

Computer expert gets no jail time in extensive spamming case

January 28 2016, by Joe Mandak

A computer expert was sentenced Thursday to two years' probation for helping send millions of spam messages that allowed computer marketers to illegally harvest email addresses and phone numbers.

Naveed Ahmed, 27, of Tampa, faced at least two years in prison under advisory sentencing guidelines, but Senior U.S. District Judge Maurice Cohill Jr. in Pittsburgh imposed probation. Defense attorney Melvin Vatz called Ahmed "a man of considerable intelligence who has unfortunately succumbed to directing those talents in the wrong way."

Ahmed cooperated with investigators "the moment he got the knock on the door" from federal agents, Vatz said.

Ahmed was a systems administrator and master's degree student at the University of South Florida. He lost his job but gained a wife since pleading guilty in August.

Cohill's sentence will allow Ahmed to work with computers that will be monitored by federal probation officers.

Ahmed was one of 12 people charged federally for marketing their illegal computer skills on Darkcode.com, a cybercriminal marketplace disabled by the FBI in July. Seventy people in the U.S. and 19 other countries were targeted in that takedown.

From September 2011 to February 2013, Ahmed and two others earned

between \$2,000 to \$3,000 weekly by conspiring to violate a 2003 law designed to protect cellphone and computer users from unwanted marketing and pornography spam emails and text messages.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jimmy Kitchen argued the sentence should be stiff enough to deter "an entire world full of potential computer hackers." But he didn't object to the probation sentence, which was similar to one given last week to a co-conspirator, Dewayne Watts, of Hernando, Florida. Watts must spend the first six months of his probation confined to his home.

A third person who pleaded guilty in the spam scheme, Phillip Fleitz, 31, of Indianapolis, is scheduled for sentencing Monday.

Fleitz has acknowledged operating the computer servers in China that the trio used. Ahmed, whom Kitchen called the "most technically adept" of the three, wrote a program that helped match cellphone numbers with their carriers. That enabled the scammers to bombard the phones with unsolicited messages. Watts wrote the text messages meant to entice phone users to respond.

Both types of spam included Internet links. Those who received the text messages were told they had won Best Buy gift cards that could be accessed by clicking the links.

In reality, computer and phone users who responded were routed to Web pages controlled by Internet Cost Per Action networks, which are companies that gather email addresses and other personal information. Such companies are legal, but the means Ahmed and the others used to drive traffic to the companies' websites was not, Kitchen said.

The networks paid Ahmed and the others for each email address they gathered. That money was sent through a Swiss bank account controlled

by an unindicted—and so far unidentified—co-conspirator, who kept 10 percent for laundering the money, Kitchen said.

"I know my actions were irresponsible," Ahmed told the judge. "I had this naive, immature view of being invincible."

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