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**Media Coverage of the
Drone Program**

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In 2009 and 2010, the media fell short in its coverage of the Obama administration's drone program, a campaign of lethal strikes focused on terrorists in Pakistan. Once the drone program expanded its range of potential targets to include American citizens and its geographic scope to countries such as Yemen, Libya, and Somalia, however, news organizations increased the breadth and depth of their coverage.

INTRODUCTION

President Barack Obama authorized his first drone strike three days after his inauguration. Since then, he has approved more than three hundred drone strikes against Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups in Pakistan, six times the number of attacks that were carried out during President George W. Bush's two terms in the White House. In addition, strikes have been carried out against terrorism suspects in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and the Philippines.¹ The drone program represents a shift in strategy for the United States, turning the nation away from large-scale deployment of troops and instead focusing on drones and small bands of special operators who carry out lethal operations. Under the Obama administration, the targeted-killing program has become the centerpiece of U.S. counterterrorism strategy. The Obama White House program of targeted killing is unprecedented in its mission and scope; moreover, the administration's approach to fighting terrorists is likely to be adopted by presidents in the future, whether Democratic or Republican. For these reasons, it makes sense to examine the role of media in the public debate about the program and moreover to see how journalists have fared in their efforts to cover the story of the targeted-killing program.

Ever since the Al Qaeda attack on the United States in September 2001, executives at media organizations have devoted considerable resources to the coverage of national security. Indeed, scholarly research shows that overall the coverage of terrorism has remained relatively strong for much of the past decade,² despite widespread layoffs in

the media industry. More recently, journalists and editors have shown a special interest in the subject of the drone program and its role in national security, and the reporting on this subject increased steadily during President Obama's first term. For this paper, an informal survey of news articles about drone strikes was conducted, looking at pieces that appeared in five major U.S. publications: *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. The media coverage of strikes in these publications nearly doubled during the Obama administration, from 326 articles in 2009 to 625 articles in 2012 (as of November).

Three of these newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, have teams of reporters devoted to national security, reflecting the commitment that publishing executives have shown toward the coverage of this subject. Each newspaper devotes at least four full-time reporters to national-security issues, ranging from drone strikes to cyberwarfare, and has editors who specialize in the field and help to shape their newspapers' coverage of the subject. In addition, dozens of blogs and websites such as *Wired's* Danger Room and Lawfare are devoted to national security and cover the drone program.

Social media has also expanded the possibilities for media coverage of the subject: Journalists such as *Time's* Bobby Ghosh, ProPublica's Dafna Linzer, and Pir Zubair Shah, formerly with *The New York Times* and now the Edward R. Murrow Press Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, tweet on the subject. News about CIA- and military-run operations, including the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan in May 2011, were reported first on Twitter, and an application known as Drone+ has been created in order to follow the strikes in Pakistan.³

The development of citizen reporting on Twitter and Facebook, as well as software that provides information about the targeted-killing program show the fascination Americans have in the subject as well as opportunities for them to deepen their

knowledge of the program. Moreover, this type of reporting shows that the targeted killings, while officially classified, are widely documented and allow journalists to report on the subject using a variety of tools. As the coverage in social media shows, drone strikes raise a host of questions about their legal foundation, as well as their ethical and moral implications, and this paper looks at the manner in which the news media has addressed these issues. For that reason, articles about drone strikes in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* were examined not only in terms of quantity (see Appendix, Figures One and Two), but also in terms of content (see Appendix, Article Database).

For the content analysis, a database of articles was compiled in order to examine the level of complexity and sophistication in the coverage of the drone program from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2012. This database includes only articles that looked at the legal aspects of the drone program, since those articles tended to be more nuanced in their efforts to understand the program and served as a measure of the quality of coverage. The same five publications, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*, were studied for the content analysis part of the study. However, *Time* published so few articles that looked at the legal aspects of the drone coverage that the work from their reporters was not included in the database.

Reporters and editors at *The New York Times* pursued the story of the targeted-killing program more aggressively than reporters at the other publications, both in terms of the quantity of articles and also in the quality of content. In 2009, the year Obama was sworn in as president, *The New York Times* published 142 articles. Three years later, *The New York Times* published 245 articles on the subject, many of which focused on the international angle of the story. *The Washington Post* published 72 articles in 2009, reflecting in part the newspaper's interest in the business of Washington, federal agencies such as the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency, which were managing the drone program.

Over the next three years, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* both increased their coverage at roughly the same rate. *The New York Times* kept its focus on the international angle, while reporters at *The Washington Post* continued to look more closely at the federal agencies involved in the program. *The Washington Post* published 234 articles on the subject in 2012, nearly the same number that appeared in *The New York Times*.

The Christian Science Monitor ran a significant number of stories, fifty, in 2009, which reflected their interest in international affairs, and it published 58 articles on the subject in 2012. *Time* ran a relatively substantial number of stories, thirty-seven, in the first year of the Obama administration. In 2012, though, their coverage dropped to 27 stories.

The Wall Street Journal ran twenty-six articles on the subject in 2009. As drone manufacturers increased their profits, *The Wall Street Journal* increased its coverage, and by 2012 it published 86 stories on the subject and had begun to examine how the industry was being regulated in Washington.

Meanwhile, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* invested more in their reporting on the drone program, as demonstrated in the articles that looked at its legal aspects. From July 2009 to June 2010, each of these newspapers published one article that looked at legal aspects of drone strikes. From July 2010 to June 2011, *The Christian Science Monitor* published three articles that looked at legal aspects of drone strikes, while *The New York Times* published twelve; *The Wall Street Journal* published two, and *The Washington Post* published eleven. From July 2011 to June 2012, *The Christian Science Monitor* published four articles that looked at the legal aspects of drone strikes, while *The New York Times* published twenty articles; *The Wall Street Journal* published seven, and *The Washington Post* published twenty.

At *The Christian Science Monitor*, reporters were more likely than those at other leading publications to look at moral and ethical aspects of drones and targeted killings, a

sensibility that is shown in “Al Qaeda drone attacks on US?”, published in September 2011, that described the use of drones as an “ethical minefield.”⁴ In another example, reporter Scott Baldauf wrote in an October 2011 article; “Imagine a war without coffins draped with American flags, without yellow ribbons, without post-traumatic stress disorder. But drone wars are not bloodless, and for every ‘successful’ strike against a ‘legitimate’ target like Anwar al-Awlaki [an American-born radical cleric killed on September 30, 2011], there are several others that go astray, hitting a civilian hospital, a school, or someone who bore an unfortunate resemblance to the target.”⁵

In *Wall Street Journal* articles that looked at legal aspects of the drone program, reporters focused not on ethical aspects of the program, but on lawsuits filed against the government. A May 2012 piece, “U.S. Rethinks Secrecy About Drones,” showed how government programs were being examined in the courts and presumably how legal findings could affect businesses that are investing in the industry. In contrast, reporters for *The New York Times* placed more of an emphasis on a political angle,⁶ a sensibility that was reflected in articles such as a January 2010 piece, “Obama’s War Over Terror,” which described how the president rejected harsh interrogation methods used on detainees under the Bush administration since these techniques had “fallen out of favor.” Instead, Obama White House officials ramped up the use of drones, an approach that was supported by individuals such as Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s then–chief of staff, and others who had worked on his presidential campaign and were sensitive to “the politics of these decisions.”⁷ In addition, two other articles, “Obama Team Split on Tactics Against Terror” (March 2010) and “Renewing a Debate Over Secrecy, and Its Costs” (June 2012), looked at disagreements over the drone program within the White House, describing a politically savvy president and his advisers as they grappled with a national-security strategy.

Of the 11 articles that looked at legal aspects of the drone campaign appearing in *The Washington Post* between July 2010 to June 2011, five⁸ focused on the CIA, reflecting the interest that *Washington Post* reporters have in federal agencies.

Of the 12 articles that *The New York Times* published between July 2010 to June 2011 that looked at legal aspects of the drone campaign, a substantial number, five,⁹ looked at contentious issues regarding the drone program, such as a U.N. adviser's criticism about the strikes and the level of secrecy surrounding the strikes. As pieces in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* demonstrated, human-rights advocates criticized the drone program, while analysts presented an ethical argument in support of the program. "Never before in the history of air warfare have we been able to distinguish as well between combatants and civilians as we can with drones," according to the author of a January 2010 piece in *The Wall Street Journal*, describing "a more moral campaign."¹⁰ Several months later, another *Wall Street Journal* piece explained, "Drones represent the most discerning — and therefore most moral — form of aerial warfare in human history," adding that the operators, software engineers, and lawyers have set up procedures for the strikes that "protect innocent civilian life."¹¹

As these articles show, the issue of the drone program and targeted killings is complex, with human-rights advocates, philosophers, and military strategists arguing over the merits of the program. However, few journalists considered the range of complexities of the issue during the early years of the Obama administration. They began to examine the issue in a more sophisticated manner only in the later years of Obama's first term in office, a shift in coverage that was caused less by the passage of time than by two important events in the evolution of the drone program, the killing of an American citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, in Yemen in the fall of 2011, and a speech given by counterterrorism adviser John Brennan several months later in which he spoke about "moral questions" regarding the drone program — and coincided with an expansion of the program. These events caused a change in both the volume of coverage, which

increased dramatically, and also in the tone and depth of coverage. After both of these events, journalists at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other media organizations began to write more analytical and investigative articles about the targeted-killing program, despite a reporting environment that was marked by secrecy and paranoia and by a crackdown on leaks.

REPORTING ON A SECRET PROGRAM

National security is one of the toughest subjects for a reporter. “No beat is more humbling,” wrote journalist Ted Gup in a Shorenstein Center paper, *Covering the CIA in Times of Crisis*.¹² The remotely piloted drone is one of the most significant military developments of the past decade, allowing American forces to kill terrorists abroad in record time, and it is also one of the most challenging stories for journalists. The drone program has been expanded over the years, a trend that has been fueled both by the counterterrorism strategy of President Obama, which emphasizes unilateral action against militants in Pakistan to a greater extent than President Bush did, as well as by a spike in the number of drones available and by the technology that has made them into increasingly efficient machines.¹³

Decades ago, wrote Robert A. Pape in *Foreign Affairs*, “U.S. bombers flattened factories and other buildings in Germany and Japan and electric-power plants in North Korea and Vietnam with large numbers of ‘dumb’ bombs.” He explained that roughly seventy-five percent of guided munitions now hit their targets or land within ten feet of them, adding that “this is a remarkable improvement compared to World War II, when only about 18 percent of U.S. bombs fell within 1,000 feet of their targets, and only 20 percent of British bombs dropped at night fell within five miles of theirs.”¹⁴

The improved technology led in part to the increased use of drones under the Obama administration, following a pattern of U.S. air campaigns over the past several decades. Military planners began to rely more heavily on air power in Vietnam when they found that attack helicopters such as the Huey AH-1B could be sent out over dangerous terrain and attack the enemy from a distance. The helicopters ramped up the kill rate. The drone strikes against Al Qaeda are part of a long-standing tradition for American forces, which relies heavily on air power, and previous bombing campaigns, such as B-52 strikes in Vietnam and aerial campaigns in Bosnia and Serbia, provoked similar controversies. In all of these conflicts, however, Americans favored the use of surgical air strikes over the deployment of ground troops.

In Vietnam, Americans dropped bombs on North Vietnamese targets, flying more than 750,000 sorties from 1965 to 1972.¹⁵ Many of the aircraft were B-52's, which, as journalist Ron Moreau wrote in *Newsweek*, "inflicted heavy losses during the long and bloody siege at Khe Sanh in 1968," explaining that "Vietnamese airfield, SAM and antiaircraft sites were also hit hard in the north." One military specialist, Maj. Gen. Tran Cong Man, the former editor of the Vietnamese Army daily, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, said later that the B-52s' biggest impact was as "an instrument of terror."¹⁶

Decades later, American forces used air power when they bombed military targets in Bosnia. "U.S. air strikes delivered 1,026 bombs against fifty-six military targets in western Bosnia and near Sarajevo," wrote Pape in *Foreign Affairs*, "enough to debilitate the far smaller and less heavily armed Bosnian Serb army."¹⁷ The air strikes were supported by the majority of Americans, with sixty percent of the public saying they were in favor of the strikes, according to an article, "Arms and the People," that was written by Andrew Kohut and Robert C. Toth for *Foreign Affairs*. "U.S. air strikes, which some have termed the 'American way of war,' were clearly favored over committing U.S. ground troops to Bosnia."¹⁸

An improved version of the drone was used for surveillance in the Balkans, and military planners were impressed with its ability to provide images of enemy forces, and soon they began to contemplate its potential as a weapon. Airmen at a Nevada test range fired anti-armor missiles from a Predator and found that the experiment worked: They destroyed their target, a rusty tank, with a drone that was operated remotely. Before the creation of the weapon-ized drone, the kill chain, or the amount of time it takes to identify an enemy and then “neutralize” him, could take three days, but drones can do that in five minutes. The drone, which a former top aide to Gen. David H. Petraeus describes as “near-perfect,” comes equipped with five-hundred-pound, laser-guided bombs. It has accelerated the speed of killing as well as the ease with which strikes can be carried out, and in turn American forces have relied increasingly on the Predator in the battle against Al Qaeda.

The growth of the drone industry has been impressive: The American army’s inventory of drones went from fifty-four in October 2001, the month the Afghanistan war began, to today’s store of more than 4,000 unmanned aerial vehicles. President Obama said in a speech at the Pentagon in January 2012 that the new military would be “agile” and “flexible;” and as a result America’s forces will have more Predators. As journalists Scott Shane and Thom Shanker wrote in an October 2011 article for *The New York Times*, the nation’s reliance on drones has been driven both by “shrinking budgets, which will no longer accommodate the deployment of large forces overseas at a rough annual cost of \$1 million per soldier, and by improvements in the technical capabilities of remotely piloted aircraft.”¹⁹

The nation’s economic downturn hit the defense industry hard, but the drone program remains relatively unscathed. “The services are all so intrigued by their capacities that they are buying more of them than they anticipated,” defense analyst Gordon Adams, a professor at American University, explained. “What you are finding is every year the projected size of the UAV capabilities is getting larger.” Over the next ten years, military

officials will spend \$17.9 billion on unmanned aerial vehicles, and they plan to build nine thousand new aircraft. General Atomics is the creator of the Predator, and it has a commercial-style flight schedule with at least forty of the remote-controlled jets flying somewhere in the world every second of the day.

During battles in the 1990s and today, many Americans believed that the use of air force is more efficient than the deployment of ground troops — though critics of the drone program say that remotely controlled aircraft make warfare *too* distant. “Assassination and targeted killings have always been in the repertoires of military planners, but never in the history of warfare have they been so cheap and easy,” wrote philosophers John Kaag and Sarah Kreps in *The New York Times*. The drone strikes make killing appear simple, they wrote, and consequently journalists have overlooked the “slow accretion of foreign casualties.”²⁰ Distance obscures detail: In Graham Greene’s screenplay for the 1949 film *The Third Man*, Harry Lime (Orson Welles), who is accused of stealing penicillin from hospitals, rides a Ferris wheel and then looks down at people on the ground below him. “Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever?” he says.²¹ Lime finds it possible to commit crimes once he has dehumanized the victims.

In targeted killings, according to critics of the drone program, the Predator accelerates the process of dehumanization and allows journalists to characterize combat as a form of “pest control,” a phrase that philosopher Uwe Steinhoff used in an essay.²² In that vein, journalists describe the activities of Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters in words that are commonly used to describe vermin: Militants “snaked” and “crept.”²³ From 2009 to 2011, the drone program was perceived in this country as an efficient way to exterminate terrorists, and the coverage of the strikes during that time was relatively positive, with only sporadic reporting on collateral damage or on the program’s legal and moral ramifications. Most of the drone strikes take place in an area of Pakistan known as the Federally Administered Tribal Area, a region that is roughly the size of Maryland and is

one of the poorest places in the world, a terrain that has added to the difficulties that American journalists have faced in their coverage of the program. The Pakistani military has banned Western journalists from this region except when accompanied by the military, and so Westerners rely on local journalists to visit the sites where strikes have occurred, an extraordinarily dangerous assignment that has led to some of their deaths.

The Predator and its chunkier cousin, the Reaper, are both known as unmanned aircraft, but in reality each one is a team of human beings, including many who work at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, the hub for America's drone program. Government officials who worked on the drone program were relatively open to journalists during the Bush administration and allowed them to come to interview drone operators. Yet access to the base was denied after a *Washington Post* article about encryption of drone feeds appeared in 2009.²⁴ Military officials thought the journalist had "gone too far" in revealing information about the drone program, and they cut off access to Creech.²⁵ For the next three and a half years, requests from journalists to visit the air base were postponed, indefinitely.²⁶

Journalists who cover the drone program say that the biggest obstacles to their work has come not from Air Force officers, however, but from officials in Washington, a pattern that goes back decades. During the Vietnam War, it was "not the military that imposed restrictions on the journalists; when there were restrictions, it was the civilian leadership in the White House," said Daniel C. Hallin, author of *The 'Uncensored War' — The Media and Vietnam*.²⁷ Today the situation is similar. Since the drone program is classified, officials are not allowed to talk about it. Yet it is an uneven policy of silence. President Obama discussed the drone strikes on Google's social network, Google+, and White House officials have spoken with some journalists about the strikes, largely in an attempt to foster a positive image of the drone campaign. At the same time, officials have guarded against leaks of classified information, particularly about counterterrorism efforts that could cast the government in a bad light.

Government officials have reason to be cautious. Disclosing information about covert operations “puts American lives at risk, makes it more difficult to recruit assets, strains the trust of our partners and threatens imminent and irreparable damage to our national security,” according to a joint statement that was issued by Republican and Democratic leaders of the House and Senate intelligence committees.²⁸ As one former CIA official explained, “Revealing the identification of sources and their deeds at some subsequent time could subject them and their families to personal danger, ridicule, or persecution in their homeland for generations to come, hardly an incentive for cooperating with us.”²⁹

Government officials believe that secrecy surrounding military programs is crucial to their success. After the NATO strikes about the Serbian military in 1999, members of the media pressed Pentagon officials for information about the attacks — to no avail. “Even to disclose the number of bombing sorties or their targets after the fact — when the Serbs already knew what had been done — would provide the enemy with too much information,” Kenneth Bacon, who was at the time the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, told a reporter. “You could extrapolate from what we were doing one night what we would do the next.”³⁰

Under the Obama administration, many government officials also believe that providing information about the drone strikes would be dangerous. CIA officials have “argued that the release of any information about the program, particularly on how targets are chosen and strikes approved, would aid the enemy. Among other variables, according to one source briefed on the program, those selecting targets calculate how much potential collateral damage is acceptable relative to the value of the target,” wrote Karen DeYoung in an article, “U.S. sticks to secrecy as drone strikes surge,” in *The Washington Post* in December 2011. “An insurgent leader aware of such logic, they said, could avoid an attack simply by positioning himself in the midst of enough civilians to make the strike too costly.”³¹

In an effort to keep government secrets under wraps, President Obama has prosecuted six cases of leaks (the investigations were not focused on the drone program) during his four years in office, more than any president before him. Many lawmakers applaud his aggressive approach towards leaks as a way to ensure that government secrets will remain hidden from view. However, journalists say the crackdown on leaks has been excessive, and moreover has had a chilling effect on their efforts to cover government activities such as the drone program. Government officials are reluctant to talk to reporters, since they are routinely asked in polygraph examinations about contacts with reporters,³² and the coverage of the drone program has been largely shaped by the officials who control the media's access to the air base and to information about the program.

PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR DRONES

Obama White House officials have attempted to foster positive coverage of the drone program by disclosing information about successful operations. When a CIA-directed drone strike killed Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud in Pakistan in 2009, for example, administration officials revealed details about the attack in off-the-record interviews and in this way journalists were able to include graphic accounts of the strike in their articles.³³ "I'm shocked. There's gambling in the casinos," said *Newsweek's* Daniel Klaidman, the author of a critically acclaimed book entitled *Kill or Capture*, during a panel discussion at the Council on Foreign Relations in June 2012.³⁴ "Of course the White House wants to do that." Philip Alston, the former special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions for the United Nations, wrote in an article for *Harvard Law School National Security Journal* that the leaks from administration officials "played a powerful role in legitimizing the targeted killings program by trumpeting the killing of senior militants and disseminating the CIA's entirely unsubstantiated accounts of the number of civilian casualties."

“Instead of challenging these assumptions and probing beneath the surface, too many of those writing about targeted killings lamely accept that there is insufficient information in the public domain to enable existing policies and practices to be meaningfully assessed against rule of law standards,” wrote Alston. “But the default approach of presuming probity good faith, constant self-discipline and deference to formally accepted legal limits on the part of officials acting in secrecy undermines basic democratic principles, defies experience, and mocks the notion of human rights accountability.”³⁵ As Alston pointed out, officials have spoken about the strikes under controlled circumstances, but they have been unwilling to discuss the majority of the attacks. Nor will administration officials explain who may be targeted. “I think there’s a post-9/11 legacy in which the ‘trust us’ mindset lingers,” says journalist Ted Gup. “They’re saying, ‘Trust us — we have the goods on these individuals.’”³⁶ Josh Rogin, who covers national security for *Foreign Policy*, says, “It’s an ad hoc approach to how they respond to the press.”³⁷

Many of the articles about the drone program during the early years of the Obama administration provided accounts of the successful strikes, yet offered little information about the controversial ones. After the raid on bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan in the spring of 2011, the largest spike in coverage occurred, with a total of eighty-seventy articles in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Wall Street Journal* (see Appendix, Figure Two). Many of these articles about the drone program were positive, with only a few mentioning legal or moral issues. Yet from 2009 to 2011, the number of civilian casualties from strikes had begun to rise, and meanwhile people living in Pakistan were becoming more vocal in their opposition to the targeted-killing program.

During a speech in Washington in June 2011, the president’s counterterrorism adviser, John O. Brennan, said, “There hasn’t been a single collateral death because of the exceptional proficiency, precision of the capabilities we’ve been able to develop.”³⁸ The CIA had directed fifty-two drone strikes in Pakistan during that period of time and

killed dozens of people.³⁹ Nevertheless, journalists at the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *National Journal*, Reuters, and other media organizations expressed little skepticism in their accounts.⁴⁰ “John Brennan gave a speech and said there were no civilian casualties, and we did a story about what he said,” Warren Strobel, the U.S. foreign policy editor at Reuters, told me. “What we didn’t do was a truth squad on his claims.”⁴¹

One reporter did. In August 2011, Scott Shane of *The New York Times* published a piece, “C.I.A. Is Disputed on Civilian Toll in Drone Strike,” that examined the claims of Brennan and other administration officials and also those from unofficial sources. “A closer look at the competing claims, including interviews with American officials and their critics, discloses new details about how the C.I.A. tracks the results of the drone strikes,” he wrote. “It also suggests reasons to doubt the precision and certainty of the agency’s civilian death count.”⁴²

The tone of the media coverage shifted in 2011, with a drone strike that killed the American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. This led to the largest spike in media coverage, with ninety-six articles about the targeted killing program in October, the month after his death, in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Wall Street Journal* (see Appendix, Figure Two). The death of an American raised questions about who might be targeted in a strike, and journalists became more circumspect. “The killing of Awlaki was sort of watershed because it was an American citizen who was not convicted of any crime,” Reuters’ Warren Strobel told me. “It was a pretty big step for the U.S. government to take.”⁴³

The killing of al-Awlaki marked a turning point in the way that journalists wrote about the drone program. Of the dozens of articles about the program that appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Time* and *The Wall Street Journal* from July 2009 to July 2010, only thirty-seven mentioned legal issues about

the program. Ten mentioned moral issues surrounding the targeted killings. During the following twelve-month period, a comparable period from July 2011 to July 2012, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Christian Science Monitor* published roughly 120 articles, or more than four times the number of articles from a comparable period in the previous twelve months, that looked at legal aspects of the drone program. In addition, these newspapers published thirty-three articles that looked at moral aspects of the program, more than three times the number of articles during the previous twelve-month-long period of time.

Some of these articles were groundbreaking: Reuters published a piece, "Secret panel can put Americans on 'kill list,'" by Mark Hosenball, revealing details about the targeting of terrorism suspects. He wrote that administration critics had accused President Obama of "hypocrisy" and noted that White House officials "insisted on publishing Bush-era administration legal memos justifying the use of interrogation techniques many equate with torture, but refused to make public its rationale for killing a citizen without due process."⁴⁴ Putting together the story about the "kill list," says Strobel, was an arduous task: "You get bits and pieces of the puzzle, and it took a while before we were confident that we had enough detail."⁴⁵

For both editors and reporters, the process of doing a story about the drone program is time-consuming and delicate. Ideally, says one female journalist who works on stories about drone strikes for a prominent publication, "You talk to the hunter and to the people who are being hunted. Both sides are human." (She asked not to be identified because of the sensitive nature of her work). In Washington, she arranges to meet her sources at Starbucks and other coffeehouses. She arrives early, and she brings out a thick reporter's notebook. "I ask if I can take notes," she says. "I never record." Once, she was interviewing an official about the Arab spring, and a friend of hers walked by their table. As it turned out, it was Singles Night, and her friend thought that the journalist and her source were on a date. "I thought, 'What an interesting cover,'" the journalist recalls.

In the spring of 2012, counterterrorism adviser John Brennan gave another speech in Washington because, he said, “President Obama has instructed us to be more open.” The speech was a milestone, both in terms of candor about the program and also in the media coverage. Brennan spoke openly about the program, using the word “drone” for the first time, and he expressed his personal concerns. “The issue of targeted strikes raised profound moral questions,” he said. “It forces us to confront deeply held personal beliefs and our values as a nation. If anyone in government who works in this area tells you they haven’t struggled with this, then they haven’t spent much time thinking about it. I know I have, and I will continue to struggle with it as long as I remain involved in counterterrorism.”⁴⁶ The month after Brennan’s speech, reporters at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Wall Street Journal* published ninety-six articles, one of the biggest spikes in coverage of the drone program (see Appendix, Figure Two). It was not only Brennan’s speech that marked a change in how White House officials were administering the drone program: By then, President Obama had expanded the program dramatically. Terrorism suspects were being killed not only in Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan, but also in Libya, Yemen, and Somalia. “Drone strikes in six countries,” says Reuters’ Warren Strobel. “That statistic kind of jolted me a little bit, and we started to do analytical pieces.”⁴⁷

“I think that people didn’t understand how central this was to a counterterrorism strategy until it migrated from one place, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, to a bunch of different places,” says James Traub, a former contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine* who now writes for *Foreign Policy*. “Before, I thought, ‘Well, maybe it’s bad, but not as bad as the other options. I was probably wrong about that nonchalant attitude. But now that it’s part of the broad policy, it needs to be brought to light.”⁴⁸

Throughout the summer and fall, journalists began to write more about the various aspects of targeted killing — in one case, by doing a profile of a Notre Dame professor who examined moral and legal issues about the program.⁴⁹ “I think the way we grapple

with it is not to write about the moral and ethical implications, but to make sure we're reporting on this program because it has moral and ethical implications," Reuters' Warren Strobel says. "It's incumbent upon us to report on this stuff and let the American people know what is being done in their name."

"The most agonizing issue in the drone program is figuring out who is an enemy combatant, who is not, and how one knows," wrote Georgetown Law's David Luban in an essay for *Boston Review*. "So much turns on the details: the expected collateral damage, how much care has been taken to verify the target and the danger he poses, whether the target was trying to surrender, whether the foreign state is truly unwilling or unable to suppress the target, what the non-lethal alternatives were the wrong answer on any of these issues means the decision to kill from the air flunks the test of morality."⁵⁰

The quantity and quality of the coverage of the drone program has improved since President Obama's inauguration, leading to important pieces such as Scott Shane's "C.I.A. Is Disputed on Civilian Toll in Drone Strike" in *The New York Times* and Mark Hosenball's article about Obama's "kill list" for Reuters. Overall, though, it took two important events, the killing of Al-Awlaki in the fall of 2011 and counterterrorism chief John Brennan's speech about "moral questions" in the following spring, to elevate the coverage of the subject, alerting journalists to the legal and ethical complexity of a targeted-killing program and ultimately to a higher quality of journalism. Yet four years later important aspects about "things that go boom in Pakistan," as a CIA spokeswoman described the drone strikes, are still unclear. Who is targeted? Are these individuals a threat to Americans? Why has only one high-level terrorist been taken prisoner since 2009, yet thousands have been killed? The opacity about the program makes it all the more important for journalists to continue to press administration officials for more transparency and also to write investigative and critical pieces about the targeted killings.

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Appendix. Coverage of Drone Strikes, 2009 to 2012

Figure One.

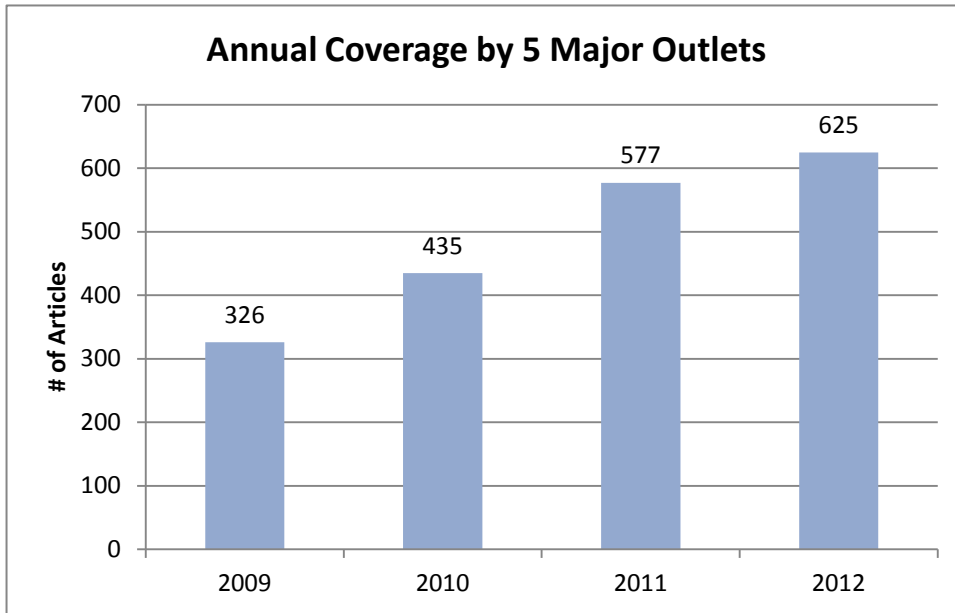
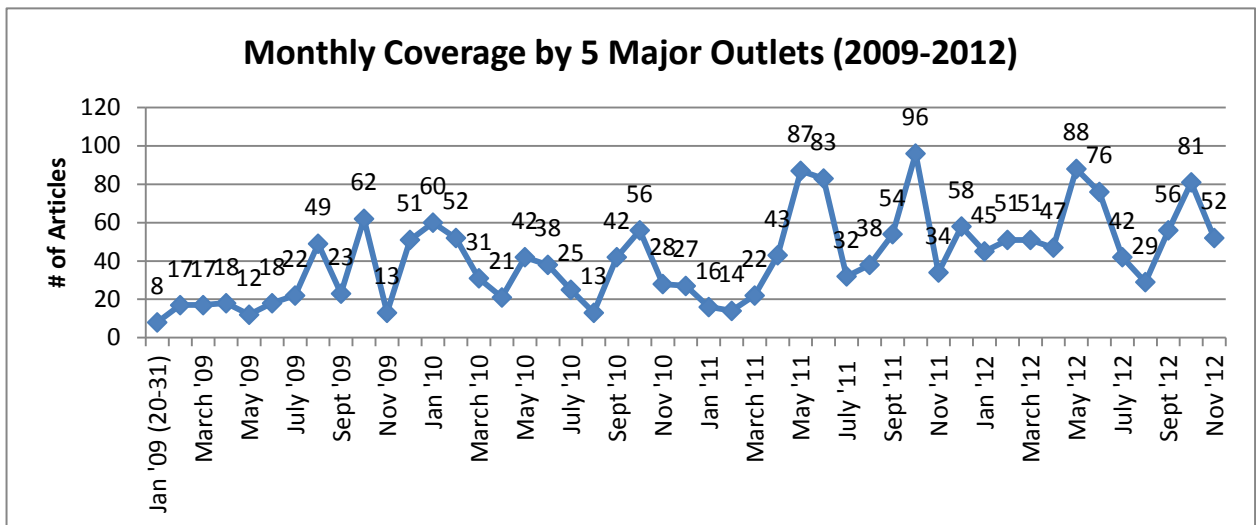


Figure Two.



Data from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, and *The Christian Science Monitor* were compiled from Lexis-Nexis using a search for articles with “drone” and “strike,” commonly used terms that describe the drone program. Data from *The Wall Street Journal* were gathered from a ProQuest database search, and data from *Time* were collected from the magazine’s internal search function using identical search terms. During President Obama’s first term, coverage of strikes in these newspapers nearly doubled, from 327 to 650 articles in 2012, as of November 29, 2012 (see Appendix, Figure One, “Annual Coverage by Five Major Outlets”).

Article Database, Coverage of Legal Aspects of Drone Strikes, 2009 to 2012.

Summary: From July 2009 to June 2010, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* all published one article that looked at legal aspects of drone strikes. From July 2010 to June 2011, *The Christian Science Monitor* published three articles that looked at legal aspects of drone strikes, while *The New York Times* published twelve articles; *The Wall Street Journal* published two articles, and *The Washington Post* published eleven articles. From July 2011 to June 2012, *The Christian Science Monitor* published four articles that looked at legal aspects of drone strikes, while *The New York Times* published twenty articles; *The Wall Street Journal* published seven articles, and *The Washington Post* published twenty articles. This information was collected from Lexis / Nexis.

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