

Predator Drones and Public Discourse: A Framing Analysis of the Killing of Anwar al-Awlaki

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the dynamic framing processes that occurred within the public discourse in the United States surrounding the targeted killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen, by a CIA drone in Yemen on September 30, 2011. The study examined mainstream media broadcast transcripts and publications, advocacy organization press releases, and government statements to analyze the framing of the drone program in the aftermath of the incident as compared to an earlier strike on a non-US citizen, Baitullah Mehsud. The study found that the killing of al-Awlaki generated a “legality” frame that differs qualitatively from prior discourse that focused on strategic implications of the program. Whereas prior drone strikes produced debate over the strategic utility of drones, the killing of al-Awlaki caused a shift in focus to the legality of drones within the post-9/11 political context. These findings suggest that the killing of a US citizen by the US government created a breach in which previously parallel ideological goals of execution of the war on terror and protection of civil liberties came into contradiction with one another. The introduction of a new frame suggests a shift in the narrative pertaining to the relationship between liberty and security in the context of the war on terror, while also raising questions about contemporary citizenship in a globalizing world.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to analyze the differential framing processes that occurred within the public discourse in the United States surrounding the targeted killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen, by an unmanned aerial vehicle (“UAV” or “drone”) in Yemen on September 30, 2011. This paper will articulate the impact of this incident on the changing perception of drone use and targeted killing by comparatively analyzing the framing of the al-Awlaki killing and the framing of another high profile drone strike—that which caused the death of Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud—in August 2009. This paper will then suggest particular ideological ramifications of this change on the continuing discursive construction of the post-9/11 US political context.

At the time of his death, Al-Awlaki, an American-educated native of New Mexico and high ranking member of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), had become a high-value terrorist target of the United States for his role in utilizing digital technology to radicalize potential terrorists in English-speaking countries as well as his material roles in various terror plots such as the Fort Hood shooting on November 5, 2009 and the attempted “underwear bombing” incident on a commercial airliner heading to Detroit, Michigan on December 25, 2009. Al-Awlaki was killed, along with fellow American citizen Samir Khan, when a hellfire missile, fired from a CIA Reaper drone, struck his convoy in a joint military operation in Yemen on September 30, 2011 (Mazzetti 2013). The successful drone strike was at the least the second attempt to eliminate al-Awlaki using drone technology. Similarly, Mehsud was killed by a US drone strike on August 5, 2009, in Pakistan. Mehsud was the leader of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban), and was considered responsible for a campaign of suicide

bombings designed to drive Pakistani and US forces out of tribal areas and to impose Sharia law in the areas (Mazzetti 2013:157).

This paper will argue that while both incidents garnered attention in the mainstream media, the al-Awlaki incident precipitated the introduction of a “legality” frame that represents a qualitatively new strand of discourse in the public sphere debate over the use of drones by the US government. This argument is achieved and supported by an analytical comparison of the discourse following the al-Awlaki drone strike to the parallel discourse following the Mehsud killing. Framing analysis provides a unique set of tools that can be used to determine the cultural and ideological values associated with a public response to an event (Snow and Benford 2000); the methodology has not, to this point, been applied to the discourse surrounding the drone program or the killing of al-Awlaki in this way. It will be argued that this particular incident—the ordered killing of a US citizen by the US government and the subsequent generation of a “legality” frame in the public discourse—suggests an attempt by activists and political actors to harness citizens’ ideological beliefs about American civil liberties in the post-9/11 context to construct a contentious discourse on the use of drones for targeted killing.

The analytical significance of measuring the discursive shift following the al-Awlaki killing is three-fold. First, on a most basic level, the application of a dependable analytical method—framing analysis—to drone discourse will provide a material contribution to a growing understanding of the role of drones as both strategic tools in the war on terror and as symbolic objects in the persistent negotiation between liberty and security in the post-9/11 political context. Second, the intentional killing of a citizen by that citizen’s government as part of a war whose sides are only defined ambiguously raises questions about contemporary citizenship in a globalizing world. Finally, the notion of framing as remedial ideological work (Snow and

Benford 2000) suggests that the introduction of a new strand of discourse—that is, a “legality” frame—represents an attempt by political actors to influence widely held beliefs and values pertaining to the relationship between liberty and security in the context of the war on terror.

LITERATURE

Framing Literature

Framing has emerged as a crucial element of social movement literature in recent scholarship focused on understanding the mechanisms behind consensus building and the mobilization of collective action. Framing analysis represents a methodological opportunity to evaluate the cultural and ideological attitudes upon which collective action can be built as well as the dominant value structures that guide citizens’ policy preferences (Zald 1996; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 2000; Nelson and Willey 2001). The study of political contention requires an analysis of framing, for what is determined through framing is the nature of political reality itself (Benford 1993). Snow et al. (1986) argue that framing analysis is significant because it accounts for the interpretive tasks associated with collective action that other approaches tend to exclude.

Framing and contentious politics

The study of social movements has dominated the literature on collective action, but Tilly and Tarrow (2007) have attempted to disentangle the study of collective action from social movements, arguing instead that categorizing all forms of collective action only as they relate to a narrowly defined social movement category restricts the opportunity to properly understand collective action that does not meet the criteria to be categorized as a social movement. Rather, Tilly and Tarrow advocate for the concept of “contentious politics” to account for a range of

actions that involve groups or individuals making contentious claims on political actors. Contentious politics is inclusive of, but not limited to, social movements (Tilly and Tarrow 2007).

This paper will examine the use of framing strategies—traditionally understood within the social movement context—within the broader context of contentious politics by examining a particular case study. The death of Anwar al-Awlaki by a CIA drone represents a significant point within a contentious discourse that is not necessarily tied to a dedicated social movement but which exhibits the framing processes and dynamics discussed by Benford and Snow (2000) and Gamson (1992). Official statements by government officials as well as those of activists and advocacy organizations from the days immediately following the event reflect at least two out of three core framing tasks presented by Benford and Snow (2000).

Framing and ideology

The relationship between framing and ideology is one that has become a point of debate among framing scholars (Zald 1996; Snow and Benford 2000; Nelson and Willey 2001; Oliver and Johnston 2005). Snow and Benford argue that framing draws on ideology and can be used to negotiate ideological contradictions. Ideology provides a toolbox from which political actors can generate frames that have high degrees of resonance in the general population. In this particular case, those actors who initiated the “legality” frame utilized Snow et al.’s (1986) frame amplification to draw upon the American ideology of civil liberties to create frame resonance for their opposition to the targeted killing program.

For individuals, frames can provide a tool for situating empirical observations in the context of ideological belief when the two are not congruent. Framing allows groups to engage in this “remedial ideological work” by providing a lens through which citizens can explain real

world events that do not match ideological symbols or beliefs (Snow and Benford 2000). The killing of a US citizen by the CIA produced this type of breach, as the previously congruent ideological beliefs about execution of the war on terror and protection of American civil liberties were brought into contradiction with one another. Zald (1996) concurs that major historical events can illuminate cultural contradictions that necessitate reality construction, which is where framing finds its relevance in this scenario. It is clear that political actors and activists attempted to utilize Snow and Benford's (2000) concept of remedial ideological work in an attempt to situate the intentional killing of a US citizen by the US government in the larger context of American post-9/11 ideology.

Nelson and Willey (2001) argue that it is value structures—not ideologies—that influence peoples' opinions on political issues. Because nearly every issue involves conflicting values, Nelson and Willey argue that issue framing is an essential process by which contentious political actors can amplify particular values over others in order to mobilize support for their cause. Nelson and Willey argue a similar perspective as Snow and Benford, but argue that instead of having unified, abstract ideologies that guide a universal set of political beliefs, individuals turn to individual values to guide their political preferences on an issue by issue basis. To Nelson and Willey, then, it is the job of those generating and articulating frames to amplify particular values over others; in this scenario, Nelson and Willey would argue that it is the job of framing actors to help guide citizens through the debate between liberty and security in order to help them determine their preference on the use of drones in the war on terror.

Related Drone Literature

Drones represent a new vehicle for studying the war on terror and the post-9/11 United States political context. While research on drones is a relatively new field, scholars are

beginning to carve out various research trajectories on the topic. Research on the effectiveness of the drone program itself represents one such strand. Carvin (2012) argues that while the public debates the strategic efficacy of drone warfare, new assessment techniques are necessary to determine the realistic advantages and disadvantages of this new military technique.

Kaltenthaler, Fair, and Miller (2013) argue that Pakistani citizens are largely opposed to drone warfare, and that the degree of opposition is directly correlated to level of education on the topic of drones. Similarly, Hudson, Owens, and Flannes (2011) and Boyle (2013) argue that while some drone attacks likely achieve their intended purpose, the strategic benefit of these attacks is outweighed by the high numbers of civilian casualties and the resulting political strain between the US and the affected states and citizens. Conversely, Llenza (2011) argues that predator strikes in Pakistan are both legal and effective counterterrorism measures. Williams (2010) argues that assessing strategic advantages and disadvantages to US military operations ignores an important third variable—that drone strikes find support with Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen who oppose the Taliban.

An additional strand of drone research examines the ethics of a targeted killing program such as that of the United States in the war on terror. Aslam (2011) argues that a policy of targeted killing as a counterterrorism strategy cannot be considered a responsible program for a global superpower. While Aslam puts forth a new framework for making this argument, multiple scholars argue that drones have ethical implications when utilizing international law as an ethical framework (Ratner 2007; Enemark 2011).

A particularly salient segment of the drone literature to this paper is the minimal existing research on media coverage of drone warfare. Jones, Sheets, and Rowling (2011) and Zia (2013) conduct comparative frame analyses looking at differences between media presentation of drone

warfare in domestic and foreign news sources. Jones, Sheets, and Rowling find that domestic news sources are more likely to build narratives about drones that support United States national identity and justify drone use, while British and Pakistani newspapers are more likely to focus on negative impacts such as civilian casualties. Zia finds that cultural proximity is an important factor—that is, the framing of drone strikes becomes more negative as one moves geographically closer to the most affected areas.

Legal-academic discussion

Despite its relative absence from the public sphere prior to 2011, the legality of drone strikes has been a distinct topic of discussion within the legal-academic community since well before the al-Awlaki killing, but has increased in volume and scope since the incident. This literature represents a healthy debate over the legality or lack thereof of drone warfare (Downes 2004; Jahagirdar 2008; Ramsden 2011; Farley 2012). While it does focus on legality as a central issue, this literature is restricted to the purpose of determining the legality of drone warfare itself; this paper, on the other hand, is concerned not with the outcome of this legal debate but rather the origination and social implications of the debate itself within the public sphere. Therefore, while the current academic discussion about the legality of drones within the legal field is tangentially related to the goals of this paper, the answers to the research questions posed here cannot be found within this thread.

At the same time, this legal debate represents the type of discursive content that this paper argues doesn't emerge in the public sphere until after the al-Awlaki killing. This is because the debate within the legal community is not being utilized within the framework of contentious politics nor is it occurring with the intent of mobilizing collective action. It does appear, however, that this previously existing academic discourse on the legality of drones

provided the foundational arguments for what would become the legality frame that emerged in following the killing of al-Awlaki.

Post-9/11 Ideology

The post-9/11 era is marked in significant ways by the war on terror as its own ideology (Chandhoke 2007). The al-Awlaki killing and the related discourse occur within the post-9/11 political context, and this is a crucial element of the relationship between the framing of the issue and dominant ideologies and value structures. Since 9/11, the narrative of counterterrorism has dominated the news media landscape (Altheide 2009). This war on terror ideology served as the political backdrop for the introduction of the “legality” frame.

Prior to the generation of this frame, however, the dominant rhetoric centered on winning the war on terror at all costs; this logic resulted in detention and interrogation programs at Guantanamo Bay, the USA Patriot Act, and other controversial practices by the US government. Hutcheson et al. (2004) argue that during the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration engaged in particular discursive tactics designed to increase support for these controversial war on terror policies. That is, in order to garner support for policies like the USA Patriot Act and military pursuits such as the Iraq War, the administration constructed a reality in which security had to be protected at the expense of civil liberties. As a result, opposition to these controversial policies, while present and at times vigorous, ultimately faded into the ideology that securing the United States against terrorism was an end that justified the means necessary for its achievement.

While these policies and actions all had detractors, the conversation tended to return to its focus on the strategic objective of stopping terror. The al-Awlaki case is another instance within this trend of legally ambiguous action by the state; unlike the other situations mentioned, however, the legal objection to this particular state action became a major frame through which

the policy was discussed. This outcome appears to be the result of the unprecedented action of targeting a US citizen and the subsequent framing processes that political actors used to attempt to mobilize public opinion.

Citizenship within post-9/11 ideology

The security-based political context, in combination with ambiguous definitions of the “enemy,” brought forth questions about US citizenship in the post-9/11 era. That is, with an ambiguously defined enemy, the question of what citizenship entails within the post-9/11 political context began to arise. By declaring war on a “stateless” and ambiguously defined enemy, the United States altered notions about the particular qualities of individuals and groups that could be defined as in alignment with the “enemy.” Grewal (2003) describes the racialization of the “enemy” in the post-9/11 era, arguing that the Otherization of Muslim and Arab Americans was a major part of the “us versus them” binary that characterized much of the political rhetoric of the administration after 9/11. Schildkraut (2002; 2009) and Salaita (2005) argue that this racialization led to structural violence that increased the risk of differential protection under the law for certain groups of US citizens.

The war on terror legitimized intolerant modes of conceptualizing citizenship—a pattern indicative of a developing value structure that favored security over civil liberties, particularly in regard to certain segments of the population (Chandhoke 2007). In a society dominated by an ideology of defeating an enemy—in particular, an ambiguous enemy whose geographic reach expands across the globe—it is logical that discourse on policies related to the war on terror would revolve around the strategic benefit of those policies.

Even as the line between citizen and enemy status became blurred, the narrative of executing the war on terror for the protection of real Americans’ civil liberties remained strong

(Altheide 2009). That is, while winning the war on terror dominated the national narrative in the post-9/11 era, the importance of American liberties remained ideologically parallel. Political actors hoping to generate resonant frames have to align their frames with the dominant ideological trend of the war on terror, which is where the “legality” frame becomes a unique concept because it implies that due process is necessary even for certain individuals who identify with and have been clearly established to be aligned with the “enemy” as it is understood within the post-9/11 context (Snow et al. 1986).

The narrative behind controversial policies such as the Patriot Act and interrogation and detention was that these policies were designed to protect the freedoms that made the US exceptional; this narrative, however, was inconsistent in its application to all segments of US citizenry. The killing of al-Awlaki caused a significant contradiction because, while the narrative remained the same, the intentional killing of a US citizen without due process materially breached the idea that all US citizens had protections under US law.

Post-9/11 ideology and the public sphere

The war on terror generated profound changes in the global community within both material and symbolic channels, significantly altering the context of the public sphere. As a result, the war on terror began to serve as a backdrop against which any policy decisions—be they military, foreign, security, or any other—had to be made. This same backdrop existed for individuals or groups wishing to voice resistance to these policies.

In addition to the effects on material policy, the war on terror ideology had symbolic impacts. The ambiguity of the “enemy” caused a situation in which enemy status was not always clearly defined. The administration’s framing of the post-9/11 context was bounded up with strong implications of the importance of an American national identity (Hutcheson et al. 2004;

Maggio 2007). This campaign caused a narrowing of the American “ideal-type” as national identity became conflated with security. That is, the narrowing of American identity simultaneously led to an expansion of potential enemies— a group that included segments of the American population that didn’t meet the criteria of the racialized or patriotic American ideal.

Post-9/11 ideology and the media

An increasingly important element within the modern repertoire for collective action is the media. The media represents the greatest opportunity for frame diffusion by actors making claims on the state (Zald 1996; Gamson and Meyer 1996). The media has become a major tool within contentious politics, providing a vehicle for the diffusion of claims to an expanding audience at an increasingly fast pace (Tarrow 2011). Indeed, Walgrave and Manssens (2005) argue that the mass media can be useful in mobilizing not only public opinion but collective action itself. Within the modern repertoire of contention, it is imperative for political actors to operate within the media (Tarrow 2011).

Reese (2010) analyzes the way that the administration framed the post-9/11 political landscape, and argues that the media played a significant role in furthering the War on Terror frame that the administration used to justify military action as the only solution to terrorism. Reese argues that the War on Terror frame served as an organizing structure for American ideology in the post-9/11 environment, making it difficult for opponents of the war on terror and its associated policies to articulate their opposition. In this scenario, the media’s effort to appear unbiased led to a naturalization of the war on terror that caused it to be perceived not as a policy, but as a reified way of life.

There have been few studies analyzing the coverage of drones in the media. Jones, Sheets, and Rowling (2011) argue that American journalists frame drones in a way that protects

US national identity, while foreign newspapers are more likely to discuss the negative outcomes of drone use, such as civilian casualties. Zia (2013) argues that cultural proximity plays a role in coverage of the drone program, finding more substantial coverage of drone strikes in Pakistani newspapers than in British or American newspapers. These studies focus on external comparison; that is, they compare news sources in the United States to news sources outside of the United States. There has not been, to this point, a framing analysis of the shift in discourse within the United States as a result of the al-Awlaki killing.

METHODS

Data Collection

This paper utilizes public discourse as data, in the form of news transcripts and publications, press releases from advocacy organizations, and statements from government officials involved in the execution of drone operations. These particular sources were chosen because they represent the segment of the public sphere in which drone discourse occurs. The universe of discourse on drones is comprised of these actors.

The particular media sources being analyzed are news transcripts and publications from CNN, Fox News Network, and MSNBC. These media outlets were selected for their mainstream prominence and combined coverage of a large portion of the political spectrum in the United States. The sample was limited to US media outlets. These sources were analyzed for the time period of September 30 through October 7, 2011 (the immediate aftermath of the al-Awlaki killing) and for August 5 through August 12, 2009 (the immediate aftermath of the Mehsud killing). The al-Awlaki killing produced fifty-seven transcripts and fifteen articles between these media outlets, while the Mehsud killing produced twenty and eight, respectively.

It is important to note that the transcripts consist primarily of interviews and panels with experts and activists. Therefore, the goal of this paper is not to claim intentionality on the part of the particular media outlets in constructing the legality frame, but rather to analyze the way that political actors diffuse their framing practices through these media outlets.

The data from advocacy organizations will include press releases from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Amnesty International (AI). The total number of press releases analyzed was seventeen.

Statements from government officials were included in the analysis. This included executive branch personnel, military personnel, and CIA personnel. These comments appear in the media transcripts, as well as in a small number of isolated statements and released documents.

The news media transcripts and publications were collected using online databases, while the press releases were collected directly through organizational websites. The government statements were embedded within the broadcast transcripts as well as in standalone documents such as the Department of Justice white paper that was released to clarify the legal justification for conducting targeted killings against US citizens. The total number of documents analyzed was 117.

Data analysis

Once collected, data were organized by date and coded by frame (e.g. legality, strategy, morality). The coding system utilized semantic analysis to identify the presence of the various frames within the data (see “operational definitions of frames”). The data were then further analyzed in order to find which specific frame components were present (e.g., within the strategy

frame, “fosters terrorist recruitment” or “eliminates terrorist leader”; within the legality frame, “no due process” or “enemy combatant status”). The frequency of the presence of various frames were compared between the two timeframes and recorded (see Tables 1, 2, 3).

Arguments in support and arguments against the drone strikes and killings are both included in the analysis, if they are invoking a particular frame. For example, arguments that the drone strike was legal because al-Awlaki had declared war on the United States and had engaged in material support for Al Qaeda terrorist plots are considered within the “legality” frame, while arguments that the drone strike was a good thing because it resulted in the elimination of a high-value terror target and a strategic victory for the United States is not invoking the “legality” frame. Rather, this second example would be occurring within the “strategy” frame, which represents the dominant frame in the drone discourse prior to the al-Awlaki killing. This differentiation is the crux of the argument of this paper; that is, the al-Awlaki killing resulted in a shift from a discourse on drones focusing on strategic victories and defeats in the war on terror to a discourse on whether or not using drones to fight the war on terror was legal in the first place—the latter of which has since become a dominant frame within the discourse.

It is important to stress that the argument presented in this paper is based upon a temporal change in total discourse rather than spatial differentiation between political actors within a single time period. That is, Fox, CNN, MSNBC, ACLU and other organizations are all viewed as participating in a single discourse that unfolds in total. The unit of analysis, therefore, is the time period within which the discourse occurs rather than any particular actor or set of actors. Based upon an analysis over time, it is clear that the al-Awlaki killing facilitated the expansion of the discourse to incorporate a distinct “legality” frame.

Operational definitions of frames

The data produced three clear thematic trends that were used to construct three particular frames. These frames are “legality,” “morality,” and “strategy.” Each was operationalized according to their primary components. Each frame displayed diagnostic and prognostic elements, consistent with those described by Benford and Snow (2000). In order to operate within a particular frame, the speaker did not need to oppose the drone program.

The strategy frame is constituted by rhetoric that invokes or makes an argument toward whether or not the drone program or the targeted killing of Anwar al-Awlaki or Baitullah Mehsud was strategically beneficial toward the United States’ goal of winning the war on terror. There are three diagnostic components of this frame: “anti-Americanism” (program/killing cause anti-Americanism and/or foster terrorist radicalization), “uncoordinated” (dealing with lack of coordination of drone program between Pentagon and CIA) and “ineffective/mistake-prone” (that the program is not helpful or is less effective than alternatives). A major theme within the media transcripts was warnings of retaliatory attacks following the al-Awlaki killing; this was coded as “anti-Americanism.”

The sole prognostic component of the strategy frame was “coordination is good,” which is essentially operationalized by claims that the program would be more effective if the Pentagon and CIA could come up with consistent parameters for the execution of the program, or if the program would just be moved out of the CIA and into the Pentagon altogether.

The “legality” frame is constituted by rhetoric that invokes or makes an argument about whether or not the United States drone program or the targeted killing of Anwar al-Awlaki or Baitullah Mehsud was legal. The diagnostic components of this frame are particular arguments that are meant to illustrate how or why the program is legal or illegal. There are seven unique

diagnostic elements of the legality frame that appear in the discourse. The seven diagnostic components of the legality frame are “due process,” “outside of declared battlefield,” “judicial efficacy” (arguments about the efficacy of a justice system that permits targeted killings), “executive overreach,” “international law” (whether it violates or not), “imminent threat,” and “slippery slope.”

There are four prognostic components of the legality frame. The prognostic components are constituted by distinct arguments for how to remedy the legal problems with the drone program that were laid out as diagnostic components of the frame. These prognostic components are “judicial integrity” (arguments about whether judges should force the government to be transparent about the drone program), “transparency” (that the government should release its criteria for why al-Awlaki and others can be targeted), “coordination” (better CIA/DOJ coordination could bring program within legal bounds), and “international law” (that the drone program should be conducted in accordance with international law). Interestingly, there is no prognostic claim that the government should end the drone program altogether.

The morality frame is constituted by rhetoric that calls into question the morality or ethics of the US drone program. Because of the ambiguity of the concept of morality, this frame is the most difficult to operationalize, though it appears to be a distinct strand within the discourse nonetheless. The diagnostic component of the morality frame is that drone warfare results in large numbers of civilian casualties. This is the most common argument against the drone program on moral grounds. The morality frame does have three distinct prognostic elements. The first is that increased coordination of the drone program—particularly better communication between the Pentagon and the CIA—could prevent large numbers of civilian casualties. The second prognostic component is the argument that the drone program should have greater

accountability. Finally, the third prognostic component of the morality frame is that families of civilian casualties should be compensated for their losses.

FINDINGS

The comparative model utilized in this study to analyze the temporal differences in the discourse on targeted killings revealed numerous stark contrasts in the framing of the drone issue between the aftermath of the Mehsud killing and that of the al-Awlaki killing. The argument that the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki produced a qualitatively new strand of discourse in the drone debate—a “legality” frame—is strongly supported in the data. The discourse on drones expands following the incident in terms of both complexity and volume of participation. The public sphere’s response to the killing of Baitullah Mehsud in August 2009 portrays a relatively unilinear conversation focused on a simple assessment of the role of drones in the context of the war on terror with intermittent mentions of civilian casualties. The killing of al-Awlaki, on the other hand, produced a complex and self-reflexive dialogue that incorporated strategic concerns but also focused on negotiating the role of citizenship within the post-9/11 political climate in the United States.

Across all segments of the data, the common theme was a sharp increase in both volume and complexity within the discussion of targeted killings upon al-Awlaki’s death in comparison to the discussion following the death of Mehsud. The number of broadcast transcripts mentioning drones and targeted killings in the aftermath of the al-Awlaki killing was nearly triple that of the same criteria following the Mehsud killing. Because of the differing roles of the media and advocacy organizations within the public sphere, there were functional differences between the rhetoric within these two data segments. That is, as a provider of information, the framing within the media took a primarily diagnostic tone by discussing the drone program in its

current state, while the advocacy organizations placed a heavier emphasis on prognostic framing by focusing on recommendations for responsible use of drones in the future.

Media

Table 1 illustrates the variation in the discourse both quantitatively and qualitatively, indicating the number of media broadcast transcripts that addressed the two killings as well as the frequency of particular frames being utilized in the discourse over the course of the given time period. Table 1 represents the aggregate media broadcast discourse.

Table 1: Frequency of Frames in CNN, MSNBC, and Fox Broadcast Transcripts
August 5 – 12, 2009 and September 30 – October 7, 2011

Frame	Mehsud, 2009 (n=20)	Al-Awlaki, 2011 (n=57)
Strategy	15 (75%)	42 (73.68%)
Morality	1 (5%)	4 (7.02%)
Legality	0 (0%)	39 (68.42%)

As is indicated in Table 1, the Mehsud killing did not elicit discussion of the legality of drones or the targeted killing program from any of these major news networks. The discussion of the death of al-Awlaki on Fox, CNN, and MSNBC began similarly—with discussion of the strategic victory brought about by the successful elimination of a target using a drone strike. Despite similar initial concerns, the conversation in this second instance quickly became

multifaceted, focusing almost equally—in terms of the percentages of transcripts that evoked the various themes—on this strategic angle as well as the newly introduced legal angle. CNN addressed the drone strike most frequently by discussing the incident 37 times during the second time period. Fox News addressed the incident twelve times, and MSNBC discussed it a mere four times. Fox News and MSNBC immediately acknowledged the killing as the result of a US drone strike, while CNN mentions al-Awlaki’s death a number of times before treating it as a confirmed United States drone strike.

The simplest trend in the discourse when comparing the al-Awlaki killing and the Mehsud killing is the clear difference in the degree of complexity. That is, after al-Awlaki’s killing, the news media features rhetoric coming from morality, legality, and strategy frames, each with diagnostic and prognostic components. Each frame is represented through multiple diagnostic components and at least one prognostic component within the discourse from 2011. The discourse following Mehsud’s killing, on the other hand, is almost entirely strategic, with exclusively diagnostic components of the strategy frame appearing in the week after the drone strike. Following al-Awlaki’s killing, out of 57 transcripts featuring discussion of the strike, 39 featured the legality frame, four featured the morality frame, and 42 featured the strategy frame. Clearly, the al-Awlaki killing produced a complex and nuanced dialogue. Conversely, out of the twenty transcripts featuring discussion of the Mehsud killing, fifteen utilized the strategy frame, while zero utilized the legality frame. The proportional frequency of the morality frame was roughly similar between the two time periods.

As expected, the print media from these same news sources displayed similar patterns as the broadcast transcripts. The majority of the articles take a highly informative tone—as

opposed to the discussion-based format utilized in the broadcasts—but the framing patterns are consistent nonetheless. Table 2 illustrates these patterns.

Table 2: Frequency of Frames in CNN, MSNBC, and Fox Published Articles
August 5 – 12, 2009 and September 30 – October 7, 2011

Frame	Mehsud, 2009 (n=8)	Al-Awlaki, 2011 (n=15)
Strategy	3 (37.50%)	10 (66.67%)
Morality	0 (0.00%)	3 (20.00%)
Legality	0 (0.00%)	6 (40.00%)

The framing patterns present in the published articles are somewhat muted in comparison to those that occur in the broadcast transcripts, though they continue to support the argument that the killing of al-Awlaki precipitated the generation of the legality frame. The articles were primarily informational and in large part did not address questions of the efficacy of drones in a legal, strategic, or moral discourse. Many of the articles following the Mehsud killing, in particular, address drones only briefly, and at times tangentially in the context of a discussion about other national security concerns. The articles from 2009, all of which came from CNN, fail to confirm Mehsud’s death, though they acknowledge near assurance that it had occurred. In these eight articles from 2009, the only frame utilized is the strategy frame, and the only component represented is a counter to the argument that drones or targeted killings are

ineffective; more specifically, it is noted multiple times that the death of Mehsud via a United States drone strike is a victory for the US in the war on terror.

The conversation following the al-Awlaki killing mirrored the pattern present in the broadcast transcripts. That is, the first several articles invoked only the strategy frame, but as the conversation developed, it became more nuanced and multifaceted. The strategy frame remained the most frequently utilized frame, but the introduction of the legality frame remains consistent with the broadcast data.

While the framing of the killings in the publications was not as pronounced as it was in the broadcast transcripts, the act of descriptively justifying the drone strikes was prevalent across all media data. That is, without framing it as a legal or strategic issue, seventy-five percent of all media data made reference to the roles the targeted killing victim had been alleged to have played in terrorist plots against the United States.

Advocacy Organizations

Though the media may arguably have greater influence in the public sphere, advocacy organizations may have been the public site of the introduction of the legality frame. The pattern of discourse in advocacy organizations differs from that in the media, though it supports the same conclusion. Because of the relative dearth of press releases, this study examined all drone-related press releases from the selected advocacy organizations and discovered that other than one press release by Amnesty International in 2006, these particular advocacy organizations did not enter the public sphere discussion of United States drones until 2010. While al-Awlaki had not yet been killed at this point, this is significant because the entry of advocacy organizations into the discourse (other than the lone 2006 outlier from AI) occurred after it was made public that the US government had authorized a strike on al-Awlaki (Shane 2010). Even so, excluding

the AI 2006 press release, the legality frame does not surface in press releases until after al-Awlaki's death.

The ACLU played a key role in generating the legality frame by responding to Shane's 2010 report with direct legal action against the US government. The ACLU filed a lawsuit on al-Awlaki's behalf in August 2010 (al-Aulaqi v. Obama). A federal court dismissed the lawsuit in December 2010, but the ACLU has filed several additional legal claims on behalf of al-Awlaki and others, as well as Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests seeking the release of the classified documents that contained criteria for the targeted killing of US citizens. The Department of Justice released a white paper containing this information in February 2013, though advocacy groups viewed this gesture as failing to be fully transparent, as is indicated in more recent press releases.

Table 3 illustrates the frequency of the three frames in the press releases from the ACLU and Amnesty International. Out of the seventeen total press releases, all invoke the legality frame (fifteen of seventeen occur after al-Awlaki's death). Unlike in the media data, the legality frame is used with greater frequency than the strategy frame, and the frequency of the morality frame is higher in the press releases than it is in the broadcast transcripts.

Table 3: Frequency of Frames in ACLU and Amnesty International Press Releases

Frame	Advocacy Organization Press Releases (n=17)
Strategy	4 (23.53%)
Morality	9 (52.94%)
Legality	17 (100%)

By nature, advocacy organizations focus more attention on the prognostic components of framing than do the media. The single most common argument made in advocacy organizational press releases is the legal-prognostic argument that the federal government should be more transparent about the details of the drone program, particularly those regarding the criteria that warrant authorization of the targeted killing of an individual, especially when that individual is a United States citizen. Fourteen of the seventeen press releases made this argument. At the time of al-Awlaki's death in September 2011, the US government had yet to acknowledge the use of drones for targeted killing altogether, let alone provided a rationale for its use in particular cases.

Interestingly, the prognostic framing of the drone issue by advocacy organizations does not call for the termination of the drone program; rather, it focuses on recommendations for responsible use of drones. Transparency is the most common of these recommendations, but the argument that the government must create clear rules for oversight and coordination of the program is also prominent. The ACLU repeatedly implores the federal court system to force the executive branch into making these changes.

DISCUSSION

Having established the introduction of the legality frame into the discourse regarding the use of drones and the targeted killing program, this paper suggests several potential implications of the generation of this new frame for American ideology within the post-9/11 context. A significant literature attempts to describe and analyze framing behavior—that is, processes and techniques used by contentious political actors to mobilize support (Gamson 1992; Benford 1993; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Byrd 2007; Reese 2010). This paper addresses these same processes in the context of the US targeted killing program. The purpose of this paper, however, is not only to examine descriptively the framing of targeted killings; it is to address the

other side of the framing coin—that is, the issue of frame resonance and reception. Prior literature argues that frames gain resonance through cultural identification and that framing represents remedial ideological work for citizens who engage in reality construction to negotiate cultural contradictions (Zald 1996; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 2000). Drawing from these theoretical perspectives and the empirical findings of this paper, it is possible to make inferences about social implications of a highly resonant “legality” frame.

The findings of this paper suggest that prior to the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, consideration of targeted killings as a legal issue, at least in the major informational and activist channels of American society, was nonexistent. The analysis revealed zero instances of concern over the legality of the targeted killing of Baitullah Mehsud in 2009 from the media, and the incident was not addressed through the press by major advocacy organizations. At the time of Mehsud’s death, drones were understood only as strategic military devices being used to achieve success in a declared military conflict. Nevertheless, the shift in the framing of drones reveals the symbolic quality of drones within the post-9/11 United States.

Neither the Mehsud killing nor the al-Awlaki killing generated a conversation of guilt; that is, it was assumed in the media and advocacy rhetoric that Mehsud and al-Awlaki had in fact committed crimes worthy of being targeted and killed by the US government under the Authorization of the Use of Military Force (AUMF) that was passed after 9/11. In fact, the al-Awlaki aftermath featured a high frequency of rhetoric justifying the killing, yet it was at this point in the discourse that the legality frame emerged. The combination of these discursive elements—the assumption of guilt and the simultaneous concerns over legality—indicates that activists’ use of the legality frame was spurred by abstract concerns over the theoretical implications of the killing rather than the particular material circumstances of the incident. In the

comparative model, citizenship functioned as an independent variable; despite the widespread assumption that both Mehsud and al-Awlaki were guilty of crimes worthy of treatment as enemy combatants, it appears that al-Awlaki's American citizenship—rather than al-Awlaki's death as a unique incident—provided the fodder for the emergence of the legality frame.

The emergence of the legality frame as a response to cultural concerns over the role of citizenship in the post-9/11 US political climate is consistent with Benford and Snow's (2000) discussion of cultural resonance and Snow and Benford's (2000) discussion of the relationship between framing and ideology. The emergence and continued use of the legality frame likely infers that it struck and continues to act upon a salient cultural note. The ambiguity of the United States' enemies after 9/11 created a precarious situation that facilitated dangerous marginalization for segments of the US population, but the extent of these concerns rarely resulted in anything beyond profiling, from an institutional standpoint (Chandhoke 2007; Schildkraut 2009). The targeted killing of al-Awlaki brought these previous concerns into sharp focus, potentially stripping to some extent the perceived protections of citizenship for groups or individuals the government viewed as suspicious or dangerous; this perception was exacerbated by the perceived lack of due process and unilateral decision making in the al-Awlaki case, creating a scenario in which Americans could not be completely certain that they were safe from their own government.

The intense ideological contradiction produced by this set of circumstances forced individuals and institutions to engage in a process of reality construction—the outcome of which was the legality frame. Al-Awlaki's killing created the type of ideological contradiction that Zald (1996) argues necessitates reality construction; the development of a new frame provided the opportunity for Americans to adopt a new cognitive schema that allowed them to situate the

strike within previously existing ideological beliefs. The “us versus them” rhetoric of the US government following 9/11 established Chandhoke’s (2007) notion of the war on terror ideology—that US foreign policy would be designed to achieve success in the war on terror. Simultaneously, the purpose of winning the war on terror was articulated as for the protection of civil liberties of American citizens. These two related sets of beliefs—winning the war on terror and the preservation of civil liberties—existed as parallel and complementary ideologies in the years after 9/11. As a result, targeted killings (among other national security issues) could be seen as being supportive of maintaining these two parallel sets of beliefs.

Al-Awlaki’s death brought these two previously parallel ideological beliefs into contradiction with one another. By killing an American citizen in an act that was perceived by many to violate that citizen’s constitutional right to due process, the US government essentially violated one set of beliefs (maintenance of civil liberties) for the purpose of achieving the other (winning the war on terror). As a result, American activists engaged in framing as remedial ideological work; that is, the legality frame was created to assist Americans in situating the killing of an American within a framework of previously held ideological beliefs that such an event would never occur (Snow and Benford 2000). The establishment of targeted killings as a legal issue helped stabilize the ideological contradiction by portraying the agents that authorized the killing as deviant. By conceptualizing the killing as illegal, activists framing the issue in this way made it possible for Americans to understand the event without having to rearrange deeply held ideological beliefs about the purpose of the war on terror. Essentially, the killing could be reduced to a particular, deviant decision by individuals rather than a harbinger of a completely new ideological narrative.

The fact that there was little, if any, dispute over al-Awlaki's guilt in the aftermath of his death brings the significance of the legality frame into sharper focus. That is, the incident most likely did not alter the degree of concern over being targeted by the state for the majority of Americans. The implications are more abstract; the adoption of the legality frame into the discourse suggests that al-Awlaki's death functioned as a pivot point in the narrative of the negotiation between security and liberty in the post-9/11 United States. At a minimum, the incident prompted a moment of national collective self-reflection in the aftermath of a successful military endeavor.

CONCLUSION

The analysis in this study revealed a distinct shift and elaboration of the discourse on drones and targeted killing as an attempt to negotiate the new realities of the program within deeply ingrained ideological beliefs about the post-9/11 political climate in the United States. The process of reframing an issue in order to repair breaches between empirical observations and ideological beliefs is one that has been thoroughly articulated in the literature (Zald 1996; Snow and Benford 2000). Though this particular study provided strong evidence of the introduction of a new, legality frame into the public sphere discourse, these results must be seen as a starting point for future research that can help better clarify the role of a new relatively new form of technology that continues to gain prominence in a number of social arenas.

The primary shortcoming of a study such as this one is that it must be temporally bounded. That is, as time goes on, the drone program continues to develop and more circumstances emerge that can impact the discourse. This study, however, was strategically designed to capture the impact of a particular event—the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki—on the framing of the program. Future research can address the continuous discourse on the US drone

program by conducting similar studies to this one that focus around other potential pivot points or key moments in the development of military drone use and targeted killing. Additionally, establishing the relationship between public opinion and the way targeted killing is framed in the media would be beneficial in corroborating the impact of the framing of the issue in the American population. The issues of frame resonance and reception must be a major element of research on framing moving forward.

The framing of targeted killings reveals changes in the presentation of the security versus liberty debate, but an additional major piece of this puzzle is drone surveillance. The issue of surveillance has taken center stage in the drone discourse, and fears over domestic surveillance have become a major point of political contention in the United States. By the very nature of surveillance, the discourse on this issue is likely to be highly based in legal concerns, but the idea of using surveillance to advance the US position in the war on terror remains a counterpoint. Future research should analyze discourse on drone surveillance to further clarify the arguments about the negotiation between security and liberty presented in this paper. By examining this alternative use of drone technology, in combination with the findings about the framing of targeted killings, sociological researchers can paint a more complete picture of the symbolic role of drones in the American public sphere.

The proliferation of uses for drones appears, anecdotally, to be moving quickly. Drone technology has been recently suggested for use in myriad roles including package delivery, border control, monitoring drug trafficking, meteorology purposes, and others. It is essential for researchers to continue to monitor this trend as the introduction of drones into a variety of public and private arenas could have significant social and economic impacts ranging from the obvious political implications to new forms of industry and potential impacts on employment, among

others. The drone issue is one that is relatively young, and researchers have an opportunity to build a rich, sociological understanding of the role this new technology plays in American society.

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