

# FEEHLEER

## Sorry, Wrong Number!

by Jocelyn Robinson

**Jocelyn Robinson:** I'm Jocelyn Robinson. My octogenarian mother recently announced on the family Facebook page that she has given up her landline. She claims she never uses it, it's a waste of money. So the ten digits I grew up with are no longer associated with my childhood home. It's the end of an era.

**Joyce Robinson:** After nearly 60 years of having the same number I figured, who needs the aggravation? And I have a smartphone. So here we go, no landline.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** You see, my mom has been assimilated. She may not look or sound like it, but she is like an 85-year-old cyborg. She doesn't need implanted hardware, like the Borg, Captain Jean-Luc Picard's nemesis from the *Star Trek: Next Generation* franchise. She is augmented, it's like she's paired with her smartphone by Bluetooth. But, as they say, "Resistance is futile." She is part of the collective now.

And that collective is huge. According to communications industry analysts, of the nearly 8 billion people on this earth, over 60% have mobile phones, with near 45% of those owning smartphones. So, like the other 3.5 billion souls on the planet with a smartphone, my mom's life is enhanced by this technology.

Her smartphone lulls her to sleep at night and is there the next morning, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed with the weather and news of all that took place the world over while she slumbered. If you're like my mother, there's very little you do without your trusty mobile device in hand. She never misses a voice call or an e-mail or a text, and with GPS she never gets lost. She has telemedicine appointments, plays trivia over Zoom, and posts political memes, photos, and videos on social media, where she stays on top of the doings of family and friends all over the globe.

And yet, we still call these miraculous technological devices, 'phones.' Smart phones. But how smart are they when it's in that function that the dumbest mistakes most often happen?

Now, dialing the wrong telephone number has plagued us as long as these devices have been around. A slip of the finger, or transposing numbers could yield an embarrassing encounter with someone on the other end of the line, resulting in "Sorry, wrong number!" It's a forgivable mistake, an inconvenient moment for caller and called.

Sometimes, though, calling the wrong number helps us make the right connection.

**Amanda Cole:** My name's Amanda Cole.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Amanda runs a small nonprofit in Cleveland, Ohio called Plexus...

**Amanda Cole:** ...which is an LGBT chamber of commerce, there's only 60 in the country, so there's not very many of us and it's not uncommon for people not to know about us. But I had called a member, and was trying to organize a virtual event, this is all when COVID was happening, and so I was trying to make a switch from an in-person event to a virtual event that would really support this member's business, and I wasn't hearing back from him at all and I was getting kind of disappointed and frustrated. And finally I got a call back and I answered it and I was like hi Brian, how ya doing, and it was a woman on the other end, and she said, yeah, so you've been calling me, this is not Brian, my name's Mary, but I'm a lesbian and a business owner and I had no idea there was an LGBT chamber of commerce, so I would really like to join! And so it just turned into this thing where I was trying to contact a member and it just so happened not only was I dialing the wrong person but it was another gay person who also was a small business owner and it was like the perfect thing, she needs to be in a chamber of commerce especially right now, especially an LGBT one where she can get the support that she needs as a gay business owner during COVID, and during a time when she's not sure how her business is going to make it through. And that was really great, a totally connected and random connection.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** But on the other hand, receiving a misdialled call can be worse than making one.

**Sarah Caplan:** I woke up, and I had a missed call.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** That's Sarah Caplan, who lives in Southwest Ohio. She remembers getting a voicemail meant for someone else entirely.

**Sarah Caplan:** I don't believe that the call woke me up, I think I just woke up and I had this missed call and a voicemail. I didn't recognize the number, but they had left a voicemail, relatively lengthy. So I said alright let me check my voicemail and see what's going on here and I dialed into my voicemail. To my shock and eventual horror it was a long voicemail from a man to another man, so wrong number, absolutely the wrong number, leaving, he thought, this other man a very long, very explicitly threatening voicemail to the effect of, "If you don't have my money by ten o'clock, I will kill you." And not in a convivial way, you know, it was very much like something out of *The Godfather*, you know, "I will come to your house tonight at ten o'clock, and if you don't have my money, I am going to beat you to death." And I listened to this and it went on for, I don't know, it seemed like forever, but it was a voicemail so probably for ninety seconds. I'm listening to this in abject horror and all I could think is this poor potential victim isn't getting this voicemail, he has no idea, and also this person who wants his money doesn't know that he hasn't gotten this message. So the only thing I could think to do was to call that number back again and try to say like sorry, they didn't get that message and I called and it rang and rang and rang and then went to "This number is not set up for voicemail," so I couldn't leave a message. And as far as I know, I don't know what happened between these two, I did watch the news for a couple of days waiting to see some sort of news story that would kind of relate to the situation...I tried calling a couple of times, I just, the fairness in me wanted to say like he should definitely probably pay you his money, but also he didn't get the warning, so you might want to give him another day or something, I just felt so bad. Never got another message from that number, they never called back, there was never any follow up that I knew of, but it was definitely something that I won't ever forget.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Wrong numbers aside, the most frequent misdialled phone calls are inadvertent, accidents that result from the technology itself. A person with a rotary phone might dial the wrong

number, but that's human error. With the smooth black mirror surface of the smartphone, though, different kinds of mishaps occur. Lots of them.

'Pocket dialing,' or the more colorful term, 'butt dialing,' happens when the phone's sensitive touch screen makes contact with a person's pocket material, especially if that pocket is on a person's backside, causing a call to a number saved on the phone's contacts list.

It so happens that many smartphones have special features which make it easier to dial 911 in an emergency – and in some jurisdictions, thousands of such accidental pocket calls are made annually. The city of Calgary in Alberta, Canada fields over 300 unintentional 911-calls per day, and in San Francisco, as many as 30 percent of calls that come to an emergency dispatcher are accidental. At one point, the Federal Communications Commission estimated that half of the 84 million 911-calls made annually in the US were inadvertent, which takes a huge toll on emergency services that have to treat every incoming call like the real thing.

But North America's emergency systems aren't the only things disrupted by these types of calls. And it can happen to anyone.

**MSNBC Giuliani report:** The butt dial heard round the world: we have details of Rudy Giuliani's accidental calls to an NBC reporter including his attacks on the Bidens and his apparent need for a lot of money.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Yes, Trump lawyer and former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani butt dialed a reporter not once but twice in the fall of 2019, much to the amusement of many. Not all such mishaps reek of political intrigue, thankfully. Sometimes a pocket dial is a welcome event.

**Jami Mattison:** So I am Jami Mattison, and I am from Grant Fork, Illinois, and I have a funny story about an accident butt dial. So I was working in my yard and I had my cell phone in my back pocket, and working away, planting some plants, doing my thing, and all of a sudden I hear my mother saying Jami, Jami, Jami! So I reached in my back pocket, grabbed my phone, looked at my phone, and I had faceted her, and I was like oh my gosh, so she didn't know how to do FaceTime, so I was like mom, can you see me? And she's like I can't see you, I can only see myself, I said press this button so you can see me. And finally she figured it out, she was like, Oh my gosh, if I would've known that you were gonna FaceTime me, I would've put on make-up. She goes, but how do I look? And we just laughed, and we had the best conversation and visit, but the funniest thing is when we were getting ready to hang up, I said "Well I guess I face-butt-dialed you!" (Laughter).

**Jocelyn Robinson:** But there are times when a pocket dial is not so innocuous. Like when the board chairman of a major airport in Northern Kentucky, called the airport chief executive officer's assistant to have her make a dinner reservation for him while he was on a business trip. After the call, he put the phone in his pocket, and then unintentionally dialed her back. During that second call, he started talking to another board member about replacing the CEO. The assistant said hello a few times and tried to get their attention, but they were talking about discriminating against her boss, so when that didn't work, she kept listening and taking notes –for an hour and a half! She even recorded a portion of it.

During the call, the board chairman had met up with his wife, and he told her what he had discussed with the other board member – just in case the assistant didn't catch it the first time. Afterwards, the loyal assistant shared the recording and her notes with the other members of the airport board, thwarting plans to oust her boss, and the chairman and his wife ended up filing a complaint against her for invasion of privacy.

The court ultimately found that there is no "reasonable expectation of privacy" for anyone who makes an inadvertent 'pocket-dial' if they haven't taken quote "simple and well-known measures to prevent

pocket-dials from occurring.” People should know full well that locking the phone, setting up a passcode or using an application that prevents pocket-dials, is their responsibility. The court equated the board chairman’s expectation of privacy for a pocket dial to that of “[a] homeowner with an uncovered window.” Case closed.

[Gavel Sound]

Yikes! No one who owns a smartphone hasn’t accidentally dialed someone. So lock your screen before you slip your device into your pocket. Because the hardware isn’t the only way your smartphone can let you down; the software can betray you as well.

**Chris Wydman:** It was actually over the holidays. And I had recently gotten a new iPhone. My one takeaway from this: never keep your iPhone in your pocket right here.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Chris Wydman is an archivist at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. He also teaches Information Management to graduate students.

**Chris Wydman:** We've all heard conspiracy theories, you know, that somebody is always listening. That's not just a conspiracy theory. But, what happened is, we got together for Christmas dinner, I was at my sister's house and her husband is named Scott, and my sister uses Siri all the time.

And she's always walking through the room, going Siri, this or Siri that. So, as we're kind of hanging out, all of a sudden in my pocket, I kept hearing Hello? Hello? And I picked it up and it was...and I have a friend named Scott, a good friend named Scott...and it was him. And I'm like, Hi, how are you doing? And he's like, How are you? And so I thought he called me. But, and then he's like, no, you called me. And I'm like, Oh, I'm sorry. It must've just been a pocket, you know, a pocket dial. So, you know, Merry Christmas, hung up, then five minutes later, the same thing happened again.

I hear, Hello? Hello? And then after I thought about it a while, I figured out what was happening is my sister was saying 'Siri,' and then was saying, 'Scott,' and my phone heard that. Siri on my phone heard that and called Scott, and it happened several times. And so my one takeaway from that I learned is to hit the lock button before you put it in your pocket. Because it is a living microphone. And you know to activate it, supposedly you have to say "Siri," but for it to hear you, obviously it's listening all the time. And, you know, I teach information management and talk about Big Data and data collection and it's not always, you know, a lot of times it's for very good reasons, it's not just for marketing purposes, or Big Brother listening to your conversation. But there is some truth to the matter that anything you say on a phone is being, somewhere, is being backed up and stored and that that data can be aggregated for different purposes. And so it's funny as that's something I teach and then for this to happen was somewhat ironic, I thought.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** So never mind *Star Trek*, this is how we descend into *The Terminator* scenario. As dumb as they can be, smartphones really are smart! Artificial Intelligence is listening to us, watching us, gathering information and gathering strength. All of us using smartphones unavoidably generate tons of digital data that are accessible to and can be used by others. These data provide clues to who we are – where we live, what we like and don't, what we're willing to spend money on, how we'll vote. A.I. knows us better than we know ourselves. It's only a matter of time before the rise of Skynet and the extermination of humanity. *Hasta la vista, baby*. But I guess the risk of a science fiction Armageddon is a small price to pay for connection, especially now that face-to-face contact is limited by a global pandemic.

Smartphones are how my cyborg mother keeps up with her human kids, grandkids, and great grands. They're how we keep up with her, which is no easy task. And let's face it, smartphone technology is

what made telling this story of phone mishaps possible. Life without our phones would be less productive, less entertaining, and certainly lots lonelier. My mom may have given up her landline, but right now, mistakes aside, our smartphones provide us a lifeline, even if they are cheeky bastards.

Thanks to Amanda Cole, Sarah Caplan, Jami Mattison, Chris Wydman and my mom Joyce Robinson for sharing their smartphone foibles. And please, don't forget to lock your screen!

---

**More at [goethe.de/mistakes](https://goethe.de/mistakes) and under the hashtag #FEHLER. Radio stations can download this episode and others for broadcast via PRX at <https://exchange.prx.org/series/39299-fehler-mistakes!>**