

Cellular Phones

Frustrate Feds

By Larry Miller

The enemy in the war on drugs has put a new weapon into its arsenal. That new weapon is the cellular car phone and every day, drug dealers, gun runners, and just about every other sort of low-life, fill the air waves with things so vile that it's likely to curl the hair on the average citizen's head.

Cellular car phones operate just like regular phones except for the fact that the conversations are transmitted over computer-controlled radios. Because cellular conversations can be assigned to one of thousands of different frequencies that may change as the car moves from one place to another, tapping them is both complicated and expensive.

As a result, car phones are now standard operating equipment for anyone wanting to avoid detection by law enforcement officials. Lt. Ron Cacciatore, head of the Broward County, Florida, sheriff's narcotics squad, calls the cellular phones "the biggest hurdle we've run into. Everybody has them. I mean everybody."

Take for example the case

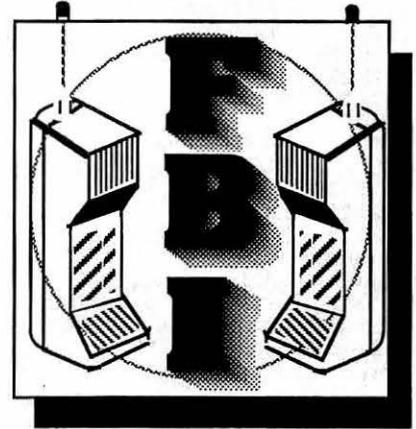
of Ernesto Benevento, leader of one of the largest heroine-smuggling rings in history. "We had his home phone tapped for three or four months but he wasn't using it," said John Carroll, U.S. attorney in New York. "Instead he was using the cellular phone in his car."

Unable to intercept the car phones easily, law enforcement agencies routinely subpoena phone records to aid in their investigation. But now, the criminals have found a way to stump police there, too.

The Tumbler

If regular cellular phones have law enforcement tied up in knots, a new twist in the portable phones is giving them fits. Police say that specially modified cellular phones, called "tumblers," now give criminals the kind of near total anonymity that they desire and are responsible for some 100 million dollars a year in fraudulent phone calls.

"It's not the actual losses that the (cellular telephone) industry is incurring, it's the people who are using these altered phones that attracts fed-



eral law enforcement to the scene," says Earl Devaney, special agent in charge of the Secret Service Fraud division in Washington. "They are usually drug dealers or people selling arms."

Available on the black market for \$1500 or less, tumbler phones are normal cellular phones that have been modified with a specially programmed computer chip. A legitimate mobile phone has a silicon chip that generates an identification number. When a call is made, that number is relayed to the carrier, along with the caller's phone number and the two numbers are compared to establish billing.

The resulting record is what police have, in the past, subpoenaed for use in their investigations.

Free Phone Calls

"These (altered) phones allow the criminal to have the use of a telephone without a bill," says Devaney. "It also makes it extremely hard for law enforcement agencies to intercept these calls as we would under court order with a (normal) land-line phone. So it offers the potential user of the phone a certain amount of anonymity and cuts down on his or her overhead." It is because calls on tumblers cannot be stopped or traced that their use has exploded in major cities across the country.

The counterfeit chip used in the altered cellular phones exploits a weakness in the cellular telephone system that allows a caller's first call to be completed before the billing status is verified. The phones then "tumbles" through numbers, generating a different, phony identification number on each call, tricking the system into thinking each call is the first. Criminals are also able to get a phone activated using the name and Social Security number of a law-abiding citizen. This phone will then be good for one month to three months of service, depending on the cellular company's accounting procedures. The chip can also be programmed to use the identification numbers of legitimate subscribers, placing but a single call on someone's bill before

moving on to the next victim or phony serial number.

Says Devaney, "it's becoming very fashionable, if you're a criminal of any size, to have one of these phones. If you don't have a beeper and a phone, you're not really a first-class crook."

The Big Break

Fashionable or not, the Secret Service has been hard at work, trying to crack down on the use of the tumbler phones. A break in the case came when one illegally rigged cellular phone, confiscated by police in New York City last year was turned over to the Secret Service. Like a hacker-- a phone computer cheat-- an agent broke into the chip, read the microchip, decoded the algorithm at its core, and wrote a program that would help the industry detect criminals who use the phones illegally. As a result, during the past two months, the service has quietly distributed a free software "patch" that blocks unauthorized long-distance calls at cellular phone switches. The patch is being heralded in New York City, where more phone service is stolen than anywhere else in the country. In Los Angeles, the first day the patch was put in to use more than 5,000 illegal cellular calls were blocked, a Secret Service spokesperson said. "We would not claim that this alone stops all fraud in the

cellular industry. But we are in fact very optimistic that this patch is going to have a very significant impact, said Norman Black, spokesman for the Cellular Telephone Industry Association, the industry's dominant trade group. Says Jim Gerace, a spokesman for NYNEX Mobile, one of two largest service providers in the metropolitan New York area, "This is really good news for us."

Cellular telephones operate on frequencies available on some scanners. Depending on your location, you can also monitor cellular telephone calls on old UHF TVs that have manual (not digital) tuning by carefully going through the higher UHF channels.

Listening to car phones was made illegal under the Electronic Communication Privacy Act (ECPA) of 1986. ■

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