



Exploding The Phone

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SCENES

By Howard Smith
& Lin Harris

WATS When

You want proof that times have changed? Dig this: Phone phreaks now call themselves "telecommunications hobbyists." No longer is intimate knowledge of blue boxes alone sufficient to claim the appellation. "The average phone phreak is being put out of business," explained Cheshire Catalyst, a pseudonymous spokesperson for *TAP*, an underground publication whose subtitle reads: "The Hobbyist Newsletter for the Communications Revolution." "Hardware has become so advanced that our ranks are being culled. You have to understand digital circuits and micro-computers or you can't compete with Ma Bell."

Leaping Eighties, is this the end of phreakdom? "Oh no, certainly not," came the jaunty reply, "We're just being forced into becoming a more technically sophisticated bunch with a greater need to share information." Hence the reason for a major convention of telecommunications hobbyists scheduled for August 9 in Washington, D.C. Dubbed the Washington Area Telecommunications Symposium, or WATS-80, the gathering should be somewhat of a departure in both style and content from past phreak retreats. "For one thing," said Catalyst, who is to be a featured speaker, "we'll be bringing together knowledgeable people who will be available for informal conversations about the phone company's new computerized switching system, data networks, and various forms of computer hacking." ('Hacking' is phreak for cutting into a system.) "We'll also present Bell System films and a lecture on the etiquette of phone phreaking." Etiquette? "Yeah. For instance, we're advising against hacking into independent long-distance systems like Sprint and Execunet, because they're competing with the Bell System to provide lower-cost long-distance services."

Because their "hobby" has been construed by some as tantamount to theft of services, phone phreaks in the past have been a cautious—even paranoid—lot, super-careful not to be identified. Has this, too, changed? "We still use pseudonyms, and anyone registering for the conference is asked to come up with an interesting one. (Please, no more Bilbos.) Also, we'll be issuing at the door the traditional Lone-Ranger-type masks, which will of course be optional." Registration is \$5 by mail (147 West 42nd Street, New York, N.Y., 10036) or \$6 at the door of the Gramercy Inn, 1616 Rhode Island Avenue, starting at 9 a.m. (A subscription to *TAP*, in operation since 1971, is \$8, payable in cash, to the same New York City address as above; back issues are available for 75 cents each).

But aren't the phreakless phreaks expecting to be aswarm with inphiltrators? "We're pretty much used to that. In fact, we figure that at least half of *TAP*'s subscribers are probably telephone company security agents." Still, a convocation in the middle of Washington does seem unnecessarily audacious. Isn't it unwise to flaunt their presence in a town there intelligence has nothing to do with IQ? "We do expect a lot of agents to show up—from the FBI, CIA, GSA, DOD. . . . But we're not baiting them. We're almost providing a service. In effect, we're saying, look, this is how easy it is to penetrate your systems. You've got some really big holes, and we can actually help you patch them. It's one thing for us to hack—look at what the kids at Dalton could do!—but it's another for real nasties, like the Russians or whoever, to get easy access.

"The agents want to protect these incredibly complex electronic data banks, and we set about punching into them. Then they produce counter methods and we counter their counters. It's all a friendly game of electronic warfare. Actually, I'm not sure how friendly *they* consider it, but when you think about other forms of electronic warfare, it's *very* friendly." He chuckled, "Some of us are even bringing resumes."