

CALLING CARDS

Malicious callers get the message

In a Press Release dated February 21st 1995, BT announced a 20% drop in malicious calls reported to the company, thanks to its new caller display and call return services. Hoax calls to the emergency services show a similar fall.

According to BT, malicious calls reported to their network of bureaux around the country began to fall as soon as the new services were announced. The Caller Display Service, announced in July last year, became available in November 1994. This allows the customer to see the number of the person calling them before they answer the phone - but requires the rent or purchase of special equipment (either a new phone with a display facility or a small additional unit to be used in conjunction with an existing telephone). Call Return, also available since November 94, enables you to find out the number of the last person to call you by dialling 1471. Nearly three million calls per day were being made, in February, to this free service.

However, as a recent Home Office Research and Planning Unit paper (Paper 92 1995) has pointed out "while the police will still be able to obtain telephone numbers of reported nuisance calls (and the spread of digital exchanges will speed this process), the new BT caller identification measures may be limited in effectiveness by the fact that callers can withhold their telephone numbers, either on a call-by-call basis, (by dialling 141), or by asking BT to put a total block on their numbers ever being shown."

BT stresses, though, that potential malicious callers cannot escape detection by using the 141 number withhold facility. Calls will continue to be traced

at police request through BT's malicious calls bureaux. Since the bureaux were set up in July 1992, some 2,500 malicious callers have been prosecuted or received a formal police caution. A recent test case in Chester Crown Court set a legal precedent by charging an obscene caller with grievous bodily harm on psychological grounds. The offender received an 18 month prison sentence.

The Home Office Report, by Wendy Buck, Michael Chatterton and Ken Pease, reviews the results of four surveys conducted over a ten year period into



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obscene calls to women in England and Wales. The authors in fact reject the description of these offences as 'nuisance calls', as this both trivialises the offending and underestimates the distress it can cause. The most highly victimised group, according to the results of all four surveys, comprised single, separated and divorced young women.

The four surveys in question are the British Crime Survey 1982, the 1989 Channel 4 Dispatches Survey, the Bristol and Hull Safer Cities Survey, and the 1992 British Crime Survey.

Analysis of the first British Crime Survey in 1982 highlighted for the first time the magnitude and seriousness of the problem in this country. All four surveys suggest that between 7 and 10% of women suffer one or more obscene calls in the course of a year.

The latest of the surveys, the 1992 British Crime Survey, included other types of so called 'nuisance calls' (threatening, offensive or heavy breathing). This roughly doubled the prevalence of victimisation. BCS estimates suggest that in 1991 women received more than 30 million such calls.

However, all four surveys indicate that a minority of victims get the majority of calls - or in other words that most calls are made in series to the same victim. This means that call tracing approaches stand a good chance of being successful in tackling the problem.

Another aspect of the patterns established by the researchers was the 'likelihood that most offenders know their victims.' This also indicates that the increased technological possibilities of successful call tracing will deter many offenders.

The authors commend BT's efforts in this field, since the early eighties, and are hopeful that further technological progress might provide a solution to a problem technology itself has created.

SOURCE: Obscene, threatening and other troublesome telephone calls to women in England and Wales: 1982-1992. Home Office Research and Planning Unit Paper 92. 1995. Wendy Buck, Michael Chatterton and Ken Pease.