

Drone Journalism Code of Ethics

Above all else, drone journalists should adhere to the national and local laws which govern the jurisdiction in which they fly. Drone-journalism ethics should be even more stringent than other journalism ethics. It is one form of journalism legally regulated by government authorities that control airspace.

Consider these guidelines:

Safety is the first concern. Do not endanger people, animals or property. Drone pilots operating as commercial operators (which most drone journalists are) have an obligation to obtain appropriate licenses which are recognized in the country in which they fly. In addition, the pilot should endeavour where possible to adhere to each country's unique laws and regulations regarding drone flight. In countries with no established drone regulations, drone pilots should endeavour to follow best practices of air law and safety for property and people. In addition, the pilot should obtain adequate insurance coverage for property damage and personal injury that could result from drone flights. Journalists generating content for their newsroom should not fraudulently claim they are recreational pilots to avoid licensure requirements.

Newsrooms should not encourage others to fly illegally. Newsrooms should discourage drone flights that violate laws and regulations by declining to publish, broadcast or post still images or video that, although legally obtained by the news organization from a third party, may contain evidence of those violations (i.e. flights over unprotected people, night flights). Not rewarding unauthorized drone use with public recognition may help to discourage similar violations by others. If the images or video captured through improper means are of such high news value that the journalists deem them newsworthy, the journalist or news organization should clearly explain why those images are newsworthy despite the techniques utilized to capture them.

Respect privacy. The Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics says, "Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. The pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness." What is your journalistic purpose? How is this tool helping you to tell a more complete story? Would you "do that" if you were capturing the image while on the ground? If you would not peer over a fence, look into a window or enter private property, how would you justify capturing the same image because you are airborne?

Respect the integrity of the photographic moment. Drones have the potential to interrupt events, especially when hovering low. While photographing subjects, drone journalists should not intentionally contribute to, alter, seek to alter, bother, or influence events.

Do not improperly enhance. Journalists should not add natural sound to drone video unless the sound was captured at the same time and place as the drone video was captured. Carefully consider how slow motion or speeding up effects, as well as dramatic color grading, might affect the editorial integrity of the video. Slow motion can appear dramatic and change the context of a news story. Video sped up may add false urgency.

Newsrooms should recognize that the pilot in command makes the decision about whether a flight can be accomplished safely. Newsrooms should not ask or pressure a drone pilot to fly in a way that the pilot in command considers to be unsafe or legally questionable. The ultimate authority for flying the drone is the pilot, and also, any penalties will fall on the pilot.

Drone journalism pilots in command should not be expected to report or perform other duties while commanding an aircraft. Safe drone flight should be the pilot's main concern while operating a drone or overseeing performing preflight checks.

Drone journalists have an obligation to practice their flight skills and be aware of new developments in the industry. Practice flying in various atmospheric conditions, and continue to develop safe flying skills. Maps and laws change, and pilots should stay current on the evolving legal landscape regarding drone operations in both their country and those they will fly in.

Drone journalists have an obligation to be certain their aircraft and gear are in good repair. Preflight and post-flight safety inspection checks are a must. Pilots should inspect props, motors, batteries and the aircraft body. Do not allow cost-cutting to compromise safe flight. If you cannot afford to fly safely, you cannot afford to fly.

Coach others. The public's perception of drone flights depends on how professionally pilots operate in these early days of this emerging technology. If the public sees drones needlessly invading privacy and putting people at risk, there is no doubt voters will pressure public officials to clamp down on drone operations. It is in your interest and the public's interest for you to coach other operators, especially other journalists, when you see them flying unsafely, illegally or unethically.

These guidelines were developed initially by:

- Al Tompkins/Poynter
- Mickey Osterreicher/General counsel for the National Press Photographers Association (USA)
- Matt Waite/Drone Journalism Lab at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln (USA)
- Dr. Kathleen Culver/Assistant professor and director, Center for Journalism Ethics, University of Wisconsin School of Journalism and Mass Communication (USA)
- Jon Resnick, DJI

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