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By Merce Eleccion

Staff Writer, IEEE Spectrum

As if the telephone utilities didn't have enough to worry about, it seems that a new breed of defrauder has emerged over the past decade or so to intrude upon a particularly vital part of the telephone system - the toll net-work. Armed with hardware that ranges from the shoddiest of devices to the newest in integrated circuitry, these "phone phreaks" are able to call virtually anywhere around the world via the telephone network, without paying. The methods that are currently being used exploit an unfortunate vulnerability that exists in the present toll dialing telephones in control of signal within the voice-frequency band.

This article will raise concern among the telephone utilities of what is perhaps the most serious problem in the art of "ripping off" the phone companies. In the recent literature publicizing these "phone phreaks" (a more appropriate epithet), the implication is that they are a loosely organized but glamorous cadre. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather than the ant-establishment "Robin Hoods" that these defrauders pretend to be, they are in essence violators of the public faith; since their crime is directed at the telephone community as a whole, the user as well as the carrier.

Certainly, such projects as Captain Cream, Dr. No, the Snark, and Midas Skulker have created a fearful image to those supposed modern day Robin Hoods. It is true that the fact that besets them; however, the color begins to fade. Captain Cream (derived from the whistle found in the breakfast cereal of the same name that generated 2600 Hz, a traffic signaling tone), one of the original phone phreaks, was recently arrested by the FBI and faces prosecution. The Snark conviction record is a little more encouraging; although there were only six arrests and two convictions in 1970, there were 45 arrests and 35 convictions in 1976. These figures could continue to rise, but there is no hard data on phone phreaks; that number may be anywhere from 500 to 1000; and one estimate gives the total number of phone phreaks to be as high as thirty thousand. Fortunately, the losses that are sustained by these phone phreaks or "phone phreaking" are not difficult to estimate. Bell representatives have been quoted at a conservative figure of between $50,000 and $100,000 a year, but individual, pre-emptive frauds, and single-slot coin telephones that detect and resist "stuffing" as an anti-theft device.

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Although the extent of blue-box activities has been thought to be somewhat restricted, the recent experience of a few Bell Laboratories investigators may serve to be a more accurate indicator of the numbers of those actually involved. In visiting a large Bell Telephone Central Office in another state one of the investigators was informed that it is indeed possible to do so. The lesson was learned in 1970, when the Bell group was informed that approximately 100 blue-box devices were in use at this one school alone.

If one can believe the literature, the ramifications of blue-boxing exceed the ability to put forth these methods. According to at least one source, phone phreaks are also able to intrude upon the privacy of time-shared computers that are accessible through the common carriers. In querying the director of engineering of a major software corporation, this writer was informed that it is indeed possible to do so, especially if one learns the control format of a particular system as a former or present user of the computer. However, even if the user is able to breach the top two levels of security, there are additional levels within the file system itself that are known only to the hard-core, mainline experts. Access is presently an exceedingly difficult feat to achieve actual intrusion. As if that weren't enough, truly critical data can be stored in a scrambled format.

The extent of phone phreaking is not only a matter of concern to the Bell Telephone System. According to an IEEE Spectrum article, at least 255 arrest and 230 convictions (with many cases still pending in the courts) have been made, ranging from 35 arrests and 45 convictions in 1967, Bell System losses from phone fraud since 1965 has been an average of about $2 million a year, but individual, pre-emptive frauds, and single-slot coin telephones that detect and resist "stuffing" as an anti-theft device.