

computers are bad

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2022-03-12 an 800 scam in short

A non-diagetic aside

This is an experiment in format for me: I would like to have something like twitter for thoughts that are interesting but don't necessarily make a whole post. The problem is that I'm loathe to use Twitter and I somehow find most of the federated solutions to be worse, although I'm feeling sort of good about Pixelfed. But of course it's not amenable to text.

I would just make these blog posts, but blog posts get emailed out to a decent number of subscribers now. I know that I, personally, react with swift anger to any newsletter that dare darken my inbox more than once a week. I don't want to burden you with another subject line to scroll past unless it's *really* worth it, you know? So here's my compromise: I will post short items on the blog, but not email them out. When I write the next proper post, I'll include any short items from the meantime in the email with that post. Seem like a fair compromise? I hope so. Beats my other plan, at least, which was to start a syndicated newspaper column.

Also, having now written Computers Are Bad for nearly two years, I went back and read some of my old posts. I feel like my tone has gotten more formal over time, something I didn't intend.

I would hate for anyone to accuse me of being "professional." In an effort to change this trend, the tone of these will be decidedly informal and my typing might be even worse than usual.

The good part

So tonight I was lying on my couch watching *Arrested Development* yet again while not entirely sober, and I experienced something of a horror film scenario: I noticed that the "message" light on my desk phone was flashing. I remembered I'd missed several calls today, so I retrieved my voice mail. That is, I pulled out my smartphone and scrolled through my inbox to find the notification emails with a PCM file attached. Even I don't actually make a phone call for that.

The voicemail, from a seemingly random phone number in California, was 1 minute and 8 seconds long. I realized that this was a trend: over the last few days I had received multiple 1 minute, 8 second voice messages but the first one I had listened to seemed to be silent. I had since been ignoring them, assuming it was a telephone

spammer that hung up a little bit too late (an amusing defect of answering machines and voicemail is that it has always been surprisingly hard for a machine to determine whether a person answered or voicemail, although there are a few heuristics). Just for the heck of it, though, realizing that I had eight such messages, I listened to one again.

The contents: a sort of digital noise. It sounded like perhaps very far away music, or more analytically it seemed like mostly white noise with a little bit of detail that a very low-bitrate speech codec had struggled to handle. It was quiet, and I could never quite make anything out, although it always seemed like I was just on the edge of distinguishing a human voice.

Here's the best part: after finding about fifteen seconds of this to be extremely creepy, I went back to my email. The sound kept on playing. I checked the notifications. Still going. It wouldn't stop. I went to the task switcher and dismissed the audio player. Still going. Increasingly agitated, and on the latest version of Android which is somehow yet harder to use, I held power and remembered it doesn't do that any more. I held power and volume down, vaguely remembering they had made it something like that. No, screenshot. Holding power and volume up finally got me to the six-item power menu, which somehow includes an easy-access "911" button even though you have to remember some physical button escape sequence to get it. Rebooting the phone finally stopped the noise.

Thoroughly spooked, I considered how I came to this point.

Because I am a dweeb and because IP voice termination is very cheap if you look in the right places, I hold multiple toll-free phone numbers, several of which go through directly to the extension of my desk phone. This had been the case for some time, a couple of years at least, and while I don't put it to a lot of productive use I like to think I'm kind of running my own little cottage PrimeTel. Of course basically the only calls these numbers ever get are spam calls, including a surprising number of car warranty expiration reminders considering the toll-free number.

But now I remember that there is another type of nuisance call that afflicts some toll free numbers. You see, toll free numbers exhibit a behavior called "reverse charging" or "reverse tolling" where the *callee* pays for the call instead of the *caller*. Whether you get your TFN on a fixed contract basis or pay a per-minute rate, your telephone company generally pays just a little bit of money each minute to the upstream telephone providers to compensate them for carrying the call that their customer wasn't going to pay for.

This means that, if you have a somewhat loose ethical model of the phone system, you can make a bit of profit by *making* toll-free calls. If you either are a telco or get a telco to give you a cut of the toll they receive, every toll-free call you make now nets you a per-minute rate. There is obviously a great temptation to exploit this. Find a slightly crooked telco, make thousands of calls to toll-free numbers, get some of them to stay on the phone for a while, and you are now participating in capitalism.

The problem, of course, is that most telcos (even those that offer a kickback for toll-free calls, which is not entirely unusual) will find out about the thousands of calls you are making. They'll promptly, usually VERY promptly due to automated precautions, give you the boot. Still, there are ways, especially overseas or by fraud, to make a profit this way.

And so there is a fun type of nuisance call specific to the recipients of toll-free

calls: random phone calls that are designed to keep you on the phone as long as possible. This is usually done by playing some sort of audio that is just *odd* enough that you will probably stay on the phone to listen for a bit even after you realize it's just some kind of abuse. Something that sounds almost, but not quite, like someone talking is a classic example.

Presumably one of the many operations making these calls is happy to talk to voicemail for a bit (voicemail systems typically "supe," meaning that the call is charged as if it connected). why one minute and eight seconds I'm not sure, that's not the limit on my voicemail system. Perhaps if you include the greeting recording it's 2 minutes after the call connects or something.

I've known about this for some time, it's a relatively common form of toll fraud. I likely first heard of it via an episode of "Reply All" back when that was a going concern. Until now, I'd never actually experienced it. I don't know why that's just changed, presumably some operation's crawler just now noticed one of my TFNs on some website. Or they might have even wardialed it the old fashioned way and now know that it answers.

Oh, and the thing where it kept on playing after I tried to stop it, as if it were the distorted voice of some supernatural entity? No idea, as I said, I use Android. God only knows what part of the weird app I use and the operating system support for media players went wrong. Given the complexity and generally poor reliability of the overall computing ecosystem, I can easily dismiss basically any spooky behavior emanating from a smartphone. I'm not going to worry about evil portents until it keeps going after a .45 to the chipset... Maybe a silver one, just in the interest of caution.