



# Online dating scam victims hire hackers, private investigators to fight back

7.30 By Pat McGrath

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**Cyber crime victims are hiring professional hackers and private investigators to get to the bottom of online scams that authorities refuse to touch.**

Melbourne man Gerard Prescott turned to a private investigator earlier this year after losing \$260,000 through an online dating scam.

"For the last 12 months all I've done is look for answers" he said.

"I got a private investigator to find the IP addresses, and I found an IP address in Nigeria and one in South Africa."

Mr Prescott was tricked into sending the money after meeting who he thought was a Brisbane-based woman on a Christian dating website late last year.

Mr Prescott originally reported the fraud to the Federal Government's Australian Cybercrime Online Reporting Authority (ACORN), but said he did not get a response until six months later.

"I haven't been able to get the police to do anything," he said.

## Following the online trail

Private investigator Simon Smith, who was hired by Mr Prescott, said the information he gathered would go a long way to helping Australian and international police to identify the scammers.

"All you need to do once you have an IP address and time is contact the relevant internet service provider in whatever country it is and, with a law authority, basically ask them, 'Who is the owner of this IP address?'" he said.

"And if you are a law enforcement officer, or even through a court, you can subpoena this information, then there's going to be a trail."

Through his investigations Mr Prescott managed to track down another victim of the same scammers, fellow Victorian Leslie Folk.

"I lost about \$120,000. It was all my super," Mr Folk said.

7.30 has spoken to another woman who hired a US-based professional hacker to track down scammers that cheated her out of almost \$300,000 through an online dating service.

She said she hired the hacker after getting no response from ACORN.

## 'God forbid someone else's case takes 11 months to get noticed'

ACORN was formed two years ago to allow victims to report crimes through an online portal.

Reports are supposed to be passed on to the appropriate law enforcement agency for investigation.

Earlier this year 7.30 lodged a Freedom of Information application with the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC), which is responsible for ACORN, requesting figures on how many reports ACORN had passed on to police.

The commission provided data showing ACORN received 39,487 reports last year and 22,710 reports in the first six months of this year.

However, it did not provide any figures on how many reports had been passed on to police.

The commission used an exemption in the Freedom of Information Act that allows agencies to withhold information if they believe it could jeopardise their operations.

"Not all ACORN reports will result in police action or lost money being recovered," the ACIC said in a statement at the time.

"Once a report has been submitted, the ACORN system automatically refers suitable reports to law enforcement agencies for consideration and possible investigation."

Melbourne woman Anna Krien waited almost a year before receiving a response from the police after making a report to ACORN.

The response came in the form of an email from a Queensland police officer asking if she still wanted police to investigate the scam that cost her \$15,000.

"So I wrote back and said if you think you can do something that's more useful somewhere else, you have my blessing to go do that," she said.

"Because God forbid someone else's case takes 11 months to get noticed."

**Topics:** law-crime-and-justice, internet-technology, science-and-technology, information-and-communication, melbourne-3000

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