



THE DRONE: SUPPORTING ACTOR OR LEADING ROLE?

*The perception of unmanned aircraft in
mass media and Italian public opinion*

THE DRONE: SUPPORTING ACTOR OR PROTAGONIST?

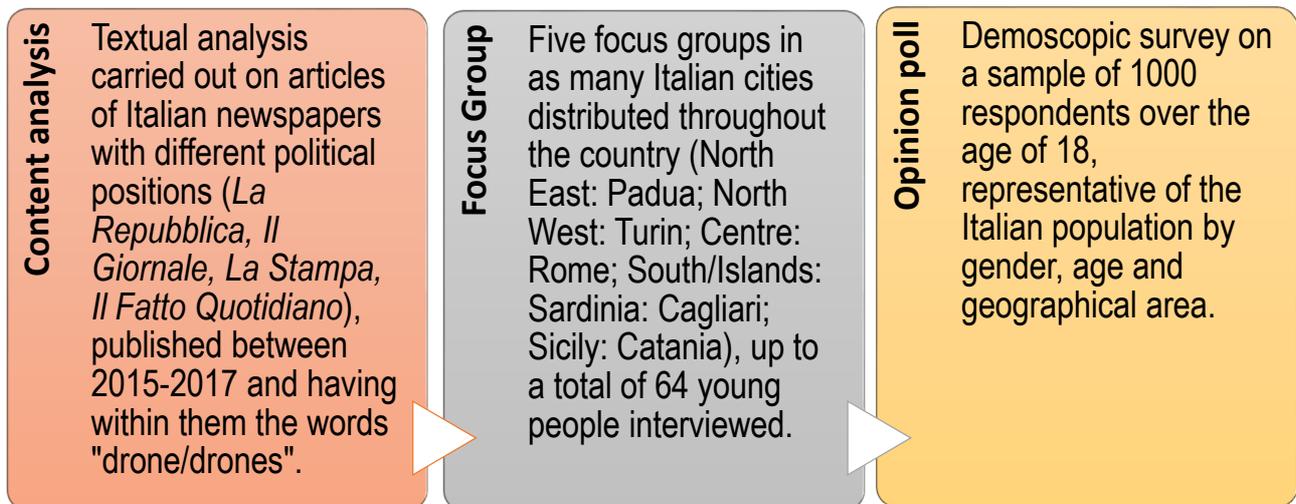
The perception of unmanned aircraft in the mass media and in Italian public opinion

Research Report carried out in the framework of the activities of the European Forum on Armed Drones and the collaboration with Rete Italiana Disarmo

In the age of the "new wars", the drone, a land, sea or air vehicle remotely or automatically controlled, is imposing itself in the processes of redefinition of international conflicts. While experts underline the risks deriving from the use of drones, which is considered the first step towards a progressive "automation of the battlefield", international public opinion is only partially aware of the extent of the phenomenon. The Italian public opinion is no exception. Public opinion and the traditional and new media remain decisive players in the decision-making processes of the international policy of Western countries.

The Report by Archivio Disarmo aims to investigate to what extent and with what attitudes the media and public opinion are dealing with drones.

To this end, the research has carried out three different surveys:

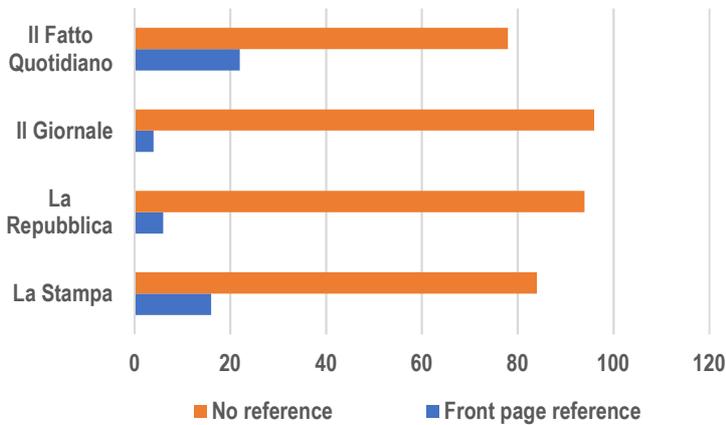


1. Content analysis: the drones and the Italian Press

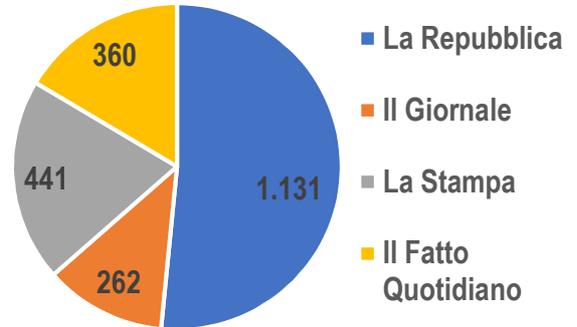
The main result that emerges from the analysis is that on the semantic level the military dimension remains predominant. The drones tend to take on the role of "supporting actor", which therefore does not stimulate a in-depth debate. In fact, in the articles in which drones are cited, their profile is narrated in a reductive way: they are dealt with in the discourse only to describe wider phenomena (for example, the digital revolution which is characterizing our society). When the articles address drones' military and strategic aspects, they don't take into account the ethics, legal and political implications of the use of drones. Drones are described as a simple means through which military operations are carried out in areas of crisis against either governmental and non-governmental actors.

Therefore, the Italian press fails to elaborate a discourse which would inform public opinion about the military, ethical and legal implications of the use of drones.

Front page articles mentioning drones (val. %)



Number of articles per newspapers



2. Focus group: public opinion and quality aspects

Sources of information about drones
(according to respondents)

INTERNET, SOCIAL NETWORKS, TELEVISION, PRINT MEDIA.

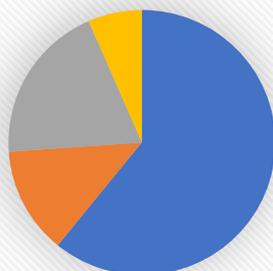
THE REPRESENTATION OF REMOTE PILOTED AIRCRAFT IS PERCEIVED AS PREDOMINANTLY POSITIVE WITH REFERENCE TO THEIR USE IN BOTH

The five focus groups carried out in 2018 in Turin, Padua, Rome, Catania and Cagliari demonstrate that knowledge about military drones is modest, as is the information provided by the media on the subject.

According to many of the participants, the sources from which they have been informed provide a representation of remote-controlled aircraft: a) as predominantly for civil use; b) as predominantly positive, with reference to both civil and military uses. While civil drones are praised for their technological characteristics and their ability of supporting human action in socially useful functions, military drones are appreciated for their effectiveness in countering terrorist groups without putting the life of the pilot at risk. There is a clear consensus in reference to the use of drones in the civil sphere, less defined in reference to the military sphere.

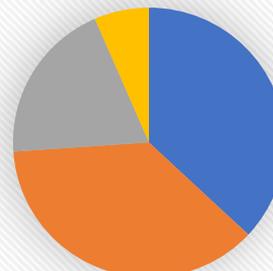
Level of appreciation of civil drones

- in favour
- against
- undecided
- don't know



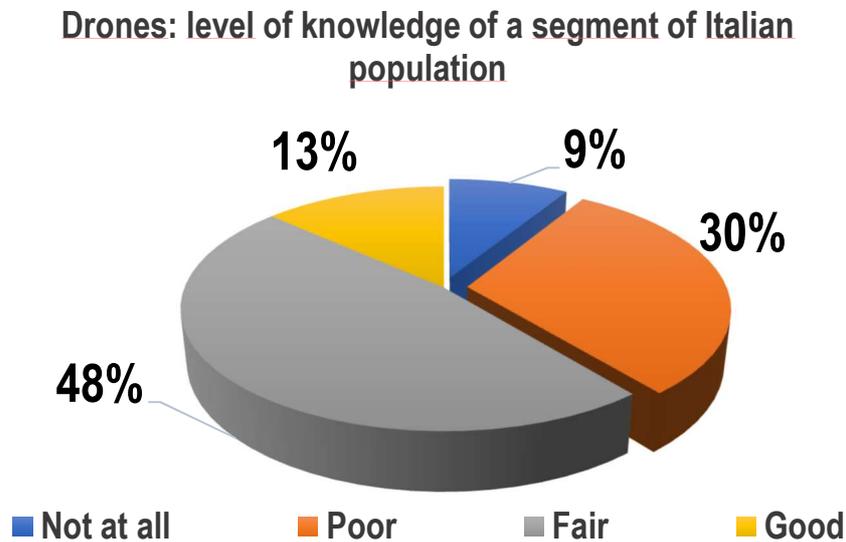
Level of appreciation of military drones

- in favour
- against
- undecided
- don't know

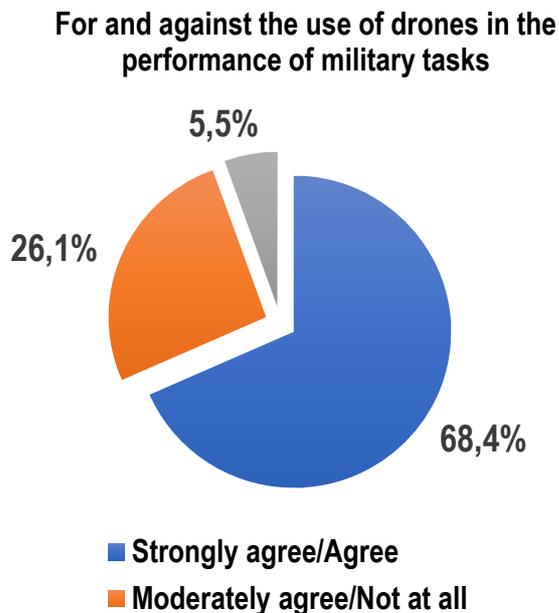


3. Demoscopic survey: public opinion and quantitative aspects

The results of the survey realized in February 2019 attest the presence of a minority (decreasing compared to previous surveys, but still significant) of respondents (39%) who claim to know little or nothing about remote piloted aircraft.



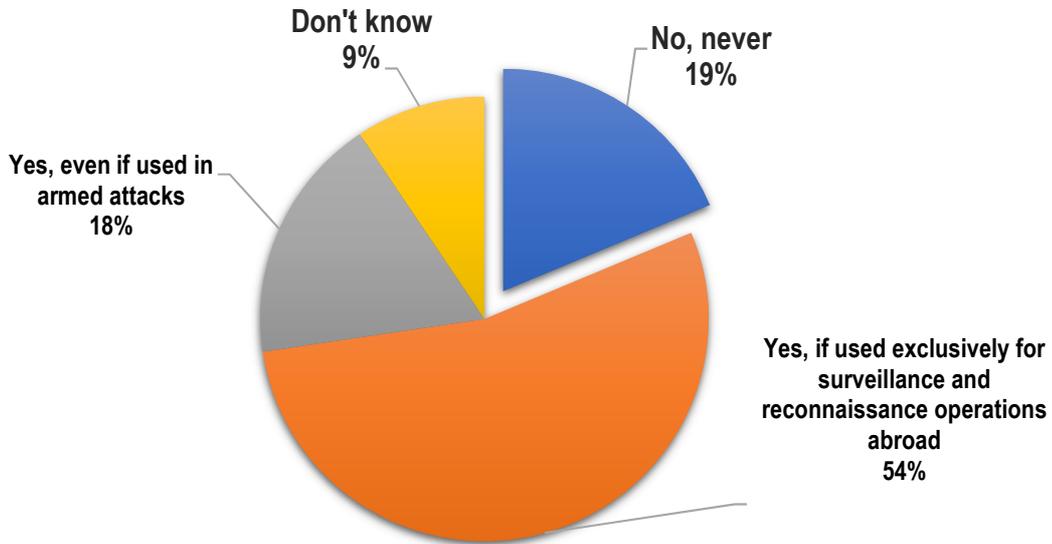
As demonstrated by the focus groups' findings, those who claim to have a fair or good knowledge of drones express a favourable or contrary attitude in different proportions depending on the field of employment. The only area in which opponents outperform those in favour (by about four percentage points) is the area of gaming and entertainment. On the other hand, there is a very wide support for their use in rescue operations (93.7%), in traffic control (87.4%), in public order (82.3%) and in the agricultural sector (80.3%).



Most of the interviewees agree with the positive consequences of the use of drones, such as the improvement of activities against crimes (74.8%), counterterrorism (73.5%) or the creation of better public services (69.1%). Only a minority foresees negative consequences such as a possible increase in unemployment or air pollution. The only area of concern (by 67.6% of respondents) is the possibility that the use of drones could put people's privacy at risk.

68,4% of respondents are inclined to rate positively the use of drones in military operations, if it is not specified whether they are employed in surveillance or in attack operations nor it is not specified if they are used by the Italian government. This result changes considerably if we do not consider a "theoretical" utility of the military drone, but rather its "effective" use in military operations by the Italian Government and its Armed Forces.

Would you be in favour of the Italian Government using drones for military purposes?



Considering the structural variables, the gender gap according to which women are more reluctant to the use of force is confirmed. As far as the age of the respondents is concerned, the over-65s are the most frequent opponents to the use of military drones (35%). The political affiliation of the interviewees is also crucial: the greater favour for military drones confirms that the right/left continuum corresponds to a greater/lower propensity to the use of force. Surprisingly, anyway, the military use of the drones arouse a certain distrust among the voters of Fratelli d'Italia, a right-wing Italian party. This opposition stem from the fact that military drones are a type of armaments which contradicts the traditional ethics of the fighter oriented to face the enemy on his own.

