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HEADLINE: Computer Commandments - DON'T STEAL THE CAPSLOCK KEY

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Snooping in someone else's computer files would constitute a keyboard sin under a proposed set of "Ten Commandments of Computer Ethics."

The commandments were drawn up by the 6-month-old Computer Ethics Institute and are being circulated within the industry for comment and refinement.

The institute grew out of a 1985 Brookings Institution conference on proper and improper use of computers and the information they amass. Among its members are ethicists, theologians, businessmen, educators, technologists and public policy experts.

More than 50 million computers are in use in this country and 100 million around the world, and their use has already generated computer crimes by hackers, the creators of computer viruses and the theft of confidential data.

"We are clearly in need of ethical guidelines," says institute chairman Ramon C. Barquin, a former IBM executive who runs his own consulting firm.

"Whenever you have a new technology you find there are some unforeseen and undesirable consequences," he said. "No one thought of traffic jams or drunken drivers when the automobile was first developed."

The proposed commandments:

- I. Thou shalt not use a computer to harm other people.
- II. Thou shalt not interfere with other people's computer work.
- III. Thou shalt not snoop around in other people's computer files.
- IV. Thou shalt not use a computer to steal.
- V. Thou shalt not use a computer to bear false witness.

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VI. Thou shalt not copy or use proprietary software for which you have not paid.

VII. Thou shalt not use other people's computer resources without authorization or proper compensation.

VIII. Thou shalt not appropriate other people's intellectual output.

IX. Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you are writing or the system you are designing.

X. Thou shalt always use a computer in ways that ensure consideration and respect for your fellow humans.

Institute secretary Warren Cikins, a senior staff member at Brookings who trained in theology, was asked about the fifth commandment: What would constitute bearing false witness with a computer?

"The selective use of data to give an impression that is not valid," he said. "It's like a reporter stacking information. It's not lying but it comes out that way."

He said ethical questions already have arisen, citing the attempted use last year of the Prodigy network to disseminate an anti-Semitic message.

Company officials had to decide whether the First Amendment guarantee of free speech applied. Ultimately the company announced it would not permit messages "grossly repugnant to community standards" to appear on its electronic bulletin boards.

In another instance, an attempt was made to use a computer bulletin board to swap information on child pornography.

Barquin said subtle ethical questions are arising. He said computers used by courts to gather information in child custody cases could be programmed to make the decision about which parent gets custody. But that would be an improper use of the machine, he said.

So would using computers to choose the recipients of transplanted medical organs, he said.

"Let us think about these things before we do them," he said. "That's what this is about."