

Lawmaker concerned about using drones to collect news

The use of remotely controlled drones to gather news has stirred interest among a small group of journalism students at the University of Missouri.

At the same time, it has raised concerns among some members of the state Legislature, which is considering a bill to prohibit the use of unmanned aircraft to collect information in agricultural areas.

State Rep. Casey Guernsey, the bill's sponsor, said Tuesday he has no problem with journalism students learning how to use drones. But the Republican from Bethany opposes the notion of news organizations using remotely controlled flying cameras to collect information.

"If they want to learn about it, that's perfectly fine," said Guernsey, whose district includes parts of four counties in northwest Missouri. "If we are moving into an age of news agencies using drones to collect information on private citizens, I'm definitely concerned about that."

Drones are unmanned, remotely controlled aerial vehicles best known for military surveillance and strikes against terrorists in foreign countries. The government also uses them for border security and to fight forest fires.

While no news organization is currently using drones to collect images, a pioneering MU journalism class is studying the possibilities. Professor Bill Allen, a former St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter, is teaching a three-hour course titled "Science Investigative Reporting: Drone Journalism." The class has seven students, graduates and undergraduates.

The idea for the course came from Scott Pham, the content

director at KBIA radio, the university-owned station in Columbia. Pham, who is collaborating in delivering the course, obtained a \$25,000 grant to pay for the construction of the drones by the school's engineering department.

Allen said the UAVs his class was experimenting with were about the size of a basketball. They don't have wings but gain lift from four propellers, much like a small helicopter.

So far, the course has progressed carefully, given the fact no rules or guidelines exist for a bird's-eye method of collecting images or video. Earlier this week, Allen's class heard from Troy Rule, an MU law professor.

"Journalistic uses of drones are likely to become more prominent in the coming decades, although many legal questions associated with them remain unresolved," Rule said.

Allen's class is brainstorming story ideas such as conducting aerial surveys of prairie land, conservation areas or coastlines. Pham said a drone can supply the same kind of images and video that would be delivered by a helicopter but at less cost.

Guernsey's bill says: "No person, entity, or state agency shall use a drone or other unmanned aircraft to conduct surveillance of any individuals, property owned by an individual, farm or agricultural industry without the consent of that individual, property owner, farm or agricultural industry."

The bill was heard for the first time Tuesday by the House Agri-Business Committee, which Guernsey chairs. He said he got the idea from farmers in Iowa and Nebraska who were concerned about the federal government flying drones over agricultural areas in those states.

"I think we have a responsibility in the legislature to make sure that technology is not being used irresponsibly and

Missourians have their basic freedoms," Guernsey said.