



Litigation and Trial

Posted at 3:18 PM on August 24, 2009 by Maxwell Kennerly

"The Boy Who Heard Too Much" - An Incredible Social Engineering Story

At [Rolling Stone](#):

Weigman's auditory skills had always been central to his exploits, the means by which he manipulated the phone system. Now he gave Lynd a first-hand display of his powers. At one point during the visit, Lynd's cellphone rang. "I can't talk to you right now," the agent told the caller. "I'm out doing something." When he hung up, Weigman turned to him from across the room. "Oh," the kid asked, "is that Billy Smith from Verizon?"

Lynd was stunned. William Smith was a fraud investigator with Verizon who had been working with him on the swatting case. Weigman not only knew all about the man and his role in the investigation, but he had identified Smith simply by hearing his Southern-accented voice on the cellphone — a sound which would have been inaudible to anyone else in the room. Weigman then shocked Lynd again, rattling off the names of a host of investigators working for other phone companies. Matt, it turned out, had spent weeks identifying phone-company employees, gaining their trust and obtaining confidential information about the FBI investigation against him. Even the phone account in his house, he revealed to Lynd, had been opened under the name of a telephone-company investigator. Lynd had rarely seen anything like it — even from cyber gangs who tried to hack into systems at the White House and the FBI. "Weigman flabbergasted me," he later testified.

As [I wrote before in the context of Marc Dreier](#), "In the world of computer security, that's known as [social engineering](#). Hackers have recognized for a long time that it is far easier to trick someone into giving up their password than to 'hack' it via wizardry."

Weigman's story is incredible, a blind teenager with nothing more than a phone who managed to dispatch SWAT teams, attack other phone hackers ("phreaks"), relentlessly harass phone company investigators, and complicate the FBI's investigation into him.

A [Wired story](#) about his sentencing includes an audiotape of him smooth-talking an AT&T operator (by using a small amount of internal lingo and a chatty demeanor) into disconnecting someone's phone line.

I highlight these stories for several reasons, not least to reiterate the importance of (and presumption of) trust in our interdependent society. It's always easy *in retrospect* to see "obvious" signs of fraud, to recognize the importance of verifying someone else's statements, and to understand the need to reduce agreements and understandings to writing.

But the truth is, no one can protect themselves all the time, at least not if they have any plans for their life other than perpetual paranoia.

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Content aside, this is one of the most attractive web pages I've see yet. Congrats to your designer.

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