



Exploding The Phone

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CHEATING THE TELEPHONE COMPANY

MALACHY MCCOURT: I'm Malachy McCourt, and my guest is Ron Rosenbaum, and in the present issue of ESQUIRE magazine there is an article which is titled "Secrets of the Little Blue Box." And there's a sub-title thing here which says "a story so incredible it may even make you feel sorry for the phone company." Now, before your heart starts to bleed for the phone company, I, I think it's one of the most extraordinary articles that I have ever read in my life, in that it's a network of what called "phone phreaks"--p, h, r, e, a, k, s--across the country who are somehow, through an extraordinary, uh, I would say, uh, like a, divining the secrets of the phone company and managing to by-pass the normal legal networks and trunklines and so on. How'd you get onto this, Ron?

RON ROSENBAUM: A friend of the editor of ESQUIRE saw the little blue box demonstrated at a party on the West Coast. For a while, before the police began cracking down, it was very popular for people to bring their little blue box to parties and, what they do is they just sit around and people would give them numbers -- all over the country, all over the world -- and they'd beep them out with their blue box for free. And, lately though, that's not as prevalent because the police have been--have begun--to crack down on it.

MCCOURT: Is it a federal offense, or is it local, or what?

ROSENBAUM: It's probably both. I guess if you make a long distance call that's interstate commerce, so it's a -- and they're also, the phone company has gone around to state legislatures and had them design a lot of laws specifically against telephone fraud. In California, I think, even possession of one of the little blue boxes--even though you don't use it--is probably illegal.

MCCOURT: What's the, what was the nature of the offense in the sense of telephone fraud? How, how would they prove it, and what are they defrauding the phone company of?

ROSENBAUM: It's one of those things that are called "theft of service" crimes. And it's very abstract, and so they find it difficult, as a matter of fact, to act-- to ever actually convict

anyone for making an illegal phone call, so what they'll do, they'll get them on conspiracy to make illegal phone calls, which is, which is easier. So, in other words, if you talk to another person over the phone illegally, it becomes thereby a conspiracy.

MCCOURT: Even though the subject of the conversation may not have anything to do with that--

ROSENBAUM: Right. The actual act itself is difficult to prove. Because the people who make, the people who do this with their blue boxes use 800 numbers which are toll free. And they just dial up an 800 number, put the blue box on the receiver--the talking end of the phone--and beep out a few tones, and as far as the phone company records know -- you could be calling Copenhagen, Denmark --but as far as the phone company knows, you're just calling, say, Avis Rent-a-Car. And, because what they do is, they hook you up to the 800 number, then they, you push a little button and it disconnects the 800 number but you're into the Long Lines, the long distance telephone lines--

MCCOURT: Um-humm...

ROSENBAUM: --and you can go anywhere you want.

MCCOURT: And that's without operator interference?

ROSENBAUM: Right. You, usually what happens is you hear the 800 number ringing, and you push a little button, and the ringing stops, and then you hear this nice humming sound. And then, the people who use the boxes just beep out any, anything they want, any number in the country.

MCCOURT: They have these, sort of a matter of tone then? Finding a certain tone?

ROSENBAUM: Right. If you listen to--sometimes when you make a long distance call you notice you hear in the background that beeping, you know, a quick series of beeps--

MCCOURT: (IMITATION OF BEEPS)

ROSENBAUM: Yes, right. (LAUGHS)

MCCOURT: Very musical. (LAUGHS)

ROSENBAUM: And, essentially, what these-- And, see, what the whole phone system of the world is run, but certainly this country, is run on those currents(?), those tones. Each tone stands for a number, and the phone company computers just are relays of these tones, and, and so you're--when you dial a number, it's translated

into those tones, and what the blue box is, essentially it's a little toy that produces those tones in your own home. And, so you don't have to use the phone company's equipment. You can tell the phone to do anything it wants--anything you want.

MCCOURT: (LAUGHS) It, it's a-- One of the interesting things about your article, which you traveled extensively to do, Ron, was the proliferation of blind 'teenage kids involved in this. That, that fascinated me.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah. A lot of the people who use blue boxes-- and some of them don't even have blue boxes. The blind kids have found out a way to do it. Blue box is a kind of sophisticated electronic device, but the blind kids have managed to use those home-entertainment type organs to produce the exact tones that the phone company uses in their long-distance dialling system. So a blind kid will just get a, you know, get a hold of one of those organs--his family or another family might have it--and a cassette recorder, and he'll start playing certain keys on the organ which will produce certain tones for each number in the phone. In the phone number he wants to dial. And he'll just record it on the cassette, and put the cassette up against the phone, the mouthpiece. And a lot of these blind kids are fascinating. They're, some of them are electronics geniuses and they spend hours every night just communicating with other blind kids who are into the same kind of thing.

MCCOURT: Are they--they have this underground thing of--

ROSENBAUM: There is a kind of a central--

MCCOURT: One kid though, who kind of started it, wasn't there?

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, there's one kid, too -- his name is Dillon Greshner(?), and he was perhaps the first blind kid to discover that by whistling into the phone he could, he could make the phone-- he had perfect pitch. He didn't even need a cassette recorder or a home-entertainment organ or a blue box or anything like that. He could just whistle out the numbers. He got a certain amount of national publicity a few years ago when he was, he wasn't arrested but he was exposed and warned about it. And as soon as that happened, kids from all over the country, blind kids, would call him up and ask him how to do this, and a lot of kids who'd already been experimenting with the phone. And so, gradually, I call it -- it really is an underground telephone company, developed with these--

MCCOURT: Using--

ROSENBAUM: --blind kids.

MCCOURT: Using the facilities of the telephone, the regular telephone company?

ROSENBAUM: Right. They just don't tell the telephone company they're doing it. Yeah.

MCCOURT: This is WMCA, New York and the number of Plaza 9-1000. I'm talking with Ron Rosenbaum who has written an article in ESQUIRE magazine, "Secrets of the Little Blue Box," and we are now discussing that. So we'll take a break here. We'll be back momentarily.

* * *

MCCOURT: All right. It's 18 minutes past eight o'clock and Ron, on the phone phreaks, as they call themselves--one character you had in there, Captain--uh--

ROSENBAUM: Captain Crunch.

MCCOURT: Captain Crunch.

ROSENBAUM: Mmm, he seems to be more obsessed with, uh, the--

MCCOURT: Well, it seems to me it's more of chess game with him than it is any way of beating the phone company in any way. But just the electronic puzzle.

ROSENBAUM: Right. He really is kind of a magician, more than a, more than a technologist. The phone for him has the attraction almost of magic, and he can do really magic things with it. And he's the person who was able to call himself around the world by way of satellite and cable, for free of course. He got his dime back. And then he was also able to call--he would, you see, he'd have two pay phones and he would be able to call, uh, the pay phone next to him, by way of India, Greece, Australia, New Zealand, all over the world. Bouncing back and forth all over the world, because he knows the, what are called "country codes," which allow you to switch yourself from relay stations in every country all over the world, and then he'd get himself back to the pay phone right next to him.

MCCOURT: It's a -- the, your description of him and his involvement with the phones, and the, and so on. It seems to be a highly sexual involvements rather than--

ROSENBAUM: There is, listening to him talk, yes--

MCCOURT: Yeah.

ROSENBAUM: He would talk about stacking and unstacking tandems, and there was a kind of obsessiveness. He had the tone of voice of a kind of mild-mannered obscene caller when he would talk about this. He's actually a very nice person. He's a little obsessed,

and he has the kind of fascination for the way you can make relays connect and link up, and switch back and forth, and -- maybe it's -- yes, when I was talking to him, it's hard to describe the tone of voice, but there was that kind of attractiveness to him, I sensed.

MCCOURT: Once you unearthed one, it seemed, you didn't have much difficulty in unearthing another phone phreak.

ROSENBAUM: Oh, right. It was a -- you'd go to one, and "Oh, have you talked to this guy in Oregon? Have you talked this guy out in Montana, he runs his own phone company. And we have this guy in Alaska who's fantastic -- got international calls, and an expert on making international, you know, calls on the east coast. And this guy in..." You know, if you go from one to another and they give you an ever-expanding list of people to talk to, and they specialize. They'll have these conferences every once in a while, and they'll have reports from the international experts--

MCCOURT: (LAUGHS)

ROSENBAUM: --and the guy's who an expert on getting together all the secret 800 numbers, and the guy who's the expert on opening up loop-arounds. And all, all these things. It's like a fantastic high-level seminar in, in fraud--but nevertheless, it's a kind, it's a gentle magic--

MCCOURT: It's all self-taught, it would appear.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, just about. They're usually kids who start out-- Well, there's two types. There's the blind kids who start out, they like to play with the phone because when you're--apparently when you're a blind kid playing with the phone is a big attraction when you're--

MCCOURT: It's contact with the outside world.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, exactly. And then there's the kind of kid who always liked to point out 18,000 ways of getting his dime back when he'd just make a local call, you know. And he would--and the kid who would really get into that, that, in getting their -- and then maybe get into stealing coin boxes and that kind of thing-- finally they'd graduate. They'd learn a little electronics and get into a kind of sophisticated technological theft from the phone company. And their, the obsession grew. The more they could see what they could do. And they can do almost anything.

MCCOURT: I loved your phrase, ah, that they, that they have-- what struck me, I think I said the other, said before in the other part of the program, was the lack of malice they have. And that a phone phreak without Ma Bell would be like a lapsed Catholic without the judge. (LAUGH) And I laughed, because I don't know where I'd be without it myself. Or Satan without God. (LAUGHTER)

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, or (INAUDIBLE) ...white whale.

MCCOURT: Yes, in Moby Dick. Well, but, how, when the--have you spoken to the phone company? Have you had any response from them on this?

ROSENBAUM: No, I haven't heard anything from the phone company, and I'm kind of interested to see their reaction. The phone phreaks I have been talking to--since the article was published--say that harassment by the phone company has stepped up in recent days. Captain Crunch called me the other day, and said the FBI was following him, and I'm not sure how seriously to take that, but that may well be true.

MCCOURT: They were able to get to him despite his pseudonym?

ROSENBAUM: Well, he says they were, but then, uh--

MCCOURT: He's a bit of a dramatic character, isn't he? In a sense?

ROSENBAUM: Yes. He, he's very bright and very paranoid at the same time.

MCCOURT: Yeah. And he was also something about -- also a lot of his conversation was about girls, his action with girls, and--

ROSENBAUM: Oh, yeah, right. He's one of these very American types, these people who form perhaps the most effective underground, in a sense, in America are--none of them are radicals or revolutionaries, or, you know, Woodstock-nation people. They're the more the traditional American--

MCCOURT: Businessmen?

ROSENBAUM: --rebel. Or, well, yeah. Right, but --

MCCOURT: At heart they're businessmen.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, like the young hustlers, the young disaffected electronics people. Disgruntled electronics people who, you know, kind of see the phone company as a way of getting back all their frustrations. And it's, yeah, they're very American types.

MCCOURT: Well, the -- one fascinating thing about it was, that you mentioned, the characteristics of them is that--one of the characteristics anyway--is that they are reasonably proper kind of people who would possibly like to work for the phone company, if they could, and the other thing is that, going on that, that they would not, for instance, I gather, be unpatriotic enough to give away secrets to, say, communist, communists, or something like that. But you said there is a possibility, or they mentioned the possibility, of being able to get into the FBI computer system.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, that's--

MCCOURT: Which is a frightening sort of thing to me, because--

ROSENBAUM: Oh, not that I approve of the--

MCCOURT: (UNINTELLIGIBLE) ...not that I approve of the FBI or anything like that, but I think there are two sides to it. It could be for good or evil.

ROSENBAUM: Well, I personally would like to read everything in the FBI files, but--

MCCOURT: I would too.

ROSENBAUM: --I kind of doubt, at this stage, whether anyone could do that. The guy, the guy who told me about this said that the way to do it is, you know, a lot of computers are hooked up to home terminals by phone. A lot of large computers. And the FBI crime-control computer apparently is hooked up to local, local--

MCCOURT: Phones?

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, police stations and their phone lines, which connect it to the big computer in Washington. So if can somehow-- the phone phreaks can somehow use the blue box to get into one of the local police computers, just by dialling up and tapping in, something like that, it's possible that they can creep, creep sort of in disguise, all the way to Washington, by, to the FBI's crime-control computer, and order it around, and you know, order up information, or tap it. I, I kind of doubt it. I mean, it's, that would be -- I'd love it if they could, but--

MCCOURT: I would like to see them get into some of the utilities companies here and put all the bills back to zero.

ROSENBAUM: Right. Oh, well, that's something-- Yeah. You see, some of them claim that they can dial up the large credit card organizations and, if they know the passwords and the code, that--because they're all controlled by telephone--that computers go from the small ones to the central ones by means of telephone lines. So it's possible that if I wanted to I could wipe your bill clean and--

MCCOURT: (LAUGHS)

ROSENBAUM: --and put a coupla hundred thousand dollar charges on, you know, LBJ's charge at Abercrombie and Fitch or something like that. So, you know, sounds like a nice idea.

MCCOURT: I'm talking with Ron Rosenbaum and he's written

this article in ESQUIRE magazine, "Secrets of the Little Blue Box," which is, to use the vernacular, is "a mind blower," and we'll be back after we blow your mind with this.

* * *

MCCOURT: Right. As I said before, I'm talking to Ron Rosenbaum who has written an article in ESQUIRE magazine, and it's called "Secrets of the Little Blue Box." And the story is so incredible that it even makes you feel sorry for the phone company. (LAUGHS) That'll be the day! One comfort I took from this article of yours, Ron, was the fact that the more automated and electronified and what have you the phone company becomes, the most likely that the phone phreaks are able to beat the system. So therefore it will prevent them from becoming more automated and make them more human. That's my thought, anyway.

ROSENBAUM: Right, because, you know, if you ring up Jennie and tell her you want to call Copenhagen, you know, if you just have an operator you're talking to, you're not going to be able to fool her on anything. I mean she's gonna write down, "He wants to call Copenhagen," but if you've just got this vast switching machine someplace, you know, hundreds of miles away, trying to figure out what you're doing with calling 800 numbers and re-routing it through Los Angeles and then over to White Plains and then over across England -- you know, it's much easier. And the more things that are computerized, the more information and, well, money, it's just a matter of shifting numbers around, the more, the smaller the leverage you need to move a huger amount of information and money around. And that's, I think that's what this is. They get so giant that they're unable to defend themselves against little fleas.

MCCOURT: No doubt. So then -- and what I liked about it, as I said, therefore I don't feel therefore that these enormous conglomerates or complexes are going to crush me, as long as there are people--

ROSENBAUM: Oh, they might crush you, I mean, I--

MCCOURT: --as long as there are phone phreaks around to stop them.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah. It's hard to say. 'Cause, I sometimes almost get the feeling the phone company doesn't, may not think that any of this is a threat to them. They, they're so huge, it's hard to tell. They may tolerate is, as, and you know--

MCCOURT: As a necessary nuisance.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah.

MCCOURT: And, but you said it would take how many billions and how many years to--

ROSENBAUM: Well, that, that was just a very artificial estimate. As a matter of fact, that was just what one phone phreak inventor told me--for the phone company to switch their system so that it would be impossible for the little blue boxes to operate upon it. I think they're in the process of switching to a more and more computerized switching system, less and less using these tones which the blue box will produce. However, the phone phreaks themselves, the really bright ones, are getting more and more into computers, so I imagine they'll be coming up with interesting ways of dealing with that too. I mean, I think computers--that's what I'd like to do a story on. There must be the equivalent of phone phreaks now working with these huge computers, and sabotaging them in interesting ways, stealing, tapping, things like that. I'm sure that, I'm sure that's going on too, and that's the next step.

MCCOURT: Would you say there's a possibility, and this is a thought of mine, that we have a, ostensibly a hot line between Washington and Moscow -- is there a chance that one of these phone phreaks could come in on the hot line and create some sort of an international incident?

ROSENBAUM: There is a rumor that one phone phreak was able to, had been playing around and managed to get into LBJ's private line in the White House, and that brought FBI inquiries. I, I think the hot line would be maybe a little too closely guarded. However, phone phreaks do regularly call up Moscow. They've found out the codes by which to call Moscow, and so any time night or day they'll call up the American Embassy, the, and, or, you know, a bunch of other numbers they've discovered in Moscow, and speak to people there. Free of charge of course. So I suppose if they were inclined, they could create an incident, although I doubt it would be world-shaking.

MCCOURT: Yeah. That was a cafe(?)... I suppose there must be certain codes that there are between the two--the Kremlin and the White House--that would have to be introduced first before a call would be taken?

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, to be genuine. I think that probably the White House and the Kremlin would be stupid to trust the hot line to AT&T anyway.

MCCOURT: (LAUGHTER)

ROSENBAUM: I mean, you know, when missiles are being launched and the operator says, "I'm sorry, you'll have to dial this again," you know. (LAUGHTER)

MCCOURT: (IMITATING FEMALE VOICE) "The missile you are firing is the wrong one. And your time is up. Please bring the missile back to earth." Well, let's go to the telephone and see if there

are any phreaks on the way. (LAUGHTER) Ron, would you put on one of these things here--and the number is PLaza 9-1000, on WMCA. I'm Malachy McCourt and I'm talking with Ron Rosenbaum. Hello, you're on the air.

MALE CALLER: Hello, sir, I (INAUDIBLE) your article in the ESQUIRE, and also about the phone phreaks, what they do is--'cause I used to play a trick with it myself when I was younger--you call the operator, tell the operator you want to make a call, you're calling from a coin booth, to such and such a place. You give your area code that you're calling, and the number. Then do it, and you think of somebody's number, out of your head, bill it to area code 201, so forth and so forth and so forth number. Then end of the month--you speak two, three hours--end of the month, that person who you billed to will get the bill.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, that's okay, except what the -- the phone phreaks are hurting the telephone company, what people who do that are, they're hurting other individuals, like, at random. In other words, I wouldn't mind if you made a free call at the expense of the phone company, which is what the phone phreaks do, but if you made a free call at my expense, like that, I would be a little annoyed. And so, in other words, if you gotta hurt someone I'd rather hurt the phone company.

CALLER: Also, you said about gettin' your dime back. People also call the operator and through the mail(?) Mine calls Miami Beach, and it costs me like say two dollars. I deposit two dollars in quarters, and my party was not there on a person-to-person basis. (INAUDIBLE PORTION) ... operator says what's your name and address and we'll send you a check. For how much money? Doesn't that hurt the phone company?

MCCOURT: Well, it sounds like -- this sounds to me, in relationship to what we're talking about, it sounds pretty, like tupenny hapenny candy stuff. (LAUGHS) It's, it's outright, sort of unthink--ah, not well thought out fraud. Okay, thank you.

CALLER: Thank you.

MCCOURT: Right. WMCA, PLaza 9-1000. You're on the air. Hello--

MALE CALLER: Hello, Malachy?

MCCOURT: Yes. (INTERFERENCE; CHANGE OF PHONES) ...better.

CALLER: First of all, it's true what (INAUDIBLE) will tell you about is rather small compared to those little blue box business, but what the person said about I just made a call down south, and I want my money back?

MCCOURT: Yeah.

CALLER: The operator doesn't make out the check there. She enters it on your bill, and then the computer checks to see if you made the call. If you said you made a call and it doesn't show up that that call was made from your number, you won't get the check back.

MCCOURT: Yeah.

CALLER: It only credits it to your bill. Second of all, I have a question. I read your article, and you mention that Captain Crunch is very worried that if these secrets, the stability(?) of the exact frequencies and what they did, got into the hands of radicals, they could screw up the entire nation's phone system. Is that true?

ROSENBAUM: It's hard to say. I, I think the secrets are in the hands of the radicals already, and I think that AT&T has screwed up the nation's phone system more than the radicals have.

MCCOURT: (LAUGHTER)

ROSENBAUM: Uh, I don't know. It's hard to separate rumor and exaggeration. Because, you know, I'm not a technical expert. They say there are ways where a few people using computerized blue boxes--

CALLER: Exactly. What they tried, to--

ROSENBAUM: That--

CALLER: --to knock out the entire system.

MCCOURT: That was three people, I think--

ROSENBAUM: Three people, and I, I sort of doubt it. But, you know, I don't know. I really can't judge.

CALLER: Because you mention in the article that already someone had messed up a trunk line between New York and someplace on the West Coast.

ROSENBAUM: Right. That's what they said. Yeah. And I didn't check with the phone company on that. As a matter of fact, I didn't talk to the phone company at all while I was doing the article. I didn't want to, and so, it, I think it's, in a limited sense it's possible. I think you need more than three people to do it.

CALLER: Right.

MCCOURT: Okay, thank you.

CALLER: Malachy?

MCCOURT: Yes.

CALLER: Can I finish?

MCCOURT: Sure--

CALLER: Yeah, listen. You just mentioned that you didn't want to speak to the phone company in reference to your article. Why is this?

ROSENBAUM: Well, I was just, I was, I wasn't particular interested in them--

CALLER: I see.

ROSENBAUM: I was interested in the phone phreaks.

MCCOURT: He knows about their bad service.

CALLER: Right. One more thing. I just figured out this situation of the blue box (INAUDIBLE PORTION)...and everybody I spoke to who knows anything about this, or most everybody, knows of somebody who's just been busted, or is in court now, for doing blue-box things. Two engineers, and two producers at MCA did it, and a bunch of friends I know said they know people who got busted.

ROSENBAUM: You see, there are bad ways and there are-- I mean, there are ways to use blue boxes which will get you caught easily and there are ways that will get, that are more difficult to be caught.

CALLER: Yeah.

ROSENBAUM: And it just depends on--

CALLER: If you go to a phone booth, that, you (INAUDIBLE)

ROSENBAUM: Right, if you go to a phone booth it's much--

CALLER: And one final thing. The hot line, isn't that a telegraph line and not a regular phone line, that's directly hooked up?

MCCOURT: Used to be a teletype line, I thought.

CALLER: Yeah, teletype. And wouldn't it be awfully hard to get in there with a voice system?

MCCOURT: Well, I, I think it's preceded by a phone call that a message is about to come through.

CALLER: Oh.

MCCOURT: So, I suppose it would have to be-- See, I guess there's a system of checks and balances, which used to be a constitutional government here.

CALLER: 'Cause I saw a picture of the guys manning this thing. And there are like five or six engineers and thousands of dollars of equipment manning it, so it would be awfully hard for one guy to try to fake out, you know--six engineers without a country.

MCCOURT: (LAUGHS) Okay, thank you very much.

CALLER: Okay.

MCCOURT: Can you hold on a second -- Maurice wants to speak to you.

CALLER: Sure.

MCCOURT: WMCA, Plaza 9-1000. Hello, you're on the air.

FEMALE CALLER: Hello. May I address my question to Mr. Rosenbaum?

MCCOURT: Go ahead.

CALLER: I didn't read your article. I wish I had, and perhaps it does mention that which I'm going to say now. Does it ever occur to you that some of these kids might be hitting back in this way at the monopolies? Somehow it seems to me that they're trying, they're attempting at a power of which they feel deprived--what do you think of that?

ROSENBAUM: For some of them that's true. But some of them are motivated by a kind of hatred for, for huge organizations. For others it's a little more complex, see? They almost view the phone company as a kind of benevolent sugar daddy who lets them get away with all sorts of magic tricks, and very seldom punishes them for it. It, it's a--they're very, they're complex people, like everyone.

CALLER: What did you say--they're accomplished?

ROSENBAUM: Complex.

MCCOURT: They're complex--as well as accomplished.

CALLER: Aha! I agree. You know, I'm older, but somehow I'm rooting for all those phreaks.

MCCOURT: (LAUGHTER)

CALLER: Isn't that funny?

MCCOURT: Well, you're an aging phreak--like myself.

ROSENBAUM: It would be funny if you were rooting for the phone company.

CALLER: Well, thank you very much. Goodbye.

MCCOURT: Good bye. Thank you, dear. I think, Ron, that one of the difficulties that the phone company will have--I just can't imagine them putting masses of blind kids in jail.

ROSENBAUM: Right. Well, they did put one kid in jail--one blind kid in jail. Just a couple of months ago. They didn't--he spent a night in jail because he couldn't make bail, but occasionally they, they apparently will crack down, as a--to try to serve as a warning to other phone phreaks. But in general they haven't wanted to arrest people because it doesn't look good to, to arrest--

MCCOURT: To arrest blind--

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, you know, 'teenage blind kids. And also, once an arrest is made and hits the papers, then everyone who had never heard of this, all of a sudden begins experimenting.

MCCOURT: (LAUGHS) Isn't that the way it always is? If they are arrested, and brought to court, is there technical testimony that would come out that would be useful to prospective phone phreaks? How's that for alliteration?

ROSENBAUM: What do you mean--technical testimony?

MCCOURT: Well, if the phone company has to testify, that he did this and did that, he used this and so on -- could the defendant have his cross-examine them, to elicit more information, sort of thing. "I didn't use that frequency--I used the other frequency," kind of thing.

ROSENBAUM: Oh, I see. Well, I don't think it's ever come to a trial, but that would be interesting, because the phone company does have security men, and a lot of them are assigned just to keeping track of phone phreaks. And they play a kind of chess game, between the security men, some of whom are sophisticated, and the phone phreaks. And sometimes, like some phone phreaks in California tapped the security man's line and listened in to him talking about them --

MCCOURT: (LAUGHTER)

ROSENBAUM: --and sometimes they, they'll do things like disconnect the security man's home phone, or, you know, and then the security man will disconnect them. It's an interesting kind of game they're playing.

MCCOURT: (LAUGHS) Security follows them, and they follow security, and security follows them. Do security men ever turn into phone phreaks?

ROSENBAUM: Ah, that would be interesting. I, I think they'd be really good phone phreaks if they did it.

MCCOURT: Yes, or phone phreaks into security men? I think you mentioned that. One of them--

ROSENBAUM: Yes. Some of the phone phreaks--they rat on other phone phreaks. For example, if the phone company catches a phone phreak and says "Listen, we'll put you in jail unless you want to cooperate" -- some of them will give information on other phone phreaks. Turn them in. That kind of thing. And some of the phone phreaks that said they wouldn't mind working for the phone company but because they'll know more about phones. In other words, their idea isn't to hurt the phone company but to learn everything they want to know about phones. And they even said they wouldn't mind being security agents for the phone company, tracking down other phone phreaks. But they'd be in it for the game, I think, more than--

MCCOURT: Okay, back to the phones. Speaking of that. Hello, phreak. You're on the air.

MALE CALLER: Hello. Can I speak to Ron?

MCCOURT: Yes, sir.

CALLER: Okay, now listen. I was reading the article, and I'm very fascinated by this--

MCCOURT: Aren't we all?

CALLER: Yes, because I regularly call England on a phony credit card, and I was thinking that this is a much more practical way, you know--

MCCOURT: You're under arrest--

CALLER: (LAUGHS) Of getting--

MCCOURT: Did you know this line was tapped?

CALLER: I don't care. Of getting in touch with people, like from across, you know, from a faraway place. And I was wondering if there was any way a person could get in touch with some of these underground people. After reading that article, every time a phreak comes into my thoughts, I say, "Hey, you're a phone phreak..."

(LAUGHTER)

CALLER: And every time I look at somebody, and I'm wondering, "Maybe somebody knows."

MCCOURT: You want us to give criminal information over the air?

CALLER: Well, maybe there's a code that you can relay to me.

MCCOURT: (LAUGHS) Ha, ha, to me(?) it's PLaza 9-1000.

CALLER: Do these phone phreaks know anything about the credit card system and if it's gonna change next year?

ROSENBAUM: You mean the, the manipulation of numbers to make a working credit card number?

CALLER: Yeah.

ROSENBAUM: I don't know. That was published in several underground press--

MCCOURT: That's Abbie Hoffman's department, In Steal This Book.

CHILD'S VOICE: Ahh-boooo....

(LAUGHTER)

MCCOURT: Oh, you have a mini-phreak!

CALLER: They got 'em all over.

MCCOURT: Okay, sir, thank you.

CHILD: 'bye, daddy.

MCCOURT: 'Bye. (LAUGHS) Hello, you're on the air.

MALE CALLER: You're a lollygig(?).

MCCOURT: Yes, sir, you're on the air.

CALLER: You know, I got a number of ways to beat the phone company, and I sincerely believe the phone company deserves a good beat(?) because they're guaranteed profits and, come hell or high water, and the rest of us have just gotta take it or leave it. It's like Con Ed--they got a lock-up, they got a monopoly.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah.

CALLER: And I don't know, I used to be a salesman, and as a salesman, you know, you'd, say you'd be traveling up in New England

and you call your office, you'd ask for yourself, the girl on the switchboard would know who you're asking--who is calling--she'd recognize your voice.

MCCOURT: I think-- (LAUGHS) I think in the interests of WMCA we'd better not allow any schemes to go over the air. Okay, sir?

CALLER: All right, well, all right, but I, nevertheless this is the way I feel about the phone company.

MCCOURT: Okay, well if you'll only just give me your feelings, and not systems, you see, because I can't risk that, as I don't own this station.

CALLER: Well, you ask for yourself, and if the operator doesn't have any messages for you, she says "Bon jour"--

MCCOURT: I can't go on with that, sir. PLaza 9-1000. Hello. You're on the air.

MALE CALLER: Hello.

MCCOURT: Yes, sir.

CALLER: Hey, what, why are we promulgating larceny?

MCCOURT: Who's promulgating larceny? We're telling you about it.

CALLER: Yeah, you're telling me about it. But you're encouraging it. Don't you realize that the telephone company is owned by more than three million people who have saved their money and invested it?

MCCOURT: My heart bleeds for them.

CALLER: Well, your heart must bleed for working people who saved their money and invested in a corporation, and then--

ROSENBAUM: Not a very good investment, I--

CALLER: --and then you put these kooks on here who are telling about how they commit larceny.

MCCOURT: No, no. Mr. Rosenbaum didn't say how he committed larceny. He said--

CALLER: Oh, it's larceny, it's larceny if you use--

MCCOURT: My dear man, you obviously haven't been listening.

CALLER: I have been listening.

MCCOURT: All right. Well, open both your ears then.

CALLER: Listen, old buddy, if, if I invest my money in a corporation--

MCCOURT: That's your problem, not mine.

CALLER: Of course.

MCCOURT: I'm not talking about investments.

CALLER: No, you're--

MCCOURT: And I'm not talking about--

CALLER: Talk about investment--because three million people have invested their money in--

MCCOURT: Well, it's immoral to invest in the phone company.

CALLER: It, it would be what?

MCCOURT: Immoral. I,m,m,o,r,a,l.

CALLER: That's immoral...

MCCOURT: That's in my opinion. I just have a feeling about those corporations. I have the same affection for them as I have for rattlesnakes.

CALLER: Well, how about WMCA? That's a corporation.

MCCOURT: I don't know if it is or not.

CALLER: Well, you know damn well it is.

MCCOURT: I don't know damn well it is. I've never asked.

CALLER: Well, then, you're pretty ignorant.

MCCOURT: It's not a corporation. Maybe it's a private corporation but it's not one of those giant tentacle-like things that reaches into our lives to oppress us.

CALLER: Oh...(INAUDIBLE PORTION)

ROSENBAUM: Yes, WMCA doesn't say, "We're the only radio station that can go out over the air--none of you other..."

CALLER: Malachy, please -- you are a corporation, whether you--

MCCOURT: I am not -- I'm Malachy McCourt. I haven't incorporated yet.

CALLER: Well, you-- WMCA is a corporation.

ROSENBAUM: Not a monopoly.

CALLER: I resent your having these kooks on the air telling how they can steal--

MCCOURT: Sir--

CALLER: --corporation...

MCCOURT: Sir!

CALLER: Yes.

MCCOURT: You are listening. Good. This is an article about people who do this. It is a fact of life that there are phone phreaks around the country. Mr. Ron Rosenbaum went to a great deal of difficulty, to travel the entire length and breadth of the United States to find out about this, and ESQUIRE had the courage to publish it, and I have him on the air to tell me about his experiences. Not that Mr. Rosenbaum has a blue box, a black box, a yellow box, or any other kind of a box. He's a male.

CALLER: That's--

MCCOURT: Yes, go on.

CALLER: What'll we talk about--pickpockets?

MCCOURT: Sure, why not? I'll get a pick-pocket on and he'll pick your ears.

CALLER: All right, but--

MCCOURT: Okay, sir. Thank you.

CALLER: Now, let's not--

MCCOURT: WMCA, incorporated, I hear. You're on the air. Hello.

MALE CALLER: Yes, hello. Let me speak to Mr. Rosenbaum, please. I'd like to know if the frequencies given in the magazine article were the correct frequencies?

ROSENBAUM: Um, as, they were given to me by someone else, and they told me they were the frequencies.

CALLER: Oh, I see. 'Cause I have taken the frequencies and developed a full cable, for all the frequencies. You understand?

ROSENBAUM: Um-humm.

CALLER: And I was just wondering about that--whether they were right or not--whether I should invest the money in building the, the blue box?

ROSENBAUM: Well, that's up to you I think.

MCCOURT: (LAUGHTER)

CALLER: Well, I assume that, but I wanted to know if they were the right frequencies or not before I went through all that kind of money. Do they have to be very accurate--the frequencies? Or can they be off a little bit?

ROSENBAUM: I think -- what the people told me, there was a 30 cycle per second tolerance. Something like that.

CALLER: I see. Any particular modulation, or just anything at all?

ROSENBAUM: I don't know. I'm not an electronics expert, so I just tried to give the most accurate picture of what they said.

MCCOURT: Call the phone company tomorrow.

CALLER: Oh, I see.

MCCOURT: Yes.

CALLER: Ron, so you can't tell me any way that I can contact any phone phreaks, could you?

ROSENBAUM: Uh, the phone phreaks are a little paranoid these days, and so they don't--

CALLER: Yeah, I can see why.

ROSENBAUM: And so they'd rather, you know, they'd like to be contacted, but on the other hand it's hard to know whether the people who will contact them will have the best intentions in mind.

CALLER: Yeah.

ROSENBAUM: Because, you know, there are phone company security undercover agents.

CALLER: I understand.

MCCOURT: Okay, sir, thank you.

CALLER: Thank you very much.

MCCOURT: WMCA, PLaza 9-1000. We'll be back in a moment.

MCCOURT: WMCA, PLaza 9-1000. And the lovely Mrs. Balaban is out there in the control room. She was brought by her husband Mike who is the, he's in the public relations department of ESQUIRE. We don't know if the public relations department will plunge after tonight, when they cut off ESQUIRE'S phones tomorrow. (LAUGHTER) They shall be sending up smoke signals from fires lit by old issues. (LAUGHTER) PLaza 9-1000, hello, you're on the air.

MALE CALLER: Malachy, I just want to say that the guy that was arguing with you about the phone company must have stock in it.

MCCOURT: Of course he does.

CALLER: I realize that. Ron--

ROSENBAUM: Yeah.

CALLER: I'd like to know if you know anything about the party lines that are goin' around the United States.

ROSENBAUM: Party lines? You mean, loop-arounds?

CALLER: Right.

ROSENBAUM: Yeah, I mentioned it in the article.

CALLER: Well, the loop isn't as great as what I'm talkin'-- the loop is like out in California where only two people can talk. What I'm talkin' about is people, people are calling these numbers, people which the phone company is setting them up--people are calling these numbers and they're crazy. I was on last night--they actually have wars. One guy got shot--

ROSENBAUM: Where--

CALLER: --in the arm already. Like they went after him and shot him in the arm because he was screwing up the line. And, you know, more people are going to go, come into Brooklyn tonight, and shoot some more people, somewhere in Brooklyn, I don't know.

(OFF-MIKE MURMURS)

CALLER: Crazy on there. Malachy--

MCCOURT: Yes.

CALLER: If you want to, I could give you this number, off the air. You could call it, and you could just put it on the air and you'll hear what it's like.

MCCOURT: Yeah. Hold on, I'll give it to you--give you over to Maurice there.

CALLER: Give what?

MCCOURT: I'll give you to Maurice.

CALLER: Okay.

MCCOURT: Okay. Got this, Maurice? WMCA, Plaza 9-1000.
Hello, you're on the air.

MALE CALLER: Malachy?

MCCOURT: Yes, sir.

CALLER: You had a caller earlier--spoke about charging telephone calls back to other people.

MCCOURT: Yes.

CALLER: There was an article in one of the magazines about using credit-card numbers.

MCCOURT: Yes, we have gone into that somewhat.

CALLER: Oh, you had something before, huh?

MCCOURT: Yeah.

CALLER: This is if you use, if you break down the code, you can charge back to like government agencies, and the Bell Telephone employment offices--

ROSENBAUM: You gotta be careful--

CALLER: --and charging back to the, you know, to any particular individual.

ROSENBAUM: You've got to be careful about that, because they, once the code is broken, some companies sometimes quickly has alerts on credit-card users.

CALLER: If you, if you're using continually the same number--

ROSENBAUM: Right.

CALLER: But if you're breaking down like, say, you use the, just for argument's sake we'll say the federal government agencies. There are dozens of agencies you can find in the phone book, and once you break the code--you know, once you use the code, the interesting thing is you can use them, and you can use them from different towns, different building(?) companies--

MCCOURT: Of course, you know, somebody has to pay for them eventually. Certainly not the phone company. I was astonished to read that last year our phone bill in New York was thirty mil-- thirtyone million dollars. The City of New York paid the phone company \$31 million in phone bills. Isn't that an astonishing amount of talk?

CALLER: Right.

MCCOURT: Who said it's cheap? The phone company did.

CALLER: What about if you have-- First of all, if you live in New Jersey you're charing it all back to the state of New Jer-- or the state of New York, or the city of New York, it's not costing you anything.

MCCOURT: That's true, but, again, somebody has to pay for it. And it eventually ends up with the taxpayer, and this, the phone phreaks, of course, believe the phone company should pay for it.

CALLER: Well, okay sir, thank you.

MCCOURT: Thank you. Right. WMCA. PLaza 9-1000. Hello.

MALE CALLER: Hello. I saw advertised, oh, maybe a couple of years ago, a device attached to your own phone in your own home, and the advertisement went on to say that no matter where you were, in the country or in the world, you could listen in to it without being at home. And apparently one part of it, or maybe the whole thing together, was called an "infinity transmitter" and apparently the--it said in this newspaper advertisement that it didn't cost anything to listen in your own phone. Did that mean that this used the same type of tone system?

MCCOURT: There's a -- I know the thing you mean. There's a little, little box of sorts that's supplied by the company and it, you have a tape recorder attached to your phone, and it, this beep from your, from this little instrument, alerts your tape recorder, or activates it, and it gives you your messages.

CALLER: Right. But this was something--it was not for messages. It was to actually eavesdrop on your own business premises--maybe at night to find--

MCCOURT: Oh, I see...

CALLER: And this was advertised, you know, in one of the dailies, here in New York. And it called part of it, or all of it together, an "infinity transmitter."

ROSENBAUM: Hmmm. I don't know why.

MCCOURT: I suppose it goes on forever and ever.

CALLER: (INDISTINCT) guess you're familiar with it.

ROSENBAUM: I'll have to get through to that.

MCCOURT: Okay, and thank you.

CALLER: Thank you.

MCCOURT: Well, Ron, thank you very much for coming along here tonight, and revealing some of the secrets of the little blue box. I imagine that, I gather from the calls that there are more phone phreaks around than one can count.

ROSENBAUM: Or at least everyone who isn't one wants to be one.

MCCOURT: It would appear. The phone company is not exactly held in great esteem and affection and warmth by the general populace-- except that gentleman and three million other investors. So, I would say, there it is. That's the facts of the little blue box, and if you've got one--well, a hell of a lot of good luck.

This is WMCA, New York. I am Malachy McCourt, and I shall return after the American Information News. Again, thank you very much, Ron.