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Misclassification of Information in Afghanistan

After the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001, the United States declared war against the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden who had been accused of devising the plan for the plane hijackings. The United States Military was sent to invade Afghanistan and decimate both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban with the purpose of holding those who assisted in executing the attacks responsible. After years of fighting against the Taliban and slowly decreasing the extent of their power and control over Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden was found and killed in Pakistan, an event that proved to the public the effectiveness of the resources being dedicated to the war.

Although the overall goal of the Afghanistan's invasion was accomplished, everything was not going as smoothly as reported back the American public. On July 25, 2010, WikiLeaks released 90,000 documents which consisted of war logs from January 2004 until December 2009 that detailed everything that was reported back from military officers in the battlefield. A majority of the documents leaked to the public were classified as "secret" by the US government under the Executive Order 13526 which states that they are files that "could be expected to cause serious damage to the national security that the original classification authority is able to identify or describe." (*Obama*) Knowing this but also realizing the importance of informing the public about the reality of what was going on in Afghanistan, Chelsea Manning handed over what he had acquired from secure military databases.

As a U.S. army intelligence analyst deployed in Baghdad, Manning had complete access to many of the military's secret networks used to transfer and share classified information such as the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network (also known as SIPRNet) and the Joint Worldwide Intelligence Communications System (also known as JWICS). Through her security clearance, Manning was able to see things she thought should "belong in the public domain and not on some server stored in a dark room in Washington DC." Manning was well aware of the information she now possessed but constantly questioned leaking them to the public. After no longer being able to deal with the idea that none of this knowledge would ever fall into the hands of the public on its own, Manning took it upon herself to compress, encrypt, and illegally download thousands of confidential files from government servers in order to share what was being kept secret from US citizens. Initially, Manning contacted Adrian Lamo, a former hacker and current threat analyst, about the information she had through an online chat through a username known as Bradass87. She spoke to him about her findings and even revealed how and to whom he had been uploading what she had found. She admitted to feeling lonely after experiencing trouble while being deployed in Afghanistan and having Lamo as "friend" was what partially motivated her to share the leaks with the public. Over time, Manning felt more comfortable sharing what she was secretly up to and the things she had seen on military computers. After discovering that Julian Assange was her confidant and how illegal his actions were, Lamo handed over his chat transcripts to the federal authorities. Eventually military officers arrested Private First Class Bradley and transported him a military prison in Kuwait where he was dishonorably discharged for violation of the Espionage Act.

But by then, all of the files he had access to had been copied and delivered to Julian Assange, leader of the organization WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks, known for publishing secret

information from anonymous sources, decided to hold off on the immediate disclosure and instead decided to share its database with three publishers, The Guardian, Der Spiegel, and The New York Times. This way, WikiLeaks was separating itself from how the files would be interpreted and analyzed, leaving it to the press to choose what to write on and redact. Through this access, the three news organization were able to convert the raw data and create an organized list of war logs for the public to see “the conduct of the war.” (*Davies*)

Each war log consisted of metadata such as the location and time of a reported military event on the Afghan battlefield. They are formatted in a simple and concise way in order to allow easier processing and organization of the information before being shown to higher ranked officials. All messages are received from different units, convoys, or any other military group in the battlefield throughout each day to report even the most basic of information such as location changes or any intelligence gained. More serious reports include incidents such as enemy fire, engagement with insurgents, encountering Improvised Explosives Devices, or conducting a raid. Some details included within the logs were useful statistics such as numbers of wounded, killed or detained while others contained information about intelligence intercepted from local radios or the lack of necessary equipment for a mission.

Each log was meant to be as short as possible for information to be quickly relayed back to higher ranked officers for analysis. Due to the harsh conditions that many infantry units face, most reports are kept short anyways and sometimes even ignore small details. Officers also take into account the fact that each and every one of their reports will be read by higher ranked officers who will take action against any unlawful or potentially dangerous reported activity. To avoid repercussions from an incident, reports will usually lower its severity and even leave out any violations of engagements or misbehavior on behalf of military officers in Afghanistan. This

is one of the many reasons why many highly illegal incidents were never on the record and WikiLeaks felt it was their duty to release every bit of information to the public in order to give a better picture of the Afghan War.

After being published, the Afghan War logs made clear the kind of corruption and secrecy that had been taking place within the military unbeknownst to civilians and that someone needed to be held responsible in order to set an example for similar future cases. The data showed that for different ranks within the military, officers would report incidents within a different category in order to cover up a mistake or not raise any alarms. Over time, this consistent misclassification of incidents led to a massive disparity between what the public thought was going on and what was actually happening in Afghanistan. This included thousands of misreported deaths which covered up the killing of innocent Afghan civilians who were caught in the crossfire between United States soldiers and insurgents. Other military reports about military operations or units tended to be more truthful and reported properly but some were still used to play down the gravity of the incident. On the other hand, military reports about non-US forces and the Taliban were extremely detailed and would emphasize any sort of misbehavior or disastrous incident. The logs were also extremely useful in revealing information about other secret military units and how they worked with military officers to carry out different operations.

In one report shared by WikiLeaks from June 17, 2007, a secret military unit known as Task Force 373 was given the mission of killing or capturing senior Al-Qaeda military commander Abu Layth Al Libi. This temporary unit, which consisted of “Army Delta Force operatives and members of the Navy Seal,” (*Chivers*) was sent in to ensure the death of the commander after a 5 missiles were fired at the compound in which he was staying. In doing so,

the unit ignored the fact that there were 7 children still inside, 6 of which were instantly killed by the explosions. In the end, Al-Libi was neither found or killed and the report was immediately classified as “secret” in order for it to be easily hidden away from the public. Exposing these covert operatives who “do not wear names on their uniforms” but “receive their missions directly from the Pentagon” is crucial to helping stop the continuous unwarranted classification of war logs for cover up purposes. According to Nick Davies from The Guardian, the war logs “raise fundamental questions about the legality of the killings and of the long-term imprisonment without trial, and also pragmatically about the impact of a tactic which is inherently likely to kill, injure and alienate the innocent bystanders whose support the coalition craves.”(Davies) Without the help of WikiLeaks and Chelsea Manning, U.S. citizens and even other soldiers would have never received “an insight into the activities of a US special forces unit which operates in Afghanistan outside of the ISAF mandate.”(Gebauer)

In another military report from May 30, 2007, an Army helicopter was taken down by a missile which resulted in several casualties and was classified before being publicly reported. However, the Afghan war logs show that there was much more to this incident than a helicopter simply being taken down by insurgents. Instead, the logs show that even “the crew of other helicopters reported the downing as a surface-to-air missile strike” and it killed not only 7 soldiers but also a British military photographer. (Gosztola) The attack was suspected to be done using heat seeking missiles and revealed the fact that Afghan insurgents were in possession of missile launchers. The ones used in the incident were known as Stingers and their background and origin is what the US government was trying to hide. The weapons were originally provided by the Central Intelligence Agency(CIA) to Afghan insurgents in the 80’s in order for them to fight against Russia and have a role within Soviet-Afghan War. To reveal the fact that US

weapons were used against the US military would be a huge embarrassment to the government and therefore were to be kept completely off the books. Knowing this, a NATO spokesman Major John Thomas told the press “it’s not impossible for small-arms fire to bring down a helicopter,” suggesting there was no existence of rocket launchers. However, with the knowledge of what led to the crash of the CH-47 Chinook, the public is able to look deeper into the insurgents’ acquisition of the US weapons systems. Now, thanks to WikiLeaks turning secret classified files into non-classified information, the public can have a better view of what kind of illegal government activity is occurring and how the suppression of information can come from the highest levels of government.

According to Kirk Hanson and Jerry Ceppos from Santa Clara University, all of the leaked information justifies the illegal hacking Manning had to go through to release the war logs to the public. Hanson, professor and executive director of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, believes that the necessity of a leak is largely based upon “how you evaluate the public benefit” and “if it illuminates understanding of an important issue even if it harms someone, as long as the public interest at stake is significant-lives and health are at risk.”(*Hanson*) Hanson strongly believes that simply leaking documents because they are being kept secret is not enough to completely justify sharing the information with the public. The information they contain and what they reveal to whom is what truly ends up determining how people view the documents. Sharing files that contain tons of personal information and target someone is not a necessary leak. As Manning said to Lamo, the public needed his leaks “because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public.”(*New York Magazine*) Citizens being able to find out that their taxes are going towards a war full of misconduct and unethical activity is important

in a democracy where the people need to be well informed about what the United States is doing around the world in order to prevent misconceptions.

However, Rex Brynen, a writer for a small multi-author journal and professor of Political Science at McGill University, opposes the leaked war logs for the content it not only revealed to the public but Afghan insurgents as well. Brynen considers the Afghan war leaks to be poorly executed because of how it “provide[d] the Taliban with unparalleled information on what ISAF knows, doesn’t know, and often how it knows it too.”(*New York Times*) The logs were published completely unredacted and allowed for anyone to read how operations were carried out or even how officers had been tracking down targets. This raised concerns for journalists like Brynen who believe far too much sensitive military information was distributed to interested parties such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

But this issue is beyond the small negative effects it can have on the military and its ongoing operations. The Afghan War leaks did not pose a threat to national security after they were published and therefore should have never been classified as “secret” in the first place. The documents did reveal some of the military’s language and tactics but accomplished a greater goal of restoring the people’s right to knowledge that belongs to them. As Abu Mugawama, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defense for Middle East Policy, states “I think there is much more to this whole episode than whether or not you knew civilians were being killed in Afghanistan and former ISI officials were giving advice to insurgents in Afghanistan. This is about public opinion. Measuring what the public thinks and predicting how it might react to events...”(*New York Times*) The public should never be left out and should rather take precedence over the military and its secretive tendencies because they can serve as a check and help ensure the military is conducting proper raids and other operations.

Government relies on secrecy in order to defend itself from other nations but false claims of classifications are also relied upon in order to conceal potentially damaging information. In the case of the Pentagon Papers being released 1971, the U.S. government immediately made the claim that sharing all of the information contained in the files would extremely harmful to the nation's security. This tactic enabled the government officials to become the victims in the situation and accuse military analyst Daniel Ellsberg that leaking the documents in his possession would endanger American citizens and military. After an investigation by the Supreme Court, Ellsberg and the New York Times were "vindicated by the fact that no such damage was shown to have taken place."(*Ellsberg*) In the case of the Afghan war logs, Ellsberg claims the US government took the same approach with dealing with the leaks and in the end, the Pentagon was forced to "acknowledge that it doesn't have any evidence of a single life being harmed in Afghanistan."(*Ellsberg*) Not only does this prove that the information did not pose a threat to national security, but also shows the lengths to which intelligence agencies will go in order to protect themselves from scrutiny.

However, the intelligence shared with the public is not what the government considers harmful but rather the disclosure of how the US gathers intelligence. To government officials, the way in which intelligence gathering is done is put at risk because sharing classified files can reveal how to counter it to enemies of the US. According to James B. Bruce, Vice Chairman of the DCI Foreign Denial and Deception Committee, the media plays a large role in spreading information about leaks and has had an effect on the US efforts against terrorism. Through sharing sensitive information, Bruce claims that leaks have "helped foreign adversaries develop countermeasures to spaceborne collection operations."(*Bruce*) Although these statements may be true, the Afghan war leaks themselves did not contain information about future operations or

methods of intelligence gathering. Sharing these leaks gave no further information to other countries but rather conveyed secret activity the US was involved in other countries to American citizens. The information did affect its operations in Afghanistan but this was largely due to the public condemning the military for its inexcusable actions in the battlefield.

Through the efforts of Chelsea Manning and Wikileaks, the Afghan war logs were able to reach the hands of the public and reveal the wrongdoings of the United States. Although Manning was charged with several counts of espionage, the information he risked his career to share sparked discussion about the undeniable actions that took place in Afghanistan and how secrecy is misused to hide military mistakes from the public. Using this information, the public can now have a greater understanding of how the US government deals with possibly damaging information and can be aware of the misclassification of information that has become the norm in the nation.

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