

Like Drone Strikes, 'Eye in the Sky' Is Much Less Accurate than Claimed

Written by Alex Edney-Browne

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ALEX EDNEY-BROWNE, MAY 25 2016

Eye in the Sky (2016) has been hailed the 'quintessential modern war film', the 'drone movie we've been waiting for' and the 'Hollywood film that reveals the reality of drone warfare'. Excited by these reviews, I headed to the cinema expecting an accurate depiction of the US Coalition drone programme and a compelling exploration of its ethics. I left disappointed. Like drone warfare, *Eye in the Sky* is much less accurate than claimed.

It may seem redundant to highlight the inaccuracies of a Hollywood movie. Of course *Eye in the Sky* is inaccurate: it's an entertaining piece of fiction! The problem is, details of the US Coalition's secretive drone programme in the Middle East and Africa are not common knowledge. Who knows how a Hellfire missile works, how drone targets are identified, or the number of civilians killed in drone strikes? Who understands the chain of command in targeted killing, or can speak confidently about the psychological illnesses suffered by civilians in target countries?

Into this knowledge gap, Hollywood films like *Eye in the Sky* are released, giving them more power in shaping public opinion than their creators might have anticipated. For some *Eye in the Sky* audiences, the film will be their first in-depth encounter with military drone technology and its ethical issues. Dismissing Hollywood movies as mere entertainment fails to appreciate their important role in shaping perceptions and framing debates. It therefore matters that *Eye in the Sky* inaccurately depicts the Coalition drone programme and its ethical issues.

Eye in the Sky follows the tense decision-making process of UK government officials, a US Air Force drone team and the UK Foreign Secretary as they are faced with attacking a group of high profile terrorists preparing a suicide bombing. The US-piloted drone has a Hellfire missile locked into position and ready to strike, but there's a major problem: a young girl is selling bread to passers-by within the missile's blast radius. Bread sales are slow and she's taking an awfully long time to move. The terrorists could leave on their suicide-bombing mission at any moment. If the Coalition decides to strike, there is a high likelihood the girl will die. If they decide not to, the suicide bombers might go on to kill many more civilians. Should the Coalition kill one civilian to save a greater number of civilians?

While *Eye in the Sky*'s ethical dilemma is an interesting thought experiment, it has little moral relevance to the US Coalition drone programme. The decision to frame a debate on the ethics of drone warfare in this way is dangerous as it ignores and obscures much more pertinent ethical questions.

Instead of pondering whether to kill one innocent person to save 80, consider the ethics of killing a large number of innocent people in order to kill one guilty person.

A 2014 report by Reprieve found that the US Coalition might have killed as many as 1147 people in attempting to kill 41 men on their kill list. CIA drone strikes in Pakistan, for instance, killed 221 people (including 103 children) in attempt to kill only four men. These numbers tell a very different story to *Eye in the Sky*.

Eye in the Sky not only fails to explore the real utilitarian calculations of the US Coalition drone programme, its inaccurate depiction of how targets are identified makes this reality seem impossible.

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Eye in the Sky portrays target identification as a closely followed and highly accurate process. 'I cannot authorise a strike without a positive ID', states Colonel Katherine Powell (Helen Mirren). The kill chain springs into action, relying on a range of technology to fulfill Powell's request. A micro-drone resembling a beetle is expertly flown inside the house where the terrorists are preparing their suicide bombing. The beetle captures high quality video footage that is immediately available to the US-based image analyst. The analyst runs the footage through facial recognition software and – voila! – gets positive IDs.

Eye in the Sky does not purport to be a science fiction film, yet it depicts technologies (micro-drones and facial recognition software) that are not currently used to identify drone targets. As Reprieve's report demonstrates, target identification is much less rigorous, and the effects of targeting far more disastrous for civilians, than suggested in *Eye in the Sky*. The Drone Papers likewise reveal that in one five-month period of Operation Haymaker in Afghanistan, nearly 90% of people killed in US Coalition drone strikes were not the intended targets. All deaths during that period were still declared "EKIA" (Enemy Killed in Action) despite no definitive evidence that those killed were enemy combatants.

Eye in the Sky deserves some credit. The film may understate drone warfare's civilian toll, but it doesn't render it invisible. I was impressed, for instance, that the film pays significant attention to the blast radius of Hellfire missiles, undermining official rhetoric that war technology is now so precise that no civilians are killed in Coalition attacks.

But cinema – even Hollywood cinema – can do better. We need a film that's brave enough to consider the Coalition's difficulty in obtaining reliable information for identifying targets, the CIA's use of signature strikes (which do not require positive identification of targets at all), or the ad-hoc process of post-mortem identification of drone victims. The practice of assigning combatant status to all "military aged males" inside a combat zone is a massive ethical issue. Relevant to my PhD research, the psychological effects of drone warfare for civilians in target countries is another under-explored reality of drone warfare that could inspire a movie narrative.

These are just a few ethical concerns (there are many more) that would make for a more realistic and more compelling drone movie than *Eye in the Sky*. Until then, we're still waiting for the quintessential modern war film.

About the author:

Alex Edney-Browne is a PhD candidate in International Relations in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Melbourne. Her thesis investigates the psychological and physiological affects of military drone technology on people living under drones and US Air Force drone operators. Alex's research is interdisciplinary, engaging with science and technology studies, critical international relations and biopolitics. Alex can be followed on twitter, [here](#).