

Making the case for the UK's drone capability: public relations as a carrier of strategic culture

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer critical analysis of how public relations (PR) were used to justify the use of drones by the UK Government, through the promotion of a distinct strategic culture. The paper locates governmental PR discourse on drones in the UK since 2013 within the strategic culture associated with the global war on terror.

Design/methodology/approach – The project was based upon critical discourse analysis of the UK governmental PR on drones since 2013, examining press releases, opinion articles by ministers, media relations content, parliamentary statements, news content and other related materials.

Findings – The analysis led to five discursive themes of persuasive intent in relation to drones being identified, most of which were notably similar to the US governmental discourse on drone policy and deployment.

Originality/value – The project contributes a novel interdisciplinary synthesis of the communicative aspects of international relations as theorised in the field of strategic culture with the cultural aspects of the state-level PR in order to explain how PR was used to promote and diffuse a strategic culture in which drones are assumed to be the counter-terrorism measure of choice. The conclusion is that governmental PR discourse combines aspects of colonialism with focus on superior technology, remote control and precision of weapons, generating a military and communicative logic that overwhelms the voices of victims and impedes meaningful discussion on the reality of suffering caused by drone deployments.

Keywords Communication management, Drones, Public relations, War

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction and purpose

In the keynote speech of the 25th BledCom International Public Relations Symposium in 2018 addressing the conference theme of “A World in Crisis: The role of Public Relations,” Dejan Vercic (2018) confronted the association of public relations (PR) with the dehumanisation and the sanitisation of conflict: “Every war starts and ends with communication [...] we are at the forefront of every military conflict and we have to acknowledge that”. Since the early deployments of drones in what President George Bush labelled the “global war on terror” and what the media-savvy Obama administration renamed on taking office in 2009 as “overseas contingency operations” (Howley, 2018, p. 25), political and military leaders and their PR staffs have made discursive justifications for the use of drones. Their argument has been that a new type of war is required to deal with new types of threats, resulting in a “droneworld” of robotic surveillance of regions deemed unruly followed up with “electromagnetic manhunts” and deaths from this alienated “brand of state violence” (Shaw, 2016, p. 111).

Not all nations have responded to what is presented as a global security threat in the same way as the UK and USA, and so the intention of this paper is to offer critical analysis of the way PR has been used to promote and diffuse a distinct strategic culture in which drones are the counterterrorism measure of choice. Specifically, the paper analyses how governmental PR on the UK's drone capability acted as carrier of a strategic culture that made the deployment of these weapons politically acceptable. The project attempts an interdisciplinary synthesis of the communicative aspects of international relations (IR) as theorised in the field of strategic culture with the cultural aspects of the state-level PR. Using these two theoretical lenses, the paper seeks to explain how the UK's drone deployments



were justified through PR that promoted a distinct strategic culture, mindful of the warning from a pre-eminent philosopher on military matters (Von Clausewitz, 1832, p. 101) of the need for alertness to “the abstruse definitions of war used by publicists”.

2. Literature review

2.1 *A socio-cultural approach to public relations*

Socio-cultural perspectives emerged alongside the critical direction in PR scholarship that was summarised in L'Etang and Pieczka's (1996) book, *Critical Perspectives in Public Relations*, and other work that developed the theme (e.g. L'Etang and Pieczka, 2006; Heath *et al.*, 2009). A sophisticated consideration of how cultural studies might inform PR studies was offered by Curtin and Gaither (2005) who applied the circuit of culture concept to a theorising of PR, in which PR people operated as intermediaries who managed information production and consumption in the cultural economy. The arrival of a socio-cultural turn in PR scholarship was recorded by Edwards and Hodges (2011) and by then, the social themes had been advanced by Ihlen *et al.*'s (2009) application of social theory to PR while the cultural focus moved forward with Edwards' (2012) explication of PR as a cultural intermediary function in promotional culture, in a paper that drew on Bourdieu's (1984, p. 360) writing on the presentation of culture. More recently, in the 2018 book *Understanding Public Relations Theory, Culture and Society* (Edwards, 2018, p. 115) the same author addressed the IR aspects of PR or “public diplomacy interventions” that are made by states in the “transnational public sphere” of an increasingly globalised culture. Kunczik (2003, p. 400) labelled this domain as “public relations for the nation state” which combines a semantically indistinguishable cocktail of advertising, PR and propaganda to influence public attitudes on what Lasswell called “controversial matters” (as cited in Kunczik, 2003, p. 400). The role of state-level PR in world affairs over the last hundred years, as global media, persuasion and global conflict coincided, led David Welch (2015, p. 3) to label the twentieth century as the “propaganda century”. Yet PR and propaganda at times of war and is a field lightly covered in PR literature, although there are useful contributions in parallel fields, such as O'Shaughnessy's (2008, p. 79) consideration of the role of PR in Gulf War II under the title “Weapons of Mass Seduction” in which he cites strategic cultural dimensions of the USA as an “aggrieved victim” in the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan that was unable to carry forward the same “moral force” of justification in the Iraq war.

2.2 *Strategic culture*

Strategic culture has been defined as “a cultural understanding of war” (Uz Zaman, 2009). It is a theory, conceptual field and tool of analysis in IR that attempts to explain the “distinctive strategic behaviours of states” (Lock, 2017) that result from shared ideas across populations which have been distributed over time by political and military elites, through cultural, discursive and communicative exchange. The term was first coined by the US security analyst Jack Snyder in 1977 as a theoretical explanation of the distinct approaches to nuclear war by the USA and USSR during the Cold War era, that brought a “political cultural argument into the realm of modern security studies” (Lantis, 2005, p. 34). National strategic cultures are derived from factors of history, geography and political culture alongside the voices of political and military establishments and public opinion” (Booth, 1990, p. 121). The historical dimension has been emphasised by Clarke (2017, p. 22) who traced a “long shadow” of influence from empire, guilt and religion on the foreign policy choices made by British Prime Ministers, resulting in a strategic culture that has combined a sense of morality and obligation to police the globe that endured for over 100 years from the Gladstone era to Tony Blair's transatlantic alliance with President Bush in the global “war on terror”. Addressing the communicative aspects of strategic culture, Johnston (1995, p. 32) stressed the importance of “argumentation structures [...] languages, analogies, metaphors” using an “aura of factuality” to establish “pervasive and long lasting strategic preferences”,

while Uz Zaman (2009, p. 77) has emphasised the role of regular “rhetorical pronouncements” in the public sphere that define and justify strategic culture. PR processes are put to work in the distribution of these strategic ideas through channels of popular culture and civic society – including media – to culturally frame the war and promote a shared public belief that it is justified in the national interest (Farrell, 2005, p. 11).

2.3 Drones

An extensive literature has emerged to describe the way drones combine surveillance and violence to dominate space through a new form of technological and remote “atmospheric policing” (Shaw, 2016, p. 27). Although the first recorded combat use was by Iran in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the recent history of drones is essentially American, with US deployments in support of targeted killing operations authorised by President George Bush in Afghanistan following the 11 September 2001 terror attacks. The years after the 2001 attacks saw the CIA evolve from an intelligence service with the capability to protect the homeland to what the *Washington Post* called a “paramilitary force” (Miller, 2015, p. 1) undertaking a clandestine programme of targeted killings in collaboration with the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). John Nagl, who advised General Petraeus on counterinsurgency described JSOC as “an almost industrial-scale counterterrorism killing machine” (Gavett, 2011) while the CIA side of the operation was described in similar terms by Mazetti (2013, p. 4) as “a killing machine, an organisation consumed with man-hunting”. With 83 per cent of Americans declaring themselves in favour of deploying drones, killing terrorists with drones became “great politics” (Feldman, 2011). From 2009 to 2017, President Obama oversaw a six-fold increase in strikes compared with the Bush Presidency as the low operational risk of drones combined to create a logical imperative for “attacks in faraway countries without having to mobilise and deploy troops and with no fear of American bodybags” in operations that were “legitimated by a state rhetoric of justification” (Gusterson, 2016, p. 141).

2.4 The UK's drone capability

Reaper drones were first deployed by the Royal Air Force in Afghanistan in 2007 and flew 5,000 sorties until the end of combat operations in October 2014, during which time 8 per cent of sorties had “weapons released” (Brooke-Holland, 2015, p. 23). The answer to a Parliamentary Question to the Armed Forces Minister in November 2014 confirmed that two UK Reaper drones had been deployed “for operations in the Middle East, including for surveillance missions over Syria” (HC Deb, 2014a). This marked the first deployment outside Afghanistan and confirmed the beginning of operations against Islamic State in the region. Little more information was made public by political leaders on UK drone deployments at this time, with the Armed Forces Minister justifying the decision to withhold information “as its disclosure would or would be likely to prejudice operational capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces and also relations between the UK and another State” (HC Deb, 2014b) or simply for “safeguarding operational security” (HC Deb, 2014c). In April 2013, control of the Royal Air Force’s (RAF) remotely piloted air systems (RPAS) or drones moved from the US Air Force (USAF) base at Creech in Nevada to Waddington in Eastern England. The move led to an increased volume of protest against the UK’s offensive drone capability in general and their deployment on targeted killing missions in particular. As of June 2015, the UK was operating five different types of RPAS including a fleet of ten Reaper drones, which have been described as “the most contentious conventional weapons system in use” (Brooke-Holland, 2015, p. 4).

3. Methodology and materials

The focus on how PR promoted a strategic culture that justified the use of drones suggested a discursive study was required into how this capability was presented by military and

political spokespeople. In parallel, the analysis of PR activity through the lens of strategic culture led to the methodological literature in that field to confirm suitable objects of analysis. The result was a decision to focus on two types of materials in the investigation. The first category was the official statements of the “national strategic community” (Snyder, 1977) of military and political leaders, records of debates in Parliament and PR materials issued by key military and political actors. (Johnston, 1995, p. 49) listed strategic culture artefacts as the “writings, debates, thoughts and words of culture bearing units, such as strategists, military leaders and national security elites” which combined to produce a symbolic discourse (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 43) of strategic culture. This first aspect was operationalised through online searches of the records of press releases and statements relating to drones on the UK's Ministry of Defence press office websites and the UK Government news site, gov.uk, since 2013, with the same search applied to the record of all activity (debates, statements and committee hearings) in the UK Houses of Parliament as recorded in Hansard at <https://hansard.parliament.uk>. The investigation included a particular focus on the December 2013 press visit to RAF Waddington because of its importance as the first set piece PR visit to the site of UK drone operations and the arguments made there by political and military leaders in what became a “critical discourse moment” that made this issue “especially visible” (Gamson, 1992, pp. 25-26).

The second type of materials is the results of the statements of these “culture-bearing units” in the public sphere in the form of “images of war and peace portrayed in various media” (Johnston, 1995, p. 49). This led to the analysis of news stories that resulted from PR activity such as press conferences and was operationalised through a search of UK national news media on the Nexis media database from 2013 using the search terms “drone”, “remotely piloted aircraft”, “Reaper” and “RAF Waddington”. News media was considered important because of the way the journalistic processes of selection and PR attempts at influence result in a form of “representational discourse” that is “articulated from a particular ideological position” in which “language is not a clear window but a refracting, structuring medium” (Fowler, 1991, p. 10).

Fairclough (1995) developed the field of media discourse analysis from the perspective that news is a vital site for the production or re-production of dominant ideologies, offering a tripartite framework for studies that take account of text, discursive practice and social practice in a widely used methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 258) defined discourse as “a form as social practice” and CDA is concerned with understanding how social relations of power are projected through discourse, resulting in a theoretically grounded and well-tested form of analysis that is primarily concerned with understanding “pressing social issues” (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 359), such as consideration of ethics, politics and IR aspects of drone operations. Thematic analysis was undertaken manually after a first review of the 165 separate pieces of material in the corpus with categories refined after four further reviews to arrive at a definitive set of discursive themes that covered all material. The initial categories of discourse were informed by a thematic analysis of the text of four important speeches on drone operations by US political and security figures between March 2010 and May 2013 – including President Obama – which can be founded at Table AI. This combination of work was undertaken in order to investigate the following research question:

RQ1. How was PR used by the UK Government from 2013 onwards to promote a strategic culture justifying the use of its remotely piloted aircraft?

4. Findings

4.1 *The UK drone capability comes home*

The first official mention of the UK's Reaper drone capability in 2013 came with the 2 April announcement in an MOD press release of a “graduation ceremony” of RAF drone

pilots – recorded as the first of its kind – at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, USA. This news followed a December 2012 announcement of a specialised flying branch for remotely piloted air systems and explains that the move was “recognition within the RAF of the growing complexity and capability of RPAS and the increasingly pivotal role on operations” (Ministry of Defence, 2013a). The MOD press release includes a photograph of the four airmen with the Deputy Commander in Chief Operations, Air Marshall Richard Garwood, who states:

The first graduation of RPAS pilots makes clear not only the RAF’s commitment to this pivotal technology but the associated need to produce highly qualified pilots devoted to fully exploiting RPAS capabilities now and in the future (Ministry of Defence, 2013a).

The RAF’s background notes on RPAS at the time are clear that Reapers have been in service in Afghanistan since October 2007 in the reconnaissance role and “within 6 months of use the requirement to strike at fleeting targets” and provide close air support to land forces “was quickly realised” and armed missions began in May 2008, with Reapers “operated by crews of professional pilots” (Royal Air Force, 2013). With these facts already in the public domain (although since deleted following a reorganisation of the RAF’s web pages), the April 2013 press release includes some surprising claims of newness and firsts, including the headline “RAF Reaper pilots gain wings” and the subheading “The UK’s first airmen officially qualified to fly remotely-piloted air systems have graduated in the USA”. These claims seem poorly grounded in fact and raise questions. For example, were the “professional pilots” flying drones since 2007 not officially qualified? There seems little purpose in these claims other than adding news value to what is really a point of internal organisation at the RAF to create the RPAS pilot flying branch. However, the otherwise light press release does clarify that the RAF “has 2 RPAS Squadrons: 39 Squadron currently based at Creech Air Force Base and 13 Squadron, which is based at RAF Waddington, Lincolnshire”, establishing that drone operations were soon to be controlled from the UK.

News of drone control being established in the UK was followed almost immediately by protests at the base and criticism of the drone programme by a coalition of activist groups, including a march on RAF Waddington by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Drone Wars UK and War on Want (Ross and Woods, 2013) in late April 2013. In the months that followed, a governmental PR discourse on drones began to emerge from the statements, articles and press notices from politicians, military leaders and MOD and RAF PR staff. The emergence of a national PR discourse on drones was punctuated most prominently by the critical discourse moment (Chilton, 1988) of a press visit to RAF Waddington on 17 December 2013. In the written and spoken press briefings, press releases and accompanying opinion articles that were distributed by MOD and RAF PR officers on the day and as follow-up, five discursive themes of persuasive intent in relation to drones were identified as a result of the discursive analysis and these are explicated in the following section:

- (1) there are myths and criticism about the UK’s drone capability, based largely on misunderstanding or misrepresentation – including inappropriate use of the word drone to describe remotely piloted aircraft;
- (2) drones protect troops on distant battlefields and prevent attacks on civilians at home;
- (3) drones are not indiscriminate remote killers controlled by operators with a video game mentality but are operated by highly skilled and discriminating pilots;
- (4) the superior technology and operating characteristics of drones – coupled with skilled aircrew and targeting analysis – enable precise strikes based on enhanced intelligence, so minimising civilian casualties; and
- (5) UK drone operations conform with the law of armed conflict, with the same rules of engagement as conventional manned air operations.

4.2 *Confronting myths*

In response to the growing criticism of drone operations, on 17 December 2013, the MOD PR team organised a press visit to RAF Waddington for selected defence journalists to showcase the UK's capability. Defence Secretary Philip Hammond told the BBC that the decision to open up RAF Waddington to press visitors was driven by the need to "bust some myths" and address the "PR deficit" for drones (Beale, 2013). Journalists reporting on the 17 December 2013 press visit provided an insight on attempts by the MOD PR staff to control both the scope of the discussion and the language used in reports. Oliver Wright, of *The Independent* included a verbatim report on the opening presentation by the MOD PR hosts of the visit:

You are at a military briefing facility, the man from the Ministry of Defence told us. You will notice that I am military and so are all my chums. This is [about] defence correspondents talking about defence and the military.

If you want to talk about foreign nations, you can talk to the Foreign Office. If you want to talk about legal interpretations, you can talk to some legal beagles. We will not touching any of those areas. If you start touching any of those areas I will cut you off (Wright, 2013).

BBC defence correspondent, Jonathan Beale (2013) reported on the MOD PR team's attempt to control language, commenting that the struggle "to rename the drone as a remotely piloted air system has probably already been lost". In a *Guardian* opinion article, Defence Secretary Philip Hammond (2013) addressed "the most basic falsehood" which is simply the use of the term drone and its associations with machines free from human oversight:

A drone is a pilotless vehicle, but the Royal Air Force's Reaper – the system to which the word is commonly applied in the British press – is anything but (Hammond, 2013).

The "carefully controlled PR exercise to defend its use of armed drones" – and the semantic discussion on whether a drone can be called a drone – meant that "more serious questions surrounding remote warfare were given less attention" (Cole, 2013). Rather than confronting the ethical, legal and policy issues related to drones that have been raised by critics, the aim of the press visit appeared to be dispelling "the myths about the programme, while subtly pointing out the differences between our approach to drones and that of our American allies" (Wright, 2013). This reporting reflected the clause in the MOD press release, which described the aim of the day as "to dispel some common myths about the role of the equipment" (Ministry of Defence, 2013b) and confront the "criticism" and "misunderstanding" on drones by seeking to "better inform people about these life-saving assets and their variety of purposes". In his op-ed in *The Guardian*, The Defence Secretary himself was critical of the media's contribution to the discourse on drones:

Much criticism, though, is based on genuine misunderstanding or a wild misrepresentation of reality – even in the pages of prestigious newspapers. We in the Ministry of Defence have not done enough to correct these misapprehensions. I for one, wish to put the myths to bed (Hammond, 2013).

This discursive baseline was repeated by Minister for the Armed Forces Mark Francois on a January 2014 follow-up visit to RAF Waddington, which formed "part of a wider drive by the MOD to dispel some of the myths around the use of unmanned aerial systems" (Ministry of Defence, 2014a).

4.3 *Drones are not automated, indiscriminate killers piloted by video gamers*

The subheading to Philip Hammond's *Guardian* (Hammond, 2013) article is "Ignore the drone myths. They're not indiscriminate killers but assets that keep civilians and troops safe". This line of argumentation seems designed to confront the criticism that drones increase casualties because they lower the threshold for a strike, due to the lower risk compared to fighter ground attack missions by conventional aircraft. The PR discourse that

the MOD deployed on this point is consistent with the US's discursive theme of drones being controlled by skilled human pilots and so there is no greater risk of indiscriminate killing than in conventional strikes. Defence Secretary Hammond states that the "decision-making process leading to the identification and engagement of targets is identical to that for conventionally-manned aircraft" and the speech from Air Vice Marshall Philip Osborn, to the RAF Waddington press conference follows this theme:

Highly trained and experienced personnel are at the heart of the capability, and human control is always paramount (Ministry of Defence, 2013b).

The point is developed further in the MOD press release which goes on to stress that while viewing the Reaper control cabin, "the Defence Secretary was able to see how it is guided and controlled at all times by a team of highly trained and skilled people" (Ministry of Defence, 2013b). Armed Forces Minister Mark Francois repeated this theme in his comments on a Defence Committee Report in March 2014, which recorded that he was "Particularly pleased to note the committee's recognition of the highly skilled personnel who operate this equipment" (Ministry of Defence, 2014b). Criticism of the role of drone operators was confronted by UK parliamentarian, the chair of the Defence Select Committee, James Arbuthnot, who commented that the pilots "are no video-gaming 'warrior geeks' as some would portray them" but human beings with a "strong sense of connection to life and death decisions they are sometimes required to take" (Arbuthnot, 2014). This PR discourse featured in the materials and statements during the December 2013 visit to RAF Waddington, as recorded by a BBC journalist:

The RAF is keen to challenge any impression that this is like some kind of hi-tech video game. The crew speak of their professionalism. They all learned to fly in the air first and insist that operating the Reaper is not that different (Beale, 2013).

4.4 The enhanced intelligence gathered by drones means they enable precise strikes that minimise civilian casualties

The discourse of precision and the use of the surgical metaphor is common to political and military public discourse on drones in the UK and USA, and reflects the role of technological superiority in defining US strategic culture. For example, the word precise features three times in the MOD press release to accompany the 17 December 2013 press visit to RAF Waddington, with Philip Hammond stating that the "battle-winning technology" of drones enables the UK to "precisely strike [...] those who threaten or hurt the people we are protecting" (Ministry of Defence, 2013b):

The decision-making process leading to the identification and engagement of targets is identical to that for conventionally manned aircraft. But more than this, the greater access to information our pilots have, through a combination of the aircraft's onboard sensors and the ability to access off-board information, means that they are the best-informed and least pressured of all our aircrew (Hammond, 2013).

Hammond goes on to argue that the result of this technical advantage is drones delivering "greater precision" on the battlefield. Similarly, during the January 2014 follow-up press visit to RAF Waddington, Air Marshall Philip Osborn spoke of the "precision strike capability offered by drones". Ground troops who had served in Afghanistan were on hand at this press visit to describe how the UK's Reaper drones had "provided them with life-saving support at vital times" as well as protecting Afghan colleagues and civilians (Ministry of Defence, 2014a), in a sophisticated example of endorsement marketing for the UK's drone capability.

4.5 UK drone operations conform to the law of armed conflict and follow the same rules of engagement as conventional manned air operations

Emphasis on the legality of RPAS operations has become a dominant theme of PR discourse on drones in the UK and USA that has developed to counter public criticism. In particular,

after drone strikes that killed UK and US citizens by their own forces in Syria and Yemen, respectively, spokespeople offered carefully crafted statements to justify these operations. The start point of the argument on legality is that drones are “just like any other capability”, using a line of argument which casually places drones alongside any other weaponry in an effort to play down their distinctive features. Typical of this genre is Air Vice Marshall Osborn’s statement at the December 2013 press conference at RAF Waddington:

This is a capability just like any other across defence; it has skilled and motivated people at its core, people who are in charge of technology and use it in strict accordance with the law (Ministry of Defence, 2013b).

This discursive theme was repeated in the January press visit (Ministry of Defence, 2014a) with the statement that any use of “precision strike capability” of RAF Reaper drones “is always in accordance with international humanitarian law and governed by the same strict rules of engagement as those governing manned aircraft”. Defence Secretary Philip Hammond similarly emphasised that “RAF Reaper pilots follow the same law of armed conflict and rules of engagement as pilots of manned aircraft”. Legal matters are often discussed in connection with civilian casualties. For example, Minister, Lord Hever of Astor offered this comment in reply to a questions in the House of Lords:

The UK seeks to avoid civilian casualties while undertaking airstrikes against ISIL targets. All airstrikes are conducted in accordance with international Humanitarian Law, following the principles of distinction, humanity, proportionality and military necessity (HC Deb 18 November 2014).

Despite the consistency of this discursive argumentation in both Parliamentary statements and press releases from the Ministry of Defence PR team, critics have challenged the legality of UK drone operations. For example, a submission of written evidence by Public Interest Lawyers (2013) to the Defence Committee claimed that while it was difficult to come to a settled view on legality because “one of the principle mischiefs of the UK’s use of drones is its lack of transparency”, the indications were that there was a “strong possibility” that the Government had “misdirected itself” on the legal issues that applied to drone deployments. Commenting on a report into the 21 August 2015 Reaper strike on UK citizen Reyaad Khan in Syria, Prime Minister Theresa May used carefully crafted language to justify the attack within international law as an “act of UK self-defence” that was “necessary and proportionate” in response to intelligence reports of a “direct and imminent threat” (HC Deb, 2017).

5. Discussion

This paper aimed to investigate the PR discourse used to promote a strategic culture that justified the UK’s drone programme and the resulting analysis has identified five dominant themes which have been described above. The commonalities between USA and UK PR discourses on drones are unsurprising in view of the identical deployment of the same weapon (Reaper drones) in Afghanistan and the Middle East by both countries, as well as training of UK pilots in the USA and control of UK drones from a USAF base until 2013. The decision by these two countries alone to deploy drones can be seen as a logical result of a shared strategic culture (in particular the common moral imperative to act globally and defend against remote threats) and also contributed to common operational styles.

UK governmental PR discourse on drones from 2013 onwards was reproduced by journalists with little criticism, although dissenting voices such as spokespeople from the activist group Drone Wars group were regularly cited in lengthier articles. Most mainstream media coverage consisted of either a neutral or broadly supportive narrative for drone operations that emphasised capable and professional people (the pilots) coupled with the technological superiority of the machine itself. In Howley’s (2018, p. 8) terms, this techno-military emphasis was part of a PR “rhetoric of the technologically sublime” which presented drones as a militarily,

morally and technically superior solution to the “problem” of counter-terror operations in the Middle East. In this rhetorical presentation, the high tech component of drone warfare becomes a persuasive argument, offering a military modernity with all the cleanliness, neatness and rational detachment derived from remoteness of control. An emphasis on weapon technology has been a common feature of US strategic culture that values technology generally in defence matters and particularly as offering solutions to the war on terror. However, the technical proposition of drone warfare was a novel line of argumentation for the UK, where the strategic culture and military PR since the Second World War has traditionally emphasised the quality of personnel and the long experience winning “hearts and minds” in counter insurgency operations from Malaya to Northern Ireland. This PR focus on remote technology as a component of strategic culture and capability was a politically shrewd choice of message, as it addressed the UK population’s fatigue with the scale and severity of troop casualties resulting from the war on terror. PR was used to signal a shift in strategic culture away from large scale troop deployments in favour of remote surveillance., In the discursive construction used by the Ministry of Defence’s PR team, offensive drone operations were justified because their capability synchronised with the revised strategic culture as shaped by close collaboration with the USA in the war on terror alongside the public’s wish for security at a lower cost.

The rhetorical register in all the PR materials was one of rationality, professionalism and a resignation that drones were the best tool for the unpleasant but necessary task of counter-terrorism policing in distant places. This strategic cultural obligation was supported by a governmental PR discourse that presented drone warfare as a just form of war. The just war was made using through PR argumentation that emphasised precision and made the claim that UK drone operations had resulted in no civilian casualties, which was subtly marketed as a point of difference from the USA. In the case of UK operations against Islamic State, this claim held true until May 2018, when the MOD admitted for the first time that a Reaper drone strike in eastern Syria on 26 March that year had “unintentionally” killed a civilian on a motorbike who entered the target area at the last minute (BBC News, 2018). As this case and other examples showed, the discourse of precision in relation to drones is not a statement of fact but rather a politically loaded line of argument which is used to present drones as a form of just war making – despite the military asymmetry between those countries operating drones and those against whom they are operated. UK governmental PR discourse to justify killing by drones has been based upon a carefully assembled and formulaic language of representation designed to soften the sharp truths of devastation and societal harm that these weapons cause on the ground. In the discursive universe that underpins a strategic culture of remote intervention, all drone missions are “precision strikes” with “smart” weapons, resulting in what drone pilots declare as a “good kill” according to one US filmic depiction (Niccol, 2014). Yes despite the use of surgical metaphors provide assurance on precision, the wars in which drones have been used have resulted in levels of civilian casualties and psychological damage, in line with Mary Kaldor’s (2007) ratio of military to civilian casualties changing from eight to two at the beginning of the twentieth century to two military to eight civilians in modern conflicts.

The dominant PR narrative of drones doing no harm has led to the voices of innocent citizens being ignored in a Western-centric public sphere that rarely includes accounts of the effects on populations who live under surveillance and constant fear of attack. This imbalance in public discourse reflects the asymmetry of violence inherent in drone warfare itself and an alienation that can be traced to the colonial origins of control by aereality, as practiced by the RAF in the Middle East in the 1920s onwards. It is a topic where Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism has been usefully applied to help understand and confront the racialized nature of drone warfare and the strategic culture by which it is justified:

Those under the drone’s gaze are not perceived as fully human due to Orientalism, like natives in the colonies [...]. Their voices are not worthy of circulation, despite the fact that they know much better the violence inflicted by the drone programme (Espinoza, 2018, p. 385).

Although rarely voiced explicitly in PR materials, the historical residues of Orientalism, imperialism and colonialism can be detected in some of the aggressive rhetorical registers used to discuss surveillance and targeted killing. While no UK examples of explicitly aggressive sub-discourses were found in this study, they have been recorded in the USA, with the former head of counterterrorism at the CIA telling a journalist “We are now killing these sons of bitches faster that they can grow them” (2011) when discussing drone operations in the Middle East. Similarly, a retired US drone pilot spoke of how crews would look at target lists before starting shifts asking “which one of these mother****ers is going to die today?” (Woods, 2015). Reaching to theoretical work by Foucault on warfare and control in order to understand such attitudes, Allinson (2015) and Kordela (2016) have explained the logic of the drone as a bio political tool of remote supervision by two dominant Western powers seeking to protect their people. The conclusion is that those same powers – the UK and USA – have skilfully used the state apparatus of PR to promote a strategic culture that conjoins remote aerial warfare and homeland protection – at a lower cost than troops on the ground – in order to justify the use of drones and gain widespread public support for their deployment.

6. Limitations and future work

The use of PR to defend and promote a strategic culture that justifies the use of drones raises familiar ethical issues about PR practice and questions of scope of responsibilities of practitioners when working for states and the military. If states and the military have a right to be heard in the public sphere, what sort of PR can or should be undertaken on their behalf? The case of governmental discourse on drones is troubling for the way it fails to ensure a balanced public debate on this important topic, and also for the way it does not always allow for distant and opposing voices – including the voices of victims – to be heard or considered. Moreover, it also shows that the incentives for nurturing balance on the part of governments involved in militaristic, national PR remain weak, despite claims by modern governments to be “willing to listen”.

This exploratory project on the interplay between PR and strategic culture in justifying drones focussed on analysis of a single capability in one country over a short time period, making any broader conclusions of limited applicability. While recommendations for practice are premature, the lens of strategic culture and consideration of its relationship with public opinion and PR on military matters did prove a fruitful tool of analysis for examining the role of PR in the context of IR. Future work to extend the intersection of PR and IR using the field of strategic culture both as a bridge between the two disciplines and a promising tool of analysis with which to examine issues of global conflict would be welcome. Similarly, the hope is that this article might stimulate further work that explores and informs the work of PR professionals as they navigate the ethical landscape when working on behalf of a government or its military in the field of IR. Such work could also be valuable in helping PR actors in these fields to better understand how they might contribute to more balanced discourse on complex and sometimes polarising global policy issues.

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| Speaker | Date | Location | Messages |
|--|------------|--|---|
| Harold Koh (Legal Adviser to US Department of State) | March 2010 | American Society of International Law | Confronts illogical criticism of drones rather than fighter aircraft. "Because drone technology is highly precise [...] it could be more lawful and more consistent with human rights and humanitarian law than the alternatives" |
| Eric Holder (US Attorney General) | March 2012 | Northwestern University Law School | Cites John F Kennedy and need for the US to defend freedom in its "hour of danger" |
| John Brennan (CIA Director) | May 2012 | Woodrow Wilson Center | Stresses precision of the weaponry in use and the precision of the targeting and target selection process |
| President Obama | May 2013 | National Defense University (and broadcast live on TV) | Drones are needed as an effective technology to deal with a "different kind of war" |

Table AI.
Thematic analysis of four key speeches on US drone policy

While there is some variance between the four speakers on their points of emphasis based on their sphere of expertise – Harold Koh, for example focusses on legal aspects including the doctrine of just war or *jus ad bellum* – there are some shared themes, that are laid out here as a summary of the discursive argumentation made in the set-piece speeches and related statements at the time by these actors:

- (1) drones use new technology and offer a unique capability in the new type of operations against terrorism that are needed to protect the West;
- (2) drones offer precision and minimise civilian casualties;
- (3) drones are controlled by skilled human pilots and there is no indiscriminate killing; and
- (4) the use of drones is legal and consistent with the laws of war.

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