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Drone Journalism

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of drone journalism as a significant development in contemporary news production. Defined as the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for journalistic purposes, drone journalism extends the visual, investigative, and analytical capacities of reporting by enabling access to perspectives and locations that are often difficult or unsafe to reach through conventional methods. The study explores how drones have evolved from novel imaging devices into essential tools for investigative reporting, crisis coverage, environmental journalism, and data-driven storytelling. In doing so, it highlights the ways in which drone technologies are reshaping newsgathering practices, broadening the scope of reportable events, and transforming audience engagement with visual news content. By situating drone journalism within the broader context of digital media innovation, the paper argues that drones have become an increasingly indispensable instrument in the pursuit of comprehensive, timely, and impactful journalism.

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Keywords: drones, unmanned aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), journalism, journalists, news, news media

1. Introduction

The media landscape has evolved significantly in recent years, with journalists and news organizations continually searching for innovative ways to capture and share stories.

The integration of new technologies has reshaped journalism by changing how news is gathered, processed, and disseminated. Among these developments, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, have become an important tool for reporters and news organizations. By providing aerial imaging capabilities, drones expand access to locations and perspectives that may otherwise be difficult, dangerous, or costly to cover. As a result, they have broadened the visual and narrative possibilities of journalistic storytelling. In particular, drones enable freelancers and smaller news organizations to capture panoramic views and real-time aerial imagery, thereby enhancing the scope of contemporary journalism ^[1].

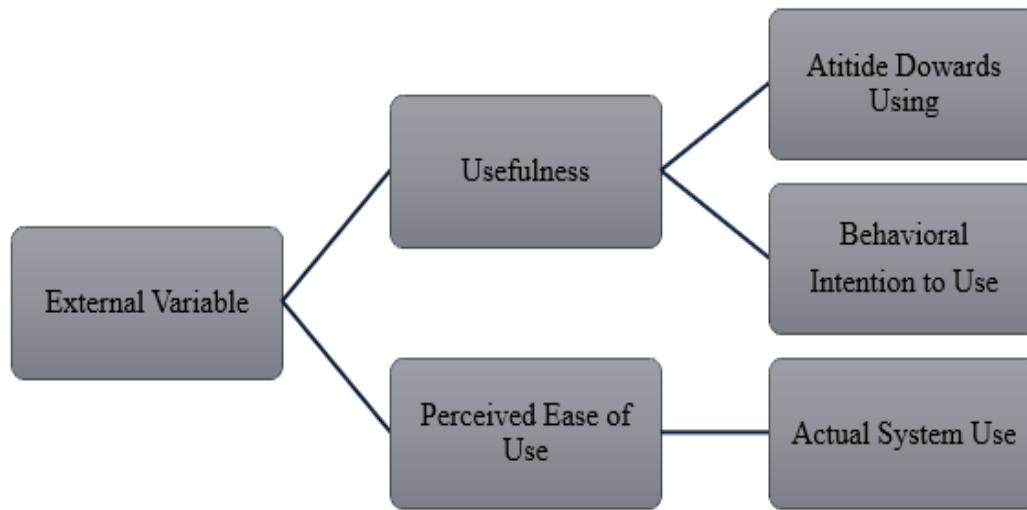
vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, into the field of journalism.

Historically, the acquisition of aerial footage for news reporting was both costly and logistically demanding, typically requiring the use of chartered helicopters or fixed-wing aircraft. In this context, drones have emerged as a cost-effective, flexible, and comparatively safe alternative, enabling journalists to capture high-definition video, still images, and environmental data from perspectives that were previously inaccessible or posed significant risks to human reporters. Drone journalism is the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly called drones, equipped with cameras and other sensors to collect aerial news footage and data. As a rapidly developing field, drone journalism offers a wide range of benefits and applications for journalists and news organizations ^[2].

2. Theoretical Framework

In this paper we use the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) developed by Fred Davis in 1989 to explain how users adopt and use drone technology. This framework helps examine the relationships among prior studies on drone technology particularly in journalism. As shown in Figure 1:

TAM suggests that two key factors influence technology adoption in journalism: perceived usefulness and ease of use. Perceived usefulness refers to the extent to which a person believes that using drone technology will improve job performance. In contrast, ease of use refers to the extent to which the technology is perceived as easy to use [3].



Illustrative TAM Model for Drones in Journalism.

Fig 1: Technology Acceptance Model Framework for Drone in Journalism

3. Literature Review

3.1. Overview of Drone Technology

Early literature on drone technology can be traced to the pioneering work of Archibald Low, who developed radio-controlled pilotless aircraft during World War I, laying the foundation for modern uncrewed aerial vehicle (UAV) research [4]. Later, Abraham Karem advanced modern drone engineering and is widely regarded as the father of modern UAV technology [5].

At least three terms are used to describe drone technology, depending on how it is operated. The terms include Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), Unpiloted Aircraft System (UAS), and Remote Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS). The FAA defines drones, also known as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), as aircraft systems without a flight crew on board. Drones include flying, floating, and other

devices, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), that can fly independently along set routes using an onboard computer or follow commands transmitted remotely by a pilot on the ground. A typical drone is shown in Figure 1 [6]. A drone is usually controlled remotely by a human pilot on the ground, as typically shown in Figure 2 [4]. Drones can range in size from large military drones to smaller drones. Drones, previously used for military purposes, have increasingly been used for civilian purposes since the 2000s. Since then, drones have continued to be used in intelligence, aerial surveillance, search and rescue, reconnaissance, and offensive missions as part of the military Internet of Things (IoT). Today, drones are used for a variety of purposes, including aerial photography, surveillance, agriculture, entertainment, healthcare, transportation, and law enforcement.



Fig 1: A typical drone [3].

Drones work much like other modes of air transportation such as helicopters and airplanes. When the engine is turned on it starts up and the propellers rotate to enable flight. The motors spin the propellers and the propellers push against the air molecules downward which pulls the drone upwards.

Once the drone is flying it can move forward backward left and right by spinning each propeller at a different speed. Then the pilot uses the remote control to direct the flight from ground [8].



Fig 2: A drone is usually controlled by operators on the ground [4].

Drone laws exist to ensure a high level of safety in the skies especially near sensitive areas like airports. They also aim to address privacy concerns arising from the use of camera drones in residential areas. These include the requirement to keep your drone within sight at all times when airborne. In the United States drones weighing less than 250g are exempt from registration with the Federal Aviation Administration. If your drone weighs more than 250g you will also need a

Flyer ID which requires passing a test [6]. It is necessary to register as an operator be trained as a pilot and have civil liability insurance in addition to complying with various flight regulations and those of the places where their use is permitted.

Most drones have a limited payload usually under 11 pounds. Drones are classified by size [10]. Below are the different drone types and their characteristics as depicted in Table 2

Table 2: Type of Drones and their Characteristics

Drone Category	Typical Weight	Typical Operating Distance (Range)	Common Uses
Nano Drone	< 250 g	Up to 1 km	Indoor flight education toys research prototyping
Micro Drones	250 g – 2 kg	1– 5 km	Surveillance inspection short-range mapping
Small Drone	2 – 25 kg	5 – 25 km	Agriculture photography emergency response
Medium Drone (often called simply “Drone”)	25 – 150 kg	25 – 150 km	Cargo delivery border patrol long-range surveillance
Large Drone	> 150 kg	> 150 km (often 1,000+ km)	Military strategic surveillance heavy cargo

One emerging trend in drone use in factories is the use of LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technology. This technology provides accurate in-depth information essential for understanding the three-dimensional structure of the environment. LiDAR sensors emit laser beams to measure distances to objects creating high-resolution 3D maps of the surrounding terrain and objects. The ability to capture detailed data using LiDAR technology has enabled better predictive maintenance reduced inspection times and overall cost savings [11].

4. Drone Technology in Journalism

The integration of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) commonly known as drones into the field of journalism has catalyzed a paradigm shift in newsgathering visual storytelling and data collection. Often termed “drone journalism” or “dronalism” this practice provides newsrooms with unprecedented aerial perspectives enhancing coverage of disasters protests environmental issues and social inequality. The concept of drone journalism is a relatively recent phenomenon;

it gained significant traction around 2011, when institutions like the Drone Journalism Lab at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln began exploring the ethical, legal, and practical implications of UAVs in reporting. The New York Times officially heralded the “arrival of drone journalism” in 2011, noting how newsrooms were beginning to use unmanned aircraft to report on protests and environmental disasters safely. Similarly, in 2014, The Daily Dot utilized a drone to capture first-hand footage of a building collapse in Harlem, New York. Historically, obtaining aerial footage required chartering helicopters or airplanes, a practice that was prohibitively expensive and largely restricted to major news networks. The advent of lightweight, affordable consumer

drones equipped with high-definition cameras democratized aerial imaging and data collection, making them accessible to journalists, researchers, and hobbyists alike [13].

For decades, the physical and financial limitations of aerial reporting constrained the scope of visual journalism. The advent of drone journalism has disrupted this paradigm. What began as an experimental novelty in the early 2010s has rapidly evolved into a crucial tool for modern newsrooms. By offering unprecedented aerial perspectives, cost-effective operations compared to traditional helicopters, and access to hazardous environments, drones have transformed visual storytelling. Figure 3 shows a typical use of a drone in journalism [14].



Fig 3: A typical use of a drone in journalism [8].

4.1. Types of Drones in Journalism

There are several types of drones used in journalism, including [2]:

- **Quadcopters:** These are the most common types of drones used in journalism, known for their stability, maneuverability, and ease of use.
- **Fixed-wing drones:** These drones are designed for longer-range flights and are often used for mapping and surveying applications.
- **Hybrid drones:** These drones combine the benefits of quadcopters and fixed-wing drones, offering both stability and range.

4.2. Application of Drones in Journalism

The analysis below examines drone journalism, the use of drones for journalistic purposes. Drone technology has emerged as a powerful tool for newsrooms globally. The utility of drones in journalism spans a wide array of reporting beats, transforming flat narratives into vivid, three-

dimensional stories. Drones can be used to capture stunning shots of natural disasters, conflict reporting, political protests, sports broadcasting, and other large-scale events that would be difficult to capture on foot. Common applications of drone journalism include the following [1, 14]:

- **Investigative Journalism:** Drones have proven invaluable in investigative journalism, particularly in uncovering environmental crimes and social inequalities. For example, in Tanzania, an investigative project utilized drones in conjunction with underwater microphones (hydrophones) to track and record illegal dynamite fishing that was destroying marine habitats. When an explosion was detected, drones were automatically dispatched to gather visual evidence, allowing journalists to determine patterns of illegal activity. Investigative reporters have utilized drones equipped with specialized sensors to monitor pollution levels, track deforestation, and document the impacts of climate change. Figure 4 shows a team of journalists [15].



Fig 4: A team of journalists ^[9]

- Aerial Reporting:** Drones are quickly becoming one of the most powerful tools in the journalist's arsenal: such as aerial reporting. They have the potential to revolutionize newsgathering and reporting. Thanks to advances in drone technology, aerial reporting is now within reach of even the most novice of journalists. With the increasing popularity of drones, journalists can now capture footage and images from the air in ways once impossible. With drones, journalists can access aerial perspectives that were previously inaccessible or cost prohibitive. Drones also make it easier for journalists to capture footage in hard-to-reach locations. For instance, drones can fly into areas that are too dangerous or difficult to access by traditional means. This can be especially useful for investigative journalists who need to gather evidence or report on events in remote or hostile locations. This can be a powerful tool for journalists reporting on natural disasters and other events in hard-to-reach areas. Drones can help journalists capture footage in difficult-to-reach places, provide an otherwise unobtainable perspective on an event, and even reduce the cost of gathering news.
- Sports Broadcasting:** Sports Broadcasting is common usage. In sports journalism and the coverage of large-scale public events (such as protests or rallies), drones offer dynamic, uninterrupted overhead views that fixed cameras cannot replicate. The ability to track fast-moving subjects or monitor crowd flow provides audiences with a comprehensive understanding of the event's scale. For example, drones have been increasingly integrated into major sports broadcasts, such as the Winter Olympics and the NFL Pro Bowl.
- Drone Survey:** In the survey industry, the integration of drone technology has proven beneficial. Drone survey offers many advantages for journalists. The most obvious benefit is the ability to capture aerial footage and images from multiple perspectives. With a drone survey, journalists can easily capture bird's-eye views of a scene, which can be used for news coverage or for producing more creative pieces. Drone surveys can also capture detailed visuals of an area. Using advanced mapping technology, a drone can capture detailed images of a location, providing an accurate representation of what is taking place on the ground. This kind of reporting can be especially useful in volatile or dangerous situations, as it allows journalists to document events safely from a distance.
- Drone Photography:** Drones are often used to capture aerial photos in places that are difficult for humans to access. Drone photography is an invaluable tool for journalists, offering unique and dramatic perspectives that can help tell a story more compellingly and engagingly. It can capture a wide variety of scenes, from stunning aerial views of cities and landscapes to close-up shots of events and newsworthy stories. Drones can also be used to capture images and video of newsworthy and historic sites, such as monuments, ancient ruins, and landscapes, to illustrate stories and bring them to life.
- Disaster Reporting:** One of the most profound applications of drone journalism is in the coverage of natural disasters. Drones allow journalists to assess damage, map affected areas and provide real-time footage without exposing themselves or first responders to immediate physical danger. A landmark example occurred in the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, where drones provided some of the first clear damage assessments of the Fukushima nuclear facility, minimizing human exposure to radiation. Drones are also increasingly being used to deliver medical supplies to remote locations or to deliver aid to disaster areas.
- Conflict Reporting:** In conflict zones or during large-scale civil unrest, the physical presence of a journalist can provoke hostility or place them in the crossfire. The ability to launch a lightweight quadcopter from a safe distance ensures that the public receives timely and accurate information, fulfilling the journalistic mandate without compromising human life. Drones can be used

to document wars or conflict zones that would be too dangerous for a human crew.

- **Social Inequality:** Drones have been employed to provide stark visual evidence of systemic social issues. The “Unequal Scenes” project initiated by photographer and drone journalist Johnny Miller in 2016 utilized aerial photography to document the stark geographical divides between affluent and impoverished neighborhoods in South Africa and other countries. By capturing these disparities from directly above, Miller’s drone journalism bypassed ground-level visual obstructions, presenting undeniable evidence of spatial inequality and sparking global conversations on urban planning and economic disparity.
- **Emergency Responders:** Drones have the potential to save lives in emergency situations by acting as a first responder. In the event of an emergency, drones can be used to quickly assess a situation and deliver life-saving supplies, such as food, water, and medical supplies. Drones can be used to locate and rescue survivors in the aftermath of natural disasters. For example, after 2018 Hurricane Michael, drones were used to locate survivors, assess damage, and provide vital information to emergency responders. Drones can also help coordinate medical care during an emergency. For example, during the 2017 California wildfires, drones were used to deliver medical supplies to those in need and coordinate medical care. Drones have the potential to save lives in emergency situations by providing emergency responders with the ability to assess a situation quickly and provide vital information and supplies to those in need.

5. Benefits and Challenges of Drones in Journalism

5.1. Benefits of Drones in Journalism

Drones offer several advantages over traditional reporting methods, making them valuable tools for gathering information and capturing compelling visual material. One of their most significant benefits in journalism is the ability to capture aerial footage that provides a unique perspective on events and locations. In addition, drone journalism offers important advantages in automation, cost-efficiency, accessibility, safety, and visual storytelling^[1, 14, 15].

Automation is one of the key advantages of drone journalism. The integration of journalism with drone technology can streamline the newsgathering process by enabling machine learning algorithms to automatically process hours of drone footage to identify specific objects, count crowd sizes, or detect environmental anomalies. Automated flight paths also allow for precise, repeatable data collection, which is especially useful for tracking changes over time, such as coastal erosion or post-disaster reconstruction.

Cost-efficiency is another major advantage. Drones provide a more affordable alternative to traditional aerial reporting methods, such as helicopters, airplanes, or satellite imagery, which can be prohibitively expensive for many news organizations. A news helicopter can cost between \$3 million and \$4 million to purchase, with additional operating costs for fuel and pilot fees. In contrast, a professional-grade drone can often be purchased for a fraction of that cost. This lower financial barrier democratizes access to aerial storytelling, enabling freelancers, local newspapers, and independent journalists to compete more effectively with major networks. Accessibility and safety further strengthen the value of

drones in journalism. During floods, wildfires, earthquakes, and other hazardous events, drones can be deployed rapidly to assess damage and provide real-time footage from locations that may be inaccessible or dangerous for reporters and pilots. This supports a core ethical principle in journalism: obtaining critical information without unnecessarily endangering people, animals, or property. Drones also allow news organizations to document events objectively from a safe distance while maintaining coverage during emergencies.

Drones also enhance visual storytelling by offering a broader, more cinematic perspective than ground-level reporting can provide. This aerial vantage point helps audiences understand the scale, layout, and spatial relationships of major events such as protests, disasters, and environmental damage. At the same time, aerial footage is most effective when contextualized with traditional reporting, so that visual evidence does not replace the human realities on the ground. *Robot Witness:* In this sense, drones can function as “cameras in the sky,” offering a robotic eyewitness perspective that extends beyond the physical limitations of human reporters. They can provide a seemingly objective, wide-angle view of events. However, this “God’s-eye view” can also strip events of their human context. For example, an aerial shot of a protest may accurately show the size of a crowd while failing to capture the emotions, grievances, or ground-level realities of the participants. For this reason, ethical drone journalism requires aerial footage to be carefully contextualized with traditional, on-the-ground reporting.

Beyond journalism, drones are also valuable for their precision in deployment. They can be programmed to fly to exact coordinates, hover in place, or follow predetermined flight paths, making them useful for surveying large areas in a short time. This precision supports a wide range of applications, including environmental and geological surveys, wildlife monitoring, and search-and-rescue operations. It also makes drones effective tools for inspections, allowing operators to capture detailed images of hard-to-reach or hazardous locations such as bridges, high-rise buildings, power lines, pipelines, and construction sites.

Another broader application of drones is delivery. Drones can be programmed to deliver goods or packages to specific locations, significantly reducing delivery times compared with traditional transport methods. This can be particularly beneficial in remote or rural areas where delivery services are limited. In this way, drones improve delivery by increasing speed, expanding access to hard-to-reach areas, and reducing operational costs.

5.2. Challenges of Drones in Journalism

Although drones offer significant reporting advantages, their use in journalism also raises serious ethical, legal, technical, and safety challenges. These concerns are often grouped into three broad areas: privacy and ethical use, regulatory compliance, and operational risks^[1, 15].

One of the most significant concerns in drone journalism is privacy. The same capabilities that make drones valuable for reporting—the ability to access difficult locations and capture high-resolution imagery from a distance—also create a risk of surveillance and intrusion. This raises important ethical questions about whether journalists should use drones to observe private spaces, vulnerable individuals, or sensitive situations that would not be justified by ground-level reporting. Professional guidance attempts to address this

tension. For example: the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) Drone Code of Ethics states that journalists should not use drones to capture images they would not be justified in obtaining from the ground. As a result: responsible drone journalism requires careful attention to privacy: dignity: and minimizing harm.

Regulatory compliance is another major challenge. Journalists must operate within legal frameworks established by aviation authorities such as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in the United States and the European

Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) in Europe. These rules often restrict where and how drones can be flown: including limitations on flights over crowds: near airports: or at night without special authorization. In some regions: especially where drone laws are expensive: restrictive: or unclear: regulation can also limit press freedom. For example: in Zimbabwe: a freelance journalist was reportedly arrested for operating a drone while covering abandoned government road projects.



Fig 5: Investigation of Latin America's global reach for illicit activities ^[10].

Technical limitations also affect the reliability and safety of drone journalism. Drones depend on stable radio signals to maintain control and transmit live video: but signal interference from tall buildings: dense urban environments: or competing wireless networks can disrupt operations. These failures may result in signal loss: interrupted coverage: or crashes: undermining reporting and posing safety risks to people and property below. For journalists: this means that effective drone use requires not only editorial judgment but also technical planning and risk management.

6. Global Use of Drone in Journalism

The global adoption of drone journalism reflects a major shift in how news is gathered: documented: and presented. Across regions: the use of drones is shaped by national aviation regulations: newsroom resources: and the broader role of technology in public-interest reporting. The following examples illustrate how different countries and regions have incorporated drones into journalism: media training: and investigative reporting ^[16, 18].

- **United States:** Drone journalism began to take shape in the early 2000s through discussions of how unmanned aerial vehicles could be used ethically and practically for reporting. In 2011: the University of Nebraska-Lincoln established the Drone Journalism Lab: signaling formal academic recognition of the field: and major news organizations such as The New York Times began highlighting its potential. In the United States: drones have been used to help journalists report on events such

as protests and environmental disasters more safely. At the same time: freedom of information laws can also make government-recorded drone footage available for public-interest reporting.

- **European Union:** The European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has worked to harmonize drone regulations across member states: creating a more consistent framework for journalistic use. Adoption has expanded in countries such as Finland: and research published in 2020 found that drone journalism had spread from a few pioneering organizations to a much wider range of newsrooms: including regional and mid-sized newspapers.
- **United Kingdom:** Drone journalism has been supported by both academic research and regulatory oversight. In 2013: the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford published a report on the opportunities and challenges of drones in news gatherings: while the University of Central Lancashire's Media Innovation Studio and Civic Drone Center have explored journalistic uses of drone-based data collection. At the same time: the Civil Aviation Authority requires drone pilots to register and complete a test: reinforcing the importance of legal compliance in media use.
- **Africa:** Drone journalism has become increasingly valuable for overcoming infrastructure limitations and for covering underreported issues. Drones have been used to investigate illegal activities such as dynamite fishing in Tanzania and to verify damage in conflict-

affected areas such as Somalia. In 2018 African DRONE was formally established in South Africa as a nonprofit organization that supports drone pilots, journalists, and media advocates, helping expand training and collaboration across the continent. This growth is especially significant in contexts where budget constraints often limit the resources available for in-depth reporting.

- **Asia and the Middle East:** In Asia, the rapid growth of commercial drone technology in countries such as China, India, and South Korea has supported wider media experimentation and production. At the same time, the use of drones in journalism remains shaped by political and regulatory pressures, including concerns about surveillance and restrictions on reporting in some settings. In the Middle East, drones are increasingly used for commercial and media purposes, but their adoption in journalism is often closely scrutinized because of regional security concerns.
- **India:** Drone journalism began to gain visibility through media education and professional training. In 2019, the Indian Institute of Mass Communication introduced drone journalism into its curriculum through a workshop and similar workshops have since been conducted at other institutions that teach mass communication. It therefore suggests that adoption in India is developing through journalism education.
- **Ukraine:** In Ukraine, the visibility of drone technology has increased significantly since 2022, and this broader expansion has also shaped public awareness of drones in media and documentation. While much of the country's drone development has been driven by security needs, the prominence of drone footage in documenting events has also underscored the role of aerial technology in recording and communicating complex realities. This example illustrates how the wider social context of drone use can influence how aerial technologies are perceived in journalism.

7. Future of Drone in Journalism

Looking ahead, drone journalism is likely to become more sophisticated as automation and artificial intelligence are integrated more fully into reporting workflows. These technologies can improve efficiency in tasks such as data collection, image analysis, and real-time situational awareness, but their value will depend on how responsibly they are applied within journalistic practice.

Rather than replacing journalists, drones and AI are better understood as tools that can expand the reach and capabilities of reporting. As drone technology matures and becomes more affordable, its responsible use may contribute to more informed public understanding, particularly when journalists provide the ethical judgment, verification, and context that technology alone cannot supply^[19].

Conclusion

The integration of drones into journalism represents a significant technological leap forward. It has significantly enhanced reporters' ability to cover a wide range of stories, from natural disasters and environmental degradation to mass

protests and conflict zones. Drone journalism represents a significant evolution in newsgathering, offering journalists a powerful tool for capturing immersive, contextual, and compelling visual narratives. By providing a cost-effective alternative to helicopters, drones have democratized aerial reporting, allowing newsrooms of all sizes to enhance their storytelling capabilities. By democratizing the sky, drones have empowered journalists to uncover hidden truths, safely cover hazardous events, and provide audiences with expansive new perspectives.

Drone journalism is an essential tool for modern reporting. Drones have become an increasingly important tool in modern journalists' toolkits. The use of drones has enabled journalists to capture footage and images that would have been difficult to obtain otherwise. Journalists no longer need to risk their lives while covering stories in dangerous locations. For journalists and photographers, drones open new possibilities for informing the public, enhancing storytelling, and expanding creative potential. However, the full potential of drone journalism is currently constrained by a complex array of challenges. Restrictive and sometimes politically motivated airspace regulations threaten the fundamental rights of the press. News organizations must prioritize ethical training and transparent practices, ensuring that the "camera in the sky" is used responsibly to serve the public interest. More information about drones and drone journalism can be found in the books in^{[13, 20] [20, 27]}.

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