UT Arlington provides first academic study of journalists and private citizens' drone use

University of Texas at Arlington

Newly published research from a University of Texas at Arlington communication team offers a groundbreaking perspective on the controversial use of unmanned aerial vehicles in journalism and mass communication, or “drone journalism.”

The remotely guided aircraft gained prominence in the military’s hunt for suspected terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Such drones can be large, some about the size of small planes, which operate at higher altitudes and serve various functions.

Domestically, much smaller drones have been used to capture photographs and video images on private property without an owner’s permission. Until now, there has been no formal research and academic writing on the use of such smaller drones by news organizations and private citizens.

The UT Arlington team analyzed the first eight documented cases of drones being used in journalism, one of which involved pig blood being funneled into a Dallas river last year. They found that there are significant issues that the Federal Aviation Administration will need to address or, they predict, legislative bodies will have to get involved.

“The FAA has been promising new guidelines but nothing has happened, and many people are playing with these devices and trying them out,” said Mark Tremayne, assistant professor of broadcast communication in the UT Arlington College of Liberal Arts and lead author on the paper “New Perspectives from the Sky: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Journalism.” The research appears online in the journal Digital Journalism.

Andrew Clark, associate professor of communication and co-author of the paper, added: “The implications of this technology are many, and there may come a point where legally, these drones can be used. But ethically, maybe they shouldn’t be.”

He pointed to privacy, trespassing, legal and other issues as a reason for closer examination by academics on a broader level.

Beth Wright, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, said the work by Tremayne and Clark “demonstrates how essential it is to assessing technological developments, within a context, informed by an understanding of their social impact on the ethical and legal dimensions of their use.”

She added that it also answers a 2010 directorate by the National Science Foundation for future research in the behavioral sciences, which is data-intensive, multidisciplinary, collaborative and problem-oriented.

For their study, Tremayne and Clark used synonyms for UAVs and six search engines and databases covering both traditional media outlets and citizen media. They found eight instances of drone technology being put to use for journalistic purposes from late 2010 through early 2012. Those eight cases were spread geographically from Alabama to Australia and from Texas to Poland. But common traits emerged from those cases.

A prominent theme of drone journalism usage was anti-authoritarianism. Many of the cases involved aerial footage of either anti-government protests or secretive government activities. In several cases, citizens armed with this new technology were capturing images they probably considered unlikely to be shown on nightly newscasts, and so they obtained the video themselves and distributed it over the Internet.

In Dallas, a UAV enthusiast piloted his camera-equipped drone near a meatpacking plant in January 2012, soaring the device to 400 feet. To test his equipment, he took photos of the Trinity River. When he retrieved the remote-controlled aircraft, he noticed something unusual in the pictures: a red stream, which appeared to be blood, leaking into a river tributary.

The pilot alerted Texas environmental authorities, who then launched an investigation. In December, a grand jury handed down several indictments against the owners of the Columbia Packing Company for discarding pig blood into a creek. Neighbors had complained about the noxious fumes and other issues for some time, according to the local news. But investigators didn’t get involved until the drone pilot took his pictures.

Tremayne and Clark agree that the high quality navigation systems and dramatically decreased costs of drones will spur media organizations and private citizens to purchase them.

“These drones are increasingly sophisticated and may be used in cases where flying a helicopter would pose a safety threat for the pilot,” Tremayne said. “For

newsrooms figuring out how to pay for a helicopter, fuel and a pilot, the drones -- which can cost from $500 to a few thousand dollars, may be the way of the future."

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