



Exploding The Phone

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Phone Phreaks Hold a Convention

By Simon Winchester

Manchester Guardian

NEW YORK — The First Amendment to the Constitution declares resolutely that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech . . ."

But according to the rate schedule issued by the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Co. it costs me \$1.35 to speak for three minutes to someone in San Francisco from my telephone in Maryland. And that is no free speech.

Not in the view of the Technological American Party, that is. This thousand-strong group, which held its second annual convention in a scruffy New York hotel this fall, believes that America, which undoubtedly has one of the best telephone systems in the world, should also have the free-est system.

Accordingly, for the past 2½ years the youthful technocrats who make up the membership of TAP have been issuing reams and reams of information on how best to defraud, fiddle, steal from, or generally rip off the American telephone system. Since they believe they have the Constitution behind them, they reason — it's all good, clean fun, in the public interest and morally sound.

"Phone phreaking," as the practice of ripping off the phone company is inelegantly known, began here about five years ago when two bright young students named John Draper and Joe En-

gressia discovered there were more ways of speaking to the corner store than dropping a dime in the slot.

Draper came to be known in phreaking circles as "Captain Crunch" when he discovered that the frequency of a signal need to give him access to idle trunk telephone lines, and thus the potential to make free calls across the globe, was the same frequency as that emitted by a small plastic whistle supplied free with every packet of a sugar-frosted breakfast cereal.

Blind Joe Engressia had no such serendipity: he had, instead, a superb mind for international dialing codes and operator commands and switching procedures, and over the months became an expert in winning free telephone calls from Moscow to Madagascar from his home telephone in Memphis.

Joe claims no animosity toward the Bell System, the manager of the major portion of America's internal communications network. In fact, he says that when he was 7, "I used to lie awake and think of myself as working for Ma Bell and going out on a stormy night in my big boots and repairing a downed line and bringing a hundred phones back on circuit. I had a romantic view of Ma Bell which I still keep, tucked away, to this day.

"All I have done (and what Joe has done cost him a hefty fine and a threatened five-year term in a federal penitentiary) has been purely for the fun of it — I have never really wanted to defraud the system. Some day I guess I'd like to work for Bell, if they'd ever have me . . ."

But the boys of TAP take no such charitable view of Ma Bell.

It is the wealth and the apparent monopoly of the Bell System that really jars the technological hippies of TAP. The "Bell Telephone System" as such does not exist; it is instead a vast \$50 billion conglomerate stretching from Alaska to the Virgin Islands which, in the name of the American Telephone & Telegraph Co., has huge stockholdings in most of the major local Bell companies (like C and P in the Middle Atlantic region, or Pacific Northwest Bell or New Jersey Bell, all owned

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A former phone phreak, Joseph C. Engressia, checks a relay rack being in-

stalled at a Memphis business as part of his new, legal job. He began the craze.

Phone Phreaks Convene

PHREAKS, From G1

between 85 per cent and 100 per cent by AT & T).

The same company owns Western Electric, which makes nearly all telephone equipment used in the states, and in addition it owns half of the stock in the Bell Telephone Laboratories which do most of the basic communications research.

AT & T, from its dusty offices down at the lower end of Broadway, controls a vast empire of communications, the very nerves and ganglia of American society. It owns it, operates it purely for profit, and offloads hundreds of millions of dollars each year in dividends to Swiss banks and insurance companies and brokerage houses who own the bulk of the company stock.

It is, as writers and congressmen and competitors have repeatedly pointed out, though to little avail, a monopoly, which regulates the flow of speech from one American to another purely for the benefits of its stockholders — and that, in the view of the boys at TAP, is constitutionally improper and morally wrong.

To defraud Ma Bell, whom TAP identifies as Public Enemy No. 1, the Phreaks have devised any number of clever, not so clever and totally bizarre ways of getting around the system. They were explained at the convention, which was held in an upstairs room at a hotel off Times Square.

To explain the techniques they all wore masks and to preserve their anonymity all called themselves Al (for Alexander Graham) Bell.

One of these Al Bells called me up to invite me to the convention. So elaborately did he rig his call—it came from Honolulu, he explained later—that my own phone went completely insane for the next two hours.

The simplest way of getting a free call from a coin box is when the operator asks you to put in money. Coins register at the exchange—in the older boxes —by making a “ding” for a nickel, a “ding ding” for a dime and “dong” for a quarter.

What you do to beat the system is to put all your coins, when the operator asks you, in the phone box next to you, making sure that you hold the mouthpiece of your phone up against the coin box of the other. You drop in your coins, make the dings and the dongs and the ding-dings, the Bell lady says that's fine and connects you. You have your talk and hang up; and then you press the coin return button of your neighboring phone—and presto, all your money will come back.

But the Bell System began to get wise to that about a year ago, and so the TAP people have now invented something called a Red Box, which was on display at the convention.

Dings and Dongs are out, it seems, in the interests of security. Beeps and blurps of electronic origin are in.

But electronic noises can be simulated, as the Moog synthesizer has demonstrated. The Red Box is a little Moog synthesizer which accurately duplicates the sound of the coins going into the boxes; all a caller has to do is to order his call through the operator, put the speaker end of his Red Box up against the mouthpiece of his phone, and the operator will connect him—for nought.

Another, non electronic way of busting the system is to use bogus or stolen telephone credit card numbers.

Phreaks make up their own card numbers just as soon as they have cracked the code each January.

But these methods, and many, many more of similar kinds are horribly crude in the eyes and the ears of the devotees of the science. It is the Blue Box which remains the Hope diamond of the craft, and the language that surrounds its use remains poetry to the true Phreaks like Joe Engrossia.

The Blue Box is basically a system of electronic oscillators that emit precise double tones that exactly simulate the tones used to activate the worldwide telephone switching systems.

Tripping up onto a tandem, stacking trunks, zapping around the country from New York to Anchorage to Honolulu and back just to get to a store on your street corner—all this kind of thing is pure delight to the true phone Phreak. The 100 or so masked individuals who gathered in the Times Square hotel were many steps removed from the romantic vision of phreaking —they were into the trade purely and simply to defraud a company that they feel makes too much money.