



Exploding The Phone

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Abstract Michigan Bell newsletter article about how to identify blue and black boxes. Includes stats that in 1975 175 people were arrested for boxes and 122 were prosecuted.

Keywords blue box; red box; black box; Michigan Bell Telephone (MB); Jack Penland (security manager)

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Cheaters' disguises make ID tougher

'Blue box' is camouflaged

"I saw this gadget with switches near the phone, but I didn't think anything about it. How did I know this guy was using it to make free phone calls?"

John, an MBT installer, was recounting how he let potential toll fraud go unreported years ago. Now that he knows what "blue," "black," or "red boxes" look like and how they are used to cheat the telephone company, John says, he wouldn't make that mistake again.

"Electronic toll fraud costs the Bell System millions of dollars annually and the honest customer pays for it," says Jack Penland, security manager. "We don't want employees acting as System policemen, but we also don't want to miss cases of toll abuse just because an employee doesn't know what these devices look like."

"Last year, 175 people throughout the nation were arrested with a 'box' and 122 were successfully prosecuted,

but we're sure these arrests just scratched the surface."

Penland says identification of blue, black or red boxes is not always easy because they come in a variety of packages. "Don't expect a blue box to actually be blue, for instance. The names of these devices came from the color of the originals found by Bell security people in the '60s."

"In some instances, blue boxes resemble miniature calculators. But they can also be as sophisticated as portable systems in executive briefcases or as primitive as scrambled wires attached to tin cans. Red boxes may have the size and appearance of cigarette packs, and black boxes may look like a light switch or even a pill box."

All three serve different functions for the toll cheater (see photo), he says, and not all offenders use the devices for the same reason.

"In the early 1960's, when

the devices were first found by Bell security people, the 'phone phreaks' as they are known, were generally electronic tinkers who used them for fun — like calling Tokyo weather. Later the crime syndicates used them to prevent calls from being traced, but some top level convictions have discouraged criminal use. Now more often it seems the business community has been caught with its hands dirty."

Penland urges employees to contact his office or notify their supervisors if they think they recognize one of the devices in a home or business or in someone's possession.

"Don't attempt to take any action yourself, however," Penland cautions. "Not every electronics device is illegal and any effort by an employee to personally act on suspected toll fraud could result in serious legal problems for both the company and the employee."



Blue boxes can resemble executive briefcases (upper left) or miniature calculators (right) and use tones to bypass the network billing system. Red boxes are easily housed in cigarette packs (lower center) and simulate the sounds of nickles, dimes or quarters being placed in coin phones. Black boxes may be as small as a pillbox (center) and block telephone company equipment from registering incoming calls, avoiding toll charges. All three devices are used to cheat the System of millions of dollars each year.