



Exploding The Phone

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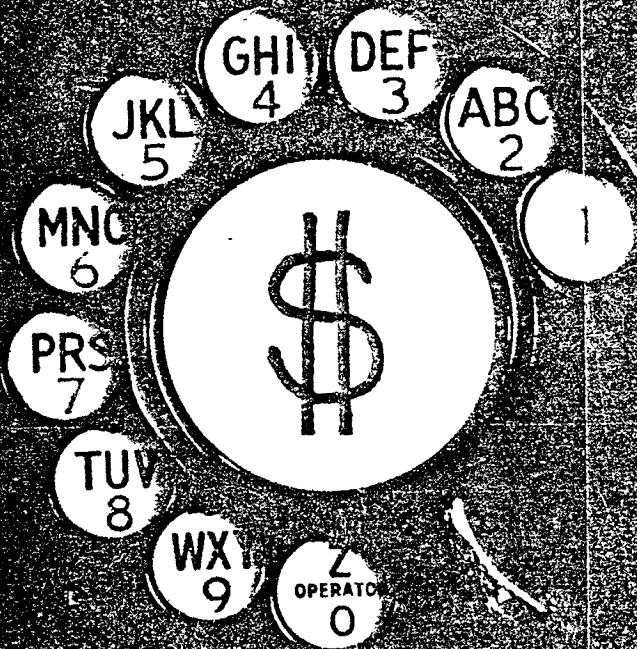
Abstract Excerpt from book; copies include cover and two pages per sheet, 6 sheets total. A brief discussion of phone phreaks, including mention of the Esquire article and various phreak groups.

Keywords San Francisco Mime Troupe; Youth International Party Line (YIPL); Abbie Hoffman; The Party Line; blue box; Al Firestein (aka Al Bell, phone phreak); Al Bell; AT&T; Esquire; phone phreaks; FBI

Source An anonymous phone phreak

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WHY ARE THE PHONE RATES GOING UP AND THE SERVICE GOING DOWN? WHY MUST YOU PAY TWICE AS MUCH FOR AN OPERATOR-ASSISTED CALL? WHY DOES THE TELEPHONE COMPANY WANT TO CHARGE FOR GIVING OUT THE INFORMATION IT ALWAYS GAVE OUT FREE?



Is there any way you can tell if you are being billed correctly? Do you know what all the charges on your phone bill are? Do you know if the telephone company is discriminating against you because you are poor? single? a woman? or non-white? In these pages is hope! Better yet, here are facts and figures, carefully researched and documented, and an action plan to



I'M SORRY, THE MONOPOLY YOU HAVE REACHED IS NOT IN SERVICE...

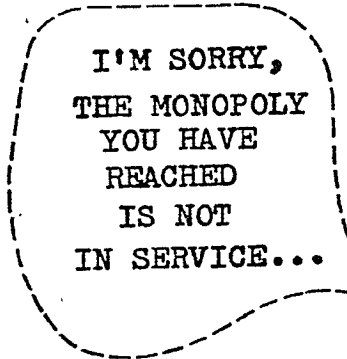
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K. Aubrey Stone

that period. Donald Gillard, vice-president of public relations for Michigan Bell, points out that the company's practice is to make a bill adjustment only if a customer's line has been out of service "for about twenty-four hours." Even then, as we have seen, the adjustment isn't automatic: the company has no legal obligation to make a rebate unless the customer brings the outage to its attention. Even so, that comes to some 4,000 customers monthly in Valentine's area. If Valentine won his case, the impact could be substantial. There are 290,000 subscribers in the five telephone exchanges involved, and even if the company knocked off \$1 a customer annually, it would hurt—especially because it would set a precedent for subscribers around the country. Valentine's action has already hurt, though, because many people who weren't aware they were entitled to rebates for twenty-four-hour outages are now requesting them. Still, Valentine isn't entirely happy with his progress: "I came down to the office on a Sunday to draw up my suit," he relates, "and guess what? The phone was out."

Still another lawyer, Daniel J. Bernstein, whose firm is a member of the New York Stock Exchange, got so exasperated after fourteen years of unreliable service that he demanded and got a sort of "hot line" to the New York Telephone Company, a direct line to the repair bureau. "The only trouble," Bernstein says soulfully, "is that that is also out of order most of the time."

From these conservative within-the-system approaches we swing to the opposite extreme, in which a variety of organizations are endeavoring both to put on and put down Ma Bell.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe, for instance, cavorts merrily across California parks and campuses presenting, among other things, a spoof describing "How to Rip Off Ma Bell." Though considerably less than Shakespearean, this drama is nevertheless packed with instructive precepts informing audiences how to decipher and apply Bell credit card codes, how to screw up pay phones, and how to

drive operators out of their gourds.

Somewhat better organized is the New York City-based Youth International Party Line, a branch of Abbie Hoffman's Yippies known as YIPLs, but its approach is basically the same as the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The *Party Line* is also the name of their more or less monthly bulletin that prints such information as how to sabotage Bell's credit card system, mess up computerized billing cards, construct anti-bugging devices, install your own conference and extension lines, make long-distance calls via the infamous blue box, and, in short, cause the company you love to hate no end of confusion and distress. Of course, the YIPLs discourage their readers from engaging in illegal acts: "We would never think of advocating any irresponsible activity," their bulletin warns. "You should always check with your local phone company and pay them any extra money that you might owe them. The phone company is your friend, and they are here to help you. . . ."

The newsletters distributed to date (YIPL was formed in the spring of 1971 at a May-day rally) have lived up to their promise. The June, 1971, issue, for instance, contained a detailed explanation of the Bell credit-card code. Here, in its slightly less than literate glory, is that explanation:

The 1971 Credit Card system works as follows: the telephone number (7 digits) of the number to be called is followed by the secret number for the area code of the number. They are listed below for several cities. At the end of the number comes a letter that matches the sixth digit of the telephone number. Many people look up the number of a large Company in that area and use their number, cause using any old number might lead to *that* person refusing to pay, and the Phone Company's hasseling the person to whom the call was placed. They should say that others use that phone, and they don't know anything. Fraud is illegal, so we don't think you should make free calls. This Code has already been printed in many under-

ground papers, as you know.

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Detroit—083	Boston—001	Phila—041	1=Q	6=N
			2=A	7=R
Washington—032	San Fran—158	Pitts—030	3=E	8=U
			4=H	9=W
New York—021	Chicago—097		5=J	0=Z

Example—769-1900-069-Z (IBM, Amant, N.Y.)

It also contained detailed schematic drawings explaining how to hook up "foreign" equipment to Bell lines, with the warning that "the phone company frowns upon hooking them up yourself, so we suggest you have a friend do it."

The July issue instructed readers how to construct a "blue box" and other devices for free long-distance calling, and also began its own form of directory assistance:

Richard M. Nixon—El Presidente—202 456-1444
 Spiro T. Agnew—El Toro—202 265-2000, Ext. 6400
 John N. Mitchell—El Butcher—202 965-2900
 Melvin R. Laird—El Defendo—301 652-4449
 Henry R. Kissinger—El Exigente—202 337-0042
 William P. Rodgers—El Crapper—301 654-7125
 Gen. Earl G. Wheeler—El Joint Bosso—703 527-6119

YIPL's advice: call these folks collect, from a phone booth.

The August, 1971, issue passed along a story, originating in *Screw*, that a prominent district attorney had purchased several thousands of dollars' worth of surveillance equipment, including the telecommand, a device formerly available only to law enforcement officers. "The telecommand attaches to your phone internally, and whenever they want to bug your pad, they just call up and send a tone into their phone before they dial the last digit of your number. This automatically picks up your phone before it rings. Now your phone, which looks like it's just sitting there hung up, is really live and listening to everything going on within earshot. When he's heard enough he simply hangs up and your phone is back to normal. The results are frightening. They can wait for just the right moment to break down the door and catch you smoking pot..."

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Other YIPLs detail methods of punching additional holes in computer punch-card bills which will give the machine apoplexy or program a \$50,000 refund into it. Behind the YIPL antics, however, is a solemn concern. Al Firestein (Abbie Hoffman dubbed him "Al Bell"), one of the group's organizers, states, "We're involved in publicizing information that can't be printed anywhere else—information about why people should have more of a gripe against the phone company than they do. Last year AT&T made a helluva lot of dimes but they just didn't do good things with them. We're trying to stem the flow of dimes until they do. Their greed is an addiction. If I could push a button and make them drop \$10 million, I'd do it. As long as they keep gobbling profits, we'll keep trying to rip them off any way we can."

Firestein's suspiciousness about AT&T exemplifies the paranoiac tendencies that people fighting Ma Bell tend to exhibit. He is convinced that Bell is anti-Semitic and believes Bell won't hire Jews for jobs that take them into customers' homes. And he asks such questions as:

- # Why can no one go above the first floor at Broadway headquarters without a pass, and above the fifth floor without security clearance?
- # Why are there two paragraphs on a Bell job application containing oaths: one determining your feelings about the Communist Party, and one in which you must deny any affiliation with groups "advocating the overthrow of the United States Government?" Aren't these strangely similar to the oaths on governmental job applications?
- # Why was it so easy for the government to attach a surtax supporting the Vietnam War to our phone bills?
- # Why will Bell workers go out on special jobs with FBI men disguised as telephone employees, but won't do the same for private detectives?

Firestein says the key to these questions is AT&T's close alignment with the "other departments" of the government, meaning that AT&T itself is "another branch of the

federal government." He sees the destruction of the phone system as "a vital link in the overthrow of the state since it is to his way of thinking equivalent in its tyrannical power to the State or Defense Departments."

Firestein has one more "theory" about the phone company, far-out but intriguing and of course totally in keeping with the YIPL's morbid obsession with wiretapping. He has opened countless telephones to examine a small black cube which contains a number of components whose purpose he is at a loss to explain (he dropped out of Cornell engineering school after two years and may be presumed to know what makes a telephone tick). Yet every time he has endeavored to open that little box, wires rip and tiny bags of tar and resin seem to explode, pouring gunk over the rest of the components and thwarting further efforts to explore the mystery: it self-destructs, in other words.

Firestein's explanation? Every Bell phone, he says, has the potential to become a bugging device with a signal from the telephone company office—something along the lines of the telecommand type. You get the device as standard equipment with your phone and it remains dormant until you do something the government considers snoop-worthy.

Any theory promulgated by an organization that claims to believe (as YIPL does) that Mickey Mouse is an "agent of the government" must be taken with a grain of salt. Still, there are some occasions when Abbie Hoffman quits clowning and speaks seriously, as he did in the July, 1971, issue of YIPL: "Yuppies think you should judge the goodness of nations by their goals. As the level of technological development increases, the costs should decrease too, the goal being to make everything produced in a society free to all the people, come who may. Neat, huh? Until AT&T and the other corporations really become public services rather than power and profit gobblers, we'll continue to rip them off every chance we get." "If you want to discuss this further," he adds wryly, "call

me up sometime. Because with all the agencies claiming to have me under surveillance, it's one of the fastest ways to speak directly to your government."

An underground movement of an entirely different stripe, and one far more capable of true revolutionary impact, was described by Ron Rosenbaum in an October, 1971 *Esquire* article entitled "Secrets of the Little Blue Box." A blue box is the generic name for a variety of devices, all working on the same principles, which enable the user to phone anyone anywhere in the world and talk to that person for as long as he wishes, free of charge.

The blue box is able to do this because some twenty years ago, Bell developed a method to activate long-distance switching systems by means of electronically generated tones, those boops and beeps you sometimes hear when you make a long-distance call. Each digit is a combination of two frequencies: the number 5, for example, is a combination of 1,300 and 900 cycles per second. When the frequencies for each digit were discovered by some curious young men, they recorded them and played them back into their telephones and discovered they could make long distance calls free by phoning a toll-free number first, zapping it with a high-frequency signal before anyone picked up the phone so as to "capture" it, then booping and beeping the number they wished to reach. Toll-free ("Dial 800") numbers are WATS lines employed by many corporations and other heavy phone users which enable them to make, and receive collect, unlimited long-distance calls for a flat charge ("To reserve a rental car at the airport of your destination, just dial 800-***-**** and it will be waiting for you when you arrive"). Once the 800 number has been captured, it is as if you yourself are the owner of a WATS line.

The secrets of the little blue box quietly circulated among a fraternity of "phone phreaks," as they call themselves, and in due time phreaks discovered some fantastic and subtle variations on the game. Using Ma Bell's own

gear, they explored such mysteries as conference calls and data transmission and mastered them until they could play the phone system like a complex instrument.

Most phone phreaks, while aware of the mischief that lies in their knowledge, decline to take advantage of the phone system for destructive purposes. At worst they're in it for the free phone calls and the groove of tripping on the circuitry of the telephone system. But the possibilities of abuse are many, especially if they achieve wide public currency. One phreak, a computer programmer, discovered how to unlock the secret codes by which large corporations time-sharing a computer manage to limit access to their information and thus prevent other corporations from having access to it. Using his own computer console at home, which plugs into a distant computer via telephone lines, he was able to determine what each company's "password" was and to snitch confidential information from that company's memory bank. He did not use the information for profit, but he could have. And when you think of some of the information stored in computers—guided missile programs, troop allocations, FBI dossiers...

Aside from communications consultants, who are not particularly interested in reforming Bell (after all, they profit from Bell's mistakes), radicals, and phone phreaks, there is a vast array of consumer-oriented organizations struggling in the middle ground. They are basically conservative middle-class people who need and like telephones and simply want a fair shake from their phone company.

Early in 1970, to combat the inanities created by the three-phone-company jurisdictional dispute described in Chapter 1, Houston Space Center residents formed a group known as the Committee On Sane Telephone Service. COSTS submitted a 900-signature petition to the FCC demanding toll-free service between Nassau Bay, Texas, and nearby Houston. The petition contained the signatures of ten angry astronauts and their wives. One of the astro-wives, Mrs. Rusty Schweickart, spoke for the incensed members of COSTS: "We find it intolerable that

in this age of instant communication with men on the moon, we of the space community should be denied basic communications services."

In Washington, D.C., a group of angry consumers, the Telephone Users Association, is a voluble and constant voice at D.C. Public Service Commission hearings. In March, 1971, they attacked a commission decision to let the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company raise its rate of earnings as a "tremendous victory" for the phone company.

In August, 1969, at a New York State Public Service Commission hearing considering a proposed \$175 million rate increase, consumers found themselves represented by Telecon Associates, Inc., a conglomerate of some two hundred organizations protesting the increase. Telecon hired an attorney, Peyton Moss, who questioned New York Telephone Company officials not only on the need for higher rates, but also on the propriety of their policy of setting below-cost installation rates wherever there was a threat of competition. Moss charged that this practice "helps the telephone company perpetuate its monopoly control of the manufacture, sale and installation of [such equipment as] switchboards." He also suggested that by consolidating its monopoly position, the telephone company was able "to force businesses with older and cheaper switchboards to replace them with new equipment costing up to five times as much."

In Old Bethpage, a Long Island community, citizens formed a committee to protest certain New York Telephone Company moves. The phone company had increased subscribers' basic rate by 75 cents a month for extending the area in which they could make toll-free calls. On the surface, that didn't seem like a bad thing, but the area into which Bell extended service was Suffolk County, east of Old Bethpage and a place infrequently called by the town's residents, rather than New York City to the west. The gimmick served to cut phone company billing costs for toll calls without giving Bethpageers much of a bargain for their 75 cents. The phone company said it

would cost too much—\$1 million—to lock Old Bethpage into the metropolitan area exchange, but the citizens' lawyer pretty quickly punctured that one, determining that it would cost only one-tenth of that sum and pointing out that several communities farther out on Long Island than Old Bethpage were already on the metropolitan exchange. The Old Bethpage Citizens Committee got about two thousand signatures on a petition and persuaded members to withhold that 75 cents from monthly bills until the matter was settled. It finally was, in Bell's favor, but a great many metropolitan and suburban subscribers watched, and silently took heart from Old Bethpage's brave stand.

In November, 1970, AT&T asked the FCC to permit an interstate rate increase aimed at raising \$385 million annually, and also to grant some other moves that would yield another \$160 million annually. Dozens of interveners, including Atlantic Richfield Co., the National Retail Merchants Associations and Ralph Nader submitted protests. Thus instead of a humdrum rubber-stamp procedure, the FCC found itself plunged into a major rate investigation.

The American Telephone Consumers Council consists of Ellie Martel and George Levine and has been most active. Both are independent communications consultants and Levine is also a rate expert. The Council represents both business and residential phone subscribers at rate hearings, such as one involving the New York Telephone Company and its petition for a \$175 million rate increase filed in May, 1969. The Council, determined to see the public represented, began an unsuccessful drive to raise \$50,000 from twenty-five hundred Manhattan businesses in order to hire independent experts. Retained by the United Auto Workers in the 1971 Michigan rate case, the ATCC played a part in keeping the increase within reasonable bounds, and keeping residential subscribers from having to assume the added burden.

One of the most notable consumer battles with AT&T was initiated by an organization known as the Anti-Digit-

Dialing League, born in San Francisco in 1962. It grew out of a protest against a 1958 Bell decision to convert its subscribers' dials from the traditional "name exchange" plus five numbers (such as DIgby 4-4200), to an all-number system (344-4200). Bell justified the move by claiming that the letter system did not have the potential to provide an adequate number of dial combinations to accommodate the nation's growing number of telephones. The two-letter, five-number system provides for only 540 dial combinations, whereas all-digit dialing allows for 800. This is how these figures are arrived at:

Two-Letter, Five-Number

First Number: 8 possible dial turns (numbers 1 and 0 reserved for special signals)

Second Number: 8 possible dial turns (there are no letters with the number 1)

8x8 is 64 potential letter combinations
- 4 that do not form usable words (5-5, 5-7, 9-5, 9-7)

60 usable combinations

Possible combinations of letters: 60

Number of possibilities in third digit: $\times 9$

Total combinations: $\underline{540}$

All-Digit Dialing

First Number: 8 possible dial turns (1 and 0 reserved for special signals)

Second Number: 10 possible dial turns

Third Number: 10 possible dial turns

8x10x10 is 800 possible exchange combinations

With a thought only to these statistics, Bell began its conversion in Wichita Falls, Texas, in 1958, and in the next four years numeral-ized Chicago, Atlanta, Omaha, Cincinnati, West Palm Beach, and Pensacola, Florida. But when the phone company set its sights on San Francisco