



# ***Exploding The Phone***

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**Abstract**       Captain Crunch interviewed about his troubles with the telephone company and law enforcement, and his notions about what is going on in the phone system, including a surveillance system being tested in Iowa.

**Keywords**     Captain Crunch; John Draper; phone phreaks; blue box; AT&T; conference bridge; auto-verify; autoverify; verification; Bell Labs; CIA; FBI; scanning; black box; red box; Phone Phreak Defense Phund; Iowa; REMOBS

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## The Captain Is Crunched Again

The voice on the other end of the line sounded scared. "I'm in big trouble. A lot of people are trying to get me. I'd like to talk to you as soon as possible, because I think you could help. But not like this. We have to talk in person."

We immediately agreed because it was the notorious Captain Crunch, phone phreak extraordinaire. The computer genius who's been cheating the telephone company with feats of technical wizardry since 1970. And he's paid a price far more expensive than the dimes he's saved.

Through a few friends, we heard rumors that the Captain had recently been arrested—twice in the past two months, and both times under very bizarre circumstances. It turned out that's what had him scared, so he agreed to come to the office to give us complete details in an exclusive interview.

But first, some background information. Although his real name is John Draper, he earned the "Crunch" handle by becoming one of the first and most prolific users of a small whistle that was obtainable, circa 1970, in Captain Crunch cereal boxes. This little toy happened to emit a perfect 2600 cycle tone—the exact same tone that normally beeped through network wires on each number that was dialed when making a regular call. Instead of dialing, someone could foot the telephone number into the mouthpiece with one of these whistles—five times for the number 5, two times for the number 2, and so on. This trick would bypass the mechanism that records calls being made and give a free connection.

Based on avid use of this, and a series of increasingly sophisticated devices, like the famous "blue box" that he invented and shared with other flip-off enthusiasts Ma Bell listed Captain Crunch in its black pages. He was arrested in 1972 on charges of committing a felony—fraud by wire. After he copped a plea and paid a \$1000 fine, he was put on five years probation. Then in 1976, he was set up by a couple of ex-phreaks-turned-informers and wound up sentenced for the first time. On this occasion, Crunch made a special deal with the government. He relinquished a few important secrets about his techniques, without implicating anybody else, and was given a token four-month jail sentence at Lompoc State Prison in California. He was released on five years probation, and has been out for several months.

Crunch sees himself as a martyr to the cause of alternative telephone communication. He wanted to be quoted in Scenes so that people would come to understand just how gigantically powerful and remorseless AT&T has become. Here's his story.

By Howard Smith &  
Leslie Harlib

Various authorities in several different states have brought charges against you. What was the incident that happened to you in Pennsylvania just recently?

I had just moved into a very nice summer home in the Poconos. I was gonna live up there and do work for a cable TV company. I was going to computerize all of the recontrol functions that you have on cable TV, switch on and off the various cable services to customers. I had two computers up there that I was using to develop the software—the computer programs—that were to control the cable TV system, and an electronic lab set up there, too. I decided to hold a housewarming party, and I tell my friends on the phone, "Come on up, I'm having a party." And I called, and then people called me, and one person left a phone number for me to call him back. I did. And it turns out that the number I called him back at, without knowing it, was a number used by the phone company for special test purposes. And that this number is a very special number, indeed—which nobody is supposed to have access to.

The phone company claims I defrauded them by calling that number. And they apparently got a search warrant for my place. But why, I asked, did they do it on the 22nd of October, in the middle of this party, in front of all my friends? Why didn't they wait and do it Monday instead of on a Saturday?

Why do you think?

For harassment purposes, I think. It can't be anything else.

How would they have known the party was going to be going on?

By tapping my phone. By tapping everybody who I called.

Well-known phone phreaks?

Yeah. Well-known phone phreaks the phone company was keeping tabs on. And they thought that maybe I was having some sort of a big secret phone-phreak training convention, when all I was having was a simple old party.

So what happened? How were you busted?

Well, on that day, in the afternoon, I had six guests who have arrived from out of town. I took them down by the waterfall. While I was down there I noticed a helicopter, a state police helicopter, hovering around. I thought maybe somebody got lost in the woods and I resumed my visits with my friends. On the way back, an unmarked car pulled up and a couple of state troopers came out and demanded identification, so I didn't have anything on me, but I told them who I was. Man says, "Yeah, he's the man we want. Come," he says, "just walk up the road to your house and we'll follow right behind you." They were in their cars and I

walked along with my guests up to the road, one person on each side of me to make sure I wouldn't, quote, "get away," unquote. There was only one person up there at the house. He's sitting on the porch, just relaxing after getting the place cleaned up for the party, and all of a sudden these people appear out of nowhere, from the woods. Surrounded the house—some 20 state troopers plus the helicopter.

Twenty?

Yeah. At least 20. They had six patrol cars. They had so many patrol cars up there that they didn't have enough room for parking all of 'em. That's basically what happened. They arrested me on the spot. And they took the two computers that they claimed had a program in them that allowed the computers to be used as a blue-box.

They claimed that right then and there?

No, they didn't, but they took the computers. They says, "We know that you've been defrauding the phone company with this computer in some way.

The state police said that?

Phone company agents said that when they were there.

There were phone company agents with the state police?

Yes.

They were identified as such?

Yes. They identified themselves as special agents of the phone company. There was at least five of them there, not to mention the state police.

Did they have a number of search warrants?

They only had one search warrant for the house. But at the same time they searched my guests' cars, they extracted all kinds of literature and information—the October 1971 *Esquire* article, the June 1977 *High Times* article, and other various articles about phone phreaks. They took everything that my friends had—all their notebooks and everything. Then they turned my friends loose and arrested me.

What were all the charges against you?

As I can remember the first charge was criminal conspiracy. The second charge was defrauding the phone company—or what was it—it was theft of telecommunications services, that's the official charge that they called it. The third was possession of instruments of crime. The fourth one was manufacturing and distribution of electronic devices used to defraud the phone company—I don't know where they got that charge from. That's about it. There were five, but I don't remember what they all were. And that's basically where I stand at this point. I can't do too much to discuss any of my legal battleplans or what I'm gonna do to fight

these charges.

Well, you pleaded not guilty.

Yeah, I made a not guilty plea, of course, and this is purely due to harassment. I'm under total, 100 percent surveillance. I'm being followed constantly. I can tell. I have ways of monitoring their communication.

You would find them actually following you?

Yes.

And you occasionally find bugs on your phone, or not?

Well . . .

With your counter-surveillance?

Well, with my counter-surveillance equipment I haven't got the capability of detecting whether or not the phone's tapped. The reason being that it's possible now to tap a phone without physically touching the wires; therefore, how can you detect the presence of anything? It's like trying to find a ghost. The only ways I can suggest you prevent your phone from being tapped is to put obnoxious noise down the wire, like, maybe punk rock or something of that sort. Constantly down the line where they have to dig through these tapes of constant punk-rock. Or whatever else you want to put down the line. Drive them up the wall. That just makes their work harder for them. Of course, it attracts a lot of attention. So, ah. It came out in court that I was under surveillance.

It came out in court? On this arrest?

Yeah. In the search warrant they said that I was under surveillance for about five days prior to the arrest. And I've noticed that there were cars parked, just sitting there with people in them looking at the house, looking over the area.

How long were you in jail?

I was in jail for a month before I could get enough money to get out.

On this charge? The one in East Stroudsburg?

Yes. I was in from the 22nd of October to about the 22nd of ah, November. I got out just before Thanksgiving.

On what bail?

The bail was originally set for 20 thousand, but we went up to the preliminary hearing we had it reduced to five.

Let me go through why I believe all this is happening to me, because I think this kind of information should be out in the open. I think the more people that know about this the better, 'cause it may cause the phone company to think twice before trying something like this again. They know they can try it on me, 'cause they know I'm on federal probation. They know that if I even look funny at a telephone they can arrest me. To arrest me, what do they need? They just need probable cause, right? What's probable cause? Possession of a device, that's probable cause. The fact that I called some number that I wasn't supposed to call, that was probable cause. But it's very flimsy probable cause. Even the slightest thing can cause my probation to be violated. Which is really all they wanted to do. They want me locked away.

Why?

Okay, let's get the whys now. One of the first things I believe is they consider me a security threat to the phone company. I am a very accessible person to a lot of people, even though I'm out on probation, even though I'm working. I let my whereabouts be known. People want to ask me questions, I don't mind giving them answers. That's what they're afraid of. They seem to firmly believe that the kind of information that's going to leak out is not just the kind to defraud the phone company. It's information that the phone company itself doesn't want out. Because they're hiding the capabilities of the new switching centers that they're installing. In Iowa they're experimenting on this new machine called a 4-E. It's all electronic, can be programmed to do virtually anything, including take out the cat, if you want it to. It has total control of tracing all trunks identified going into the machine. It knows exactly where calls are coming from, and where calls are going to.

For the entire state of Iowa?

For anything that is hooked to this machine.

But does it have the capability to handle every phone in the state of Iowa?

Yes, I believe. This was demonstrated to me by some phone phreaks in the New York area who called me up on what they call the conference bridge. It turns out it's not only a conference bridge. It also has the capability of getting about eight or 10 people up on a conference, plus, have one output port go to a phone line and tap it, which means that eight or 10 people can be put up on this conference to listen in on one person's phone line without being detected. In other words, this is better than the auto-verify.

Let me explain now what auto-verify is. Operators use auto-verify to go in on a person's line for purposes of emergency if the person is busy using that line or if the phone's off the hook. Number two, if the line is in use, the operator can break in saying, "Excuse me. We have an emergency for this line." Something like that. When this auto-verify circuit clicks in it makes an announcement beep over the phone line to indicate to the people talking that somebody's on the line listening.

Okay. The auto-verify is a decent thing. It doesn't really invade people's privacies the way they have it set up now. But, this new thing that they have does not have the capability of allowing the tapper to talk to the person he's tapping. It only allows the tapper to listen to the conversations. The people talking on the phone don't even hear as much as an audible click. It's totally silent.

You say that the phone company already has this installed in Iowa?

It has the capability.

But is it in Iowa?

It's being experimented and played around with in Iowa, that's correct.

Why would the phone company want a system where they can tap every single person's phone? It would seem to be impossible.

It is an all-out effort on the part of the phone company to prevent people from ripping them off. And this thing is going too far, in my opinion. They've already got a whole barrage of fraud detection devices which are very clever, some of which are almost flawless to try to beat. And yet they're building this super-snooper device just the same, when it's not necessary. But why are they using something that will connect to anybody's line with the flick of a switch or the press of a button, or the dialing of a phone number? You don't need a court order to dial the number. That's their technicality. It is my belief that the security departments of the phone company and Bell Labs are doing this because the government—the CIA and the FBI agents—will put pressure on or ask favors of the Telco Security Agents. 'Cause most of the Telco Security Agents today, according to many publications and articles that I've read, worked for the FBI at one point or another. Then the government can listen in on lines without a court order through the phone company's circuits. The phone company does not need a court order to tap a line. All they claim is, "Well, we're just checking the integrity of our service. We have to go out on the line to see if our lines are working." That's their argument.

And you think that part of this harassment of you is caused because

'Cause I know of this new system's existence.

How did you find out about it then? How can you prove this?

Because phone phreaks have the ability to go in through the back door and discover the existence of things like that. This number was found through a process that phone phreaks call scanning, which I pioneered.

It basically means taking every single telephone number in a particular exchange and dialing each one. For example, take the 800 exchange. The phone phreaks went through dialing every single number beginning with 800 until they found one that answered with this strange beep tone. They investigated further and they found out if they dialed this certain number, it will do certain things—just by playing around with it. The person who found this and called me on that number brought down heat upon me, because the phone company obviously had records of its use.

So you think that's one of the key reasons why they then came after you—'cause this happened just a few weeks before the arrest?

Yeah. Because they know that if phone phreaks know of something—like this wire tapping capability—existing within the network, just the mere existence of it will lead to its discovery. Scanning is totally thorough.

But the way they do it is by using computers to dial? They don't physically sit and dial 10 thousand numbers?

Oh, they'll physically sit and dial if they want to, but they'll do it over a period of time.

But now with these cheap desk-top computers that are all the rage, that are fairly simple to operate . . . ?

Exactly. And software is the key. The phone company knows that I have the capability of generating software to do it, but they don't want this software to show up anywhere. They want this software to be completely quashed.

Now, your computer that they impounded under their search warrant. I assume . . . ah—

Let me tell you a little bit about that computer. That computer was seized on October 22. The Pennsylvania state police turned it over to Bell Labs. And all my notes and documentation. Now I was working on a project for a consulting company in the L.A. area for a laser-switch system, whereby I can use lasers to communicate long-range without going under the jurisdiction of any government control to communicate from point A to point B.

This was above ground?

Totally above ground. Legitimate job.

There was nothing illegal in this contract?

A: There's nothing wrong with developing a communication system that has no licenses or laws against it . . . But all my notes and information on that project were confiscated by Bell Labs. They're claiming that I was stealing their trade secrets, when indeed they were stealing mine. Software and computer programs that I've developed for various companies were in that computer that they took. They took my notes on this other legitimate job that I was working on for the cable TV project. I still to this very day haven't gotten any of that stuff back or returned to me. They've taken every single one of my programs, a list of them out, and . . .

You mean technology's gotten sophisticated enough where one computer can deprogram another computer?

Bell Labs, with their resources and money, can do anything they damn well please to a computer. This computer that I have is a fairly straightforward computer. All it took was some Bell Labs expert to contact the computer manufacturer, to say, "Hey, where's this stuff kept in memory, now let's see what John Draper does with his memory." So they knew right where to look.

Now I program in a very unorthodox way. I use a lot kinds of special that I designed for shortcuts. It took them, I'd say, two weeks to deprogram my computer, 'cause I was in jail—I'd say less than that actually—10 days. During the preliminary hearing they admitted in court that they've not yet made my computer make a free call. But I'm sure that Bell Labs wants to really nail me to the wall, which I know they're probably gonna try in court. What I believe they're going to do is thake these programs that I have written, make changes in my program that will have it make a blue-box call instead of a regular legitimate call. That's what worries me. And who am I to argue against Bell Labs when they present their "evidence" in court?

And they don't have a prison record and you do, so your word against their's doesn't go very well.

A: Right. They're doing everything that they can to . . . keep me off the streets long enough for the phone company to change the system.

Because at this point you feel that you're ahead of them? A little bit ahead of them?

Yeah. And they don't want me around until they've had a chance to clean up their dirty, sooty little holes in the system . . . make it virtually scan-proof. And by using me as an example, they're obviously going to be able to put enough scare tactics in the phone phreaks to make them feel uncomfortable about scanning for information. Scanning in itself is not illegal. It's a very simple process. By picking up the phone and dialing up any ol' number I wanna dial, I'm not breaking the law. If I should stumble on a number that's proprietary to the phone company, that's not illegal. But if I use it, then I guess that would be breaking the law.

Is it possible for them to eventually make a, uh, some kind of a system with great capabilities for all kinds of tapping and security that the opposition will never be able to break?

They're working on it.

Before we started this interview, you mentioned another device that the phone company has come up with that sounded like it would be very valuable to police departments that want to keep checks on people.

Yes. This other thing means that when you call the police department, whether you're from out of town or in town, it doesn't matter, your phone number will be displayed on a console at the police station.

So when you call 911 they'll no longer have to say, "Give us the number that you're calling from." It will be right there on the screen in front of them.

Exactly.

Is that already in?

They're experimenting with that right now. In secret, of course. The public won't know that this capability exists. They're just gonna have it and implement it. And all of a sudden a whole lot of people are gonna get busted very quickly. And a lot of people and a lot of attorneys are gonna wonder why and how they got the information.

Now, a few days ago I understand that you were arrested on yet another charge. What happened? Can you relate that story?

A: Sure. Okay, the New Jersey problem. I had a flat tire. I get stuck over in the Lincoln Tunnel on December 26 and managed to get the car out of the tunnel into New Jersey without tying up traffic. Just on the other side there's a pay phone. I called for a tow truck to come out and tow the car. And they towed me to an unused or unopen gas station. I figured, okay, I'll go back to New York and crash and come back during the daytime, get the tire fixed, and go on my way. When I come back to the gas station after getting the money for the tire, the car's gone. So I asked the gas station owner what happened to it and they said, "Call the Weehawkin police station." I go down to the Weehawkin police station and this detective down there has a bunch of stuff that was found in the car in his office. The battery charger, a CB walkie-talkie, and a brown . . . suitcase or whatever. He says, "Do you know what this is?" I says, "It looks to me like a black box with buttons on it." He says, "Yeah. That's a

blue-box. It's used to defraud the phone company. We found this in your car." And I don't recall ever having one of those things in my car. If I had one of those things in my car, I would certainly not have had it in clear view. Or drive into any area where those things were illegal, and I knew that those things were illegal in New Jersey. And everywhere else. How that thing got there is beyond me. But the question that I have is why? What happened? You know. Why did it get there? And how did it get there? That's the question that I have to ask. Now why was the car towed?

Yeah. That's what I want to ask. They don't automatically tow every car that pulls into a gas station to the police station.

Well, the car was left there all day long with a flat tire. The gas station owner should have known that that car was there to get repaired. So what happened was I get back and the car's gone. There's several theories open to me, but . . . they all seem very far-fetched and almost fantasy. One such theory is that I was in Manhattan at the *Yipster Times* office talking to them about writing some articles. I was under surveillance. I had to give the location of the car out to some friends so that they could meet me there to get the car fixed. Okay, so, shortly after I get there the car's gone. Now, could it be—I'm asking this question—that the Telco agents had been monitoring my line or monitoring the yippies' line, which I would no doubt think they would do, 'cause I'm sure that the phone company and the yippies are definitely not on good terms?

Well the *Yipster Times* often publishes various . . .

Various things the phone company does not like. Right.

Well, specifically they publish . . .

Credit-card codes that come out and all this jazz. So naturally the phone company would probably have that office tapped. They'd probably know that I was there. My being there wasn't illegal. At least I hope not. So what happened was the phone company had learned that the car was there, had went out to the car, looked around. The car unfortunately didn't have a lock on it. So anything that was in that car was not of too much value to me.

The phone company people could have seen that car there and either contacted the station manager to have the car towed so that they could have it under custody of the police, or they themselves had the car towed so that the car was under the custody of the police. In either case the police, of course, took the car, searched the contents of the car, and produced, with this magic magician trick, the blue-box. And that's what their charging me with.

What is the charge, possession of an illegal device?

I'll read you what the warrant says. I've got it right here. 27th of December. Ah, charge number 2A: 11-7: "Make, furnish, or knowing that the device [and they have in parenthesis red-box] to defraud owner of coinbox, telephone, or other receptacle depository, or contrivance is guilty of a misdemeanor."

And when do you have to go to court on that?

Pretty soon.

I assume you're going to plead not guilty.

Of course.

At this point . . . you feel it's primarily the phone company's security cops. Those are the people who are mostly behind your harassment. But they use local, state, and the FBI in order to carry it out? Is that the idea?

It's either that or the FBI's in on it, too. Right from the very beginning.

But do you feel that the phone company itself is strong enough, and can get help from the state police whenever they want?

Oh—most definitely. Any time they want they can, quote, "file a complaint," unquote, against me. "We have reason to believe, probable cause, this John T. Draper has possession of such a device. Watch out for him. If you see any vehicles that he might be driving or you notice anything, or if his name shows up in the computer, check it out, pull him over, check his car." That type of thing. Most definitely. Most definitely.

In the past you've been identified with various devices that stole service from the phone company—blue-boxes, black-boxes, red-boxes, or whatever. And for a long time, you more or less have been considered the father of all these devices. You've spawned a whole generation of electronics phreaks who have gone on to build their own equipment. I'm curious about your view, based on this background, on how you feel the phone company should work. Do you feel all phone services should be free?

Not free. This is the first-time I've ever had a chance to publicly say how I feel the phone company should operate. So I think I'll elaborate on that. I think that what they should do is ban all time charges on phone calls and have several different kinds of services, should have a higher monthly rate, and include the whole country as the calling area. Not just the local area.

Higher monthly rate? And then how would I be charged per call, let's say to Oregon?

You wouldn't be charged for a call

You would . . . call to your heart's content anywhere in the country on a flat-rate basis of maybe 30 bucks a month. Your phone bill would always be 30 bucks a month.

And so would yours? And so would ours?

Yeah. Everybody's phone bill would be 30 bucks a month, or whatever. That's just an arbitrary figure. It might be more, it might be less. Whatever is agreed upon by the Public Utilities Commission or whatever.

Q: Would they lose enormous amounts of money?

A: No, because the equipment needed to supervise these calls can go away. Operators needed to bill these calls can go away. Their equipment does not have to be so sophisticated, which definitely eliminates blue-boxes right off the bat. Wouldn't have to worry about fraud. Everything is just flat-rate.

People who are only paying \$6.75 a month, or whatever the minimum charge is now, would freak out.

Naturally they would pay more. They would freak out.


They would say, "Why must I pay for other people's calls?"

Let them have the life-line service for \$3.75 a month and pay half the price. They're the ones who don't make the long distance calls. Let the ones who do make long-distance calls pay for them, but let's let them pay reasonable. A typical example is when I lived in Mountainview, Calif, and when I called San Francisco I payed 55 cents a minute for that call. When I lived in Mountainview and called New York City, I payed 20 cents a minute. It costs me more to call within the state than it does to call out of the state. There's something wrong in that rate.

In all the various busts that have happened to you with the phone company, have they ever sat down with you privately and said, "What are you up to? What are you doing to us? What does this mean?" Or offered you a job to come work for them?

They never have.

Could you imagine ever working for the phone company?

If I do I would do it in such a capacity where I wouldn't cause any harm to anybody, i.e., turn people in, things like that. And right now I wouldn't even consider it. Not after what they've done to me. Their "out-to-get-me attitude" is really blowing me out—ruining my life. And what I don't understand is why the Congress doesn't launch a committee to investigate and impose some kind of control over the phone company to prevent them from harassing people like me and other people who, under most circumstances, are innocent. Experts outside the Bell System would work with the Bell System engineers to determine number one—what the actual capabilities of the equipment are, and number two—to provide some kind of control over it. Otherwise innocent people may be scared into not using the phone in fear of getting tapped or harassed by police agencies. And the question I have to ask is, is 1984 here? If anybody asks me that I'll say it's been here two years ago. 

## Phone Phreak Defense Phund

To help protect themselves in the future from the kinds of legal difficulties that Captain Crunch has been subjected to, the underground telephone culture has decided to raise money by staging the first of a series of benefits. On Wednesday and Thursday, January 18 and 19, there will be a movie and live rock music bash at the United Methodist Church, 133 West 4th Street, in New York City. Appropriately, they're showing *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell*, with Don Ameche, and *The President's Analyst* with James Coburn. These will be followed by David Peel and the Lower East Side in concert. The show starts at 6:30 and there's a minimum contribution of \$3. If you can't go, donations can also be mailed to the Phone Phreak Defense Phund, 164 West 21st Street, N.Y., N.Y. 10011. Or call 691-7350 for further information.

"I want to make it clear that this money is not just for my own defense," said the Captain earnestly. "We're raising it for future arrests that will probably occur if I get convicted. I estimate that at least 200 phreaks will be busted based on my test case. So this reserve will benefit us all."

Special thanks to Robert Keating for  
his help