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WHO LAUGHS LAST?

Georgia Straight
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Phone Freaks vs Ma Bell

by R. VOLVOX

NEW YORK (UPS)—Joe walked quickly from his Greenwich Village storefront to the nearby phone booth. This would have to be a fast call; he couldn't leave his store unattended for long.

He dropped in a dime and dialed Avis' toll-free number. Then, as the phone began to ring, he lifted a small box to the mouth piece of the phone and began to beep out a Miami number. Suddenly, the door behind him burst open, and hands grabbed his arms roughly as a man wrenched his blue box from him.

There's a war going on between phone phreaks and the phone company and the going is getting rougher.

"We're putting a heavy priority on the toll fraud crackdown," says Tom Fay of AT&T. "Our toll fraud control program task force was started in April 1970. In 1971 we made 330 arrests. In 1972 we made 1050 arrests, primarily credit card and third party fraud."

There are a lot of authorities on how much the phone companies are losing, but they all come up with different figures. Fay says Bell lost $12 million last year, $22 million the year before. He claims their losses are going down.

But AT&T's press releases on the subject imply that losses are going up, averaging out to $30 million a year. And General Telephone's employee morale sheet claims losses of $40 million called 'underground' newspapers which offered students advice on how to cheat the telephone company (a New Left tactic to get even with The Establishment)".

But whatever the losses or reasons, the phone companies are fighting back. They want to catch more than the insignificant number of phone phreaks they're catching now. Fay says Bell's "first line of offense" is the operator, and they're designing new techniques for her (you better believe it's sexist) to detect fraud calls.

But the real push is going into designing and building sophisticated equipment to catch blue-boxers and others. One unit that's on the market now, for example, monitors 24 lines at a time for the 2600-cycle tone which blue boxers use to "capture" a toll-free line. When the device recognizes this tone, it tapes the next 12 seconds of the call.

Another unit can monitor a whole long-distance trunk circuit — 100 or more individual lines — at a time. When it recognizes the tone, it terminates the call, rings an alarm and traces it back-

one half of the phone companies' offensive. The other half is designing equipment that can't be tampered with. Bell has even hired people to cheat company equipment and learn its quirks.

General Telephone's new computerized exchanges won't allow the black box to work for more than 24 seconds, according to their design engineers, but they say the feature was accidental. Accidental or not, Bell is sure to follow suit in the near future. General has only three of the exchanges installed so far, though.

A decision made by Bell engineers 20 years ago to play long-distance tones over the same two wires the customer uses is what makes blue boxes work. Already independent phone companies have acted by installing filters in their pay phones which block out the 2600-cycle tone.

But the latest is that Bell Labs is designing a piece of equipment called the data-link. When it's designed and installed, which will be at least 10 years from now, it will use one set of wires to carry all the long-distance signalling for 99 customers, giving those customers no access to the signalling lines. It will make the blue box obsolete in one fell sweep.

Even further off is a unit which will take a voiceprint from credit