

FROM THE DESK OF

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The Day My Modem Called 911

MANY people need tremendous self-discipline to work in a home office. But I can't stay out of mine. So it was not unusual that I was on line one Sunday morning last year, working on a project while getting ready to attend a brunch.

After scheduling my computer to retrieve my electronic mail, I hopped into the shower. I therefore couldn't hear my modem making unfamiliar sounds, or the 911 operator who came on the telephone line, responding to my supposed plea for help.

After drying off, I returned to my computer to discover a "not able to connect" message. While making a second attempt as I dressed, I was startled by a loud knock at my door.

I live in a Manhattan apartment building with a doorman, so this knock was especially suspicious. Perhaps it was a neighbor with an emergency. "Who is it?" I asked.

"Police. Open up," a husky male voice replied.

"I'm sorry, but I don't open the door for people who are not announced," I said. "You have to go down and ask the doorman to call me."

"Lady, you called 911. Open up!"

"I did not call 911. You have the wrong apartment."

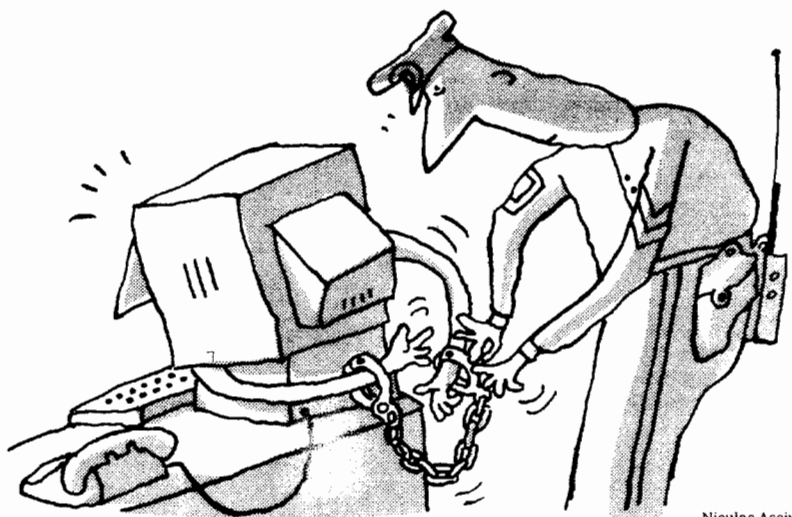
"Someone in this apartment has dialed 911. I must make sure you are safe. Now open up."

I had felt perfectly safe until he knocked. Anyone can say he's a policeman. He invited me to look through the peephole. I did, and saw that he was wearing a police uniform and a badge. But so was the tall actor in blue I once glued myself to while working on a movie on location in a nasty neighborhood.

"The uniform doesn't mean you're a policeman," I said.

"Open up!"

"I'll call my doorman for you."



Niculae Ascui

I tip my doormen at holiday time for good reasons. One is so they won't let just anyone come to my door, even if he claims to be my boyfriend. I called the doorman on duty to find out why he had let this guy up.

"We are not allowed to interfere with police activity," the doorman said.

It was clearly my problem; his would be at Christmas time.

Normally, I appear pretty cool. But I was now frantically dialing my neighbors, trying to find someone at home to bear witness over the line to whatever happened. I cursed as I got only answering machines.

My business line rang.

"Hello?"

"This is 911." The operator confirmed my name and address.

"Ma'am, a policeman is outside your door, responding to your 911 call."

"I didn't call 911!" I protested.

"Ma'am, when 911 is dialed, all of the telephone account information automatically appears on my computer screen. Someone at your address has called 911."

"Look, I live in a very small apartment. If anyone dialed 911, I would know about it."

"Ma'am, we don't know if someone is there coercing you to say that. You must allow the police officer to enter your apartment to make certain you are safe."

"How do I know you're not some nut at a phone booth and the guy outside my door isn't a mad rapist?"

"Listen to me call him over the police radio, ma'am."

I heard the echo of the conversation through the door. I resigned myself to opening it, but speed-dialed one last time and announced to my best friend's machine that if I was murdered, she would have evidence.

I opened the door a crack and saw

two police officers in a rigid attack pose, guns drawn.

"Mind if we take a look around, lady?" the first officer asked, after they had already begun. The second officer attacked my closet, barely missing the avalanche of boxes, hats and gloves that tumbled out.

He recovered and asked, "You got a fax machine?"

"Yes."

"You send international faxes?"

"Yes, but this is Sunday. I haven't sent any in eight hours."

"You got a computer modem?"

"Yes. I was trying to download my E-mail before you got here."

"Forget it, Joe, just another one of those computer modem calls."

"My modem dialed 911?"

"Yeah, sometimes the phone line skips a number and 911 gets called."

"I'm terribly sorry. I had no idea. I have a nephew who's a sheriff. I know your jobs are difficult enough without this kind of hassle. Thank you for coming. . . ." No need to continue; they were already out the door, heading to their next rescue.

I checked the access number my modem had dialed. Yes, it had skipped the first digit, and the next three were 9-1-1. Mystery solved.

NEEDLESS to say, my modem is now set to dial an access number without 9's or 1's.

My local precinct captain says these situations occur three to four times a week, especially at hotels, where guests dial "9" for an outside line, then "1" for long distance.

Perhaps I am becoming a prisoner of technology, my home office and big-city fears. My nephew, the sheriff, thinks I should get out more. Frank, my doorman, hopes that, for me, one of the officers was single and good-looking. I can't remember. □

Debra Borchert creates marketing plans for Internet-related businesses.