On the Moral Significance of Narrative, Imagery, and Social Signalling in Counterterrorism Targeted Killing Operations

Michael Robillard

1 Introduction

Some philosophers have argued that the use of drones and related UAV technologies in warfare is *in principle* morally problematic.¹ Often, these accounts make the claim that something about the absence of *sufficient risk* to the pilot makes the employment of drones somehow unfair, indecent, or unvirtuous in some respect.² Other philosophers, however, have argued that that there is in fact no *in principle* reason that speaks against the use of such technologies in warfare, and that under certain circumstances, it might be not just permissible but indeed *obligatory* to employ such technologies.³ Lastly, there have been many and various *contingent* arguments for and against the use of drones ranging from moral concerns about proliferation, to moral hazard and overuse, to issues of government transparency, to PTS and moral injury experienced by pilots, to dangers of inciting eventual blowback.⁴ By now, many of these in-principle as well as contingent ethical arguments surrounding the

M. Robillard (✉)

University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA

e-mail: michaelrobillard@protonmail.com

¹ Since it has become such a pervasive part of our contemporary lexicon, I will use the canopy term ‘drones’ to refer to the general set of U.S. un-manned aerial targeted killing platforms (i.e. Predators, Reapers, etc.). Also, for the sake of this chapter, I will refrain from speaking about so-called ‘fully-autonomous’ weapons since they entail their own set of weighty metaphysical and moral complications orthogonal to this particular debate.

² For arguments of this sort see Daniel Brunstetter and Megan Braun, “The Implications of Drones on the Just War Tradition,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, Volume 25, Issue 3, Fall 2011, pp. 337–358.

³ For arguments in this sort, see Bradley Strawser “Moral Predators: The Duty to Employ Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 9, no. 4 (December 2010): 342–368.

⁴ For treatment of contingent arguments related to drone proliferation see Robert Buchanan and Robert O. Keohane, “Toward a Drone Accountability Regime” *Ethics and International Affairs*, Spring 2015, pp. 15–37.

employment of drones constitute well-trodden and familiar ground for many just war theorists.

Despite the vast and rich amount of philosophical literature surrounding the ethics of drones that has been generated over the past decade and a half or so, I believe that there is something still left to be said with respect to the morality of drone use for *counterterrorism operations* specifically. In particular, for the aims of this chapter, I wish to build off of two arguments already developed in this space by Rebecca Johnson and Tom Simpson respectively. If we take the *likelihood of success* criteria to be a necessary feature of fighting a just war, *and* if we regard counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations to admit of a *fundamentally different* set of success conditions when compared to conventional-style warfare, then questions concerning the permissibility or impermissibility of drone use will (at least in part) be determined by the degree to which their use serves or detracts from the overall realization of such success conditions.

Since success in counterterrorism operations fundamentally involves ‘winning hearts and minds’, building enduring, on-the-ground trust relationships, and maintaining narrative dominance, all while denying one’s adversaries the ability to do the same, then our overall ethical appraisal of the use of drones in such operations must take such success conditions into account in a way *that wouldn’t otherwise be taken into account* in a conventional war context. Part-and-parcel of this ethical appraisal then is proper regard for the moral significance that the non-kinetic features of *narrative*, *imagery*, and *social signalling* play with respect to remote targeted killing operations. Lastly, these factors are made even more ethically and strategically important when considering the fast rise of social media and smartphone technology on the battlefield.

The structure of this chapter will proceed as follows. In Sect. 2, I will explore some of the generally accepted doctrinal wisdom with respect to contemporary U.S. counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. In Sect. 3, I will unpack some of the relevant features of Johnson and Simpson’s arguments and explore the two different and nuanced perspectives they bring to the discussion regarding ethical features of drone use and trust building in counterterrorism operations. In Sect. 4, I will make the case for the increasing moral (and strategic) weight of *narrative*, *imagery*, and *social signalling effects* with respect to *in bello* proportionality. And in Sect. 5, I will explore how these normatively-laden non-kinetic factors fit into our moral and strategic thinking about drone use in contemporary counterterrorism operations specifically.

2 Irregular Warfare

In its simplest form, irregular warfare, both offensively and defensively, involves, to quote Mao Zedong, ‘winning hearts and minds’ [12]. For insurgents, this goal is usually accomplished by means of using asymmetric or guerrilla warfare tactics (e.g. I.E.D.s, snipers, mortars, etc.) against the conventional military and police forces

of an existing regime or governance in order to weaken or discredit that governance's overall effectiveness and trustworthiness in the eyes of the general populace. Other times this goal is accomplished by using terror tactics against innocent non-combatants of a given populace in order to intimidate that populace into compliance and/or to discredit the existing regime's legitimacy and capacity to protect its own people.⁵ Conversely, counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations seek to establish, maintain, and improve well-ordered, legitimate, and trustworthy governance over a given populace while simultaneously disrupting, destroying, and denying sanctuary to such insurgent and terrorist threats.

From a Maoist 'protracted warfare' paradigm, terrorist and insurgent groups aim to move from a 'guerrilla/insurgency' phase to a 'positional' phase involving increased control and influence over physical terrain, infrastructure, local populace, conventional forces, and state apparatus, to a third and final phase involving conventional power projection outward and beyond state borders. The goal of counterinsurgency operations is therefore the reverse; to deny enemy power projection, to gain dominance over positional assets, and to increasingly put insurgent adversaries on the defensive back into guerrilla mode, until they lack the physical means and/or will to continue to fight or organize [3].

Importantly, the Clausewitzian 'center of gravity', so to speak, in this perpetual struggle between insurgents and counterinsurgents is to be fundamentally located in the trust and sympathies of *the local populace* and much less so in the conventional space of men and material. Indeed, Harry Summers classic, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis on the Vietnam War* highlights this very point in his analysis of the U.S. war in Vietnam. Despite the United States winning every single conventional *kinetic* battle during Vietnam, it nonetheless lost the war. Hence, contra traditional Clausewitzian thinking, the mere aggregation of kinetic victories in battle did not equate to the winning of the war in total. Rather, when it came America's lost war in Vietnam, winning the 'hearts and minds' of the local populace is what fundamentally mattered in the end [9].

The last two decades-worth of American warfighting efforts in the Middle East and beyond have attempted to make good use of these hard-fought lessons from Vietnam. Contemporary doctrinal thinking on irregular warfare and counter-insurgency reflects this shift in conceptualizing conflict, war, and conditions of success and failure for such nuanced contexts. Central to this conceptual space of irregular warfare is the centrality of *narrative* in effective counter-terrorism operations. The recently updated edition of JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, acknowledges this very fact stating the following,

In the context of insurgency, the narrative is a tool to shape how the population perceives circumstances and events. The narrative is used to link conditions-based grievances to the nature or behaviour of the incumbent regime and articulate an alternative political vision

⁵ I wish to avoid getting into an in-the-weeds debate here about counterinsurgency versus counterterrorism. For the sake of this paper then, I will use these terms largely interchangeably with 'terrorism' being a particular violent method used by insurgents, directed at innocent civilians (as opposed to police and soldiers) to achieve their political ends.

that will address those grievances. It provides an explanation and justification of how insurgents will align ends, ways, and means to achieve their political objectives and frames how insurgent and counterinsurgent actions are interpreted.

JP 3-24 continues,

The likelihood of insurgent success is based in large part on assessments of insurgent political and military strength. The uncertainty inherent in insurgency, coupled with the competition between insurgent propaganda and counterinsurgent information-related activities, often generates wild rumors and distorted perceptions of particular incidents. Populations can often only assess that strength in their immediate vicinity, generating wildly different perceptions of the broader national environment in different parts of the operational area. [5]

While far from being exhaustive, this unique set of strategic, operational, and tactical considerations constitutes the general conceptual space that contemporary military ethicists and just war theorists must focus on if they are to speak meaningfully and productively with regard to prescriptive moral guidance for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. Such prescriptions must therefore take into account the moral significance of not just typical kinetic harm trade-offs but also the moral significance of *non-kinetic* factors such as social signalling, imagery, and narrative.

3 Broad Counterterrorism Ethics Considerations

In her paper, “The Wizard of Oz goes to War: Unmanned Systems in Counterinsurgency,” Rebecca Johnson notes the various moral goods that could be gained by prudent and responsible use of drone assets in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency contexts. Some of these moral goods include; (1) the potential to more effectively achieve our just ends (2) the mitigation of soldier risk, and (3) the ability to make better calculations regarding necessity, proportionality, and discrimination in the absence of immediate battlefield duress. Lastly, a final and novel moral good that Johnson points out, one often overlooked, is the surplus time and energy that effective drone use could free up for soldiers on the ground. In other words, if drones could be used effectively to achieve a baseline of security and protection, then such protection could then free up valuable time, energy, and effort for soldiers and commanders on the ground to shift to governance and institutional-building operations [4]. She writes, “so as long as humans guiding and prosecuting the war remain committed to the principles of combatancy, distinction, and non-combatant immunity- and at present we have no indications to the contrary-unmanned systems improve civilians’ and military personnel’s ability to prosecute counterinsurgency effectively and morally.” [4]

While I am in general agreement with Johnson’s claim, I have begun to grow increasingly skeptical about how we should conceive of satisfying conditions of non-combatant immunity in light of downstream social effects due to imagery and narrative. Johnson gestures at something similar when she writes, “It is not enough to minimize collateral damage in a literal, body count, sense; US forces have the

additional responsibility of minimizing the effect their presence has on the fabric of the civilian population to protect the population's ability to return to a state of peace following the war." [4]

Hence, if it turns out that our use of drones in counterinsurgency missions succeed in minimizing collateral damage in the 'body count' sense, as Johnson puts it, but in so doing creates social events that degrade the social tapestry of the local population, then we must reconsider *both* our conceptions of collateral damage as well as mission success.

In his paper, "Robots, Trust, and War," Tom Simpson gestures at similar moral and strategic tensions concerning the deleterious effects that the employment of *fully* autonomous weapons might have for establishing trustworthy relationships in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency contexts. He writes,

The will of the population constitutes, in the terms of modern NATO doctrine, the strategic centre of gravity. Winning their trust wins you the war. The host population must trust that you will act in a way that takes their interests fully into account, and furthermore, must trust that you will defeat the insurgents. So the trust involved is dynamically interactive. And host populations through history have certainly exhibited reactive sentiments of anger when they have felt betrayed or badly used by expeditionary forces, and correspondingly, have shown gratitude when expeditionary forces have prevailed in a way that they have welcomed. For both these reasons, it must be the host population's *normative* trust that must be won, and not (solely) predictive." [8]

By 'center of gravity', Simpson is referring here to the Clausewitzian notion of an enemy's main source of power that provides moral and physical strength and the will to act [1]. While Simpson's argument is technically against the use of *fully* autonomous weapons, I believe that the general spirit of his argument still applies to the potentially deleterious social and narrative effects that present-day *semi-autonomous* drone use might have on our long-term ability to create lasting and enduring trust-relationships as part of our ongoing counterterrorism efforts.

While I am in general agreement with the overall thrust and focus of Johnson and Simpson's accounts, I believe that the sharp rise in social media and overall informational connectivity in the world since the time of their respective publications has made it the case that the debate regarding the ethics of drones in counterterrorism operations must be updated and re-contextualized with a much more significant weight being granted to narrative, social signalling, and imagistic factors. I will now explain what I mean by this.

4 The Moral Significance of Narrative, Social Signalling, and Imagery

The idea that the signalling or communicative effects of a self-defensive or other defensive act can have moral or justificatory force is nothing new for just war theorists. Indeed, it has been a long-held belief by many theorists that the 'future deterrence value' of a violent act or threat of a violent act, on both the individual and nation-state

level can be morally justified under certain circumstances. On an individual level, in the absence of an effective police force, it is arguably morally justified for the isolated Afghan goat-herder, for instance, to respond with disproportionately lethal force *at the moment* (say, by shooting a thief attempting to steal one of his goats) if that act will foreseeably deter a much *greater future harm* from foreseeably occurring later on (say, inviting a gang of thieves to rape and pillage his home a week later if he does nothing).

Theorists also recognize the justificatory force that future deterrence value adds at the nation-state level as well. Indeed, the idea that the *threat of violence* can be good insofar as it serves to deter a much greater future harm from actualizing down the line is presumably why we think nation-states can permissibly build up armies in the first place and why we think nations can sometimes justifiably launch pre-emptive attacks. These individual and collective cases therefore give credence to the moral significance of social signalling effects built into kinetic acts of harming. However, future deterrence in particular seems often to be the very limited sense in which many just war theorists regard the signalling value of violence to morally matter. Indeed, there seems to be other morally important ways; ways beyond just future deterrence, in which the signalling value of a violent act in war can morally matter. As LTC Bob Underwood notes,

Killing in war eliminates threats but also plays a part in influencing the decisions of other persons beyond those we might kill. This suggests that killing in war has a communicative function, and that the message is an important consideration that can feature in the balance of reasons to kill some but not others in war. This is true provided combatants can permissibly kill some as means to communicate to others. I argue that just combatants, those that fight for just aims, can permissibly kill to communicate and that unjust combatants cannot. This is a new reason to revise our intuition that combatants on both sides hold equal rights to kill, the so-called moral equality of combatants (MEC). [11]

This is an important point here that Underwood brings up. However, I believe that it is even more important when we consider such claims against the backdrop of a counter-insurgency/counterterrorism paradigm; one saturated with the morally salient features of trust-building and winning hearts and minds that Johnson and Simpson both high-light. That being said, we could go even further and say that not only does *killing itself* have communicative or signalling value that morally matters with respect to *in bello* proportionality, but that *the way, look, and social presentation* in which the killing is done has similar or greater communicative or signalling value as well.⁶

For instance, consider the social signalling effects of the 2013 U.S. drone strike against suspected Al Qaeda operatives in Yemen that turned out to be a wedding procession versus the successful ‘boots on the ground’ Special Forces raid to kill Abu Bakr Baghdadi, head of ISIS, in 2019 [10]. Epistemic uncertainties and kinetic trade-offs aside, the first case arguably would have still given terrorist organizations

⁶ By *in bello* proportionality I mean the trade-off between predicted goods and harms for a particular act *in battle*. We can contrast this with *ad bellum* proportionality, the predicted trade-off of goods and harms having to do with a nation-state choosing to go to war at all.

narrative and imagistic fodder even if the target turned out to be actual Al Qaeda operatives whereas the second case would have provided much less narrative and imagistic fodder even if collateral damage was taken.

These considerations arguably change our typical thinking when it comes to the ethics of drone use, particularly within counterinsurgency and counterterrorism contexts, especially when considered in light of (1) the mid and long-term communicative and narrative effects on the local populace, and (2) the potential for narrative and imagery surrounding such eliminative killing acts to be leveraged by terrorist groups for their own propagandistic purposes.⁷

Consider then the following two mission options.

Option 1: I use my drone intelligence capabilities to locate an unjust, fully liable high-value-target (HVT) who is located far from any noncombatants. I then shoot the HVT with my drone.

Option 2: I use my drone intelligence capabilities to locate an unjust, fully liable HVT who is located far from noncombatants. I then deploy my fully willing SEAL team to enter into a space of increased (but still manageable risk) and then shoot the HVT.

Looked at strictly in terms of eliminative harming trade-offs, 'body count' conceptualizations of collateral damage and in the absence of consideration for narrative and signalling effects, it seems questionably permissible for a commander to choose Option 2 over Option 1. If one has the means to eliminatively kill a liable target, with no likelihood of (physical) collateral damage, and with overall less risk to soldiers, then what additional moral reason would one have to needlessly risk soldier lives, even if it turned out the soldiers willingly volunteered to take such risk?

However, once we begin taking into account the moral importance of narrative, social signaling, and imagery in the short, mid, and long-term, our moral calculus arguably changes especially for counterinsurgency/counterterrorism contexts. If, in the short-term, a drone-strike serves to successfully take out five fully liable high value terrorist targets with no collateral damage whatsoever, but the narratives, local rumors, and imagery from the event can be more quickly and effectively reappropriated by terrorist actors to convince the local populace *that there was* in fact major collateral damage to innocents, then it is hard to count the drone strike as prudentially or strategically sound. At best, it seems like a short-term tactical win taking away from mid to long-term operational and strategic success. And insofar as the *in bello* action diminishes the overall likelihood of success, the act seems questionably moral as well. Were it the case that we knew that part-and-parcel with a kinetic drone strike we would also be providing terrorist actors narrative and imagistic fodder for future propaganda use deleterious to our overall goal of winning hearts and minds, then, all other things being equal, a combination of ethics and prudence might begin to nudge us away from such drone options. We might instead find it morally and strategically

⁷ Arguably, another theoretical option on the table would be a strategy to completely normalize drone killings so that they no longer have such negative downstream social effects. For instance, the first-time guns were used in war their use arguably had a serious narrative and messaging effect associated with them that, after a period of normalization, went away. I am quite wary of such normalization however.

preferable to employ soldiers on the ground at a heightened chance of risk for the sake of the positive narrative effects on the populace such an act would yield or at least for the negative narrative effects on the populace such an act would deny to terrorist adversaries.

At first glance, the argument I am making here sounds identical to those philosophers arguing for the in-principle impermissibility of drones based upon the absence of soldier risk.⁸ This however is not the kind of argument I am advancing here. Indeed, I believe that such accounts are incorrect and that these types of arguments for the *prima facie* impermissibility of drones because they are ‘riskless’ actually get the order of moral justification completely reversed. Indeed, soldiers derive their justification for fighting and killing in the first place from the justness of their nation’s cause, not from bootstrapping *ad bellum* moral justification *ex nihilo* from out of physical risk on the battlefield. It can’t be the case that soldier physical risk *itself* is necessary in order to fight a just war and/or that such risk is the source of moral justification for *in bello* harming. Otherwise, it would logically follow that whichever political project (ISIS, Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, etc.) subjected their troops to *more* physical risk, intentionally or just by accident, would necessarily have the claim to the moral high-ground. Such a position would also entail the radical implication that since the advent of the shield and the bow and arrow, wars have been getting progressively *more and more unjust* in lock-step with each technological advancement in weaponry and defensive capacities that increased lethality while mitigating soldier risk. That can’t be the case.

That being said, there is still something important that soldier-risk proponents are getting at and I believe it is the following. Physical risk *qua* physical risk doesn’t itself provide any additional moral justification for harming and war. However, the *communicative* and *social signalling* effects constitutive of demonstrations of physical risk in battle *do* in fact have moral weight. This is a subtle but important distinction since it is the set of positive downstream goods generated by the signalling act of risk and not *the act of risk itself* which is the source of moral justification for certain kinds of harming acts. The weight of such signalling acts is particularly morally significant if we consider the potentially beneficial or deleterious second and third order effects such signalling acts will have on our project of ‘winning hearts and minds’ and, conversely, on terrorist groups’ project of doing the same. If we begin scooping those downstream second and third order social effects into our *in bello* proportionality calculus, then the case for preferring Option 2 over Option 1 begins to find greater moral and prudential appeal. However, it is admittedly tough if not impossible to count these social downstream effects as part of our *in bello* proportionality calculus beyond a certain predictive window. In particular, given that these

⁸ For arguments of this sort see works by Paul Kahn, Christian Enemark and Anders Henriksen & Jens Ringsmose: Kahn, Paul W. "The paradox of riskless warfare." *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly* 22.3 (2002): 2–7; Enemark, Christian. *Armed drones and the ethics of war: military virtue in a post-heroic age*. Routledge, 2013; Henriksen Anders & Ringsmose, Jens (2015) Drone warfare and morality in riskless war, *Global Affairs*, 1:3, 285–291, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2015.1080042>.

second and third order social effects are really hard to predict with certainty, to quantify, and to demonstrate causally, it is arguably much more difficult to count these complicating factors in our proportionality calculations than it is for us to factor brute kinetic effects and trade-offs.

That being said, it is not as if predicting collective human social behavior is completely and totally opaque to us at all times. Accidentally drone striking a mosque or wedding amidst a smart-phone laden public, for instance, will generate certain predictable downstream social effects that are harmful and disruptive to a populace and a mission in a way that goes well beyond the immediate blast radius of the chosen munition. Running a clandestine operation under the cover of darkness will yield another. And while it is arguably incorrect for us to predict every future downstream social harm arising from a singular battle-field act, it is likewise equally incorrect for practitioners and ethicists to treat each kinetic action as somehow occurring in a social vacuum with *no* regard for downstream social and narrative effects whatsoever. My point here is simply that narrative effects need to be weighed more heavily both ethically and strategically given the twenty-first century informational space in which we now find ourselves.

5 Application to Counterterrorism Drone Operations

As to the actual extent to which U.S. drone strikes versus precision boots-on-the-ground missions have served to ‘win hearts and minds’ while preventing terrorist groups from doing the same over the past ten years, I do not know. Answering such a question thoroughly is largely an empirical matter and one in which I leave for the anthropologists, political scientists, and people with a higher security clearance than mine to sort out. That being said, I believe there is at least some preliminary empirical evidence to suggest that we ought to start paying more attention to the downstream social signalling effects that our present drone operations might be having with respect to winning hearts and minds and with respect to denying terrorist actors the ability to do the same.

In a recent paper involving an analysis of eighty-seven face-to-face interviews with Afghan civilians affected negatively by US combat operations, Janina Dill explores how civilians directly affected by collateral damage perceive the overall justness of such actions.⁹ Despite explaining to these interviewees nuanced international law of armed conflict standards, concepts of proportionality and necessity, and the standard risk mitigation measures that went into such operations, Dill’s report claims that seventy out of eighty-seven of the interviewees, roughly 80 percent, still believed that the coalition had *deliberately* set out to harm them [2]. Several strong and visceral testimonies emphasize this distrust,

⁹ It is important to note here that not all of Dill’s interviewees suffered collateral harm from drone strikes exclusively. Rather, testimonies primarily involved harms directly due to air strikes, cross-fire incidents, direct shootings, and indirect artillery fire.

We have been told that American technology is so advanced that they can see a needle from the air. Why then don't they distinguish civilians from Taliban? Americans are able to recognize black and white chickens from the air, how come they can't recognize women and children?

Americans are against Muslims. For them, Taliban and civilians are the same.

They are here to kill us and destroy our houses.

They think we are animals. [2]

The testimonial data from Dill's interviews should matter greatly in our thinking about the ethics of drones (and other harming) in counterterrorism operations. What seems to be at issue here is the sharp divergence from official just war wisdom and IHL/LOAC standards concerning such things as proportionality, necessity, distinction, collateral harming, etc. and the indigenous populace's *subjective perception* of such notions. Insofar as the indigenous populace is the centre of gravity for successful counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, then their subjective perceptions of the fairness of certain battlefield harms to themselves, their neighbours, or their surrounding community must be taken into account *as we find them*. Otherwise, turning a deaf ear to such perceptions and testimonies results not only in a missed opportunity for building local trust, but also presents a corresponding opportunity for insurgents and terrorist groups to leverage such sentiments towards their own unjust ends.

Several recent articles and reports have suggested that terrorist and insurgent groups are making just such informational and propagandistic moves, both in theatre, in the US, and in the greater Muslim world. For instance, with respect to 'in theatre' propagandistic leveraging, one 2013 *Guardian* article suggested that the US drone program, despite its tactical successes, was fundamentally sowing the seeds of strategic and international failure. In, this article four former US air force members with more than 20 years of combined experience operating drone weaponry systems spoke harshly against the strategic short-sightedness of such a program and the long-term propagandistic and radicalization tool that such a program was handing over to terrorist actors. Several of them went on to make the exceptionally bold claim that the killing of innocent civilians in drone strikes has acted as one of the most, "devastating driving forces for terrorism and destabilization around the world." [7]

A similar trend can be seen with respect to propagandistic efforts directed at Muslims in western-speaking countries and beyond. In "The Portrayal of Drones in Terrorist Propaganda: A Discourse Analysis of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire*", Jan Andre Lee Ludvigsen outlines some of the elements of Al Qaeda's strategic media messaging campaign surrounding US drone strikes. Broadly speaking, Ludvigsen's report finds that the magazine frequently portrays the US drone campaign as, (1) an ultimately failing policy that has mainly resulted in civilian deaths (2) a tool to oppress Muslims, and (3) a fundamentally cowardly, dishonourable, and inhumane way of fighting. Such appeals to soldierly honor (or the lack thereof) are encapsulated in the following lines from the 10th Edition of *Inspire*:

Let us not forget that America adopted the drone program because this has no costs in terms of (American) lives lost. Successive American administrations have realized that the American soldier is too much of a coward to prove his mettle in wars. [6]

Ludvigsen concludes his article by arguing against the possibility of drawing a *precise* causal or predictive connection between US drone strikes and eventual ‘blowback’ due to radicalization and propagandistic efforts. However, he argues that such increasingly sophisticated propagandistic moves by terrorist and insurgent groups gives US strategists some reason to rethink present and future-facing counterterrorism drone operations [6].

As to the overall effectiveness of such propagandistic efforts to recruit, radicalize, and/or inspire eventual blowback, the jury still seems out. Indeed, much more empirical work, analysis, and predictive modelling will need to be brought to bear on such problems. That being said, the purpose of this paper isn’t to decisively settle these issues. Rather my aim has mainly been to make clearer what the actual moral and prudential reasons are on the moral ledger and how they trade off against one another within a 2020s counterterrorism paradigm. The rather modest thesis of this chapter then is simply that the non-kinetic factors of narrative, social-signalling, and imagery connected to otherwise *kinetic* drone strikes needs to be factored more heavily into our overall moral thinking both with respect to *in bello* proportionality as well as with respect to our mid to long-term strategic thinking. Bearing in mind the amplification of these non-kinetic factors due to the increased speed, reach, and connectivity of the internet and social media and bearing in mind the increased potential for propagandistic leveraging of these non-kinetic factors by insurgent and terrorist actors, ethical thinking about drone use in counterterrorism operations requires reconceptualization in these more fine-grained moral and prudential terms.

6 Conclusion

As the author William Morris once said, “nothing useless can be truly beautiful.” I believe something similar can be said regarding ethics, insofar as nothing useless can be truly moral. Indeed, for morality to matter, it must, at some point, find traction with the real-world. In this sense, ethics should inform and mutually reinforce efficacy and efficacy should inform and mutually reinforce ethics. For this to be done successfully, mutual respect and dialogue between theoreticians and practitioners must be accomplished, fostered, and sustained. This is particularly important when it comes to our ongoing ethical and strategic thinking regarding counterterrorism.

When it comes to the ethics of drone use in counterterrorism, we must take the moral significance of non-kinetic factors such as imagery, narrative, and social signalling to weigh more heavily on the moral ledger than we have in the past with respect to our thinking about *in bello* proportionality. While these moral reasons do not necessarily cancel out or override other morally relevant *in bello* factors having to do with such things as mitigating soldier risk, protecting non-combatants, and

ensuring mission success, the increased moral weight of social signalling, imagery, and narrative effects due to the rise of the internet and social media may nonetheless force us to re-evaluate our ethical and strategic thinking about future-facing counterterrorism scenarios heading into the next decade.

References

1. von Clausewitz K (2009) On war: the complete. Wildside Press, Rockville, p 144
2. Dill J (2019) Distinction, necessity, and proportionality: Afghan civilians' attitudes towards Wartime Harm. *Ethics Int Aff* 3(3):315–342. 316–318
3. Guevara C (1963) Guerilla war method available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1963/misc/guerrilla-war-method.htm>. Accessed 15 July 2020
4. Johnson R (2013) The wizard of Oz goes to war: unmanned systems in counterinsurgency. In: Strawser BJ (ed) Killing by remote control: the ethics of an unmanned military, vol 6. Oxford University Press, Oxford, p 20
5. Joint Publication 3-24 (2018) Counterinsurgency. Accessed at: https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_24pa.pdf
6. Ludvigsen JAL (2018) The portrayal of drones in terrorist propaganda: a discourse analysis of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's inspire. *Dyn Asymmetric Conflict* 11(1):26–49
7. Pilkington E, MacAskill E (2015) Obama's drone war a 'recruitment tool' by ISIS, Say US air force whistleblowers. *Guardian*. Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/18/obama-drone-war-isis-recruitment-tool-air-force-whistleblowers>
8. Simpson T (2011) Robots, trust, and war. *Philos Technol* 24(3): 325–337. 330–331
9. Summers H (1982) On strategy; a critical analysis of the Vietnam war. Presidio Press, Novato, pp 1–10
10. Tayler L (2019) A wedding that became a funeral. Human Rights Watch.org. Accessed at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/02/19/wedding-became-funeral/us-drone-attack-marriage-procession-yemen>
11. Underwood B (2019) Can soldiers justify killing some as a means to influence the decisions of others? Accessed at: <http://www.bioethics.net/2019/03/oxford-uehiro-prize-in-practical-ethics-question-can-soldiers-justify-killing-some-as-a-means-to-influence-the-decisions-of-others/>
12. Zedong M (1938) On protracted war. Accessed at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.