

Tapping the Wires

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Meyer Berger

THE LATE Dutch Schultz loathed wire tappers. "I hope your ears drop off," he'd say bitterly before he put up his telephone receiver, reasonably certain they would hear him. The obsession grew worse in his last years as boss of New York's policy racket, with federal and city detectives tapping his office and outpost wires, his sister's home line, and his lawyer's phone. Even when he hung up the phone in his office, a small microphone hidden in the earpiece continued to carry his words to the listening posts over wires spliced into the telephone cord.

Most people become merely peevish when their telephones grow faint in the middle of a conversation. Only the "tap-goofy," as detectives refer to a nervous few, believe a bad connection means that someone is listening in. Although they are probably wrong, there is always a chance they may be right. The police sometimes amuse themselves on a job by tapping nearby wires at random. More often, when business is dull, they pick up calls from restaurants, poolrooms and other suspected criminal hangouts. "Blind angling," they call it, and defend the practice on the ground that you never can tell when some-

thing significant in the crime line will turn up.

Given the proper apparatus, almost anyone could tap a telephone. A simple tap merely involves scraping the insulation from a segment of the wires; a receiver is then attached to the exposed portions with metal clips and extension wires. That's the basis of all wire tapping, but the complexity of the modern telephone system and the increasing wariness of criminals have necessitated many refinements in technique.

New York is the center of wire tapping in this country. District Attorney Dewey's office has had considerable success with it in prosecuting rackets. In one instance, while Dewey wire workers were listening in on the bakery racket, they accidentally picked up a conversation that aided materially in securing the conviction of the Drukman murderers in Brooklyn.

Usually Dewey's detectives follow the standard practice of cutting in on a telephone circuit, but for special jobs they use small microphones that can be concealed in a suspect's room and a device with phonograph discs to record conversations. The federal government uses about a dozen such outfits in

Washington, which, next to New York, is the eavesdroppers' most fertile field.

The Lindbergh case was a wire tappers' holiday. They cut in everywhere. Just before the ransom money was passed, they heard Jafsie in conversation with a mysterious "Axel," who announced he was coming to the Condon home. Thinking "Axel" was the kidnaper, the tappers hid around the Condon home until a strange car drove up. They were stunned when their man emerged. It was Lindbergh, who always used the name "Axel" to identify himself to the Doctor.

Wire tapping got its start in New York in 1895 when a former telephone worker suggested that the police listen in on criminals. In those days police wire tappers just walked into the Telephone Company's offices and learned the location of the wires they were interested in without fuss. Lines were usually tapped right in the cellar of the house or at an outside wall box.

Later, during World War days, when eavesdropping was widely encouraged, the government tapped thousands of lines. A complete central-office switchboard had been set up in the New York Custom House, with taps running into it from all parts of the city. Every time a suspected alien lifted his receiver a light flashed and a stenographer, with headset clamped on, recorded the conversation.

When people got wind of the prevalence of wire tapping, the press denounced it, but nothing happened. The furor, however, made the wire tapper's job more difficult, because the Telephone Company refused from then on to cooperate with the police.

But with New York's 1,700,000 telephones, a wire tapper would be unable to find a particular circuit if he did not know the right people in strategic telephone posts. That is why most police wire tappers are former employes of the Telephone Company. They have not only an inside view of the system, but friends in the organization upon whom they count for surreptitious assistance.

Wire tappers are seldom caught at their work. They know they must remove their listening equipment if they hear a telephone subscriber complain to the operator that "something is wrong with the wire." When it is discovered that a line has been tapped, the company for the next five days makes regular inspections of that particular circuit. Detectives are aware of this routine, and when the five-day period has expired they hook right in again.

It's pretty hard to detect a wire tapper. Foreign noises on the line are more apt to be caused by worn-off insulation or dampness in the cables. A good wire tapper is rarely guilty of creating "swing," the professional term for the crackling noise caused by a faulty tap.

Wire tappers as a rule are pretty grave fellows, jealous of the good name of their calling. They spend a lot of their own time and money fussing with new listening appliances. Most of them rig up experimental stations in their homes. Out of such experiments, in 1930, came the dial detector, indispensable in discovering the destination of a call from a dial phone. Just when the dial system was threatening to end the tappers' usefulness, a detective who had been a phone company mechanic came to the rescue. His dial detector, which he made out of secondhand telegraph parts, records as a series of dots on a thin paper tape the clicks you hear when you dial; from these the tapper can read the number called.

The newest wire-tapping contraption is a powerful induction coil which resembles a five-inch firecracker. It is a magnet wrapped in 8000 turns of very fine wire — a sinister contrivance that inhales a telephone conversation without being connected to the circuit, the coil merely being placed near the wires. It will pick up sounds through an 18-inch wall.

No one has ever been convicted of wire tapping, although any layman or private detective caught

tampering with someone's telephone is liable to arrest. Criminal lawyers, whose wires are frequently tapped, have worked hard but unsuccessfully for federal legislation against the practice. Recently the Bill of Rights Committee of the New York State Constitutional Convention voted down a proposal to prohibit wire tapping, but the controversy over it still continues.

Court opinion has been divided on the legality of evidence obtained by tapping wires. In 1928 the United States Supreme Court sustained the conviction of a bootlegger on evidence picked up by wire tappers. The late Justice Holmes dissented, remarking, "Wire tapping is a dirty business." A few months ago the same court decided that federal prosecutors may not use evidence obtained by tapping wires linking two or more states. The results of intrastate tapping, however, remain admissible.

The popular belief that the police would stop tapping wires if evidence obtained by this means were ruled out of all courts is a delusion. Most wire tapping is done to obtain information that may lead to arrests rather than for the purpose of obtaining evidence to be presented in court.



Inscription on a stone in the Hartsdale, N. Y., dog cemetery:

JACK, AS EVER, PRECEDES HIS
MASTER BY A FEW STEPS.

— Joseph Mitchell, *My Ears Are Bent* (Sheridan House)