

# Feds charge man they say worked for 'darknet' marketplace

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An Illinois man who federal prosecutors say worked as a spokesman for a "darknet" marketplace for illicit internet commerce has been charged in Atlanta.

Authorities have said AlphaBay was the internet's largest darknet site—trading in illegal drugs, firearms and counterfeit goods, among other things—before it was taken down through an international law enforcement effort in July.

Federal prosecutors in Atlanta have charged 24-year-old Ronald L. Wheeler III of Streamwood, Illinois, with conspiracy to commit access device fraud.

Wheeler pleaded not guilty Wednesday at an initial hearing before federal Magistrate Judge Janet King. She agreed to allow him to remain free while his case is pending, but said she would require drug testing.

Wheeler's lawyer, Phillip Turner, said he had no additional comment after the hearing.

Prosecutors wrote in a court filing that Wheeler, known online as Trappy and Trappy\_Pandora, began working as AlphaBay's public relations specialist in May 2015. His duties included moderating the AlphaBay forum on Reddit and posting information about AlphaBay in other Reddit forums, mediating sales disputes among the marketplace's users, providing non-technical assistance to users and promoting AlphaBay

online, prosecutors wrote.

Wheeler was paid a salary in bitcoin, a digital currency, by Alexandre Cazes, the 25-year-old Canadian owner of AlphaBay who was known online as Alpha02 and Admin, the court filing says.

AlphaBay used Tor, a network of thousands of computers run by volunteers, to hide its tracks. With Tor, traffic gets relayed through multiple computers. Identifying information is stripped at each stop, so that no single computer knows the full chain.

From May 2015 through July 3 of this year, Wheeler worked with Cazes and others to use AlphaBay to traffic in personal access information and use these usernames, passwords, email addresses, telephone numbers and bank account numbers without authorization to obtain money, goods and services, the court filing says.

If convicted, Wheeler is to forfeit any proceeds from his alleged illegal activity, including \$27,562 in U.S. currency and about 14 bitcoins, the court filing says.

AlphaBay went offline when Cazes was arrested July 5 in Thailand with DEA and FBI assistance. Cazes died in Thai police custody on July 12. The country's narcotics police chief told reporters at the time that Cazes hanged himself in jail just prior to a scheduled court hearing

The police agency Europol estimates AlphaBay had done \$1 billion in business since its 2014 creation. Cazes had amassed a \$23 million fortune as the site's creator and administrator, according to court documents.

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