

With drone technology, potential pitfalls are worth the risk

Articles such as Ravi Somaiya's Jan. 15 story in the New York Times, titled "[Times and Other News Organizations to Test Use of Drones](#)," should come as a surprise to no one who's been paying attention to the technology behind these unmanned aerial vehicles.

After all, what makes drones so appealing to journalists is that they give reporters access to the sky. That's something that was not so readily accessible before these machines made their presence known. To get aerial shots used to require a helicopter, a hot-air balloon or an airplane, all of which usually are dependent on others to operate – and cost money to use, too.

But using aerial technology take pictures of the world around us is not new at all. In a May 3, 2013, Slate article titled "[Privacy Concerns Shouldn't Ground Journalism Drones](#)," New York media lawyer Nabiha Syed detailed how, in 1906, a commercial photographer named George R. Lawrence hoisted a 46-pound camera into the air above San Francisco (with the help of 17 kites and steel wire, no less) to take panoramic shots of the earthquake and fire devastation in that city. Syed then fast-forwarded five decades later, to 1958, to tell how television news reporter John Silva altered the media landscape even further through his use of the KTLA "Telecopter" in Los Angeles – ushering in the modern reality of live traffic updates, car chases and other aerial broadcasts to the city's residents.

Journalists the world over always have embraced new technologies to relate the newsworthy events in our world.

What's a little perplexing for me, though, is how many Americans think drones are a sudden intrusion on their Fourth Amendment privacy rights that need to be severely restricted by the Federal Aviation Administration.

So why do drones get such a bad rap in our society? U.S. citizens have not voiced the same level of concern – or outrage – about security cameras in department stores, banks or even public streets, so is the real impetus for all this new drone legislation spurred by a fear of potential abuse by journalists and the government?

Part of the resistance to widespread drone use appears to stem from the surreptitious nature in which they can be deployed. Think about it: A person sunbathing in his or her back yard can be filmed by a cameraman flying aloft in a helicopter just as easily as by a drone – and with the exception that the aircraft cannot be less than 500 feet off the ground, where private property protection ends, there is nothing illegal about that cameraman being up in the sky. (The U.S. Supreme Court, in the 1946 case [United States v. Causby](#), ruled 5-2 that the ancient common law doctrine that land ownership extended to the space above the earth “has no place in the modern world.” Justice William O. Douglas’ opinion noted that, if the doctrine were valid, “every transcontinental flight would subject the operator to countless trespass suits. Common sense revolts at the idea.”) Of course, one downside to using any aerial device – manned or unmanned – for journalism is that it has the potential to come crashing down on the very citizens it was sent up to look down on.

Consider, too, that the use of drones by journalists already is a *fait accompli* – something that has already been done and cannot be undone. Reporters overseas already have produced tantalizing glimpses of the future of drone-enhanced journalism. For example, a video on CNN’s website, shot from a drone and narrated by reporter Karl Penhaul 10 days after Typhoon Haiyan ravaged the Philippines in early November 2013,

showed what the people of the community of Tacloban, Philippines, had to deal with in the storm's aftermath. The video in which Penhaul appears, titled "[A bird's eye view of Haiyan devastation](#)," could be considered a peek into the future of journalism here in the United States.

Whether we Americans are ready for them or not, drones already are being deployed within the borders of the United States. They've been in use both by the Customs & Border Protection agency along the U.S.-Mexico border and by law enforcement personnel, bringing us closer to what the [American Civil Liberties Union has termed a "surveillance society" government](#). Meanwhile, the Federal Aviation Administration, under the aegis of the 2012 FAA Modernization and Reform Act passed by Congress, has been tasked with integrating commercial drones into U.S. airspace by the end of this year. The FAA estimates that 7,500 commercial drones could be flying in national airspace in just a few years, and agency officials have reported that the number of domestic drones could rise to 30,000 by the year 2030. The FAA is not constrained by the act to address privacy concerns related to the use of commercial drones, and FAA officials said the agency does not have the authority to make or enforce any rules related to privacy concerns.

While the FAA may avoid delving into the ethical aspect of drone use, a group with a focus on the future of drone journalism has made this its core mission. The Professional Society of Drone Journalists, which formed in 2011, bills itself on its website as "the first international organization dedicated to establishing the ethical, educational and technological framework for the emerging field of drone journalism." The organization's founder is Matthew Schroyer, a drone expert who works for a National Science Foundation grant at the University of Illinois. In a [July 2013 interview](#) posted on the website of International Human Press, Schroyer said he has developed a preliminary code of conduct for drone

journalism. His hope is that the code will be interactive at some point, so members of the society can alter the code to keep up with developments in the drone journalism field.

The code lays out the additional responsibilities that drone journalists take on when controlling these unmanned vehicles, and it also emphasizes the potential risks of operating these devices in populated urban areas as the speed, range and size of these machines undergo further development. Being able to take aerial photographs when reporting on a story makes a drone a valuable resource, but in this regard the code also warns that the chance for abuse – especially when it comes to matters of privacy and safety – also is increased.

But despite the potential pitfalls associated with this technology, what the drone movement has going for it is historical record: Many of the technological advances in cars and planes that Americans enjoyed after World War II can be directly traced to advances made in the war effort against Germany and Japan. In this same way, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have helped fuel the advances in the unmanned aircraft industry. Armed drones still are being used for to eliminate terrorists overseas, but the unarmed civilian versions of these machines are now available to any hobbyist (or journalist) with the money to spend on them.

The way I see it, we can't un-ring this bell. Drones already are part of the future of journalism, and today's students studying to be tomorrow's reporters will have to learn how to do their jobs with this new piece of technology. I echo the sentiments of Rose Mooney, the executive director of the [Mid-Atlantic Aviation Partnership](#) at Virginia Tech, who told Somaiya that she hopes drones "can provide this industry a safe, efficient, timely and affordable way to gather and disseminate information and keep journalists out of harm's way."