



DRONE JOURNALISM: POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES

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*“Man must rise above the Earth—to the top of the atmosphere and beyond—
for only thus will he fully understand the world in which he lives.”*
Socrates

Employment of aviation platforms in news journalism to gather news is not a new concept. The world of journalism witnessed the maiden use of aviation platforms with the use of hot air balloon back in 1858, when multidimensional French photographer, balloonist and journalist Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (Nadar) took the first aerial photographs from the hot air balloon. This was followed by the use of fixed wing aircraft in the succeeding century and subsequently the emergence of Electronic News Gathering (ENG) through helicopters in late 1970s.

Glancing through the modern history of journalism one can see how aviation technology and journalism have converged and mutually benefitted each other. Using aviation platforms to collect news stories was actually a turning point in journalism as it was breaking away from the traditional news gathering means. But the crucial question arises that what was the need to emp
state few : the colossal expansion of news channels, the 24x7 news transmission capabilities,



Source: Internet

cut throat competition between news channels, the unending consumption of news stories and increasing resourcefulness of news media houses.

Today journalism is eyeing another aviation platform, whose use would not only pose challenges but if used judiciously, could open new avenues for news gathering in journalism. Indeed, the use of Drones or Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) is all set to revolutionize electronic news gathering.

Since its origin in World War I, drone technology has unlocked abundant opportunities in both the defence and civil sectors. In military use, we have seen the employment of drones as Predators or Reapers that have been used against adversaries in targeted 'hot' battlefields. But in the military sector the use of Drone is stained with blood and controversies, especially the use of drones by the US in Pakistan. American CIA drones have targeted Pakistan more times in US President Obama's first year in office than in the previous five years combined.ⁱ According to a report released by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, (a U.K.-based non-profit organisation) in the last five years, the Obama administration has launched more than 390 drone strikes. Averaging 78 strikes per year, the death toll in that time frame is up to 2,400. In Pakistan alone, between 416 and 951 civilians, including 168 to 200 children, have been killed.ⁱⁱ However we have also seen the successful use of drones in war against terrorism. These strikes have, since 9/11, killed more than half of the 20 most wanted Al Qaeda suspects, the Uzbek, Yemeni and Pakistani heads of allied groups and hundreds of militants.ⁱⁱⁱ

This brings us to the next question on the use of drones in journalism. Will this be a wise move? Indeed, in journalism the use of RPAS is presenting itself as an exciting opportunity. Talking about the technological, policy making and journalism potential of the RPAS, the advantages are many, as identified below:

- Since the RPAS are much cheaper as compared to helicopters, their use presents itself as an attractive technology in the backdrop of tight budgets which the media houses face.
- Drones can be an advanced tool for extensive news gathering and with lower operational costs, news gathered aurally can get space in various news media channels, print, online and broadcasting medium.

- As the RPAS doesn't require any human element within the machine itself, it can make a reporter's job easy and less dangerous. RPAS have ability to reach places where it is physically not possible for reporter to reach, such as a fire incident, police firing, terror strike, disaster news etc.
- As drones come in different shapes and sizes, the journalist can customize them as per their requirements. Thus providing flexibility in terms of technology to the journalist.
- The use of RPAS by media would benefit the aviation industry also.

However, the use of this technology will have its own set of challenges as described below:-

- The use of drones would require news organizations to redesign their existing policies. Presently, the use of choppers and other aircrafts comes with contract. But with RPAS one would not require a contract. So, at the organizational level, policies, rules will have to be set keeping in mind the possibilities of abuse.
- Complexities of operating varying drone models would require the availability of additional skilled human resource.
- The use of drones for Electronic News Gathering (ENG) could create difference of interests and generate complexities for the law enforcing agencies and media houses. As the former will try to limit their use and the latter will try to exploit RPAS to their advantage. In these situations the conflict of interest will emerge.
- With more aviation vehicles hovering over cities, their management will pose a challenge to the air traffic management and law enforcement agencies, especially in terms of emergency services which may be hampered by these flying objects.

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- A mammoth task before the policy maker will emerge to synchronize the use of RPAS for news gathering purpose with the existing legal framework.
- There would be challenges pertaining to the privacy issues. As these RPAS could be misused to trespass the privacy of people, we could see the emergence of air paparazzi.
- From journalism point of view use of drone is a challenge as already journalism is criticized for invading the privacy of others in name of freedom of expressions. So with this new technology in hand when we have already witnessed the sensationalization of news, tabloid journalism, how the journalist and media owners are going to chart of regulations will be indeed a tricky task. Journalism wants to work in an unbinding environment whereas this technology needs to be regulated.

With emergence of new technology, also comes the fear of its abuse and the use of drones in journalism will be no different. A similar fear was resonant with coming of computers -- it was feared that they will replace human beings. Today, drones provide countless opportunities in defence, surveillance, farming, scientific experiments, disaster management, etc. For journalism in particular, media houses must evaluate their needs and then create a sound system where this technology can be put to best use. It should be used to raise the standards of journalism to a new height, while performing with ethics so that the watchdog 'eye in the sky', does not breach the trust and safety of people for whom the news is being gathered.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

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ⁱ Drone strikes in Pakistan. John Brennan marks first year at CIA amid no confirmed civilian drone deaths in Pakistan. 11 March 2014. URL <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2014/03/11/john-brennan-marks-first-year-at-cia-amid-no-confirmed-civilian-drone-deaths-in-pakistan/>. URL assessed on 12 March 2014

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ The Drone Wars. Weapons like the Predator kill far fewer civilians. Jan. 9, 2010. URL: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704130904574644632368664254>. URL assessed on 12 Mar 2014.

*The author has also referred the Report by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems & Journalism. By David Goldberg, Mark Corcoran, and Robert G. Picard. June 2013.