

THE AGE OF THE DRONE

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THE AGE OF THE DRONE

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A revolution is happening overhead. Super-surveillance drones that can see objects six inches across, and track human movements are starting to appear in our skies. Amazon.com plans to deliver goods door-to-door using drones, startups in Silicon Valley are figuring out how to use drones to deliver medicine where there are no roads, and farmers in Japan already spray 90 percent of soy crops with drones. Anyone can buy and fly their own remote piloted drone for only a few hundred dollars, and by 2020 the United States Federal Aviation Agency anticipates more than 20,000 drones in the air in North America, not including amateur operators. Drones raise many issues about privacy and safety—anyone can fly a drone up into restricted airspace, endangering lives—and although there are regulations governing drone use, they are almost impossible to police.

New drone capabilities include incredible speed and precision, with super HD sensors and architecture that allows them to look like birds and bugs. From a drone 18,000 feet overhead, ARGUS—a 1.8 billion pixel imaging system—can film an entire medium sized city for more than 24 hours, track vehicles and people, and follow a car all day through the entire city. Roboticists and civil rights groups are raising the alarm. The fear of unfettered drone surveillance has created a backlash, with states and cities putting forward legislation to stop domestic drone use.

But the issue is not that simple. Drones also allow us to watch the watchers. Drone journalism is a new medium, and in Turkey's Taksim square it allowed the world to see the police and protesters from overhead and right down to eye level, until the drone was shot out of the air.

Lawyer and robotics expert Ryan Calo defines the drone dilemma: "I have three concerns regarding the domestic use of drones. The first is that drones will facilitate massive surveillance by the government. The second is that private parties will use drones to harass one another. The third is that because of their readily imagined capacity for privacy mischief the transformative potential of drones will never be realized."

Drones are overhead and here to stay. The question is who gets to use them, and how?

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CREDITS

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