



How to speak up

With the editor of *Unmanned Vehicles* stepping away from his desk for a while – as he enjoys an extended holiday in Afghanistan at the expense of Her Majesty’s government – I find myself in the position of plunging back into the world of all things unmanned.

To be honest, it does not really seem like I have been away, having continued to report on the industry piecemeal at shows and elsewhere even after Andrew took up the reins with the able assistance of Beth. However, on the eve of the annual jamboree that is AUUSI’s Unmanned Systems North America, some of the continuing themes seem to be the same.

The basic lack of public understanding when it comes to what UAVs are and can do continues to be a depressing trend, and is likely to hinder the wider acceptance of unmanned flight that will be needed to break into civil markets.

Privacy could be an issue, particularly if civil agencies start using UAVs regularly for surveillance purposes, but how to engage with those that feel threatened requires proper planning.

Knee-jerk engagement with every nut who says he might shoot down a UAV coming over his property is unlikely to bear the right fruit. A comparison with how the spotlight thrown on the statements of a fringe US pastor on burning the Koran caused such a negative impact in Afghanistan comes to mind.

Sometimes speaking up only fans the flames and intensifies the negative image. However, a more thoughtful and better planned strategy of engagement is necessary. There will be the need to talk to individuals,

communities and organisations in order to gain wider of acceptance of UAVs in civil airspace. This was a lesson understood by CAE and its partners (see feature on p20), which engaged intensively with the local community in Alma as they set up shop.

In the UK, the recent experiences of one UAS conference, which was scared away from its original venue after protests, were also depressingly familiar. In this regard, UAVs have become the favourite totem to be knocked down by a section of the peace movement.

While the aspirations of the movement are to be admired, as most warfighters would agree, the fixation of this fringe element with the technology often leads them to miss the point.

Many people would agree that the policy of targeted assassination carried out by the US in Pakistan and elsewhere has been taken too far and is tantamount to extra-judicial killings. UAVs do, to some extent, enable this policy, but the same could be achieved with a manned system. Israel manages a similar type of capability without resorting to the use of UAVs.

While such ingrained attitudes continue to prevail, it is likely to be difficult for the unmanned community to achieve the wider acceptance needed to gain regular access to civil airspace. While the industry is effectively engaged with the technical and regulatory challenges, the message seems to be far less clear when it comes to cultural issues.

Attitudes change, but that takes time and a clear, honest, coherent conversation by all sides. What you say, when you say it and who you say it to matters.

Darren Lake, Acting Editor

RESPONSE

Unmanned Vehicles’ editorial team is always happy to receive comments on its articles and to hear readers’ views on the issues raised in the magazine. Contact details can be found on p1.

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