Emergency Calls Given Precedence on Party Lines by New York Statute

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must now choose between fully disclosing information or being cited for contempt.

There are some who say that immunity statutes are morally questionable since they result in the Government making "deals" with "stoolies" and "turncoats." If this be true, we should legislate against this "immorality" by placing information gained from "informers" in the same category as that derived from wiretapping or illegal searches and seizures. Such an attitude, however, would thwart legislatures and law enforcement agencies from effectively carrying out their duties of investigation.

Immunity statutes have been construed so as to give protection to the witness coextensive to that afforded by the privilege. As further construction problems arise it may be well for the courts to weigh the advice of Chief Justice John Marshall:

When two principles come in conflict with each other, the court must give them both a reasonable construction, so as to preserve them both to a reasonable extent. The principle which entitles the United States to the testimony of every citizen, and the principle by which every witness is privileged not to accuse himself, can neither of them be entirely disregarded. 109

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EMERGENCY CALLS GIVEN PRECEDENCE ON PARTY LINES BY NEW YORK STATUTE

Due to the enterprise of American capital, the telephone has become so commonplace in the United States that most people regard it as a necessity. Although it has been in use for three-quarters of a century, changing social conditions and improved methods of transmission have prevented the law of telephones from ossification and rigidity. Since the telephone is essentially an improvement upon the answer would disgrace him. 12 Stat. 333 (1862), as amended, 2 U.S.C. § 193 (1952). See Brown v. Walker, 161 U.S. 591, 598 (1896). Moreover, the privilege is personal and cannot be raised to protect others. Hale v. Henkel, 201 U.S. 43 (1906).

109 See, e.g., King, Immunity for Witnesses: An Inventory of Caveats, 40 A.B.A.J. 377, 378-379 (1954). But Dr. Bella Dodd, a former Communist, told a congressional committee: "I think probably more than anything else the reason why you are not getting many citizens coming forward to testify in this Country on the Communist conspiracy is the fear that they have of the smear and the retaliation which the Communists will have upon them. "One of the things they do, of course, is to use . . . underworld concepts of informer, stool pigeon, a person who sings, and so forth. . . ." The Tablet, Sept. 28, 1954, p. 18, col. 6.

telegraph, an appreciation of the present legal position of the telephone company is dependent upon a familiarity with the law applicable to the telegraph.

Originally, a telegraph company was widely regarded as a bailee of the message, and therefore immune from strict liability, while later opinions have more often adopted the view that it is closely akin to a common carrier. Although a telegraph company is not liable when it is an act of God which prevents the delivery of a message, it may be liable where a third party's negligence makes delivery impossible. In England, telegraph companies were liable only in breach of contract, but in the United States they are subject to tort liability as well.

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2 See, e.g., Freschen v. Western Union Telegraph Co., 115 Misc. 289, 189 N.Y. Supp. 649 (N.Y. City Ct. 1921); Western Union Telegraph Co. v. State, 86 Neb. 17, 124 N.W. 937 (1910); Gillis v. Western Union Telegraph Co., 61 Vt. 461, 17 Atl. 736 (1889); see Providence-Washington Ins. Co. v. Western Union Telegraph Co., 247 Ill. 84, 93 N.E. 134, 136 (1895) ("...[T]hey exercise a quasi public employment, with duties analogous to those of common carriers. . ."); Western Union Telegraph Co. v. Call Pub. Co., 44 Neb. 326, 62 N.W. 506, 510 (1895). According to one text, telegraph companies today actually are common carriers, or "...common transmitters, if they prefer a distinction without a difference. . ." 3 SHEARMAN & REDFIELD, NEGLIGENCE 1411, 1414 (Rev. ed. 1941).

3 Hoaglin v. Western Union Telegraph Co., 161 N.C. 390, 77 S.E. 417, 420 (1913). The telegraph company is not exonerated from liability, however, if it was negligent as in Fall v. Western Union Telegraph Co., 80 S.C. 207, 60 S.E. 697 (1908); or if it had alternate means of transmission available and failed to use them. Beggs v. Postal Telegraph-Cable Co., 258 Ill. 238, 101 N.E. 612 (1913).

4 Barnes v. Western Union Telegraph Co., 27 Nev. 438, 76 Pac. 931 (1904). Where the company which receives a message transmits it to another telegraph company, which negligently fails to send it properly over its wires, the first company is liable. De Rutte v. N.Y., Albany & Buffalo Electro Magnetic Telegraph Co., 1 Daly 547, 30 How. Pr. 403 (N.Y. Gen. T. 1866). Where the military intervenes to prevent delivery of a message, however, the telegraph company is not liable. Rose Mfg. Co. v. Western Union Telegraph Co., 251 S.W. 337 (Tex. Civ. App. 1923).

5 Playford v. United Kingdom Electric Telegraph Co., Ltd., L.R. 4 Q.B. 706 (1869). Today, of course, there are no domestic telegraph companies in England, as they were socialized by The Telegraph Act, 1869, 32 & 33 Vict. c. 73 (§ 4) which made the industry a royal monopoly.

Since, for the purposes of law, the telephone was considered *ejusdem generis* with the telegraph, many of the same legal principles were applied to the more recent of the two inventions. Telephone companies have always been regarded as common carriers by the courts. By this is meant that they are required to serve all who seek to employ them, without discrimination. A telephone company which negligently fails to make a connection is only liable if it can be shown that the damages were proximately caused by its negligence.

Because of the quasi-public nature of their operations, telegraph companies have been subjected to anti-discrimination statutes, which have been applied to telephone companies as well. These statutes have been strictly construed; for liability to attach for their violation, the violation must be wilful.

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8 See *Central Union Telephone Co. v. State ex rel. Falley*, 118 Ind. 194, 19 N.E. 604 (1889); *State ex rel. Gwyn v. Citizens' Telephone Co.*, 61 S.C. 83, 39 S.E. 257 (1901); *see State ex rel. Goodwine v. Cadwallader*, 172 Ind. 598, 85 N.E. 644 (1909); *Miller v. Central Carolina Telephone Co.*, 194 S.C. 327, 8 S.E.2d 355, 358 (1940); *State v. Cumberland Telephone & Telegraph Co.*, 114 Tenn. 194, 86 S.W. 390, 391 (1905).

9 Missouri *ex rel* Bailey v. Baltimore & Ohio Telegraph Co. v. Bell Telephone Co., 23 Fed. 539 (C.C.E.D. Mo. 1885); *see Central Union Telephone Co. v. State ex rel. Falley*, appeal dismissed, 127 U.S. 780 (1887); *State ex rel. Webster v. Nebraska Telephone Co.*, 17 Neb. 126, 22 N.W. 237 (1885); *see Central Union Telephone Co. v. State ex rel. Bradbury*, 106 Ind. 1, 5 N.E. 721, 724-725 (1886).


11 E.g., *N.Y. TRANS. CORP. LAW* §28; *LA. REV. STAT. art. 45, § 45.782 (1950)* (telegraphs and telephones); *MINN. STAT. ANN.* § 237.43 (1947); *OHIO REV. CODE* tit. 49, § 4931.17 (1954); *see also VT. STAT. § 9734 (1947)* (applies to telephones only).

12 See *Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co. v. Baltimore & Ohio Telegraph Co.*, 66 Md. 399, 7 Atl. 809 (1886); *State ex rel. American Union Telegraph Co. v. Bell Telephone Co.*, 36 Ohio St. 296 (1880).

13 See *Meyers v. Western Union Telegraph Co.*, 82 Misc. 266, 143 N.Y. Supp. 574 (County Ct. 1913).


15 E.g., *ARK. STAT. ANN.* § 73-1806 (1947); *MINN. STAT. ANN.* § 237.43 (1945); *MONT. REV. CODE ANN.* § 8-820 (1947); *N.D. REV. CODE* § 8-1002 (1943); *OKLA. STAT. ANN.* tit. 13, § 173 (1937); *The Telegraph Act*, 1863,
the requirement to telephone companies as well. Still others allow the company to contract to send news items out of the regular order of messages. It has been indicated that telegraph messages of an emergency nature may properly be granted preference in the absence of statute. Undoubtedly the same attitude would prevail in the case of a telephone call.

As has been mentioned, telephone companies are liable for damages proximately caused by their negligent failure to make a connection. A less common situation occurs where the connection between the two telephone stations is prevented through the wrongdoing of a third party. In Hodges v. Virginia-Carolina Railway Co., a railroad, in violation of a statute, wilfully cut the line of a public telephone company. Complainant could have reached a physician whom he had employed to attend his wife, had the wire been intact. Since it was severed, the wife died from lack of medical care. It was held that, if the facts alleged could be shown, the railroad would be liable for the damages which ensued from its act.

The New York Legislature has recently attempted to cope with an analogous situation by the enactment of a statute making it a misdemeanor to remain on a party line when another person needs it for an emergency call. Like that involved in the Hodges case, the

26 & 27 Vict., c. 112, § 48 (gives precedence to Queen's messages).
18 See Reese v. Western Union Telegraph Co., 123 Ind. 294, 24 N.E. 163, 165 (1890).
20 179 N.C. 566, 103 S.E. 145 (1920).

1. Any person who shall wilfully refuse to immediately relinquish a party line when informed that such line is needed for an emergency call to a fire department or police department or for medical aid or ambulance service, or any person who shall secure the use of a party line by falsely stating that such line is needed for an emergency call, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.

2. ‘Party line’ as used in this section means a subscribers line telephone circuit, consisting of two or more main telephone stations connected therewith, each station with a distinctive ring or telephone number. ‘Emergency’ as used in this section means a situation in which property or human life are in jeopardy and the prompt summoning of aid is essential.”

The new statute also requires all telephone companies in the State to pub-
statute is penal in nature. Moreover, it establishes a standard of care which might well determine the nature of the duty owed to the plaintiff in any tort action which might arise. While the violation of a statutory standard will not support a tort action unless the injury is proximately caused thereby, such enactments are, in effect, a declaration by the Legislature that injury will probably be a consequence of their violation, and it is more than likely that their violation would weigh heavily with a jury in ascertaining tort liability.

The new statute is designed to cope with a situation which may be temporary in nature, since party lines are gradually being eliminated in this state. In addition, it may present enforcement difficulties. Nonetheless, it represents a salutary effort to safeguard life and property by the Legislature, and, as the accompanying gubernatorial message states "... if it should save the life of one sick person or prevent a home from being burned to the ground, its enactment would be justified."