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Southern California Man Who Hijacked Al Jazeera Website Agrees to Plead Guilty to Federal Charges

A website designer from Norco, California has agreed to plead guilty to felony charges after admitting to federal authorities that he was responsible for the hijacking of Arabic-language news station Al Jazeera's website during the war in Iraq, United States Attorney Debra W. Yang announced today.

Earlier this week, the United States Attorney's Office in Los Angeles filed a two-count information against John William Racine II charging him with wire fraud and unlawful interception of an electronic communication. In a plea agreement filed today, Racine, 24, agreed to plead guilty to the two charges.

According to court documents filed in United States District Court in Los Angeles, Al Jazeera Space Channel, based in Doha, Qatar, is an Arabic-language media organization that had registered the domain name Aljazeera.net through Network Solutions, Inc. in Dulles, Virginia. In addition to its satellite television news service, Al Jazeera provided English and Arabic-language news through its Aljazeera.net web site. Racine diverted the web site and e-mail traffic for AlJazeera.net after learning in March 2003 that the web site contained images of captured American prisoners of war and soldiers killed in action during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Racine gained control of the Aljazeera.net domain name by defrauding Network Solutions where Al Jazeera maintained an account for its domain name and e-mail services. Racine then diverted the web site traffic to another web site he had designed featuring an American flag in the shape of the continental United States and the words "Let Freedom Ring . . . ." Racine also intercepted approximately 300 e-mail messages destined for the Aljazeera.net domain and diverted the messages to an e-mail account under his control.

Racine admitted to FBI agents that he had contacted Network Solutions by telephone and e-mail in an attempt to gain control of the Aljazeera.net domain name. He ultimately created a false photo identification card to impersonate an Al Jazeera systems administrator and forged the systems administrator's signature on a Network Solutions "Statement of Authorization" form. Racine then sent the fraudulent documents to Network Solutions by facsimile and induced Network solutions to give him control of the Al Jazeera account.

Racine subsequently changed the Aljazeera.net account settings and redirected all web traffic through a dynamic domain name service and ultimately to his web site containing the American flag. In addition, he re-routed all e-mail traffic to an account he had created on MSN Hotmail using the name of the Al Jazeera systems administrator. While Racine maintained control of Al Jazeera's domain name, Internet users were unable to access the Al Jazeera news web sites and Al Jazeera was unable to receive e-mail sent to the domain. On March 26, Racine contacted agents of the FBI and admitted that he was responsible for hijacking the web site and intercepting the e-mail sent to Aljazeera.net.

The maximum possible penalty for the two felony charges in the information is 25 years in federal prison and a fine of $500,000. The plea agreement, however, contemplates a sentence of three years probation, to include 1,000 hours of community service. Additionally, Racine has agreed to pay a fine of $1,500 and full restitution to the victims of the offenses. It should be noted that the sentence contemplated in the plea agreement will not be binding on the judge that will preside over Racine's case.

Racine is scheduled to be arraigned on the information in United States District Court in Los Angeles on Monday, June 16.

The case was investigated by Special Agents of the Cyber Crime Division in the Los Angeles Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

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