

Drones: Not Just for Military Use

This is the VOA Special English Technology Report.

Late last month, for the first time, President Obama publicly confirmed the American use of drone strikes in tribal areas in Pakistan. He answered a question on the subject during a Google video conference with people around the United States.

BARACK OBAMA: "I want to make sure that people understand that actually, drones have not caused a huge number of civilian casualties. For the most part, they have been very precise precision strikes against al-Qaida and their affiliates. And we are very careful in terms of how it has been applied."

Debate continues about how many people, including civilians, have been killed in those drone attacks.



AP

Drones are technically known as unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs. These aircraft, however, are not just used for air strikes, and they are not just used by governments.

Human rights activists, environmental groups and journalists are increasingly using drones in their work.

Drones can fly above news events to capture images that reporters may not be able to get close to on the ground.

Matt Waite is a journalism professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Students in his Drone Journalism Lab are exploring different uses for drones in news reporting.

MATT WAITE: "Drone journalism as an idea is less than a year old at this point. The first instance I saw was a labor protest in Poland where a man had a remote-controlled helicopter and he put a camera on it and he flew it up and got just a

view of the protests from the air. And you could see police moving into position to kind of block the protest route."

A video on YouTube shows images captured by the so-called RoboKopter.

A group of citizen journalists in Moscow used a similar drone camera to record protests during Russian parliamentary elections.

And Professor Waite noted a recent environmental case in the United States captured by someone flying his remote-controlled airplane.

MATT WAITE: "He spotted a meat packing plant that was polluting a nearby creek that ran into a nearby river. He had images of a river of blood flowing out of this meat packing plant, which was against the law. And environmental regulatory authorities were alerted to it."

Andrew Sniderman is a co-founder of the Genocide Intervention Network. He wrote recently in the New York Times that drones could be used to collect important information in conflict areas, like Syria.

Professor Waite also imagines many other uses for drones.

MATT WAITE: "I thought of every hurricane, and tornado and fire and every kind of mass disaster that I ever covered as a journalist and thought, oh wow, that would be amazing to have as a tool."

Drone use in the United States is now rare because of federal restrictions on airspace. However, Congress just passed a bill designed to ease those restrictions by twenty fifteen.

And that's the VOA Special English Technology Report, written by Arick Simms. I'm Steve Ember.