



Exploding The Phone

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Bibliographic Cover Sheet

Title	Phone Game Now Takes More Skill
Publication	<i>Washington Post</i>
Date	1968-03-10
Author(s)	UPI
V/I/P	p. C3
Abstract	Overview of toll fraud and countermeasures. Mentions MIT and Harvard groups. "Out of 4648 arrests in 1966 for telephone violations, only 25 cases involved electronic cheating."
Keywords	blue box; MIT; Harvard
Source	ProQuest

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Phone Game Now Takes More Skill

By Lindsay Van Gelder

NEW YORK (UPI)—College students were trying to cheat the telephone company long before goldfish-swallowing gave way to pot-smoking, but the game today is more sophisticated than anything grandpa ever imagined.

The typical long-distance swindle in the pre-computer age went something like this:

A girl at Northwestern University and her beau at Princeton would go to public telephone booths at a pre-arranged time. The boy would deposit coins the first three minutes. The long distance operator at the end of an hour of sweet things, would ask him to deposit the money to pay for the rest of the call.

Boy and girl would then run like the dickens.

But students today are using far more elaborate devices, and according to a spokesman for the American Telephone & Telegraph Co. (AT&T), they're doing it more for fun than for profit.

AT&T calls it stealing. So does the Federal Government, which punishes toll fraud with a penalty of up to five years in prison and a \$1000 fine.

One popular method is the "credit card gyp." A girl who worked at the United Nations in New York used to call her boy friend stationed in a Chicago phone booth, giving the operator the number of a phony telephone credit card.

When the real owner of the credit card received the bill and refused to pay, it was too late for the phone company to collect.

Another trick, according to AT&T spokesmen, is to freeze ice in the form of a coin. Unlike metal "slugs," the evidence melts after the caller enjoys his free cross-country conversations.

"Touch tone fraud" is still another gimmick. Callers use their own musical instruments to simulate the sound of a coin falling through a pay box or—in the case of the new touch-tone telephones—figure out the proper combination of buttons to push. Only operators with perfect pitch are immune to this one.

In some cities, free calls can be had by the student with the gumption to tell the operator he is a policeman—then give a phony badge number. Others authoritatively ask the operator to charge the call to "my business phone" and bill some hapless company.

More ingenious are the engineering majors who unleash their computers onto the long-distance lines. A St. Louis youth fed all the listed numbers of a local telephone exchange into his computer and found out what unlisted numbers were left over.

He then dialed them all until he discovered which ones belonged to corporations paying a flat monthly rate for unlimited long-distance calls and hooked himself in.

Some students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology similarly found a line between a data-processing computer at the school and Bell Laboratories in New Jersey. They figured how to get on the line, convinced the Bell operator they were company engineers and proceeded to call all their far-off friends.

Some students—including a Harvard group that figured out how to connect themselves with Strategic Air Command bases all over the world—have come up with contraptions and methods that even the phone company hadn't thought of.

AT&T denies that the practice is widespread. Out of 4648 arrests in 1966 for telephone violations, a spokesman said, only 25 cases involved electronic cheating—which may only mean the computerized thieves are harder to catch.

Why the kids have chosen the phone company as their target—rather than the Post Office, a gas or electric company or a private firm—is a mystery to AT&T.

"We don't know why the cheaters chose us," a spokesman admitted, "But they've gone about as far as they can go." He said AT&T engineers try to keep a step ahead of the students and that ordinary coin-box smashing has been rendered obsolete by newer, stronger telephones.

"We think this is a serious thing," he added. "It's stealing and there's no getting around it."