

Drone use poised to expand to newsrooms despite FAA limits

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In this Jan. 8, 2014, file photo, a drone flies at the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. Newsgathering by drone is gaining traction as an industry practice, but how the technology can actually be used to cover the news of the day is murky given its legal limitations. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

Newsgathering by drone is gaining traction as an industry practice, but how the technology can actually be used to cover the news of the day is murky given its legal limitations.

The [emerging technology](#) has been used in wars, to deliver packages and, occasionally, for causing a ruckus, but the Federal Aviation Administration has also approved more than 200 commercial uses since September for movies, real estate and infrastructure.

Among those approvals, two companies identified newsgathering as their primary mission, according to the FAA website.

Las Vegas-based ArrowData said it's looking to franchise its drone ability to [news](#) organizations.

The company wants to sell the drones to newsrooms and then train journalists to carry out an operation. It doesn't have any contracts yet but said it is seeking out broadcast and newspaper outlets.

"It's a tool that television is looking at—local television, national television, everybody's looking at it," said Ron Comings, who is the news director of KLAS-TV in Las Vegas and has been in talks with ArrowData.

But the practicality of using drones, formally known as [unmanned aerial vehicles](#), to cover the news of the day is still murky.

The FAA has strict restrictions on drone operations, and a news organization would need deep pockets to afford the equipment and manpower for what is now a limited purpose.

Cinestar drones can cost as much as \$50,000, depending on the intended use, said Ron Futrell, an ArrowData spokesman. The company, which got FAA approval two weeks ago, hasn't worked out the training costs.

The FAA also requires at least a three-person crew to use a drone for news, including a licensed pilot to fly it, a camera operator to direct the

footage and a spotter to manage the scene, officials said.

Meanwhile, the journalism bread-and-butter of breaking news probably can't be covered by a drone.

Flights must be preapproved days in advance by the local airport and federal authorities, which will make covering unpredictable situations such as crime scenes and natural disasters nearly impossible.

But the FAA itself is also promoting drones for news, announcing a partnership Tuesday with CNN for the [cable news network](#) to research drone-based newsgathering in populated areas.

Futrell is hopeful that as the industry develops and the FAA refines its policies on [drones](#), their use will become more flexible for journalists.

"They're still putting out regulations," he said. "We want to do it safely, do it right and give feedback on how it works in the real world."

It's another step forward in the developing drone industry in Nevada.

The state is a national testing site for the new technology. With vast expanses of open and undeveloped land, Nevada also has a top U.S. drone surveillance and combat operations center at Creech Air Force Base about 35 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Yet, no matter the use, drone privacy continues to be a much talked about issue that could impact journalists.

Elliot Anderson, a Democrat in the Nevada Assembly, said the bill he sponsored to create privacy regulations for drone use is not meant to limit newsgathering. He said that would be protected under the First Amendment.

"I'm not sure of the specific case law for paparazzi-type activities, but the First Amendment is pretty strong," Anderson said.

ArrowData isn't a journalism enterprise but said it would only work with "reputable" [news organizations](#).

"Journalistic integrity, it is a trust thing," the company spokesman said.

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