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Mr. Chairman, Director-General, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Conceived in the 1990s, the Chemical Weapons Convention and the OPCW have performed a vital role in the control and destruction of chemical weapons. This has been achieved in no small part because of the contributions of civil society. Today, though, the OPCW and our contemporary arms control framework stands at a crossroad: The challenges facing the global community from chemical weapons and their impact on communities and the environment have never been greater.

Mr Chairman,

In light of the prolonged events in Syria, and following the nerve agent attack in Salisbury in the UK in March this year, it is undeniable that the pressures on the OPCW, its system of verification, and public information management have been considerable. I wish to focus on one of these issues: how do we communicate information as accurately as possible?

Mr Chairman,

In the weeks following the Skripal incident one state-controlled media outlet distributed more than 20 different narratives of explanation to the world community. The veracity of these claims was rather debatable. But more than that. Often these narratives look and sound like the kind of online news millennials consume. Sometimes the public is systematically targeted with “alternative truths”. These narratives aim to create uncertainty about the effectiveness of our arms control and verification system. They achieve this by sowing doubt without verifiable facts, by attacking experts—their integrity and capabilities—and by closing down reasoned debate. To be clear, a whole host of state actors has been involved in concerted efforts to shape the global conversation about this and other incidents involving chemical weapons.

Mr Chairman,

What we are seeing here is the development and execution of a novel form of hybrid information warfare and propaganda. It requires not only close examination and greater understanding but close collaboration between the OPCW, academia and civil society. In an

increasingly inter-connected world, the role of civil society and by extension academia is becoming ever more vital. The conversation is no longer exclusively owned by nation states and international organisations, but by the global population as well. But we must ensure that this discussion is reasoned and driven by accurate, verifiable information.

Mr Chairman,

So how can academia help in fostering reasoned debate, especially when issues of secrecy and national security are at stake? State and non-state actors may be trying to muddy the waters. Our role as experts and mediators should be to cut through the noise of misinformation, misattribution, misunderstanding and intentional manipulation being generated by groups trained in techniques of hybrid information warfare.

Mr Chairman,

In response, the OPCW and its international partners should embrace both complexity and context. We should consider how information is presented and disseminated to the global population in order to counter misinformation and the malign intent of those who wish to undermine and fragment the effectiveness of our rules-based international system.

Mr Chairman,

Academia can play a crucial role in achieving this aim. In universities and other places of learning across the globe, experts stand ready to help analyze the significant challenges that the OPCW is facing. These specialists can help to ensure that knowledge is not lost between generations, that new ideas can be tested in safe environments. They can mediate between scientists, policy makers and the public. Most importantly, they can offer an ideal place for reasoned debate within a global network of professionals for a concerted response to current and emerging challenges in the field of chemical warfare. In short, I invite those present here today to engage more actively and collaboratively within the public sphere to achieve our collective vision: a world free from chemical weapons.

Thank you for your time. I kindly ask that this statement be made part of the official RC4 on-line proceedings.