



Exploding The Phone

db319

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Abstract Overview article on how blue boxes work, featuring interview with Dennis Mollura.

Keywords 73 Magazine; blue box; Dennis Mollura

Notes See also db320 (Letter to the Editor: Phone Phreaks vs. Ma Bell Part II) written in response to this article, which includes blue box frequencies.

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Source Alan Rubinstein

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PHONE PHREAKS VS Ma BELL

“Little Box Blue, get on the horn” is the call of a new band of public nuisances, the self-styled “Phone Phreaks” who have been using a small electronic device, known as a “Blue Box,” to defraud the telephone services of an estimated half million dollars a year.

73 talked with Dennis Mollura at the Bell headquarters in New York about these Blue Box activities.

First, Mr. Mollura described Blue Box operation:

“They are used to call the network signalling function on the telephone network. If you build a Blue Box that has the proper tones and you know how to use it you could tap out the right tones to give the network its command; then you'd be able to avoid our automatic billing equipment.”

These tones are the twelve dual-tone combinations of six frequencies used only for network calling frequencies, and are not the same as a standard Touchtone® phone would produce. You may have noticed, after dialing a long distance call, a rapid succession of higher-than-Touchtone® frequency tone-pairs lasting about a second. These are the network control tones.

A Blue Box user first seizes a long distance line by phoning a toll-free long distance number, most often a directory assistance or IN-WATS (area code 800) number, then hanging up on the callee while retaining the circuit by generating his own 2600 Hertz “disconnect” tone. The 2600 Hertz tone would normally not appear on line until the caller has hung up, and once sensed, is regarded by switching equipment

as a signal to disconnect. The captured line is then used to call anywhere in the world at the caller's whim. Most “Phone Phreaks” figure they're getting away with it, but the feeling is usually ephemeral.

“There are three ways which we use to try to detect Blue Box fraud; number one would be plant service center testing (with very common electrical testing equipment) . . . another way is traffic pattern analyses . . . then the third way is computer programming. The computers are watching the networks and they . . . can spot trouble . . . and kick out a trouble report card.”

It would appear that most of the current users of Blue Boxes are now at this point in telephone company investigations. They have some unpleasant surprises in store for them if they should be so naive as to think that this is as far as the investigations go.

“When we suspect a case we can put on sophisticated electronic gear . . . which can help us track down the people.

“We've . . . begun a nationwide crack-down. In 1970 there were six people arrested, two convicted, four cases pending. So far this year (September), thirty-three arrests, eighteen convictions, fourteen pending, one dismissed. In the Montana area, a group of ten people . . . were using Blue Boxes. We (actually, the FBI) moved in on them . . . they were indicted . . . and arraigned, and the evidence was so overwhelming that seven of the ten pleaded guilty right off the bat, two of the cases are pending, and one is dismissed.”

Naturally, the Blue Box users aren't hurting anybody, unless you feel that having to pay their way yourself is an imposition. "People are trespassing on the telephone network. They're literally stealing service, and actually increasing the cost of telephone service for people who do pay. I can describe this as like a guy getting on a turnpike and not stopping at a toll booth. He's creating a demand for service, but he's not contributing his share. "Our losses due to Blue Box fraud... we're estimating at about five hundred thousand a year."

With a half million dollars a year at stake, why not just clamp right down?

"One of the reasons that we gather evidence for so long, like in the Montana case, is to establish what the person's calling pattern is, to try to determine when he got the box, how often he used it, and where he called. Once we establish a pattern and can pinpoint when he got the box, then we go for full restitution. In cases we've been able to get it."

So far, no amateur radio operators have been involved, but the people who were involved might well have become hams.

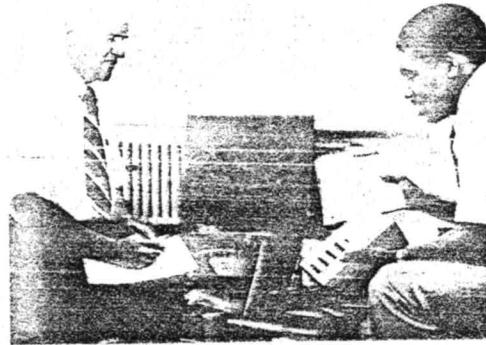
"Of the thirty-three people arrested this year, twenty of them were students, one was a private detective, one was a communications man, and most of the rest had electronics background interest."

What is the phone company position on the use of these devices?

"We consider this a very serious matter. People are trespassing on the telephone network. We do have means of detection, and we are confident that we are eventually going to catch them all. When we get them, we are going to press to the fullest extent of the law, and we're going after full restitution of the money we've lost so far."

Amateurs who have been using 2600 Hertz notch filters and 3400 Hertz roll-off low pass filters in conjunction with phone patching have most of the protection necessary to prevent accidental interference with telephone service.

"The Blue Box enables you to place calls without charge. There's another electron-



Chester County (PA) Detective Ronald Johnson (right) displays an illegal "blue box" used to bypass toll charges and seize long distance telephone circuits. Johnson and Chief of County Detectives Eugene Sharpe (left) were part of a law enforcement team (September 27, 1970) which raided several Chester County residences of suspected "phone phreaks." The "phreaks" use home-made electronic generating devices such as the "blue box" to place free long distance calls all over the world, sometimes for hours at a stretch. Four persons were arrested in connection with charges ranging from toll fraud to impersonation of telephone company employees and, in one case, wiretapping. Authorities said "several carloads" of illegal equipment were confiscated, some of which is shown here.

ic device which would enable people calling you not to be charged. I'm sure you're very familiar with this. I have an article written by you in the September 73. There was some concern. Someone in the telephone company spotted the article and was somewhat concerned about it. I checked it through and it's a legitimate article. It has a disclaimer at the end... there's no problem."

Most of the details concerning the particulars of design of the equipment used by the phone company in tracking down the Blue Box Banditos must, of course, remain confidential for the moment. 73 will continue to monitor developments in the case of the Phone Phreaks versus Ma Bell, and will release pertinent new developments as they become available.

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References:
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