

War reporting from afar: covering the covert drone war

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This post is by Polis Summer School Student Carmen Zheng

Reported deaths and injuries

Yemen 2002–2014 US Covert Action

Confirmed drone strikes: **65-77**

Total killed: **339-494**

Civilians killed: **64-83**

Children killed: **7**

Injured: **78-196**

Possible extra drone
strikes: **95-114**

Total killed: **318-509**

Civilians killed: **24-48**

Children killed: **6-9**

Injured: **85-118**

Other covert operations: **14-79**

Total killed: **150-386**

Civilians killed: **60-89**

Children killed: **25-27**

Injured: **22-115**



**See the latest US strikes in
Pakistan or Yemen.**

Source: the Bureau of Investigative Journalism

Prior to the 1990-91 Gulf War, a journalist coined the term The Powell Doctrine, named after then Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell. Vowing to utilize every resource and tool available against the enemy to minimize United States casualties, The Powell Doctrine has been successful in being the driving force behind the U.S. military's usage of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV's), also known as drones. The controversy over UAV's is that drone strikes result in excessive collateral damage, sometimes killing more innocent civilians than military combatants at once.

Alice Ross from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has been working hard on The Covert Drone War, featured on www.thebureauinvestigates.com, which tracks "CIA drone strikes and other US covert actions in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia" by drawing news from various sources across the globe including BBC, CNN, The New York Times, and The Huffington Post. Amongst the statistics and in-depth analyses of the impact of drones on international terrorism, Alice's introduction of the Bureau's Naming the Dead Project is what stood out to me most. As an American, I have done research at my university to see how projects like Naming the Dead are changing the face of wartime journalism.

Naming the Dead is basically a record of the identified people reportedly killed by drone strikes in Pakistan. As I scrolled through the familiar site I had seen in Alice's PowerPoint slides from Polis Summer School today, I read a deluge of biographies and "Case Studies" of innocent mothers who had been gardening when hit by a drone, to al-Qaeda members that have detonated bombs in New York and Great Britain.

However, I could not help but notice one aspect from the 141 pages of names I did not recognize; even though with names and sources, I felt there was still a barrier between the information I truly sought after and me. This barrier, which both Alice and Dr. Shani Orgad touched upon during their talks today, is something no one, not even large-scale news organizations can break down.

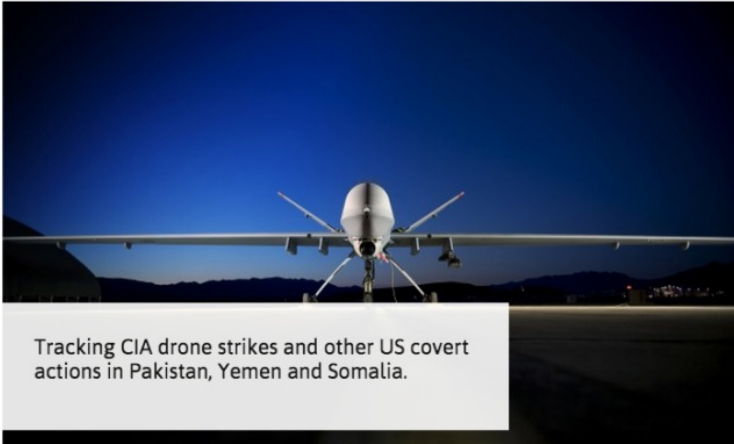


The Naming the Dead Project is beneficial to other news sources and the public in general to garner key information about drone target victims. However, as Alice mentioned, there are challenges: “How reliable are the media reports as sources? How reliable is social media?” Not to mention the inaccessibility of drone sites, which according to our guest speaker, “No journalist from the Western world has actually seen a drone attack in person.”

When I see the statistics from The Bureau’s site, numbers of civilians killed in Pakistan for example range from 416-957, and those that perished from covert operations in Yemen range from 150-386. I know this information is almost impossible to access and I applaud The Bureau for even having numbers, let alone a minimum and the maximum, but I cannot help but worry that news like this frustrates the public. Who can we turn to for accurate information if we’re not sure if 416 died or 957 died? Who was the drone supposed to target when innocent civilians also suffered?

I feel that although websites similar to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism existing specifically to report on innocent civilian casualties exemplifies the dramatic changes in war journalism, they also succeed in making the invisibility of drone warfare visible. This only strengthens the disconnection between drones and citizens, overpowering visions of harnessing any form of successful, mass anti-drone campaign in the future.

Covert Drone War



Tracking CIA drone strikes and other US covert actions in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.

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Dr. Orgad spoke in the morning lecture of “the cereal test,” where reporters would only publish “sanitized war photos” that would not immediately quell the appetites of those eating cereal while watching the morning news. I understand how blood, gore, and overly graphic imagery can make someone want to look away, but I feel that the struggle with drone reporting is that we look away because from the names and obscure numbers because they are banal and repetitive; we can never get information first-hand about any of this!

Essentially, drone warfare is invisible to the government and us: just like we try to absorb as much information from sites like the Bureau as we can, the CIA is sending their drones off from remote control rooms in places like Nevada, watching their victims die from a digital screen.

War technology has changed the face of war for soldiers and citizens alike, but now drone technology has no face – just like killing someone from thousands of miles away is different from reporting a drone attack thousands of miles away. There can be no mass anti-drone campaign from the nation if UAV warfare continues to be this invisible.

As for my personal opinion, I think we should not forget that our drone targets are not innocent women and children, but they are terrorists from groups like al-Qaeda that are responsible for the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and previous U.S. Embassy bombings. We should not forget these attacks killed thousands of innocent women and children as well. But ultimately, I am just a student writing a simple blog post. Just like drone warfare, my words are invisible.

This article is by Polis Summer School student Carmen Zheng @carmenkzheng

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