

COMPUTER ETHICS INSTITUTE

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ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

June 11, 1992

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"Computer Ethics Ten Commandments"

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Noah Adams: Thou shalt not snoop around in other people's computer files. That is one of the new 10 commandments of computer ethics. With more than 100 million computers in use around the world today, the possibility of snooping, not to mention doing a lot of other unethical things with computers is quite high. So the Computer Ethics Institute has come up with some guidelines. Warren Cikins is the secretary of the institute. He says the first commandment, "Thou shalt not use a computer to harm other people," does not confine itself simply to inflicting physical harm.

Warren Cikins: I don't think of it myself in terms of physical harm as much it is the ma--the wide range of other types of harm--psychological harm, my--physical harm in that sense, in terms of ways that one could cause people to have great discomfort and disturbance in manipulation of data and manipulation of their personal records and many other ways could have a type of physical reaction.

Adams: Mm-hmm. You're familiar with Isaac Asimov...

Cikins: Yes.

Adams: ...the science fiction writer's "Laws of Robotics"?

Cikins: Mm-hmm.

Adams: He devised these laws for the robots in his books and one of them was a robot cannot harm a person.

Cikins: Mm-hmm.

Adams: That's--that's the universe he would like--would have liked to have seen.

Cikins: Would like to see. Yes.

Adams: Yes. Yeah.

Cikins: Well, we do--if I could jump to the 10th-- we do try to say, "Thou shalt use the--a computer in ways that ensure consideration and respect for your fellow humans," so that we're not attempting to harm them and so in a way we come kind of full circle between one and ten.

Adams: Sure. Number nine is "Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you are writing or the system you are designing."

Cikins: Right.

Adams: Isn't that an awful lot to be asking...

Cikins: Yes.

Adams: ...of somebody who sits down in front of a computer...

Cikins: That's right.

Adams: ...as compared to a typewriter?

Cikins: Yes.

Adams: I mean, if you said this about a typewriter, people would think that...

Cikins: Well, it's really aimed at those who are doing major design, and--and the question is of attempting to head off unanticipated consequences, to be assured that when you're designing a computer system that it is used to enhance society. And I think that is a double commandment even though it is a kind of a fuzzy one, as you point out quite accurately.

Adams: Mm-hmm.

Cikins: We're hoping in a new technology--as this is still considered a new technology--that we can be an earlier enough--early enough stage that we can create a framework where these types of ethical concern can be more dominant than the negative uses and that people become aware. Much of it is because people aren't even aware of what they might possibly do. Everyone of the people involved in public policy and computers are everywhere now in public policy, should be sensitive to the ethical dangers of what they're doing.

Adams: One of the commandments says, "Thou shall not steal." There's an old--I think it's a song lyric--a Western song-- some rob you with a--with a six gun and some with a fountain pen?

Cikins: Mm-hmm.

Adams: And now some people are robbing you with a computer.

Cikins: Right.

Adams: Isn't it asking just a bit too much of those who are now using computers as opposed to adding machines and typewriters all of a sudden to be ethical? Isn't it going--I--I know what that you're...

Cikins: Mm-hmm.

Adams: ...being idealistic about it, but isn't it going, in a way, against human nature?

Cikins: I don't think it's particularly idealistic. I think that's a struggle we're engaged in in every dimension of public policy and how you will draw out the better in us rather than the less good in us. So that seems to me to be a struggle that all of society should be engaged in on any major issue, and here is a tool. That's the important thing to have understood. This is a tool. It's not an answer. It's not a solution. You don't turn on the computer for a solution. You need it--understand the strengths and weaknesses of an incredibly sophisticated tool.

Adams: Warren Cikins of the Brookings Institution in Washington is the secretary of the Computer Ethics Institute.

Adams: I'm Noah Adams.

Robert Siegel (host): And I'm Robert Siegel. It's "All Things Considered."