Caught Snapping
That Cell May Be a Steal, but Don't Shoot Yourself in the Face

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Dumb criminals status update:

Ashlee Hutchens, 18, stopped to reorient herself while driving through an unfamiliar Cincinnati neighborhood this fall. A young man swaggered over. First he tried to hit on her. When Ashlee, who is deaf, didn't respond, he stole her cellphone.

Police said recovery was unlikely, so Ashlee's mom, Christine, took her to buy another Sidekick. A few points and clicks later, and the clever new device imported the old phone's memory. Including a tough-guy self-portrait of . . .

"She said, 'Mom, that's him!' " remembers Christine. "He's even wearing the same shirt!"

The unintentional mug shot made its way onto the local Crime Stoppers broadcast. Soon cops had a suspect in custody.

Aaaaaahahahahahahaaa.

So. Good. This is just the kind of hand-held comeuppance we expect from a synced society -- and it's happening around the world as personal devices get more and more advanced. The photo trails left by technologically unsavvy crooks are like the online Darwin Awards, like the schadenfreude of "Cops."

The fascination might say more about us than the crooks, but self-reflection is so much less entertaining than vigilantism.

And neither action gets at the oddness of what's happening here: the idea that our gadgets have lives and existences beyond our control, that they haunt us even after they're missing, like phantom limbs that have been amputated but still itch.

* * *

In the olden days of stolen cellphones -- say, three, four years ago -- the best you could do was call yourself. Dial your own number and hope that a good citizen picked up, while you imagined the phone's possible locations. On the street? Under a barstool? Wedged in a Metro seat and bleating out weak rings as the battery . . . slowly . . . died?

Now, a whole number of applications and services have made it possible for you to Follow That Treo.
In the Cellphone Era, a New Picture of Stupidity Emerges

Martijn Van Es, a Web editor for Amnesty International in the Netherlands, had given up on his missing phone, until he started getting e-mails from friends. "They wanted to know," says Van Es, "why I was taking photographs of teenage boys."

He wasn't, actually. The kids in question had gained possession of the phone and used it to shoot themselves horsing around. They didn't know that the phone was subscribed to ShoZu, a service that automatically uploaded any cellphone snapshots to Van Es's public Flickr account. Van Es took the photos to police, who said they couldn't help -- no one knew whether the teens had stolen the phone (a crime) or merely found it (not).

So like any self-respecting webphile, Van Es got an idea: crowd-sourcing. He posted the teens' photos on his personal blog, and within a day his visitors shot from 250 to 28,000 as hoards of commenters mocked, forwarded, sleuthed, mocked some more. By the end of the week, he'd traced the kids to a local school and was fielding dozens of junior high-ish e-mails: I can ask X to find out if Y knows if G stole the phone.

Meanwhile, he was growing scared of the cybermonster he'd created. These were just kids. Comments were getting vicious, and "all of these personal details were outing about them," says Van Es, which made him concerned. He does work for Amnesty International, after all.

Eventually an exchange was arranged, and the photos were taken down from the site.

"But if I'd have known what I know now, I wouldn't have written anything on my blog," says Van Es. "Six months later and the phone was broken" anyway.

But that's the Internet for you -- no take-backs, no do-overs.

Crowd-sourcing as mystery-solving "does more harm than good in almost every case I've seen," says Daniel Solove, a George Washington University law professor and author of "The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy on the Internet," who studies this sort of thing. "The mob tries to one-up each other," the punishment doesn't fit the crime, the cybermob meets the lynch mob and one really hideous two-headed monster is born.

Which we totally, totally get.

Except that . . . These people. Are taking photos of themselves with stolen phones. And then unintentionally sending records of their every move. Directly to the people who are trying to catch them.

Aaaaaahahahahahahaaaa.

The sheer idiocy is what makes it funny. What makes it compelling is the idea of anthropomorphized phones sending S.O.S. signals, secret missives back to their original owners. Find me. Find me, I am all alone with strangers. Find me!

How tantalizing, to think that while we continue to live our lives, our phones go on entirely new adventures.

Such was the fascination of Ben Clemens of San Francisco, who gained minor Internet fame two years ago when he was the first ShoZu user to discover that his phone -- stolen on an Amtrak -- would just keep
uploading, regardless of who took the photographs.

For weeks, Clemens would log onto his computer and find a picture of a Chihuahua. A car. A woman having a snack. Children. Ambiguous fragments of his phone's new life, displayed for Clemens's viewing pleasure. It was voyeuristic and intriguing, like stalking the blog of a person you barely know.

"The photos did stop appearing after a while," says Clemens, as the phone's new owners either learned to disable the ShoZu function or discarded the device. "I was quite relieved at that point." Otherwise, who knows if he could have torn himself away.

David McDonald of Melbourne, Australia, was similarly more curious than angry, when he logged onto Flickr earlier this year and found that his phone, pickpocketed a few days before, had recently attended a street festival.

There it was, "having its own little field trip," cavorting with guys McDonald didn't know, in a neighborhood he'd never been. "I spent minutes and minutes blowing up the photo and analyzing it," says McDonald, a Web designer. He saw that the photograph in question was taken on a Sunday and used the date to determine which celebration the picture must depict. He scoured the photo for contextual clues, considered traveling to the scene to put himself in the mind of the phone.

"It's a bit of a detective story," he says, "like the myth where someone steals your garden gnome. . . . After a while, I sort of thought it was funny."

And so technology advances, crowds become vigilantes, criminals are caught . . . and David McDonald periodically checks Flickr with a mixture of obsession and excitement, wanting to see what antics his phone is up to now.

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