

“We kill...metadata”: Drones and the Processing Regime

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Overview

This research project draws on a variety of data to argue that contemporary US drone warfare can be understood as a *processing regime*. Using a variety of technologies with the drone at the center, the US military approaches potential targets as information to be processed both literally and figuratively, suspending their autonomy (partially) as well as the categories of civilian and insurgent themselves. These “data-beings” experience a form of ontological violence deeply tied to physical and psychological violence as they themselves are computed, ostensibly in order to determine their intentions and danger and therefore whether they should live or die. This processing has ethical and political implications similar to those presented by automated weapons systems in general, such as the new problem of pre-determining acceptable civilian casualty levels or risk. Methodologically this piece uses assemblage theory to uncover this regime- this is a theoretical lens that aims to analyze networks of humans and non-humans (like drones) as part of an entangled assemblage wherein both have some degree of independent influence. This destabilizes images of the drone as a static object, and instead thinks of it as a configuration of technologies shaped by social context for specific purposes. This ties in again to the central thesis that drone warfare must be understood in a broader social context, specifically here a regime of processing.

Implications

The broad implication of this regime is a fundamental shift in the relationship of killer to target, brought on by a larger shift in the US military towards a reliance on networks and data. This is not a simple increase in distance or coldness- many report drone pilots as having higher rates of PTSD, and the long-term surveillance and violence involved here is deeply intimate. Rather, the dynamics of “killability” have shifted: all those within a drone’s vision become constantly watched possible targets, their lives and signals being processed to determine whether they should live or die, often based on mistaken abstract data. Even those not killed suffer extreme mental violence.

Disruptions

However, this project also discusses the many ways those targeted by drones have disrupted this regime. Some of their tactics aim to confuse the accuracy of the data processing in the first place, for example trading SIM cards so that the link between data and person is less stable. Others try to work against the dehumanization at the core of modern drone warfare: the art project Not A Bug Splat for example (bottom right image) laid out a picture of a girl who lost her family in a drone attack staring at the pilots- with this eye contact she cannot be rendered as a distant “bug splat” or abstract data on a screen.

Life on the Kill List: Malik’s Story

Malik Jalal’s story, though not exceptional, demonstrates how these forces come together with deadly implications. Coming from Waziristan, a hotbed of US drone violence, Malik was put on the “kill list” not for violent activity but due to his role as a mediator between the Taliban and Pakistani government, likely being read as a possible terrorist by algorithmic social network analysis. Malik has survived four drone attacks: one came after a cell phone call he made, likely using SIGINT (signals intelligence) and following the processing path shown in the lower left figure. Another was on a nearby vehicle that looked almost identical to his, relying on a visual processing regime (see lower middle figure) of long-term surveillance which also registers Patterns of Life (POL) used as targeting information. This chain relies on processing targets as data on each level: Malik’s initial “killability” was likely determined based on processing his social interactions (e.g. phone records), and the targeting and then strikes were not “normal” assassinations of a known person, but targeted a configuration of data. Malik has since moved to the UK for protection and works as an anti-drone activist, represented by the organization Reprieve.

