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HEADLINE: Detective Hotline Is the Hot Ticket for Information

GUESTS: **CHARLES PINCK**, Detective Hotline; FRANK DILLON, Detective Hotline

BYLINE: DANIEL ZWERDLING

HIGHLIGHT:

Daniel Zwerdling visits the proprietors of a new information hotline where a caller can find out how to check out - among other things - a boyfriend, a nanny, a securities dealer, and a radio show host.

BODY:

ANNOUNCER: [excerpt from TV ad -- Now, for the first time ever, the Detective Hotline puts the power of a private eye in your hands by phone for less than \$4 a minute. Why should you call the Detective Hotline?

1st WOMAN: He's been sued how many times for malpractice?

2nd WOMAN: But he said he's never been married.

1st MAN: So, he's neither bonded nor licensed?

3rd WOMAN: It was the little inconsistencies in his story.]

DANIEL ZWERDLING, Host: If you live in Dallas or Philadelphia, you might have seen this TV ad recently, and soon you may be able to catch it across the country. **Charles Pinck** and Frank Dillon, both professional investigators, have a new detective business with a difference. If you call their 900 number to reach Detective Hotline, they will teach you how to investigate your enemies and friends yourself. We joined them the other day at their offices in Annandale, Virginia. In between phone calls they told us that this detective agency is for the little guy.

CHARLES PINCK, Detective Hotline: Well, the idea really sprang from the accessibility of public information and how much is available. There are a lot of people out there who have problems, but really don't know what to do with them and would never think of going to a private investigator and couldn't afford one. And that's really basic the idea behind it that we're trying to offer our service at a very reasonable price to just ordinary people.

ZWERDLING: And, Frank Dillon, it's curious to me that you were the, what, you were the head of special investigations for the Air Force, right?

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FRANK DILLON, Detective Hotline: Correct.

ZWERDLING: So, it's interesting to me that a guy like you coming who is sort of government spook in a way - well, I mean, not an international spy but a guy who would- did all sorts of secret investigations for the military - that you would be really interested in teaching ordinary people how to do this work themselves.

Mr. DILLON: Well, this is a democracy and a democracy is based on the fact that people should have a right to the files that the government produces. And I would hate to live in a country where the only people that have access to information are the police and the government.

Mr. PINCK: [to incoming call on Detective Hotline] Welcome to the Detective Hotline. This is **Charles Pinck**. How can I help you? Okay, you're thinking of investing money with this individual. Okay, he's in the financial field? The first place you should call is the National Association of Security Dealers. They will tell you if he has any disciplinary actions taken against him. Let me just get that number for you. Well, here's another number. Let me give you two numbers. First is for the Pennsylvania Securities Commission-

ZWERDLING: And Pinck gives the caller a half dozen other sources to call to check if the businessman has ever gone bankrupt or been charged with any crimes. The telephone lesson takes about six minutes and will cost the caller around \$25. If you don't have the time or energy to track down the information yourself, Detective Hotline will do it for you for more money.

Pinck and Dillon teach us, by the way, that just about the only people who have the right to demand your Social Security number are the IRS, your employer, and your bank. The more you needlessly give it away to department stores and motor vehicle bureaus, the easier it is for Detective Hotline to track you down. According to their brochure, incidentally, a lot of callers want to check out their housekeepers and nannies.

Mr. PINCK: In fact, one of the examples we cite there is a woman who called from New Jersey who was worried about her daughter's nanny. There was just something about her that struck her as funny. In that instance we took the individual's name and whatever information they had about her, whether it's a date of birth or last known address, maybe a Social Security number. One of the things we did was run a trace of her Social Security number just to see where she'd lived. We then determined that she had in fact been in South Carolina, so we contacted the South Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles and requested a copy of her driving record.

ZWERDLING: And that's legal?

Mr. PINCK: That is legal. That is legal, yeah.

ZWERDLING: And you found out?

Mr. PINCK: And we found out that she'd been cited for misrepresenting her identity to the police and also for speeding on several occasions, and for an alcohol violation. And that's important information for someone who's gonna, you know, entrust their children to someone else's care.

ZWERDLING: I wonder, could we investigate myself? Let's suppose that I am at the stage where I'm- I am now married, but let's go back a few years - many years. My wife has met me at a party. Well, in fact, it was at a pottery class. And- how yuppie sounding! And she wants to check out this guy. His pots aren't very good, but what's his personality and his record like? Can you show me how somebody can do that?

Mr. PINCK: Yeah, we can certainly check for you? Sure. I'm assuming you've told your prospective wife something about your background.

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ZWERDLING: Yeah, I was flirting, I bragged I went to the University of Michigan, great basketball and football team.

Mr. PINCK: Right, Okay. One of the first things we would do, then, would be to contact the University of Michigan to make sure that you, in fact, graduated there. A lot of people misrepresent their pasts and-

ZWERDLING: -I graduated, barely-

Mr. PINCK: -Said he went to Harvard and Yale. So, one of the first things we'll do is we'll contact the University of Michigan, and we'll just verify that you graduated from there.

ZWERDLING: So you are calling?

Mr. PINCK: [phone call to University of Michigan] Good morning. I'd like to verify that a gentleman by the name of Daniel Zwerdling attended the University of Michigan. Do I know when they attended.

ZWERDLING: A '60s kind of guy.

Mr. PINCK: Sometime in the 1960s.

ZWERDLING: And they don't even ask you who you are or where you're from?

Mr. PINCK: They don't. They won't, obviously, give me your transcript or any personal information. Wait a minute, they're connecting me now. Yeah, he received a B.S., no, I'm sorry, B.G.S., Bachelor of General Studies, August 21st, 1971. All right, thank you very much. Bye-bye.

Mr. DILLON: [phone call to Election Commission] Hi, good morning. I would like to determine if an individual's a registered voter in Montgomery County?

ZWERDLING: Okay, now wait. Now, both of you are getting information. So, you're looking up my voter registration?

Mr. DILLON: Yes.

ZWERDLING: Can they tell you if I've ever registered for a particular political party?

Mr. DILLON: Yes, they're going to tell me if you are a registered voter, when you last voted, and if you have a party affiliation. [to Election Commission] Zwerdling - z-w-e-r-d-l-i-n-g. Okay, last election voted? And do you have a party affiliation? Thank you very much. Bye-bye.

So, we just found out that you last voted as an absentee ballot in the general election in '92.

ZWERDLING: That's right. Did they say why it was absentee.

Mr. DILLON: No. And we know that your party-

ZWERDLING: Nope, nope, no party affiliation. That's secret. Wow. That took like, what, two minutes? All right.

Mr. PINCK: [pulls up information on computer] Let's go in here and-

ZWERDLING: Okay, now it says your search request has found three documents through-

Mr. PINCK: Right. Right. We found people with the name 'Zwerdling' in Maryland. So now we're gonna go over here and see if you pop up.

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ZWERDLING: Well, yeah, yeah. Okay, so there we are.

Mr. PINCK: Yep.

ZWERDLING: That's my address, righ? That's the right zip code.

Mr. PINCK: Yeah. So, we'll take down your address here.

ZWERDLING: Tells you the land value and the amount of improvements we've made? So, now you know how much that gold-plated bathtub cost.

Mr. PINCK: That's right. So anyhow, we now have your address.

ZWERDLING: Just a joke. And does it give you my Social Security number?

Mr. PINCK: It does. Tells us your year of birth, 1949.

ZWERDLING: This makes me feel sorta sick. No, really. I mean, I feel sort of invasive. It does sort of make me feel queasy in my stomach that all this information is available, and I wonder whether it's- maybe it's legal to get this information-

Mr. PINCK: It is-

ZWERDLING: -But is it ethical for people to be able to get all this information?

Mr. PINCK: I think it is and I think, you know, as Frank mentioned earlier, you know, one of the important things about a democratic society is the free flow and free accessibility of information. And I think that's important.

ZWERDLING: Yeah, but another thing about a democratic society is the right to privacy.

Mr. PINCK: That's true too. And there's an important balance that I think needs to be struck between an individual's right to privacy and the need to be able to access information for very valid purposes. People need to protect themselves, and one of the ways they can protect themselves is by having access to a lot of the information you just mentioned. So, there really- there're are two very important components to it. I mean, if we lock up a lot of this information that's currently public, it's, frankly- it probably will help a lot of people who are engaged in criminal activity because you won't be able to find out, you know, the truth about them.

ZWERDLING: So, on balance you're saying that this information is- helps the public more than it hurts them.

Mr. DILLON: I would say that, and I would especially say the difference in how we live today versus how our parents lived. My experience - I came out of a small New England town. My parents lived in an area where everyone pretty much knew about them. If you went into that town, you could probably get as much information at the local post office and grocery store about them as you can on these computers today.

ZWERDLING: Well, I guess at the small town grocery store, Frank, you could even found out who's sleeping with whom? You can't find that out on your computer data bases, can you.

Mr. DILLON: No.

ZWERDLING: OK, **Charles Pinck**, Frank Dillon, thanks very much.

Mr. DILLON: Thank you.

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ZWERDLING: **Charles Pinck** and Frank Dillon run the Detective Hotline based at An-
nandale, Virginia. I'm gonna go- I'm gonna stop giving my Social Security num-
ber to so many people.

Mr. PINCK: Well, you don't have to give it to anybody. I mean, you really
don't, that the important thing.

[music]

ZWERDLING: It is no secret that this is NPR, National Public Radio.

[promo for 'Morning Edition']

[music 'Blue Moon']

The preceding text has been professionally transcribed. However, although
the text has been checked against an audio track, in order to meet rigid distri-
bution and transmission deadlines, it may not have been proofread against tape.

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