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Unmanned Aerial Vehicles Should we stop calling them drones?

They have their own magazines, internet sites, exhibitions and conferences. Sales figures have been steadily increasing over the past few years. The internet is awash with stories and videos about how the newly unwrapped Christmas gift ended up in the neighbor's garden, or up a tree, or even attacking the would-be, sometimes quite young, "pilot". They have been around for some time. The U2s that Germany launched on Britain during WWII were drones. A radio-controlled model aircraft or helicopter is an UAV too, and the history of aeromodelling goes way back. But since a major online retailer created a buzz one and a half year ago with its plan to use package-delivery drones to improve its same-day delivery service, the development of UAV for commercial purposes has caught the media's – and the general public's – attention.

What are they?

They come under different names : UAV for Unmanned/Unpiloted Aerial Vehicles, RPA for Remotely Piloted Aircraft. The acronyms UAS or RPAS, where the S stands for System, refer not only to the unmanned aircraft, but also to the equipment needed to control it. Armed drones known asUCAVs, or Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles, are used by the military.

They come in all shapes and sizes. They range from the lethal, heavily armed, highly sophisticated army drones, some with a wingspan roughly equal to that of a medium size airliner, to the quadcopter – a modern version of

the RC helicopter – that you can buy for less than a hundred euros in a toy shop. They can be controlled by pilots on the ground, sometimes several thousand miles away, or be autonomous once their missions have been programed into their onboard systems.

What are they for?

Up to recently armies were the primary users of drones, either to conduct aerial surveys and gather intelligence, or to launch attacks withUCAVs designed to carry missiles or bombs. Drones are cheaper to operate than manned aircraft, and they can fly deep into enemy territory with no danger for the flight crew. Then state or government entities such as law enforcement or customs agencies, fire-fighting departments, or SAR operators started researching what they could gain by integrating UAVs in their operating procedures. They use them almost exclusively as technical support to assist in their tasks, and under strict conditions. Taser-equipped drones are not a reality yet, although it is probably some police officers' dream.

All these evolutions are not new and are under control. The real concern today is about the private and commercial use of UAVs. They are cheap, readily available, and with a potential in commercial applications that appears to be endless. Left unchecked their expansion could quickly become a nightmare.

Regulations

There are many issues at stake here. Safety is one of them. It includes malfunction and possible mid-air collisions if too many UAVs are flying around. But safety is not the only problem. Noise and visual pollution are other strong concerns. And so is privacy. Nobody wants a big humming plastic mosquito hovering over their backyard, eavesdropping on conversations or prying into their private lives. In most countries, regulations for the recreational use of airspace by model aircraft have

been in place for decades. The conditions are pretty much the same everywhere: low above surface and away from sensitive areas such as airports, schools or hospitals. It excludes flying model aircraft for business purposes. For the time being, regulations on the commercial use of UAVs are rather stringent, and civil aviation authorities around the world deliver permits to fly sparingly. Last February, the FAA proposed a set of rules that mirrors some already put in force in other countries: drones up to 25 kilograms would be able to fly up to 160 km/h, up to an altitude of 500 feet. They would only be able to do so during the day and in the line of sight of the operator. This operator would have to be 17 or older, and would also have to pass a written test. These are rules that would truly ground most commercial UAVs.

Some local politicians would like to go further. As for example in New York City, where a councilman introduced a bill in January this year that would ban flying unmanned aircraft anywhere within city limits. To model airplanes enthusiasts who have been flying RC helicopters or aircraft for years, this frenzy of legislative activity intended to reassure the overconcerned citizen could cause a lot of hassle. More than a dozen clubs would be concerned by this NYC bill, which, if it was to be voted, would force members to make long drives out of the city to pursue their hobby. Longtime aeromodelling fans think that part of the problem comes from the term "drone". It sounds a lot cooler and has a better marketing impact than "model airplane" but, as it is associated with war or intelligence gathering, it has become a liability and should refer only to the military version of UAVs. This comment, found on an internet blog, sums up the situation: "... stop calling them drones. If we just call them radio-controlled airplanes or radio-controlled helicopters, people will stop freaking out".

VOCABULARY

To assist in.....	aider
To be awash with.....	être rempli de
To eavesdrop.....	écouter de manière indiscrete
To freak out.....	flipper
A hassle.....	une prise de tête
A liability.....	un handicap
To pry.....	s'immiscer
RC (radio-controlled).....	radiocommandé
Sparingly.....	avec parcimonie
Would-be.....	prétendu