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Blind Whistling Phreaks and the FBI's Historical Reliance on Phone Company Criminality

By David Price

In 1971, Ron Rosenbaum's Esquire article, "Secrets of the Little Blue Box", introduced America to phone phreaks, a subterranean network of geek explorers who probed the global phone system as the world's largest pre-Internet interconnected machine. A star of Rosenbaum's piece was Joe Engressia, a blind telephonic hacking pioneer with perfect pitch and a high IQ, who seized control over phone systems by whistling dual-tone, multi-frequency pitches into telephone receivers.

Before the introduction of modern phone-switching technology, audible tones were used to connect phones with distant destinations. As a young child, Engressia was obsessed with the telephone, finding comfort within the steady blare of the dial tone. At the age of 5, he discovered he could dial the phone by clicking the receiver's hang-up switch, and at 7 he accidentally discovered that whistling specific frequencies could activate phone switches. From there, experimentation, brilliance, networking and perseverance led Engressia to probe weaknesses in the network that allowed him to make free phone calls. His mastery over this global machine was liberating, if not obsessive.

As Rosenbaum was completing his 1971 article, Engressia was arrested for theft of telephone services. At the time it appeared that the phone company had only recently become aware of his activities – though a few years earlier he had been expelled from the University of South Florida for selling fellow students long-distance calls for a dollar each.

Rosenbaum's 1971 piece put the spot-

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Memoir of a Brother from Another Planet When One African Met Black America

By Pius Adesanmi

I met black America for the first time in 2005, after three years of living and teaching in America and one year before I returned to Canada. The long journey to this eventful meeting started in my father's library in Isanlu, a small town in central Nigeria. I came of age in Nigeria as the locust decades of military despotism set in, destroying everything, including what used to be known as the middle class. This class comprised a proud and hopeful generation that returned home from Cambridge, Oxford, Canterbury, Yale, Princeton and Harvard in the euphoric 1960s-1970s. After years of colonial humiliation in the hands of the British, a newly independent and proud Nigeria beckoned, and this generation answered enthusiastically. "Unity and Progress", "One Nigeria", and other such soporific mantras were on their lips as they fanned across the land, taking up jobs in every sector of national life. Those who joined the education sector took up positions in the universities; some joined high schools founded and run by Western Christian missions; some others joined public elementary schools all over the country.

Those who accepted teaching positions in rural missionary schools took the now rested culture of the family library with them to our villages. My father belonged in this category. Being more Catholic than the pope, he had hurried home from Dundee University in Scotland to be principal of a Catholic High School in Isanlu. Over the years, as our leadership transformed the Nigerian state into carrion and turned one of the world's richest geographies into Africa's most tragic embarrassment, my siblings and I would blame him to no end for that "ill-considered" decision. "Dad, why couldn't you just wait for the three of us to be

born in the U.K. before rushing home?" We were in secondary school and could not understand why he denied us British citizenship. For most Nigerians of my generation, the passport of one responsible state in addition to your Nigerian passport, evidence of dual citizenship, is a vital insurance. Whenever the Nigerian state defaults on its responsibilities to you as a citizen, your second citizenship kicks in to save the day. But dad didn't wait. He returned to Nigeria with his books and a wife carrying his first child.

The family library became his most important asset, and he continued to expand it till he died in February 2007. I was practically raised in that library. As his last born and only son, there was nothing he enjoyed more than having me spend hours with him in there in my formative years. When we weren't reading, he was giving me long lectures on the value of knowledge, fulminating against the one thing he couldn't tolerate: "a mind that has not read books", to put it in his words. And by books he meant "serious books". Thus, while my secondary school mates enjoyed the delights of "soft" literature – James Hadley Chase, Nick Carter, Frederick Forsyth, and the Macmillan Pace Setters series – I was stuck in my father's library in the company of "serious writers". His vigilance, however, couldn't stop an underground addiction to Hadley Chase. Years later, I discovered the thematic thoroughness of my father's acquisitions: shelves of West African literature and history led to shelves of South African literature and history which, in turn, yielded to shelves of African-American literature and history. Colonialism. Apartheid. Slavery. These were the three great themes that informed my father's systematic acquisitions in black textual cultures, as his

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light on Engressia, as newspapers, magazines and television programs ran features on him and his activities. Engressia became a cultural icon, or proto-hacker stereotype, as characters with his abilities were written into cyberpunk novels and Hollywood screenplays with characters like Sneakers' Erwin 'Whistler' Emory.

Engressia's IQ loomed somewhere above 170, but as an adult he wished to live as a 5 years old, founding his own church, the Church of Eternal Childhood. His wish to remain an eternal child appears to be linked to the repeated sexual abuse he reported suffering from a nun at the school for the blind that he attended as a child, as well as the academic pressures that led him to miss out on playtime as a child. In 1991, Engressia legally changed his name to Joybubbles. Until his death this last year, Joybubbles ran a phone "story line" in Minneapolis, where callers would call and hear him tell a different children's story each week – adopting a cadence and personal style reminiscent of his hero, Mister Rogers.

When Joybubbles died last year, I used the Freedom of Information Act to request his FBI file, mostly just to see what the FBI had made of this explorer who had loved and wandered through this pre-Internet global network. I figured

there might be something in his file relating to his 1971 arrest, but I hadn't expected to find an FBI and phone company investigation of him from two years before this arrest.

An August 28, 1969, FBI General Investigative Division report describes an investigation by Kansas City telephone company of three subjects in Kansas City, Miami and Chicago, who had "discovered a means to intercept and monitor WRS and Autovon" phone lines. Autovon (Automatic Voice Network) was a Defense Communication Agency telephone network used for nonsecure military phone communication. The FBI's report mistakenly claimed that Autovon was a "top secret telephone system utilized only by the White House", when in fact Autovon was really a nonclassified military telephone system, designed to link military installations even under the unpleasant conditions of nuclear annihilation.

The FBI believed that Engressia was "the 'brains' in this matter and was an electronics genius with an I.Q. of one hundred ninety". Even though the FBI's investigation had "not revealed any national security aspect to their activities" and phone company officials stated that this group's use of free phone calls had been "strictly for their own amusement and [the] harassment of [the] phone company", the FBI's investigation reports were filed under the heading: "Security matter – Espionage: interception of communications."

The FBI thought a blue box may have been used to avoid tolls, though they realized that Engressia "was capable of orally emitting a perfect twenty six hundred cycle tone, which could be used to direct distance dial any phone number in the country".

The FBI reported that without any authorization from law enforcement personnel, an employee of Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph had contacted Engressia, interviewed him, and later gave information from this interview to the FBI. This employee told the FBI that "Joseph Engressia, age twenty and blind, [was] interviewed and he admitted intense interest in telephone company systems and equipment. He is familiar with the practices as to test numbers, circuits, and operations of telephone companies. Engressia exhibited ability to whistle twenty six hundred cycle notes which

is utilized by telephone company in toll network. He claimed he learned majority of information by trial and error using his touch-tone instrument. He claimed he did not wish to violate any law and that his activities with the telephone were for amusement and education."

The FBI viewed Engressia as a real threat. On August 29, 1969, J. Edgar Hoover sent a summary memo regarding Engressia's activities to John Ehrlichman, counselor to President Nixon, to Melvin Laird, secretary of defense, and to James J. Rowley, the director of the U.S. Secret Service. While Hoover apprised these governmental bodies of his investigation and expressed concerns that Engressia had the power to undertake undetectable wiretaps, the FBI had no actual evidence that Engressia intercepted any phone calls, they only had concerns about such powers.

Fortunately, the FBI employees processing my FOIA request accidentally revealed parts of the identities of the two phone phreaks mentioned in Engressia's file. An individual referred to as "also known as 'Tandy Way'" is identified as a blind radio and telephone enthusiast living in Miami, and a "Mr. Jacobs" is revealed as the Kansas City resident accessing free phone calls to talk with Engressia. Jacobs had first met Engressia after seeing him on Huntley-Brinkley TV show, and contacted him first by letter, then by phone.

The FBI report indicates that the phone company had known about Engressia's abilities for about a year:

"Joseph Engressia Jr. first came to the attention of the SBT&T Company in the summer of 1968. At about the same time there was a routine trouble report in the middle of August 1968, that was received by ___ showing a 'blue box' in use on the telephone number ___ Miami subscribed to by ___ Miami. ___ explained that a 'blue box' is a device that can be used to defraud the telephone company of the revenue from long-distance toll calls. This device produces multi-frequency tones which enable the user to make long-distance telephone calls and circumvent the billing equipment in the long-distance network".

It is not clear if Engressia was using an actual blue box (an electronic device designed to make free calls by generating 2600 hz through a speaker) or if he simply whistled into his phone to pro-

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