

DOES THE NYT PUBLISH “ALL THE NEWS THAT’S FIT TO PRINT” ANYMORE?

NYT’s ombud, Margaret Sullivan, dedicated her column today to whether the NYT should have done a story on The Intercept’s drone package a few weeks back. She concludes that given the NYT’s extensive coverage of this issue, it’s reasonable they gave the story just a mention, though suggests maybe they should give it more than that going forward.

I’m particularly interested in this subject because it says so much that is troubling about how our government functions – and yes, kills – in secret and often without adequate oversight. I’ve written about aspects of it a number of times.

Times journalists have done plenty of worthy coverage of the drone program themselves, with one national security reporter, Scott Shane, writing a significant **big-picture story** last April, covering some of the same ground that the Intercept is exploring now. He and Jo Becker also wrote a stunning **story** in 2012 detailing the existence of the president’s “kill list.” Mr. Shane is the author of a well-regarded recent book on the subject, “Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President, and the Rise of the Drone.”

Since The Times has done so much on this subject, it is understandable that only a brief mention of The Intercept’s scoop has been made so far. Still, given the revelations in the released documents – as well as the mere existence of a major intelligence leaker who is not Edward

Snowden – Times journalists might have served readers well to do more on “The Drone Papers.” They also could consider doing so in the future.

I suspect there are two other things going on. Shane seems to still be on book leave, and to cover the Intercept stuff – which in significant part confirms his earlier reporting, most importantly that the government treats males killed in drone attacks as military aged males appropriate for targeting – might be a bit awkward. I think some of the documents – such as the ones showing that JSOC’s targeting was bad because it relied on CIA’s SIGINT, might advance questions about why we decided to build a CIA drone base in Saudi Arabia in 2011. That might be appropriate follow-up reporting from other reporters like Mark Mazzetti (I have long suspected the Saudis were fiddling with the intelligence to force our hand on a drone base, since they had been trying for years to get drones from us), but that would take further time. So, too, would be a report on what these documents say about the CIA versus DOD debate on drones.

Still, underlying the whole question is whether the NYT publishes all the news that’s fit to print anymore.

There was a time when a NYT reader could expect, by reading the NYT, to know everything the elite of this country deemed worth knowing. It promised comprehensiveness, at least for those subjects that the NYT judged important, for better and worse.

Now, I think the NYT (which still plays that agenda setting function, and will still get fed stories to place items in the news agenda) often limits itself to items it can claim a scoop on (though far too often, it borrows these scoops from outlets obscure enough they’ll get away with it). As a result, when another outlet advances the news that’s fit to print in a publicly recognized scoop, or when news comes

without an exclusivity agreement, the NYT may not always report it, until such time as it can own it in the future.

I think we'll probably be better off when the NYT no longer serves as the agenda-setter for the country, in part because there are a lot of stories (like the Iraq War then, and now like anything pertaining to Israel or Ukraine) where other outlets are far more reliable, in part because the NYT's official perspective is often so jingoistic as to disinform its readers (as with the report that Russia might cut cables into the Middle East, which includes no acknowledgment that this is a tactic we make ample use of). But we're in a weird place now where the NYT doesn't claim to be comprehensive, but readers still assume it is. Which means that until something shows up in the NYT it won't be considered common knowledge, but the NYT will sometimes delay such reports until they can "own" it in some way. That, in turn, delays the time when something can be considered "official" and therefore worthy of debate.

I do expect the NYT to do more coverage on drones that reflects these documents, because both Shane and Mazzetti have already done so much.

But I'm at least as interested by this unacknowledged question about whether the NYT aspires to "print" all the news that's fit to print anymore.