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Author(s) Maxwell, Evan

Abstract Investigators find blue box use is increasing as criminals purchase the boxes and use them to hide potentially incriminating telephone calls. Phone crime being taken more seriously and prosecuted more vigorously.

Keywords blue box; phone phreaks; Howard Mountjoy (senior security agent, PTT); Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company (PTT); Orange County, CA; Riverside County, CA; San Bernardino County, CA; Walter Schmidt (security chief, GTCO); General Telephone Company (GTCO); pornographers; drug dealers; gambling; brown box; cheesebox; cheese box; Tom Abdeef (Orange Cty investigator)

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'MA BELL IS 'IT''

Phone Crooks Play Game With Blue Box

BY EVAN MAXWELL
Times Staff Writer

For years, the first step in many criminal investigations has been to secure a list of toll calls made by a suspect. In drug and pornography cases, particularly, the list can lead to a suspect's colleagues and his connections.

But in recent months, policemen investigating such cases have found an increasing number of toll lists which contain nothing, or perhaps only a few innocuous long-distance conversations with relatives:

The reason, investigators have been discovering, is a small metal or plastic box which, regardless of its color, is called a "blue box."

The device, sometimes as small as a package of cigarettes, has up to 13 buttons, each of which emits a squeal or squawk when pressed. Attached to a telephone, it can give the user free rein to make phone calls all over the world. No charge is made for the calls and no record is made of them.

There was a time, in the past decade, when the blue boxes were the sole possession of self-dubbed phone freaks, who gamboled at will through the integrated communications system that ties the world's telephones together.

"They liked to see how many circuits they could tie up across the country," said Howard Mountjoy, senior security agent for Pacific Telephone Co. in Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties. "It was a huge game and Ma Bell was 'it.'"

Phone Crooks

But the discovery by criminals of the box's ability to wipe out long-distance tracks has meant that phone freaks have been supplanted by phone crooks.

"In recent months, we have seized boxes from legitimate businessmen and from crooks of all kinds," said Walter Schmidt, security chief for General Telephone Co. "But pornographers and drugs dealers seem to be the most common sorts to use them."

The box duplicates the tones used to activate telephone switches and circuits inside the system. They are different from the ones used in dialing or in touch-tone phones.

A skillful manufacturer can even devise boxes which can gain access to computers tied into phone lines, thus posing a potential avenue for criminals intent on industrial

espionage or computer fraud.

"With a blue box and some inside knowledge, a crook can milk a computer of everything it has, or he can rearrange or wipe out information," said one fraud investigator. "The box is a very dangerous tool in the wrong hands."

In addition to criminals, the boxes are finding their way into the hands of legitimate businessmen intent on nothing more than avoiding their phone bills. Schmidt says that the devices have been seized from a rock music promoter and from other businessmen.

The discovery of the varied uses of the boxes has created a growing demand. Mountjoy said that Pacific Telephone has recently moved against several local manufacturers, including one who was arrested with 50 boxes in his possession.

Prices Increase

Increasing sophistication in equipment and the increasing demand have raised the prices of the illegal devices, too, Mountjoy says. One recently arrested manufacturer was asking \$1,500 apiece for the devices, and the average price has risen to about \$750.

A market has also been generated for several other "box" devices, including the "brown box," which simulates the sound of money being dropped into a pay phone, and the "cheese box," a switching device used by bookies and the like to switch an incoming call from one location to another automatically.

"When the cops raid a place, all they find is the box, and no way of tracing it to the second number," said Tom Abdeef, an investigator for the Orange



'BLUE BOXES' —Two of "blue box" devices held by the county DA's office. Times photo

County District Attorney's office.

Mountjoy points out that the use of various types of telephone cheating devices is a growing concern. His office has seized a dozen blue boxes in the past six months, and Pacific Telephone is devising new methods, involving the use of the toll-free 800 area code numbers, to catch boxes in operation.

He said Pacific is also beginning to educate local law enforcement officers to detect use of the devices, and to recognize them.

"In the past, officers conducting a search in other cases, have run across the boxes, but didn't know what they were," he said. "If the officer

recognizes them, he can make an arrest immediately, since mere possession is a crime under the penal code."

The District Attorney's office, too, has begun to proceed vigorously against such phone crimes. Abduf said that two cases are presently in the court in which the DA is alleging

grand theft in the use of blue boxes, thus treating the matter as a felony rather than a misdemeanor. If upheld, the cases could signal a new, tougher system of penalties for the use of such devices.

As Mountjoy put it, "We are trying to teach these people that it isn't nice to fool around with Ma Bell."