The first “Code of Conduct” for UAVs

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A trade group has written the first "Code of Conduct [1]" related to unmanned aerial vehicles. The Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International (AUVSI), which boasts more than 7,000 members across 60 countries, released its treatise in response to growing privacy concerns toward domestic UAV usage.

The Global War on Terror entails a very acute form of asymmetrical warfare, and UAVs have become one of the most valuable tools in our arsenal. As such, President Obama has greatly increased [2] the scale and frequency of UAV activity, particularly in Pakistan, where the U.S. has conducted a shadow war since at least 2004.

We can all envisage Predators and Reapers launching hellfire missiles at insurgents in Waziristan. But the idea of UAVs operating in Peoria is unsettling to us. It strikes a nerve – rampant civil liberties violations seem inevitable. But they’re coming, folks, whether we like it or not.

Earlier this year, Congress passed an FAA spending bill which mandates [3] that unmanned vehicles must have access to U.S. civilian airspace by September 30, 2015. The mandate applies to military, commercial, and privately owned drones.

The scientific applications are boundless. Farmers have also expressed interest in acquiring UAVs to monitor or spray crops. But law enforcement would presumably be the greatest beneficiary of domestic UAV activity. It’s happening, already.

According to the Associated Press [4], a county sheriff's office in Texas used a homeland security grant to buy a $300,000, 50-pound ShadowHawk helicopter drone for its SWAT team.

This doesn’t sit well with some people. According to American Civil Liberties Union lobbyist Chris Calabrese, "I think Congress needs to step in. This is new technology. It's potentially incredibly invasive. People are profoundly discomforted by the idea of drones monitoring them."

The AUVSI proposal seeks to quell at least some of these concerns. Its three sections – Safety, Professionalism, and Respect – address many of the fears related to domestic UAV operation. “Respect” directly speaks to privacy dilemmas:

• We will respect the privacy of individuals.
• We will respect the concerns of the public as they relate to unmanned aircraft operations.

AUVSI’s Unmanned Aircraft System Operations Industry "Code of Conduct" is, of course, non-binding. But the AUVSI hopes the industry will adopt the Code and implement it in a safe and responsible manner.

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[1] http://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/AUVSI/958c920a-7f9b-4ad2-9807-f9a4e95d1ef1/UploadedFiles/AUVSI%20UAS%20Operations%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20-%20Final.pdf
[2] http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones
[3] http://www.popsci.com/technology/article/2012-02/under-newly-authorized-airspace-rules-drones-will-fly-alongside-piloted-planes-2015
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