The Future of Autonomous Drones in Cities

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Luke McNabb

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

Advisor

Pedro A. P. Francisco, Department of Engineering and Society

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Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of modern urban development, the integration of drones into smart cities stands as a new technological frontier, marked by its many implications for various sectors including transportation, surveillance, delivery, and other public services. Although with any new technological advancement, there are societal implications to discuss first. Who is liable for damages in the events of drone crashes? Does it change in certain circumstances? Will drones overstep privacy laws? The dynamic between technological advancement and necessary regulation creates a complex situation that demands careful examination.

In essence, my research tries to find a safe intersection between technological innovation and regulatory governance to make sure autonomous drones can work in smart cities. By synthesizing insights from many disciplinary perspectives including law, technology, sociology, and urban studies, I aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges that will be encountered during the integration of drones into urban life. Ultimately, this study advocates for a careful approach to policy making and technology development, grounded in ethical principles, social responsibility, and collective dialogue, to foster the responsibly integration of drones into smart cities.

Background and Significance

For drones to become prevalent in cities, a few technological challenges need to be addressed first. Roughly 95% of UAVs travel in low altitude environments under 120 meters which are complicated and hold many more obstacles than the high-altitude flight of planes

(Chamola, 2021). Object avoidance and adaptability are key for the success of drones to navigate their airspace. On the long road to fully autonomous multirotor drones, there have been two prevailing schools of thought to achieve smart navigation, optical flow and lidar.

So, what is optical flow? It is defined as a pattern of apparent motion of objects, surfaces and edges observed by a visual sensor which is caused by relative motion between the sensor and its environment. Optical flow sensors usually employ a joint visual camera and rangefinder system. Other techniques may define it as a "sequence of time-ordered images" which allow the "estimation of projected two-dimensional image motion as either instantaneous image velocities or discrete image displacements" (Beauchemin, 1995). The onboard raspberry pi board uses set algorithms to compute the drone speed and position relative to its environment.

The three different papers of William E. Green, Deqing Sun, and S. Beauchemin all use optical flow for object detection and avoidance. For multirotor drones, these cameras are good for detecting objects underneath the drone and may be used for precise landings or drop offs. However head-on lateral collisions are sometimes difficult to avoid due to the interference of a drone's propellers. These blind spots would make urban travel difficult. Also due to the nature of optical flow, these sensors cannot be used above the drone as visual data from the sky alone isn't concrete enough now to establish relative position (Optic-Flow-Based collision avoidance, 2008).

The key to optical flow is that it is relative. A drone only using optical flow can only compare to where it was, for example its take off location. This key shortcoming is why drones must employ multiple positional tools to be autonomous with the most common one being GPS satellites. A good example mission would use GPS coordinators and waypoints for navigation whereas the optical flow sensors would be used for takeoff, landings, and basic object avoidance underneath the drone.

The other main technique for object avoidance is lidar, which stands for light detection and ranging. This technique uses pulsed lasers to measure distances to objects. A good lidar system can recreate rooms or tunnels as a 3d model instead of the 2d mapping that optical flow provides. This complete perception of the surrounding environment that lidar provides gives it a leg up over optical flow. The general framework for obstacle avoidance starts with environment perception using lidar, avoidance algorithm using on board computer, motion control using ESCs and motors, then finally a verifying check that the maneuver was correct. The two key areas that need to improve are the lidar's perceptive ability and the autonomous algorithms designed to create flight plans to react to the environment (Liang, 2023).

These two sensors' groups pairs alongside progressively more complete algorithms and onboards flight controller AI will lead to the full integration of UAV technology soon. Another researcher, Zilong Wang uses Vector histogram algorithms which can not only detect unknown objects but then steer the drone to avoid them. This research group improved the smoothness of object avoidance in two ways. First applied the VFH algorithm to the obstacle avoidance method of RGB-D camera sensor and secondly changed the cost function of the VFH. Both changes led to more reliable and smoother object avoidance. The future of autonomous drones must not only make the best use of the many sensors available but improve the avoidance and navigational algorithms onboard these drones.

Once these technologies improve, drones will become a more common part of life, requiring regulation and planning. How will air traffic work? How is liability determined? How can privacy be protected? Will everyone have access to these UAV services. There is a set of ethical and logistical problems this paper aims to address to ensure a smooth implementation of UAVs.

Methodology

This section outlines the research framework and methods used to investigate the integration of autonomous drones into smart cities, focusing on their legal, regulatory, and societal implications. My methodology focuses on cultural lag, the delay between technological advancement and the adaptation of social norms and legal frameworks, and responsible research and innovation (RRI). These two critical concepts will show why liability disputes and privacy concerns will inevitably show up in the future in the context of autonomous drones.

To guide my research, I asked the following questions:

Q1: How do autonomous drones navigate?

Q2: Where do current drone operations conflict with existing regulations, and how can these conflicts be resolved?

Q3: Which regulatory frameworks will be needed for autonomous drones to operate in urban environments? How will they define liability?

My research uses a mix of primary and secondary data sources to gather insights on the regulatory and legal issues surrounding autonomous drones. The key methods include literature reviews and case studies of other autonomous systems already facing scrutiny like autonomous cars. However, the rapidly evolving nature of the drone industry and politics may shift what regulation is needed in the future.

Literature Review

The integration of autonomous drones into cities has been gaining significant traction, with many technological advancements paving the way. My literature review will provide insights into the future regulatory framework governing autonomous drones using a case study of last-mile delivery robots. Hoffmann and Prause's paper "On the Regulatory Framework for Last-Mile Delivery Robots" (2018) offers a comprehensive exploration of the regulatory environment, emphasizing the challenges that arise in implementing autonomous technologies in urban settings.

The study focuses on the last-mile problem, which is the challenge of delivering goods efficiently from a distribution center to the end consumer. Amazon and other delivery services have had longstanding issues with these logistics. Hoffmann and Prause underscore the significance of this problem, noting that autonomous delivery robots offer a promising solution. These robots, designed for suburban areas with low traffic, can operate at a lower cost compared to traditional delivery methods. However, the emergence of these robots in public spaces raises regulatory concerns, including data protection, liability for torts, and compliance with traffic laws.

The regulatory framework for autonomous drones and delivery robots is complex and changes from region to region. Hoffmann and Prause discuss the potential challenges in creating a cohesive legal structure when each country or state may have its own legal agenda. The paper highlighted the General Data Protection Regulation in the European Union, which established particularly strict guidelines for data collection, processing, and protection. Many drones would already breach some of these privacy laws today. This regulation would impact the design and operation of autonomous drones and delivery robots, requiring companies to implement privacy-by-design principles to safeguard personal data. Companies in the future will need to adapt regionally and more likely by city to city to implement drone technology.

The question of liability is central to the regulation of autonomous drones and delivery robots. The research shows that in many legal systems, general tort law provides a framework for liability in traffic accidents. However, the unique nature of autonomous vehicles or drones complicates this issue. Strict liability, typically applied in product liability cases, might extend to the manufacturers of drones and delivery robots, especially if their products are deemed defective or unsafe. Traffic laws might also impose liability on both vehicle owners and drivers, with different rules depending on the jurisdiction.

Hoffmann and Prause further elaborate on the possible definitions for motorized vehicles operating on pavements, with regulations adapted to account for the characteristics of autonomous delivery robots. They suggest that adjustments to existing traffic laws will be necessary to accommodate these new technologies while ensuring public safety. Similarly, drones already have a legal definition, but it may change with more classifications created in the future.

The GDPR has significant challenges for the operation of autonomous drones and delivery robots especially regarding the collection, storage, and transmission of personal data. The current regulation requires explicit consent for processing personal data, with severe penalties for non-compliance. Companies operating autonomous drones and delivery robots must ensure that their data processing practices align with the GDPR's principles of privacy-by-design and privacy-by-default. This may be challenging for autonomous delivery systems.

The paper also discusses the societal implications of autonomous drones and delivery robots. Hoffmann and Prause point out that the acceptance of these technologies varies across different regions and municipalities. In some cases, like San Francisco, strict regulations have been imposed on autonomous delivery robots due to concerns about pedestrian safety and public nuisance. This variation in regulatory frameworks can create challenges for companies looking to implement autonomous technologies on a broader scale.

The literature on autonomous drones and last-mile delivery robots suggests that while these technologies offer promising solutions to logistical challenges, significant regulatory hurdles remain. Hoffmann and Prause's work provide a thorough examination of the legal and ethical issues surrounding autonomous delivery robots, emphasizing the need for clear regulatory frameworks and compliance with data protection laws. As the industry continues to evolve, it will be crucial for policymakers to address these challenges to ensure the safe and responsible integration of autonomous technologies into smart cities.

6. Results and Discussion

Starting my discussion with the present state of the world, in many areas, the rapid increase of drones has already prompted legislative and regulatory responses aimed at balancing innovation with public safety and privacy concerns. These regulations vary widely across different regions, reflecting divergent approaches to managing the risks and opportunities posed by drone technology. For instance, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in the United States has established a comprehensive regulatory framework that governs the operation of drones for both recreational and commercial purposes (Chamola, 2021). This framework encompasses registration requirements, operational limitations, and licensing procedures designed to ensure the safe and responsible use of drones in national airspace.

Similarly, other countries have enacted their own sets of regulations tailored to their unique socio-economic and geopolitical contexts. In Europe, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has introduced standardized rules for drone operations across its member states, seeking to harmonize regulatory practices and facilitate cross-border drone activities. These regulations encompass certification standards, operational limitations, and risk mitigation strategies aimed at promoting the safe integration of drones into civilian airspace (Chamola, 2021).

So how do we go from most if not all cities being no flying zones to smart cities with drones flying around providing numerous services. First, cities will need to plan where these drones will fly. Just as cars have roads to navigate and airplanes have airports to dock, drones will need sky routes to make navigating the city easier and landing pads within the city to recharge or make emergency landings. Detailed flight plans and traffic patterns will need to be created like a multi-level air highway. This concept will effectively double to triple the amount of drone activity possible (Gugan, 2023). Finally, the no-fly zones that already exist in many cities would need to be greatly amended according to these flight plans.

The next piece of this puzzle is the emergence of AI-driven drones, which raises a host of new ethical, legal, and societal implications that demand careful consideration. With the growing prevalence of AI, many governments are already moving to regulate the technology. Concerns regarding algorithmic bias, data privacy, and autonomous decision-making underscore the need for robust governance frameworks that ensure transparency, accountability, and ethical oversight during development and deployment (Erdélyi, 2018). Many drones will be or are currently running AI navigational software and algorithms. Policies regarding privacy and data collection for AI may extend over to drones just because they use the technology.

The last and largest piece to create a drone smart city is liability. Who will pay damages in court when all goes wrong? The manufacturer? The user company? I will begin by examining the parallels between the liability dynamics of self-driving cars and autonomous drones. In the case of self-driving cars, the shift from individual to manufacturer liability has redefined responsibility in accidents, compelling companies to prioritize safety measures to mitigate potential legal and financial risks. This is a huge shift from the current status quo where individuals and insurance companies almost always pay for car incidents. Applying this logic to drones, manufacturers would bear responsibility for accidents and damages, incentivizing them to invest in robust safety protocols to minimize risks. This alignment between liability and accountability is crucial for fostering trust in autonomous technologies and ensuring their responsible development and deployment in smart cities.

The liability question doesn't end there. Can liability change depending on the circumstances? The answer is a resounding yes. We can look back and draw more parallels to the last-mile delivery drone case. Currently, one of the main causes for failed last-mile drone deliveries is due to human tampering or stealing. These activities can range from as docile as standing in the robot's way to as violent as destroying it and stealing the contents inside (Hoffmann, 2018). Once drone deliveries begin, there will be inevitable theft through either physical or hacking means. In a broader sense, all the drones withing the city, even if they are performing other tasks like surveillance, may be at risk of human tampering. What laws will protect them?

The integration of drones into smart cities presents unprecedented opportunities for innovation and efficiency, but also poses complex challenges regarding liability and regulation. By adopting a proactive approach to governance grounded in ethical principles and sensitive risk management strategies, policymakers can navigate the complexities of drone integration while fostering inclusive and sustainable urban development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of autonomous drones into smart cities represents a significant shift in urban development, offering new opportunities in transportation, surveillance, delivery, and public services. However, with these advancements come complex challenges around regulation, liability, and privacy. This paper has explored these challenges, aiming to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the regulatory and societal implications of drones in urban environments.

The first step in the journey towards fully autonomous drones is marked by significant advancements in navigation techniques and obstacle avoidance strategies. Optical flow and lidar represent two primary schools of thought, each with its strengths and limitations. While optical flow excels in relative motion perception and precise maneuvers, lidar offers a comprehensive 3D mapping capability for enhanced environment perception.

Regulations and liability laws will be the next largest hurdle for autonomous drones operating in cities. Drawing parallels with the liability dynamics of self-driving cars and ground delivery robots, the responsibility during drone accidents will shift towards manufacturers, incentivizing them to prioritize safety measures. However, complexities can arise when external factors such as hacking or sabotage contribute to incidents, blurring the lines of responsibility.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive regulatory frameworks, industry standards, and proactive governance strategies grounded in ethical principles and risk management. The successful integration of drones into smart cities depends on the ability to navigate regulatory complexities and address societal concerns. Policymakers should engage in proactive dialogue with stakeholders to create comprehensive frameworks that foster innovation while protecting public interests. With the right balance, autonomous drones can play a transformative role in shaping the future of urban environments.

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