

Editorial

Journalism from Above: Drones and the Media in Critical Perspective

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Abstract

In the last decade, the development of small, remotely operated multicopters with cameras, so-called drones, has made aerial photography easily available. Consumers and institutions now use drones in a variety of ways, both for personal entertainment and professionally. The application of drones in media production and journalism is of particular interest, as it provides insight into the complex interplay between technology, the economic and legal constraints of the media market, professional cultures and audience preferences. The thematic issue *Journalism from Above: Drones, the Media, and the Transformation of Journalistic Practice* presents new research concerning the role of drones in journalism and media production. The issue brings together scholars representing a variety of approaches and perspectives. A broad selection of empirical cases from Finland, Spain, Sweden, the UK and the US form the basis of an exploration of the changing relations between the media, technology and society. The articles address topics such as: Adaption of drone technology in the newsrooms; audience preferences and reactions in a changing media landscape; the relation between journalists and public authorities who use drones; and attitudes from journalistic practitioners as well as historical and future perspectives.

Keywords

aerial views; audience preferences; drones; journalism; media history; media production; new media technology; photojournalism; Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Journalism from Above: Drones, the Media, and the Transformation of Journalistic Practice” edited by Jonas Harvard (Mid Sweden University, Sweden), Mats Hyvönen (Uppsala University, Sweden) and Ingela Wadbring (Mid Sweden University, Sweden).

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1. Introduction

What is it like to be a bird? Ever since the first manned air balloon flights in the 18th century, technologies enabling aerial views have fascinated mankind (Dorrian & Pousin, 2013). In the last decade, the development of small, remotely operated multicopters with cameras, so-called *drones*, has made this perspective from above easily available. Consumers and institutions now use drones in a variety of ways, both for personal entertainment and professionally. The application of drones in media production and journalism is of particular interest, as it pro-

vides insight into the complex interplay between technology, the economic and legal constraints of the media market, professional cultures and audience preferences.

As we take stock of nearly ten years of research on the application of drones in the media and journalism, the existing emphasis on analysing drones from the perspective of *innovations* is noteworthy, with key works calling drones a ‘disruptive’ technology (Belair-Gagnon, Holton, & Owen, 2017; Gynnild, 2014). Although these lines of inquiry have provided important knowledge about the spread and uptake of drones in journalism and the media industry, there is a clear need to broaden the

scope. As time has passed, some of the early promises have failed to materialise, and the reasons are not entirely clear. Differing legal frameworks for operating drones have produced large regional variations, but there are also other factors in play. Enduring safety concerns and integrity issues, as well as a possibly fading novelty factor have created a complex landscape of journalistic drone use.

Innovation centric perspectives thus need to be integrated with insight into counter narratives, limitations and alternative paths (for ethical issues see Bartzen Culver, 2014; for an overview see Chamberlain, 2017). The current thematic issue is therefore designed to provide a comprehensive and critical examination of drones and the media in order to untangle the complexity of the conflicts new media technology raises.

To this end, it is helpful to see drones as part of a body of 'sociotechnical imaginaries'; visions of scientific and technological progress with "implicit ideas of public purpose, collective futures and the common good" (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). This concept directs attention to issues of power and authority inherent in technology and its application in society.

One example of how drones can embody power relations is the relationship between drone imagery and the so-called 'surveillance gaze' in modern society, connected to widespread use of CCTV cameras and satellite imagery by state agencies (Carlsson, 2009). The use of drones in public frequently raises concerns from those potentially covered by the footage, as people are unsure by whom they are watched and for what purposes (Bajde et al., 2017). The complexity of what drone technology represents is also mirrored in current societal discourse, where drones are portrayed both as an opportunity and as a problem. The proposed benefits of using drones in areas such as agriculture, forestry or rescue services—or news reporting—have clashed with narratives of risk, when drones have been involved in high profile incidents, particularly in relation to airport traffic (Hyvönen, Lindblom, & Harvard, 2018).

Regarding journalism, in contrast to the emphasis on drones as enabling creative new ways of visual reporting, research is now also critically examining the value of drone imagery in news reporting. The use of drones to produce cinematic fly-overs for inclusion in news segments tend to emphasise the entertaining or immersive aspects of news, which may pose a threat to quality journalism (Adams, 2019). This signals a drastic re-coding of the symbolism of a view from above, which previously, in both journalism and the history of science, symbolised detached objectivity, order and systematisation (Ekström, 2009). In addition to techno-optimism, a potential driver behind the interest for drones in the media industry may also be commercial pressure. The development of a 'high-choice' media environment (Prior, 2007) has resulted in disloyal media consumers switching between outlets and channels. Simultaneously, tightening economic conditions (Franklin, 2017) have destroyed

business models long taken for granted. The application of new technologies, such as drones, in reporting gives media companies one option to increase the attractiveness of their material, but such a strive for innovation and novelty also raises new concerns.

The thematic issue *Journalism from Above: Drones, the Media, and the Transformation of Journalistic Practice* presents new research concerning the role of drones in journalism and media production. The issue brings together scholars representing a variety of approaches and perspectives. A broad selection of empirical cases from Finland, Spain, Sweden, the UK and the US form the basis of an exploration of the changing relations between the media, technology and society. The articles address topics such as: adaption of drone technology in the newsrooms; audience preferences and reactions in a changing media landscape; the relation between journalists and public authorities who use drones; and attitudes from journalistic practitioners as well as historical and future perspectives.

2. Contributions in the Thematic Issue

This thematic issue begins with James F. Hamilton's (2020) article, 'Drone Journalism as Visual Aggregation: Toward a Critical History,' in which he introduces the concept of 'visual aggregation' to explore what makes drone imagery so compelling for major news organisations. By aggregating space visually, drone journalism produces a visual analogy to the claim to truth of data journalism. To understand how drone journalism is a response to the institutional crisis in journalism, Hamilton employs a cultural and historical approach and identifies key points in the emergence of visual aggregation as authoritative truth, pointing to a wide range of antecedent social formations, devices and practices prior to drone journalism.

In 'Diffusion of Drone Journalism: The Case of Finland, 2011–2020,' Turo Uskali, Ville Manninen, Pasi Ikonen, and Jere Hokkanen (2020) present a case study of how Finnish news organisations' adoption of drones has developed over time. Based on a survey among the 80 most popular newspapers in Finland, Uskali et al. conclude that drone journalism in Finland has diffused from a few pioneering organisations to a large number of newspapers, and that the newspapers who own drones produce more drone journalism.

Jonas Harvard (2020) argues that early optimistic projections of the impact of drones reflect a techno-optimistic innovation discourse. Using an historical theory to distinguish this discourse from actual observations of technology in use, his article, 'Post-Hype Uses of Drones in News Reporting: Revealing the Site and Presenting Scope,' presents an interview study of photo-journalists on the role of drones in news reporting. The results show that the post-hype uses of drone photography are, in essence, summarised in two categories: situating the site of a news item, and illustrating the scope or extension of a phenomenon.

At a time when drone footage is ubiquitous, Catherine Adams (2020) seeks to explore the thoughts and actions of those who produce it. Empirically, ‘Dual Control: Investigating the Role of Drone (UAV) Operators in TV and Online Journalism,’ is based on 17 in-depth interviews with drone operators, journalists and editors, revealing a high degree of creative freedom for the operators, a passion for using drones, and some desire to immerse and impress the viewer. Furthermore, Adam’s study shows that aerial images have become paramount in video journalism and that those involved in the production feel that drones have been ‘good for journalism.’

Past research has paid little attention to audiences and their acceptance and ethical perception of drones. In ‘Technologies, Ethics and Journalism’s Relationship with the Public,’ Megan Duncan and Kathleen Bartzen Culver (2020) suggest that audiences who are open to personal technology use will perceive news media using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as more ethical. In a survey (N = 548) of US adults, they explore the correlations between trust, technology, privacy and the use of UAVs. The results indicate that all three are positively correlated with openness toward drone journalism—findings that have implications for newsrooms.

In ‘Relationships Between Law Enforcement Authorities and Drone Journalists in Spain,’ Jorge Gallardo-Camacho and Vanessa Rodríguez Breijo (2020) formulate three hypotheses: (1) that Spanish law enforcement authorities have more capacity than journalists to shoot aerial news footage; (2) that for Spanish law enforcement authorities, the informational use of the drone footage they obtain is of secondary importance; and (3) that drone journalists feel their work is too restricted by law enforcement authorities. To test the hypotheses, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of three law enforcement organisations in Spain and with five drone pilots collaborating with news media outlets. The study concludes that the restrictive regulatory framework for UAVs in Spain hinders the development of drone journalism.

Emotional journalism is driven by audio-visual technology such as drones, which allow for greater immersion of the audience. The aim of Luis Mañas-Viniegra, Alberto García-García, and Ignacio J. Martín-Moraleda’s (2020) article, ‘Audience Attention and Emotion in News Filmed with Drones: A Neuromarketing Research,’ is to determine the differences in attention and intensity of the emotions experienced when viewing different pieces of audio-visual news filmed with and without drones. In the study, eye tracking and galvanic skin response were used on a group of 30 Spanish students. The results suggest that drone footage received a higher concentration of attention from the subjects, and that drones enhance the effectiveness of panoramic images of natural landscapes.

John V. Pavlik’s (2020) article, ‘Drones, Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality Journalism: Mapping Their Role in Immersive News Content,’ identifies a number of

areas in which drones are impacting immersive news content, such as a first-person aerial perspective, geo-tagged audio and video for flight-based immersive news content, and capacity for volumetric and 360 video capture, as well as generating content based on data from a broad range of sensors beyond standard video cameras. These areas, Pavlik concludes, may contribute unique experiential media content beyond visual flight-based news material and information.

Taken together, the articles in this thematic issue position drones in journalism as a subject for which meaning is negotiated between different actors and interests in society. The articles also illustrate the usefulness of combining broader and more critical perspectives with previous research on how journalists and media institutions have absorbed, adapted, or rejected media innovations across national contexts and user-regimes.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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