



Exploding The Phone

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Abstract Illinois Bell is working to eliminate toll fraud. They did not know about AT&T's eavesdropping. Includes a description of "stuffing", a method which uses tissue paper to steal coin return change.

Keywords L.B. Egenberger (head of sec., IB; Illinois Bell (IB)); stuffers; blue box; black box; American Telephone & Telegraph Co. (AT&T); Los Angeles, CA; New York, NY; Miami, FL; Newark, NJ; Detroit, MI; St. Louis, MO

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Electronic phone cheaters, 'stuffers' dialing trouble

By Jon Van

ASSAULTING pay telephones with tissue paper may sound like an absurd waste of time, but dozens of characters in Chicago find it profitable enough to keep L. B. Egenberger irritated.

These people, known as "stuffers" to phone company personnel like Egenberger, push tissue paper into the coin return slots of pay phones and later return to remove the paper and the coins that have been blocked in.

One stuffer, arrested four times, boasted he makes \$50 to \$100 daily. It is just one popular way to "rip off Ma Bell" under scrutiny by Egenberger, who heads the security office for Illinois Bell.

CATCHING stuffers is relatively easy, says Egenberger, because a pay phone customer, irritated at losing his coins in the machine, will often report it to Bell. Once discovered, a stuffed phone can be watched, and the stuffer apprehended when he comes around to collect his coins.

The crime is only a misdemeanor, and even the stuffers may be arrested four or five times a year, they can expect to gain their freedom upon paying a fine.

MORE VEXING to Illinois Bell, says Egenberger, are the sophisticated soundrels who use so-called "black boxes" or "blue boxes" to make free long-distance calls. The boxes produce electronic whistling sounds of just the proper frequency to allow customers to use phone equipment just as phone operators can.

After sounding the initial beep, the devices can be used to dial numbers without charge with the ease of a standard touch tone phone. Use of the boxes is spreading rapidly, Egenberger says.

At congressional hearings in Washington during last week,

phone and Telegraph Company testified they eavesdropped on more than 1.5 million phone conversations in efforts to detect electronic phone cheaters.

THE EAVESDROPPING and taping of the conversations occurred from 1965 to 1970 in Los Angeles, New York, Miami, Newark, Detroit, and St. Louis.

Altho conceding the eavesdropping may have been legal, many critics contend it was improper.

Illinois Bell wasn't informed of the five-year effort to catch phone cheaters or included in it, Egenberger said, and Illinois Bell has never attempted to catch cheaters thru random eavesdropping.

THAT TECHNIQUE is too time consuming and costly. One way Egenberger's office does

involve scanning computer records of long distance calls.

A common ploy by cheaters is to dial a toll free call to an information operator in another city, then use the electronic box to cut off the operator and dial a call to a private phone. This shows up on Bell's computer printout as a call from a private phone in Chicago to the information operator in Dallas.

"When I see a record for a call to directory assistance that lasts for 50 minutes," Egenberger says, "I know something is wrong."

SUSPICIOUS phone lines may be monitored by a phone company device that detects the electronic beeping noise of the blue boxes.

Once the beep appears, the phone company begins taping phone conversations to identify

erage of two arrests a month were made of phone cheaters with black boxes.

Unlike the characters who pilfer payphones with tissues, most electronic phone cheaters are "college graduates, good, solid citizens and businessmen who become outraged if you tell them they are thieves, but that's what they are," Egenberger says.

"THEY ARE stealing from us all, because what they do results in higher phone rates for everyone else," he says.

Altho Bell seeks full prosecution of long distance cheaters, Egenberger says judges, like most other citizens, don't view phone cheaters as harshly as they view other criminals, so punishment is usually light, and electronic cheating is on



Tribune Photo by Charles Osgood

Illinois Bell security chief L. B. Egenberger shows black box devices used to place free long-distance phone calls illegally by emitting tones which fool switching systems.