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Hawaii attorney target of online harassment

By Greg Wiles
Advertiser Staff Writer

As vice chairman of the state Identity Theft Task Force, attorney Marvin Dang is well aware of ways to fend off cyber thieves.

But for the past four months Dang's encountered an unusual offshoot of identity theft: use of his name in offensive e-mails in an attempt to harass him and sully his reputation.

Dang has been unable to stop or find out who is sending the messages, which now total more than 1,000 and have been sent to him, attorneys he knows, prominent lawmakers, family members and others.

The messages range from crude attempts to paint Dang as a racist, to others that try to link him to drug use and pornography.

There have been e-mails that smack of threats and intimidation, such as one noting Dang unknowingly walked by the sender four times in two weeks or that Dang should change where he eats lunch. He's been asked how he got such a good parking space or where he purchased a shirt he wore for a picture in a local publication.

"It's a situation where you're wondering how someone would do something like this," Dang said. Each time he comes across an e-mail, he makes a copy. They fill two 3 1/2-inch-thick black binders.

"I've never seen anything along these lines," Dang said.

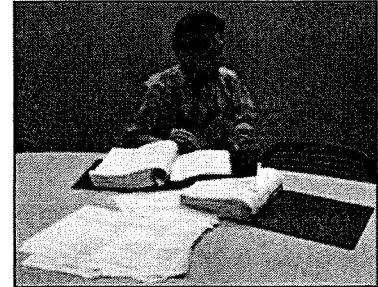
Unfortunately for Dang and others, use of e-mail and Web postings to libel and create problems for people appears to be spreading.

Cases are cropping up in other states, and the California State Assembly is considering including the offenses under its identity-theft statutes, said Jay Foley, executive director of the Identity Theft Resource Center in San Diego.

"We're hearing about more and more of it," Foley said. "Every day we wake up and there's more and more you can do with a computer."

Foley's experienced the problem firsthand. Someone got hold of his personal e-mail account's password and posted an online personal want ad talking about his supposed sexual preferences. Foley has since closed that e-mail account.

He knows of cases where derogatory e-mails led to a Sacramento resident losing her car and having to install a home security system. Foley said in another case, someone manipulated a nude photo to place a teacher's face on it and began circulating the bogus picture around the Internet.



Attorney Marvin Dang looks over his collection of e-mails circulated anonymously to defame or threaten him. The vice chairman of the state Identity Theft Task Force has spent months dealing with the attacks.

JEFF WIDENER | The Honolulu Advertiser

PROTECT YOURSELF

Here are some steps to take if you find yourself the subject of Internet harassment and scam e-mails.

- If someone is using your personal e-mail after stealing your password, consider closing down the e-mail account.
- Contact your Internet service provider to see if they can help find the offender.
- File a police report.
- Make copies of all the e-mails and document your

"It was detrimental to her career," he said.

Foley said one of the worst cases involved a stolen password and an online posting supposedly from the person listing their address and some of their unusual sexual fantasies.

FACELESS SENDER

Dang's problems began in April, when an attorney acquaintance queried him about a questionable e-mail that was circulating. The message read:

"Dear Voter,

"We don't need a (racist slur) from Hawaii to be the president so help my cause in stopping this injustice.

"Friend of Marvin Dang"

Dang recoiled and remembers thinking that someone was attempting to steal his name or perhaps ruin his reputation.

In weeks that followed, it became more apparent that both were the case.

He started to get odd e-mails himself while more friends reported receiving e-mails defaming him. Dang said it appears the sender has harvested information about him on the Internet, pulling down names of lawyers he volunteers with and researching his political relationships and business clients. Some of these people are now receiving the electronic messages.

After learning of about a dozen e-mails, Dang contacted the state attorney general's office, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Honolulu Police Department. Dang said the origin of the e-mails has been difficult to trace because the sender uses Web services in other countries that guarantee the sender's identity will be protected.

The services allow the sender to be listed as "anonymous" or to use whatever name they want to be listed as sending the message.

Dang has been listed as the originator on some of the e-mails, while others have listed prominent local politicians, Dang's workers and family members as the sender.

In some cases, the names appear to have been grabbed from other sources. One supposedly was sent by George Orwell, perhaps an allusion to the deceased author whose novel "1984" included the line "Big Brother is watching you."

E-MAILS GET NASTIER

While the initial e-mails were subtle in libeling Dang, some of them have become more distasteful and ugly. One e-mail supposedly from Dang to another attorney noted, "got a new shipment of nose candy. Contact me."

Others have mentioned kiddie porn, gay Web sites or have made derogatory statements about people close to him. They've listed Dang, a former state legislator, as head of a dubious political committee. That message makes disagreeable references about certain Hawai'i ethnic groups and asking for money so he can help them.

Included in the messages are Dang's mailing address and telephone and fax numbers.

The state attorney general's office confirmed it is looking into the incidents but would not say more because the matter is under investigation.

time and expenses in dealing with problems. You can use this record to seek restitution when the person is caught, said Jay Foley, executive director of the Identity Theft Resource Center.

- Consider reaching out to people you know to explain the situation, just in case they've received the e-mails.

- In the most serious of cases, take steps to ensure your personal safety.

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Dang's work includes collecting debts for credit card companies and pursuing foreclosures for mortgage lenders. He suspects the culprit is an unhappy debtor whom he sued and now holds a grudge against him.

WARNING TO OTHERS

Meanwhile, Dang said he continues to receive up to a dozen of the e-mails a day, while other people he knows can receive multiple messages. He's taken steps to notify acquaintances about ignoring the derogatory missives.

"You always wonder who is getting these things," Dang said. "Credibility is very important and you want to make sure what is said about you is not scum lies like these."

Dang said he decided to make his story public to help educate people.

"Anyone can be the victim of e-mail harassment," he said. "Unfortunately, it's just too easy for a nameless, faceless perpetrator to fake the name of a sender."

"Don't accept at face value every e-mail you receive."

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