

Why NYT Dissed the ‘Drone Papers’

When the “Downing Street Memo” surfaced in the UK in 2006 revealing that the intelligence to justify the Iraq War had been “fixed” around the policy, the mainstream U.S. media largely ignored it. The same has now happened with the leak of documents about President Obama’s drone war, writes John Hanrahan.

By John Hanrahan

For that slice of the American public that still depends heavily on major daily newspapers as their main source of news, they might not even know that the on-line publication *The Intercept* has published a package of alarming drone-assassination articles based on secret military documents provided by an anonymous intelligence whistleblower.

These “Drone Papers” show, among other disclosures, that the U.S. government has been lying about the number of civilian deaths caused by drone strikes in Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. For every targeted individual assassinated, another five or six non-targeted individuals are killed, giving the lie to the Obama administration’s long-standing claims of careful, precision killing of specific targets in order to avoid killing civilians.

The Intercept, relying on a cache of slides provided to it by its whistleblower source, posted its package of eight articles on Oct. 15, 2015. Among those picking up on the stories was the *Huffington Post* (which ran excerpts), and other outlets, including *The Guardian*, *Newsweek*, *New York Magazine*, *NPR*, the *PBS NewsHour*, *CNN*, which generally cited some of *The Intercept*’s main findings or speculated about a “second [Edward] Snowden” coming forth as a national security whistleblower.

As of this writing, the premier mainstream publications that carry influence beyond their own immediate readership in setting the nation’s news agenda, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, have carried virtually nothing about what is in these explosive documents, which cover the 2011-2013 period. The documents show the inner workings, and the deadly failures, of the Joint Special Operations Command’s targeted killing programs, a/k/a assassinations, which President Obama signs off on.

The *Post* so far appears to have ignored *The Intercept*’s stories; *The Times*, in a move lightly criticized by the paper’s public editor Margaret Sullivan, managed to attach a whopping two paragraphs about *The Intercept*’s scoop to the end of a story about Obama’s decision to keep troops in Afghanistan until 2017. Those who didn’t read beyond the first few paragraphs of the troops-in-Afghanistan story would have missed altogether that bare mention of *The*

Intercept's scoop in the article's 24th and 25th paragraphs, as I did.

Among the findings derived from the documents, which *Post* and *Times* readers have been deprived of: While drones do kill some of their intended targets, they kill far more non-targeted people who happen to be in the vicinity of the drone strike (or who happen to be using the cell phone or computer of someone who was targeted).

In one major special operations program in northeastern Afghanistan called Operation Haymaker (the only finding the *Times* mentioned in its two paragraphs), 35 individuals targeted for assassination were actually killed in drone strikes, but 219 other non-targeted individuals were also killed.

This meant, *The Intercept* reported, that during one five-month period of Operation Haymaker, "nearly 90 percent of the people killed in airstrikes were not the intended targets. In Yemen and Somalis where the U.S. has far more limited intelligence capabilities to confirm the people killed are the intended targets, the equivalent ratios may well be much worse."

All those killed, intended target or not, are designated "enemy killed in action" (EKIA), the source told *The Intercept*. Official U.S. government statements minimizing the number of civilian casualties, the source said, are "exaggerating at best, if not outright lies."

Now at first I thought it could be that the *Times* and the *Post* were working diligently to match *The Intercept* stories, attempting before printing anything to obtain and carefully review similar sets of slides as *The Intercept* used for its stories. After all, *The Intercept's* articles didn't just appear overnight, but rather "were produced by a team of reporters and researchers that has spent months analyzing the documents."

Perhaps these mainstream outlets were also attempting to take the story beyond what *The Intercept* has posted, I speculated. If so, we should all eagerly await the results.

But at least as far as the *Times* is concerned, that doesn't appear to be the case. The paper's public editor Margaret Sullivan questioned *Times* executive editor Dean Baquet, and the editor for national security coverage, William Hamilton, as to "why the story had received relatively short shrift."

In response, Sullivan wrote, "Both said they found the project a worthy one. They and several Washington editors looked it over with interest, they said, and agreed that there was new detail in it. But they didn't see it as something that warranted its own story, at least not at the moment, they said."

The *Times* editors' responses smack of that old chestnut of an excuse in the newsroom when some other publication scoops you: "We had that story already. Nothing much new here. Let's kiss it off with two paragraphs."

Before commenting further on the *Times's* editors' fairly inane response, it must be noted that over the past few years *New York Times* reporter Scott Shane has written some revealing stories about the U.S. drone program, without benefit of documents such as *The Intercept* is reporting on.

Shane's articles included one earlier this year noting that, despite reassurances from the President on down, the U.S. is often unsure about whom it is actually killing in drone strikes, a major disclosure reinforced by *The Intercept* documents and its source.

And in May 2012, Shane and Jo Becker were the first to report that President Obama signed off on a secret "kill list" of individuals to be targeted in drone strikes. The reporters at the same time also revealed that Obama "embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties. It in effect counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent."

But this past significant coverage does not excuse why the *Times* and much of the mainstream press has so far not reported even a good timely summary of what *The Intercept* has published in its articles, which advance the drone story beyond what has previously been reported.

As revealing as the *Times* stories were at the time, they lacked what *The Intercept* now has: actual secret military documents that back up what its exclusive source is telling it, and that provide far more detail and data about the program than what was printed earlier.

The *Times* editors' explanations just don't wash. Do these editors really believe that one major drone story every year or so is all that is required, even in the face of vital new information published by a competitor?

In a newspaper full of wall-to-wall stories on Donald Trump, Republican Benghazi shenanigans, the ever-shifting permutations of the Democratic and Republican presidential races in Iowa and New Hampshire, stories all full of much the same elements one day to the next, it boggles the mind to think the *Times* believes it has "done" its quota of drone-atrocity stories for the time being. That they saw nothing in *The Intercept's* stories "that warranted its own story" in the *Times*.

Do *Times* editors believe we, their reading public, don't need to know anything more about this dreadful subject than what they told us in articles last spring and in the spring of 2012? That what Shane reported last May, as substantial a

story as it was, is the last word in drone murders? The editors even acknowledged to Sullivan that *The Intercept* stories contained “new detail.” Why not share all that new detail with its readers?

The Intercept, after all, is a reliable, hard-charging news organization staffed by several of the nation’s top national security investigative reporters, and no editor at any other news operation should have any hesitancy about reporting a summary of its drone findings, backed up as they are by insider documents.

And in reporting the summary, of course crediting *The Intercept* in the same manner print news media and broadcast newscasts frequently do when they themselves don’t have a particular important story from their own reporters. It happens all the time.

Mainstream news organizations have an obligation to provide their readers with important, credible, timely news reports, even when the report comes from a competing, and reputable, news organization, and even if they might be working on their own story which they hope to publish at some point.

Margaret Sullivan didn’t come down hard on the *Times* for all but ignoring *The Intercept*’s stories, noting that since the newspaper “has done so much on this subject, it may be understandable that only a brief mention of *The Intercept*’s scoop has been made so far.”

Still, she added, “given the revelations in the released documents, as well as the mere existence of a major intelligence leaker who is not Edward Snowden, *Times* journalists would have served readers well to do more on ‘The Drone Papers.’ They also could consider doing so in the future.”

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of readers of the *Times* and the *Post* and other mainstream news outlets are being denied actual news that has serious implications for the ways the United States wages the endless wars this nation has been recklessly embarked on for the last 14 years.

Jeremy Scahill, the award-winning reporter who headed *The Intercept*’s reporting team on the Drone Papers, described the importance of the documents this way: “Taken together, the secret documents lead to the conclusion that Washington’s 14-year high-value targeting campaign suffers from an overreliance on signals intelligence [metadata from cellphones and computers], an apparently incalculable civilian toll, and, due to a preference for assassination rather than capture, an inability to extract potentially valuable intelligence from terror suspects. They also highlight the futility of the war in Afghanistan by showing how the U.S. has poured vast resources into killing local insurgents, in the process exacerbating the very threat the U.S. is seeking to confront.”

Scahill said the information in these secret slides is “especially relevant today as the U.S. military intensifies its drone strikes and covert actions against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.”

Tragically, there are few voices in the mainstream press and in Congress raising any alarms about the proliferation of what Scahill calls the borderless U.S. “unconventional wars that employ special operations forces at the tip of the spear”

Like so much else in the never-ending global war on Terror, Inc., the euphemistically named targeted killings have become part of the military landscape which most Americans passively accept as just the way things are, if they pay any attention at all. There are many brave souls around the country who regularly protest and get arrested at military drone sites and drone contractors’ facilities, or at the Pentagon and White House protesting against drones and U.S. militarism generally, but there is no mass movement.

With only a relative handful of people protesting, and with no congressional hearings and only sporadic news coverage raising any serious questions about the morality and legality of targeted assassinations under international law, the policy isn’t likely to change. Not unless and until a critical mass of well-organized citizens rises up in revulsion and anger at these cowardly killings and endless wars being carried out in our name.

And one big way the public should be able to find out more about the horrors of drone warfare, and how it fits into never-ending U.S. militarism, is from a news media that sees it as its mission to report about such subjects in all their terror and gruesome death aspects.

This topic truly is one of life and death for many people, particularly the beleaguered citizens of the greater Middle East. And it carries deep implications for our democracy, as well. As Scahill wrote about the Drone Papers:

“Whether through the use of drones, night raids, or new platforms yet to be unleashed, these documents lay bare the normalization of assassination as a central component of U.S. counterterrorism policy.”

The normalization of the United States as prime International Assassin: Somehow, that sounds like news, scary news that the American people need to know, and need to hear again and again.

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