investigations by ordinary citizens.

3. On Collaborative Citizen Investigations and Counter-Narratives

It is generally rational for citizens to defer to official stories, Levy argues, and he emphasises particularly the limitations of ordinary citizens 'doing their own research' to challenge official findings or recommendations (Levy 2022). For in view of the lack of specialist expertise that any individual citizen commands, there is little realistic possibility of their being able to reliably assess a set of specialist experts' claims that may be cited in support an official story. This is not to say they cannot raise awkward questions, Levy grants, but raising questions about particulars of a story is not the same as showing it to be fundamentally erroneous; and when alternative stories are ventured, these are likely to be less well-informed than the official one. Stated in those terms, Levy's position seems reasonable, and yet it implies certain assumptions that warrant closer examination. These are that independent critical investigation by citizens is typically a matter of individuals, *on their own, without the necessary competence, doing substantive research* into complex issues of the day, and in contrast to an official story that is *unequivocally supported by bodies of specialist experts*. That last assumption was already questioned in the previous section, so to be examined here are the other assumptions – about the nature of what we may call *citizen investigations*.

Doubtless there are many cases of individuals attempting, on their own, without the necessary competence, to do substantive research purporting to challenge an official story. Such efforts, as Levy says, are unlikely to present a *serious* challenge to the official story. However, the focus here is on efforts that *can* present a serious challenge. By *serious* is meant not just raising an issue of *considerable public significance* – which even amateurish investigators may well do – but presenting it in a manner that can be regarded as *epistemically rigorous*. The applicable criteria of epistemic rigour would be the same as those by reference to which established epistemic authorities are recognised as such by other institutions of society. In these cases, I shall argue, application of a general presumption in favour of the official story is *not* warranted.

The claim to be developed is that such serious challenges cannot be ruled out in principle for any particular official story, and Levy's three assumptions cannot be accepted as defaults. When we examine serious challenges in practice, we readily find cases of serious investigations that counter official stories but are *not* conducted by individuals who are *working on their own, or lacking relevant competence, or attempting substantive research*.

The first aspect of the reality to highlight is that challenges to official stories can be mustered not just by isolated individuals independently 'doing their own research' but by groups of individuals who form collaborative groups. In our time, a great benefit of digital technology is that it greatly enhances possibilities for individuals with shared and complementary concerns to find each other. This situation does have its epistemological downsides, as Levy and other social epistemologists emphasise, in that it can allow the formation of 'echo chambers' and 'epistemic bubbles' (Levy 2021). In this, however, it might be argued simply to reproduce the familiar phenomena of in-groups and exclusionary epistemologies encountered in the analogue world, which are not taken by Levy to annul the benefits of collective inquiry. Collectives are much better able to track truths than individuals, he affirms: 'the superiority of the group over the individual does not require that one member has the right answer prior to deliberation: group deliberation may enable the aggregation of the genuine insights of several members and the rejection of the false hypotheses of some of the same individuals' (Levy 2019, 316). Accordingly, if it is the case, as Levy affirms, that '[g]roups of individuals who are strangers to one another are better at tracking truths than groups of individuals who have a shared history' (318) then this is an epistemic advantage of groups comprising people who come together in cyberspace from all walks of life and may have little or no biographical information about those they connect with. Citizens doing their own research sometimes start their own Wikis, or form groups on Reddit, or informally deliberate via Twitter or Telegram. Sometimes

they create investigative collectives offline. It was from participating in chat rooms, for instance, that the now celebrated organisation Bellingcat originated: its founder, Eliot Higgins, a gamer-turned-investigative-citizen, would review copious amounts of war footage from his sofa in Leicester and discuss his observations in chat rooms. The work of his investigative collaborative has come to be 'commended in the global media and by global agencies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch' (Nguyen and Salvatore 2018, 377). It is true that Bellingcat's investigations, which are now funded by Western governments, generally *support* the West's official stories, but they are recognised as debunking official stories from the West's adversaries, and the methods of 'open-source intelligence' (OSINT) are coming to be accepted as having a certain evidentiary value (D'Alessandra and Sutherland 2021). So, there is a well-acknowledged precedent for treating citizens' investigations as authoritative. Furthermore, other groups of citizen investigators, that do not receive any external funding, have mounted significant challenges to some of the West's official stories. This is the case, for instance, with the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media, which will feature in the case study for this article.

A second aspect of the real situation that defies Levy's assumptions is that the *individuals* who contribute to critical discussion of official stories are not necessarily so incompetent, or lacking relevant epistemic authority, as his account assumes. Levy's account implies that citizen investigators are enthusiastic amateurs who are prone to inflate the significance of their own investigative competence. Yet the reality of serious dissent in the digital sphere does not conform to this depiction. Among the myriad critical individuals, there are many with significant relevant claims to epistemic authority in their own professional fields and who exhibit judicious awareness of both their own limitations and the value of others' insights. For instance, challenging various official narratives are whistleblowers, among whom are counted scientists, diplomats, intelligence officers and various state or corporate employees. Challenges come too from professionals with relevant specialist expertise across fields like medicine, architecture, engineering, pharmaceuticals and a gamut of others. It is also worth noting that there are journalists with previous careers in mainstream media organisations who found they could only maintain their integrity and professional standards by becoming independent.² So the condescending caricature of citizens rejecting authoritative stories on the basis of 'doing their own research' by 'reading things on the internet' fails to capture a very important dimension of reality. When a group of people independently deliberating together can include, for instance, figures who might formerly have been the head of a nation's armed services, a UN weapons inspector, a senior diplomat, an intelligence officer, a world leading International Relations expert and a seasoned war correspondent, the insights they generate regarding situations relevant to foreign policy may well be no less sound than those informing the official story.³ Indeed, in virtue of their freedom from institutional inhibitions, they may be more reliably informative for the public than the official story. They can certainly mount a serious challenge to it.

If serious challenges to official stories have become more prevalent in recent years, as they arguably have, this is likely due in good part to the sheer extent to which mainstream media have excluded the voices of experts who, maintaining their professional integrity and independence in the face of sometimes considerable hostility, have continued to articulate their challenges to the official story. Attentive members of the public notice this – just as they notice when the force of the state is brought to bear on those who bring to light its lies and malfeasance and not only in high profile cases like Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, Katharine Gun or Julian Assange.

A third feature of the wider challenges to official stories is bound up with the phenomenon of public attentiveness. Levy's assumption is that those he regards as contrarians 'advocate not accepting the official story (about 9/11, vaccines, climate change) on trust, but instead finding out for ourselves' (Levy 2022, 356). But citizens do not need to try and 'find out for themselves' if they become aware of experts who dissent from the official opinion and who are being silenced. Citizens who 'read articles on the internet' can become aware of arguments developed by experts which are suppressed by protectors of the 'official story'. An example would be the epidemiologists who formulated the Great Barrington Declaration (2020), advocating an approach to dealing with the

Covid situation characterised as ‘focused protection’ instead of the officially promoted lockdown approach. Lay persons may not be able to adjudicate first hand between recommendations from the GBD and the John Snow Memorandum (2020), which defended lockdown, but they can understand enough to know that the latter does not command an unproblematic consensus such as it would be rational simply to defer to. Members of the public can assess the trustworthiness of expertise and official stories without a high level of technical knowledge, as science study scholars like Steven Yearley (2005) have shown. They can make an assessment on the basis of general lay knowledge about how to form judgments about the credibility of political leaders, organisations and individuals (Hess 2012). A citizen does not even need to make a substantive assessment of relevant expertise when the challenging experts are accredited as such by the same systems of credentials that defenders of official stories appeal to, as is the case in the formation of what David Hess refers to as scientific counterpublics (Hess 2011). Indeed, sometimes it is even former contributors to official stories that blow the whistle with concerns about the official story.

It is not irrational to entertain the thought that if a view is suppressed rather than openly addressed and rebutted the reason could perhaps be that it cannot be rebutted. Hence, a good deal of critical discussion in relation to official stories is not directly aimed at ascertaining what the primary evidence shows. Members of the public do not need to be able to adjudicate on the substantial merits of a question in order to have good reasons to withhold deference from an official story. For if a substantial challenge comes from experts, then it is reasonable to expect it to be answered on its merits. If the public observes that it is instead treated as inadmissible, and especially if those formulating it are subject to smearing or censorship, then there is a conspicuous epistemic injustice and a corresponding diminution of public trust in the orthodox view. This phenomenon of expert opinion being met by denigration rather than in the spirit of deliberation is noteworthy because it is entirely contrary to the methods of inquiry that are generally understood to form the basis of epistemic authority. So even if one allows the defeasible assumption that the official story is generally correct, it is rational to have doubts in particular cases where, under challenge from other experts, the response is to avoid deliberation.

Having seen in the previous section that Levy overestimates the extent to which official stories can rely on expert advisory groups, we have now seen in this section that he also underestimates the potential of independent groups of citizen investigators to mount credible challenges to official stories. What is to be further shown, in the next, is that he underestimates the significance of serious challenges not only for the claims of expertise made by an institution in issuing an official story, but also for the warrant provided by the ‘other institutions of civil society’ for its epistemic authority.

4. Official Stories as Strategic Communications

For Levy, an official story should be presumed reliable when the epistemic authority of the body presenting it is supported by other relevant institutions: ‘we ought to defer to those institutions who identify themselves as the institutions to defer to, when (and only when) the other institutions of civil society accept this claim’ (Levy 2022, 356). The reasonableness of this proposition is premised on an assumption that those supporting institutions operate with epistemic integrity. Unfortunately, the fact is that institutions can be captured by representatives of special interest groups and pressed into the service of their own agendas. This fact need not seriously undermine Levy’s proposition if such capture is a relatively isolated problem, but what if it is a problem that affects an appreciable number of the particular institutions appealed to in support of the official story?

This very suggestion might be deemed excessively suspicious. In fact, it is quite commonly argued by defenders of official stories that the challenges to them should not generally be regarded as presumptively credible because they involve *conspiracy theories* or claims whipped up by agents of *disinformation*. So, if a challenge starts to gain significant traction amongst the public, then the official story’s adherents will themselves suspect that this might be attributable to organised propaganda efforts on behalf of adversaries of the truth. In fact, there is currently a considerable

and growing literature that depicts categories of dissenters from official stories – including those labelled conspiracy theorists, contrarians or populists – as not simply inexpert but as *dupes*. They are claimed to be unwittingly repeating talking points that originate, directly or indirectly, from some other source, perhaps a foreign state or disruptive activist organisation. Accordingly, if their contrarian hypotheses are sometimes quite sophisticated, this can be attributed to the sophistication of the strategic communications deployed by the adversary. So it is that today we find a welter of studies of the problem of online ‘disinformation’ that trace webs of connection across cyberspace seeking to link influential dissenting accounts on social media with bots and trolls associated with malign actors (Hayward unpublished).

Contrarian claims are thus quite explicitly identified as being maintained by *strategic* communications. Strategic communications can be categorically differentiated from *deliberative* communications in that they aim at persuading an audience to accept a pre-established story, whereas the latter aim to determine, through collaborative deliberations, what the most epistemically reliable story is.

Of course, a story communicated strategically can sometimes be a reliable one. This is something an advocate of an official story implicitly recognises. For regardless of whether the *content* of a given official story is reliable or not, the *form* of an official story – in virtue of fulfilling its official function – is that of a strategic communication. Even if its content might be arrived at by deliberative methods of inquiry, its communication, as *official*, is presented as a matter not for deliberation but for public *acceptance*. The communication of an official story differs from the communication of basic scientific findings in this respect. The greater part of studies published by university-based researchers, for instance, are not referred to as ‘official stories’, even when they are as authoritative as is possible under the current state of knowledge. Insofar as a particular academic article might include an interpretation or explanatory hypothesis that could be regarded as a ‘story’, it is ventured as a contribution to an ongoing scientific inquiry, not as an official settling of all debate on the matter. Its communication is still part of a public process of inquiry that can be described as *deliberative*. An official story, by contrast, is not up for debate. It is not submitted to public scrutiny with an implicit invitation for critical feedback. It is communicated not to advance debate but to settle it. The fact that a particular story is thought to need communication means that the official authority intends the public to understand and accept it and to discount alternatives. If the authority has this aim, then to pursue it successfully means communicating the story as effectively as possible.

A further point, though, is that while the fact of being strategically communicated does not in itself necessarily mean that the content of the communication is misleading or false, it does bear problematically on claims to epistemic authority on the part of the communicator. For it may be argued that the strategic communication of an official story that claims to be epistemically authoritative involves a material self-contradiction. The argument is that if legitimate assurances of epistemic authority are established through deliberative practices, then when deliberative practices are curtailed, as they are in strategic communications, this undermines the basis of that claim to epistemic authority. For instance, this was arguably the situation arising with the UK Government’s Covid response, which purportedly aimed to ‘Follow The Science’ (Stevens 2020). This latter notion, as Abbasi (2020) has pointed out, can only ever be ‘a misleading oversimplification’ of what it means to base policy on science; and during the pandemic, when UK government ministers claimed to be ‘guided by the science’, what they meant in practice, notes Paul Cairney, was being guided by *their* scientists: ‘Ministers formed strong relationships with key scientific advisors, relied on evidence from their Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), and ignored or excluded many other sources’ (Cairney 2021). In fact, Cairney notes, there was not a consensus as to the science or its policy implications. Thus, a policy of public communications was decided on the basis of a selective interpretation of scientific findings. Furthermore, instead of caution in the face of uncertainty, a policy of robustly promoting a particular view involved the use of psychological operations of a kind more normally associated with a war effort than with public health advice (Sidley 2021, 2022). Whatever may have been the justificatory rationale for this in policy terms, the authority of the

promoted story has more a political basis than an epistemic one. Since science is always open to contestation, to make a claim to follow 'the' science can in fact be to suppress science itself insofar as in designating a partial perspective as authoritative a contrasting interpretation is suppressed. The general point is that any story subject to scrupulous epistemic diligence is unlikely to be as unequivocal as official stories normally purport to be. It would always be avowedly open to correction. Any genuine claim of epistemic authority includes an implicit claim that its utterances can be deliberately redeemed; if an organisation precludes that discussion, it cuts off the possibility of showing that it really has the epistemic authority claimed for it.

The fact of being strategically communicated, however, does not itself necessarily entail that the message communicated is unreliable; and it is quite reasonable to accept scientific policy advice should often be deferred to. Moreover, it has to be acknowledged that the strategic communication of an official story can serve the public interest when the research it is based on is sound and there is a genuine expert consensus that recommendations issued on that basis contribute to the public good. As part of this communicative project, it may also be in the public interest to dispel contrary rumours that dilute or distort the message. The most appropriate way of doing so, consistent with deliberative principles, would be to issue clarifications and correction; but where contrary rumours are presented through complex and mystificatory communications, there is in principle a strategic justification for also taking counter-measures against their promulgation in defence of the official story. But here is where, in practice, real problems can arise.

The counter-measures taken through zealous vigilance in defence of an official story can take the form of 'negative' tactics against dissenters such as smearing and attempting to discredit them. This is never an edifying approach, but it is especially troubling when it involves discrediting serious critics who have their own credible claim to epistemic authority. This was illustrated in the case of the eminent scientists who signed the Great Barrington Declaration (GBD) which proposed alternative policy principles from those adopted in the UK. The GBD scientists were widely vilified not only in the media but even by other academics, for pointing to certain established principles of epidemiology – including those developed over the two preceding decades of pandemic preparedness planning – that were being set aside and overridden by policy-makers on the basis of modellers' projections in favour of a 'zero-Covid' strategy (Ioannidis 2022). This vilification involved not only overt smearing but also something more significant and insidious, namely, the pre-emptive dismissal of their views – notwithstanding their impeccable academic pedigree – as too far 'beyond the pale' to warrant serious consideration.

This situation showed that 'other institutions of civil society', including academia, can sometimes be drawn into the ambit of strategic communication. It revealed how constraints can be set on what is thinkable in 'respectable' inquiry – constraints which are contingent on contemporary political mores – whereby a self-reinforcing consensus emerges that is based on quite specific normative and epistemological assumptions.

Levy himself provides a striking illustration of this general phenomenon by apparently offering a legitimating argument in favour of it. At any rate, with striking frankness, he lays bare assumptions that certain self-identifying liberal academics take for granted about the positive correlation between a particular political agenda that they favour and epistemic authority:

Whereas for liberals chains of deference trace back to the relevant scientific experts, and therefore to properly constituted collective deliberation, conservatives' chains of deference end in 'merchants of doubt' (Oreskes and Conway 2010), or maverick scientists. (Levy 2019, 322)

The 'merchants of doubt' referred to are typically scientists financed by businesses interests, like the tobacco or fossil fuel industries, for lobbying purposes, whereas 'maverick scientists', presumably, are those who dissent from what is deemed to be a consensus view for reasons of personal idiosyncrasy rather than for tangible reward. Yet, for the major assumption that conservatives, but not liberals, are liable to be duped by special interest groups Levy offers no express warrant. What is true is that, during the period of Covid-centred policy making, dissenting scientists who were referred to in the

media and social media as mavericks were given a more receptive hearing by conservatives than by liberals. What is not self-evidently true, however, is Levy's evaluation of this situation:

Liberals are epistemically luckier: they are disposed to defer to the most competent individuals and institutions ... Liberals defer to sufficiently large groups of sufficiently expert deliberators to ensure that their beliefs have a high degree of warrant... (Levy 2019, 322)

An alternative explanation of liberals' 'luck' here, unexplored by Levy, would take the apparent majority support for the favoured view to be an outcome of the heavily one-sided emphasis on it in the media along with active disincentives – including even sweeping prohibitions – applied to prevent dissenters publicly sharing their views (HART 2022). The 'largeness' of a like-minded group cannot be regarded as strong evidence of its correctness if that cognitive cohesion is maintained by a near-monopoly of control of the means of communication. If only certain views are allowed to inform any meaningful deliberation about it, then there is no guarantee at all of its epistemic integrity or reliability.

In rationalising his position, without acknowledging or, therefore, assessing that alternative hypothesis, Levy refers to the signals that individuals watch out for when deciding whose testimony to trust – these are markers of *competence* and *benevolence*. You would not put epistemic trust in an incompetent witness, he points out, but nor would you trust a competent witness you suspected might have no compunction about deceiving you.⁴ On this basis Levy makes another sweeping claim:

Conservatives do not defer to scientists, or to their think-tank intermediaries or more local representatives, because while these sources exhibit cues of competence they fail to pass tests for benevolence. (Levy 2019, 322)

This is very close to saying that genuine science issues in all and only the advice that liberals welcome. There appears to be no conceptual space within Levy's worldview for a conservative to subject liberals' preferred epistemic authorities to tests of independence and integrity. He considers advice welcomed by liberals to be valid even when it comes from think tanks – which are somewhat misleadingly described as scientists' 'intermediaries' given that they often exist to serve the interests of their sponsors (see e.g. Parmar 2004; Robinson 2019). Yet apart from disregarding the fact that scientific opinion is often divided, Levy here also disregards such facts as that sometimes the endorsement of false conspiracy theory comes predominantly from liberals – as illustrated in the case of 'Russiagate' (Maté 2020e). Such cases make conspicuous the need for epistemic diligence to include alertness to how large communities, even of 'liberals', can fail to be persuaded by the better argument.

Hence, the central claim of this section is that strategic communications can and do play a prominent role in promoting official stories which means that although some official stories may be epistemically reliable, there is a real possibility, too, that others are not. The next section makes good this claim of a real possibility by examining an actual case.

5. Testing the Epistemic Authority of an Official Story: The Case of OPCW

When strategic communications are used to promote an official story, this implies they have official authority, but as emphasised at the outset, this is authority of a political kind that can be clearly contrasted with epistemic authority. The fact of being politically authorised, like the fact of being communicated strategically, tells us nothing about whether a story is supported by *epistemic* authority. In a situation where an official story rests on the political authority of an institution but is challenged by the very experts of the institution on whom its epistemic authority rests, however, it is rational *not* to defer – intellectually – to the official story. In practice, a real problem is that it is possible for a political authority to assert a claim to epistemic authority while producing an official story that is not based on it. Indeed, not only states, but also corporations and third sector organisations may lay claim to epistemic authority in virtue of

employing highly qualified scientists and researchers; but confidentiality clauses and official secrets legislation can prevent dissent from those sources of epistemic authority reaching the public, leaving open the possibility that the organisation issues official stories that are unsupported by its own experts.

Knowledge of this real possibility is a reason for caution about deferring to official stories. The degree of caution appropriate will vary considerably between cases, but my argument is based on evidence of cases where trust in the official story is not more rational than mistrust in it is. We are certainly aware from historical cases that intelligence can be misrepresented or even fabricated by officials or politicians so as to justify policies with terrible consequences, such as the lie about the Gulf of Tonkin incident which precipitated direct US involvement in the Vietnam War and the lie about weapons of mass destruction that led to the invasion of Iraq. We know that officials can coordinate the cover up of significant crime and malfeasance such as involved in the CIA's MKUltra programme of 'mind control', the FBI's COINTELPRO programme of covert operations, or the illicit weapons programmes of Iran-Contra and Timber Sycamore. Yet the very fact that these past instances are known about may be argued, by some, to show that ultimately the press and other institutions of epistemic authority under a Western democracy do actually perform the function of diligence we look to them for; and even if it is admitted that the knowledge came too late to prevent terrible harm, it might nonetheless be argued that 'lessons were learned' – as arguably demonstrated, for instance, by the Church Committee or Chilcot Inquiry – so that future harms might thereby be prevented. We find influential American intellectuals arguing that a line could be drawn under the 'neocon moment' of the Bush era that led to the Iraq invasion and declaring a new more enlightened approach to foreign policy.⁵ Even if these arguments are not found persuasive, there remains a distinctive value in examining a contemporary case about which such considerations cannot be suggested. The chosen study refers to one that is still open and live, the facts about which have not yet been publicly agreed in the way that the precedents mentioned have.

The particular case study also illustrates quite vividly the element of *contingency* involved in revelations becoming public knowledge – something that might be insufficiently appreciated by studying only well-established cases. It has always been a major factor: the cases we know of have depended not only on the involvement of individuals with integrity and courage to blow the whistle, but also on their succeeding in finding media partners willing and able to publicise their revelations. Thus, Edward Snowden, for instance, has credited his successful exposure of US surveillance of its own population to learning from the fate of attempts by previous NSA whistleblowers like Thomas Drake and Bill Binney how to avoid capture and secure a media partner. (This, of course, was not what others were intended to learn from the treatment meted out to those whistleblowers, which, rather, was to keep quiet (Hertsgaard 2016). As for those providing an outlet for whistleblowers, the unprecedented effectiveness of WikiLeaks on this score has led to action being taken against its founder, Julian Assange, which illustrates the extraordinary lengths to which officials will go in order to disincentivise such activity (Maurizi 2022; Melzer 2022). Yet even though we may be aware of all this, there can still be a temptation, once a record is laid, to suppose that the exposure of an official lie or cover-up was ultimately inevitable since someone would have eventually revealed the truth anyway. In fact, even in some scholarly work, we hear used, as if it were an argument against the plausibility of ongoing challenges to official stories, the thought that 'an awfully large number of people would have to be silently in on it'.⁶ Yet when the challenges faced by whistleblowers are adequately appreciated, it is less easy to assume that assuring the silent complicity of large numbers is an exceptional challenge for the powerful. At the very least, anyone who supposes as a rule that 'the truth will out', when organised malfeasance is at issue, does need to recognise that the truth only comes to public light when certain human beings take steps – sometimes courageous and costly ones – to bring it. So highlighting the significance of this contingency is important not only for adequate scholarly understanding but also for understanding why an active commitment to vigorous questioning of official stories is arguably an important responsibility of scholars who want to contribute to improving the state of public knowledge.

I should also mention the reason for focusing here on a case from the foreign policy field, rather than, for instance, from the field of public health – which especially since 2020 has seen such egregious collusion between corporations, governments, intelligence agencies, the media, social media companies and even academics – to silence inconvenient truths and smear their tellers (see e.g. Clerk 2023). Certainly, policies that may undermine populations' health and welfare, like policies that may lead to wars, are highly significant. A difference is that a much wider array of scientists, practitioners and journalists, as well as whistleblowers from numerous organisations, are now having some success in getting a hearing for suppressed points of view concerning the Covid response. At root, knowledge about public health is not the province of intelligence services, and so control of access to it cannot be so complete, while it remains the case that official justification for decisions to go to war can be based on intelligence that is not easily checkable by most outsiders.

The purpose of the case study is to highlight the strenuousness with which critical investigations relating to an official story can be obstructed and credible challenges can be prevented from reaching a wider public. It shows not only how dissent may be constructively silenced (in a variety of ways) but also how the endorsement of a challengeable official story can be secured from the civil society organisations – including press and NGOs – that Levy would have us presume trustworthy as independent guarantors for its epistemic authority. Whereas Levy argues that we should presume the reliability of an official story in virtue of its having an authority recognised by other institutions of civil society, the evidence I am referring to shows that in such situations we have to reckon with the real possibility of an official story having the support of those wider sets of institutions without necessarily being reliable.

The particular evidence to be presented concerns an organisation with an exemplary claim to epistemic authority in its field. This case study shows that not only can a respected organisation be captured and pressed into service of political objectives but that the wider institutions that warrant its epistemic authority can be influenced into endorsing an official story that lacks genuine credibility. Indeed, something to be emphasised is the sheer weight of coordinated effort that can go into maintaining an official story notwithstanding the opposition of relevantly experienced scientists. My argument is that if such an organisation can be brought to promote an official story whose reliability is demonstrably uncertain, then it is not safe to assume of any organisation that it cannot.

The chosen case has become a familiar one in academic literature (Boyd-Barrett 2022; Cole 2022; Culloty 2021; Diesen 2022; Gray 2019; Hayward 2022; de Lint 2021; McKeigue, Miller, and Robinson 2020; Olsen 2019; Robinson 2022) and it shows up the issues under discussion with particular clarity. It concerns the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which could be regarded as the epitome of an organisation with a well-founded claim to epistemic authority. Staffed by highly competent scientists and other professionals, it commands expertise that would be hard to rival, and its mandate is underwritten by 193 nations of the world. If any organisation merits the presumption of deference, this one does. And yet it has provided an illustration of how genuine epistemic authority can be undermined by actions of the political authority governing the institution.

The official story in question concerns the event in Douma, Syria, on 7 April 2018, which was alleged by opposition forces and Western governments to have been a chemical attack carried out by Syrian government forces. OPCW inspectors were sent on a Fact Finding Mission (FFM) to inspect the sites where the event occurred and where the people said to have been injured in the attack were treated. OPCW also dispatched some of its staff to a 'neighbouring country' – generally assumed to be Turkey – to interview other witnesses who had left Douma so as to avoid capture by the government forces that had meanwhile taken back the town. A report on the findings of the OPCW's FFM was expected by summer 2018, but in July of that year only a provisional report was published. This contained a number of lacunae and anomalies that were pointed out by critical citizen investigators, including from the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media (WGSPM) (McKeigue et al. 2018).⁷ It was only following a notable lapse of time that, in March 2019, the final report appeared (OPCW 2019). This still contained anomalies and lacunae that WGSPM investigators

and others criticised (McKeigue, Miller, and Robinson 2019b). Nevertheless, at that time, a reasonable presumption, for a non-expert who had not engaged in close analysis of the report, would be the one Levy advocates as a general rule.

This might have remained the case, with the incident becoming one of a growing number in relation to which the voicing of suspicions could be dismissed by more influential opinion formers as ‘conspiracy theory’. However, the situation was to change. In May 2019, a WGSPM member received a document leaked from within OPCW. This revealed an engineering assessment of the Douma incident that pointed to a conclusion opposed to that of the official report (McKeigue, Miller, and Robinson 2019a). The official response to this leak was swift but equivocal, shifting through three mutually contradictory explanations in the space of ten days (McKeigue et al. 2019c).

Nevertheless, there was scarcely any discussion of the matter in mainstream media; and Eliot Higgins, head of Bellingcat, suggested that the engineering assessment should not weigh heavily in deliberations about what happened in Douma (Higgins 2019).

In the later part of 2019, however, there were further revelations as whistleblowers came forward from within the OPCW. In October, the Courage Foundation and WikiLeaks released a statement arising from a panel that had met with an OPCW whistleblower concerning irregular practices in the OPCW’s Douma investigation (Courage Foundation 2019). This was signed by several figures of international repute, including the OPCW’s founding director general, José Bustani. In November, WikiLeaks released an email revealing claims of what Peter Hitchens, one of the very few mainstream journalists to investigate this case, called a ‘sexed up dossier’ (Hitchens 2019). However, the OPCW Director General played down their significance, and his response was uncritically reported by mainstream outlets, including Reuters, AFP, CBS News and *The Guardian* (Hayward 2021).

Then, in December, WikiLeaks’ third release of documents detailed malpractice in OPCW Douma reporting; and their fourth release revealed more evidence of an OPCW cover-up of its inspectors’ findings (WikiLeaks 2019). In January 2020, briefings by and on behalf of the whistleblowers were held at the United Nations Security Council and the UK House of Commons. Mainstream media attempts to quash the story then appeared in *The Times* and *Huffington Post*; and in February 2020, the OPCW Director General’s response to the leaks, unlike the leaks themselves, received good coverage in the mainstream media, including via *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* – which covered it twice in a day (Hayward 2021).

In March 2020 a fourth whistleblower came forward to testify to a toxic climate of fear within OPCW (Maté 2020c); and, at the 93rd session of its Executive Council, while Western states parties doubled down on their position, nations outside the Western bloc were voicing concern: China stressed the requirement of OPCW to work in an objective, impartial and professional manner, and India emphasised the need for a consensual approach to reporting and for the integrity and credibility of the OPCW and its mechanisms to be preserved (Hayward 2021).

The situation going into summer 2020 was that the epistemic authority of OPCW’s official report was under serious questioning while its political authority was being strongly supported by Western states. Any attempt to question that story was dismissed in the Western media as a political attempt on behalf of the Russian state.

Yet what the whistleblowers were actually seeking – and, to date, still are – is not the affirmation of any particular substantive view on the case but a transparent discussion of the Douma evidence. They are seeking adherence to the paradigmatically scientific approach of openly reviewing evidence and deliberating on its interpretation and significance.

Have other relevant organisations of civil society been supporting this request to take a deliberative approach to the evidence in the case or put any probing questions to OPCW management? This is what would be expected if those other organisations are to be accepted as guarantors of its epistemic authority, as Levy’s position assumes they should be. The reality is that while attempts to publicise the request, including with its endorsement by notable figures of international repute, were blocked by Western state parties, the Western media denied coverage to the whistleblowing scientists and bestowed it only, and uncritically, on its management’s claims (Maté 2020b).

More than this, though, elements of the media also took part with other organisations in a now documented campaign aimed at suppressing or discrediting any attempt to raise public awareness of the case. One organisation involved was Bellingcat, whose efforts to discredit OPCW whistleblowers included publishing a fake document which purported to be the draft of a letter to a whistleblower by OPCW's Director General (Maté 2020a). The BBC also went to unusual lengths to defend the official story, attempting to discredit the whistleblowers. In November 2020, the BBC devoted an entire episode of its Radio 4 series *Mayday* to this, including by constructing an insinuation that one of the whistleblowers had been motivated in his allegations by expectation of financial reward (BBC 2020). This defamatory accusation was subsequently dispelled by the BBC's own Executive Complaints Unit treatment which was obliged to apologise for 'serious flaws' in its broadcast (Flanagan 2021). Notwithstanding this chastisement, however, and the further questions raised about the broadcast (Maté 2020d), elements at the BBC continued to contrive opportunities to smear those associated with the whistleblowers' cause. For instance, in a BBC (2022) *File on 4* broadcast attacking dissident academics questioning coverage of Ukraine, it shoehorned in a reminder that one of them had also questioned the Douma incident, implying that such questioning had been successfully discredited in the very reporting that had in fact been declared seriously flawed.

Meanwhile, as Robinson (2022) documents, those independent journalists, citizen investigators and distinguished commentators who continued to press questions were routinely smeared in the press and by clusters of social media actors associated with such organs of strategic communications as the Integrity Initiative – part of a law breaking intelligence firm (McLaughlin 2019) – and the British Army's shadowy 77th Brigade (King and Miller 2020). Attacks included such desperate claims on the part of the official story's defenders as the bizarre conspiracy theory that a group of internationally eminent figures led by Hans von Sponeck, Richard Falk and Jose Bustani had been established as a 'front' by and for WGSPM's comparatively obscure academics (Weiss and Goldsmith 2021). Meanwhile, the former First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord West of Spithead, was denounced on the record by the UK Foreign Office (Hitchens 2021) for joining the Berlin Group's list of signatories. Even the world of academic publishing was caught up in efforts to quell questioning about OPCW reporting. These included the forced removal of an academic book chapter written by WGSPM's Piers Robinson in which he set out in some detail the very campaign being referred to here (Robinson 2022).

The case illustrates the extent of coordination of messaging that can be mustered on behalf of an 'official story' and the lengths that may be gone to in order to impede a deliberative approach to testing it. This, moreover, has been happening in the face of opposition from non-Western states representing half the world's population who support the demand for open consideration of the evidence regarding the Douma incident.

The significance of showing this is that if an organisation with such a strong claim to epistemic authority as the OPCW can behave like an organisation that has been captured, and if this is so difficult to bring to light to a wider public, then it raises a more general question about how confident it is a priori rational to be that any other institution today is not also vulnerable to political pressures of a comparable kind. This, I suggest, should be regarded as a genuinely open question: sometimes, even often, the question might readily be settled in favour of the official story, but it should never simply be *assumed* as settled when significant challenges to it remain unaddressed.

6. Conclusion

It makes as little sense to generalise about the epistemic reliability of 'official stories' as a number of social epistemologists have argued it does about the 'conspiracy theories' that oppose them. Each serious challenge to an official story should be assessed on its merits. This does not mean being swayed by extravagant contrarian hypotheses, since these should be treated with even more caution, and, when appropriate, summarily rejected. It does mean being duly aware of how the presumption in favour of official stories is necessarily defeasible. That is the case not just because any story may prove to be mistaken, even in all good faith,

but also because we know that any organisation with politically conferred authority is liable at times to come under political pressures that may, in certain circumstances, override epistemic scruples.

Notes

1. As the survey by Dentith (2018) shows, the literature presenting generalist criticism of 'conspiracy theories' frequently refers to 'official stories' but it seldom analyses these or explains the presumption of their epistemic authority. The challenge of doing so has been recognised, though, by some philosophers, including Buenting and Taylor (2010) and Hagen (2020), as well as Coady (2003, 2007) to whose account Levy's was originally developed as a response (Levy 2007).
2. This is the case, for instance, with Jonathan Cook (formerly of *The Guardian*), Chris Hedges (formerly with *The New Yorker*), John Pilger (award-winning documentary film maker), and the late Robert Parry who founded the independent outlet *Consortium News*.
3. This is to characterise part of the composition of the Berlin Group 21 that has produced the Statement of Concern relating to the case study to be discussed below. See <https://berlingroup21.org/> and associated press release (https://www.einnews.com/pr_news/538579944/leading-international-voices-call-on-opcw-and-its-scientific-advisors-to-allow-all-douma-investigators-to-be-heard).
4. As it happens, I think the kind of trust that has this epistemic relevance relates to *good faith* rather than benevolence – since people can be simultaneously honest and hateful or benevolent deceivers (e.g. *noble liars*) – but the two criteria do tend to converge insofar as one might only even expect good faith from those one regards as benevolent.
5. See the discussion in Hayward (2019, 176–7).
6. For instance, Brian Keeley has written: 'To propose that an explosive secret could be closeted for any length of time simply reveals a lack of understanding of the nature of modern bureaucracies. Like the world itself, they are made up of too many people with too many different agendas to be easily controlled' (1999, 124). He considered this so self-evident as to require no citation of actual research findings to support the assertion.
7. I am a founding member of this group but not one of the authors of its publications cited here.

Compliance with ethical standards

Tim Hayward is a member of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media, which is referred to in the text. This group is an informal collaboration and receives no support or reward of any kind.

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