

## Former exec gets 3 years in Internet sex case

By Rebecca Rosen Lum

*IJ reporter*

A Marin interactive-TV executive will spend nearly three years in federal prison for using the Internet to solicit sex from a minor, a federal judge in San Francisco ruled yesterday.

Ranjit Sahota, 36, of Fairfax, co-founder and former



SAHOTA

chief executive officer of the Mill Valley company MetaTV, is still awaiting trial in Santa Clara County for allegedly molesting a 12-year-old girl who prosecutors say was so devastated by the encounter and its aftermath, she attempted suicide.

Arrested in June 2001 after a three-month undercover operation by the FBI and Sunnyvale police, Sahota faced a maximum 15 years in prison. But a plea bargain signed Nov. 9 set a suggested sentencing range of 30 to 37 months. He was sentenced to 34 months.

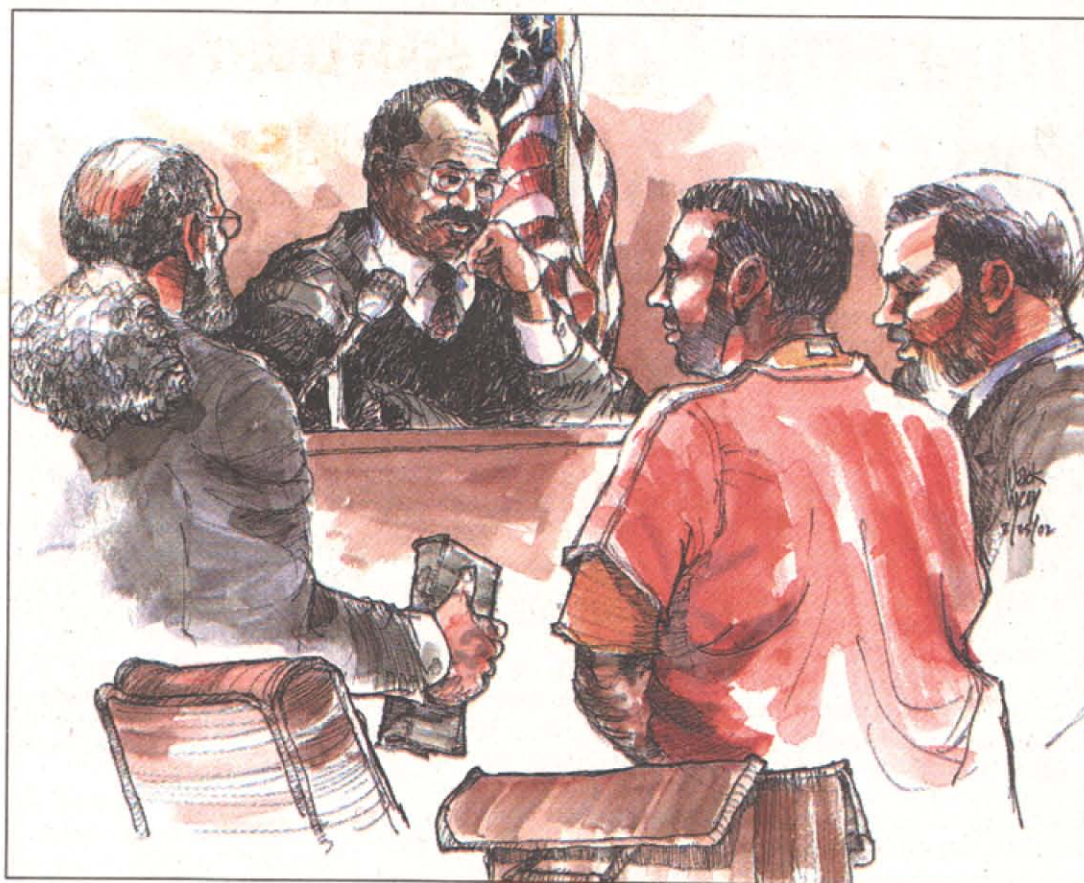
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U.S. District Court Judge Martin Jenkins granted defense attorneys' request to allow Sahota to serve his time at the federal prison in Lompoc in the least restrictive unit. Jenkins denied a request to allow him to serve his sentence in Canada, where he is a citizen.

Federal prosecutors promised not to pursue federal charges linked to his use of the Internet in the Santa Clara County case.

However, the agreement leaves the door open for prosecutors to pursue charges in additional cases. Investigators discovered stored e-mails and online chats with as many as 30 in-

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Jack Lucey illustration

**HEARING:** The scene in federal court yesterday as Ranjit Sahota was sentenced. From left is defense attorney Dennis Roberts, Judge Martin Jenkins, Sahota and defense attorney John Forsyth.

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dividuals whom prosecutors believe to be underage girls.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Davina Pujari argued for a 37-month prison sentence, saying Sahota is a danger to society.

"The defendant at least twice in one year used his skills to entice minor girls for sex," she said. "The pattern is very disturbing."

Lawyers for Sahota, who has two young sons, argued for leniency and cited abuse in his early life by a violent, alcoholic father. They also praised his accomplishments, rising from humble means to oversee a \$100 million company.

But Pujari noted that when Sahota showed up in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco on June 2 to meet a 14-year-old girl named "April," he brought a hotel card key, a bottle of body oil and a box of condoms.

"URFriendApril" was the screen name for an undercover FBI agent.

Sahota, who stood with his hands clasped behind his back during the hearing, read aloud a statement in which he apologized for his actions, and said he was "fully committed to rehabilitate."

"The whole event has been a huge wake-up call," he said.

Pujari asked the judge to take the record of Sahota's other communications with suspected minors into account in sentencing. Logs seized by investigators include the following notes and queries:

► "Cheer, party and sex," after a communication with a 16-year-old. He added, "Fly there and see her and party in summer."

► He asked one girl whether "you ever do stuff for money" and "can you travel."

► "3some with (named blanked out)," another note says. There were numerous stored photos and descriptions of girls' physical features and their telephone numbers.

Sahota has been charged with two counts of forcible child molestation in the Santa Clara County case. If convicted in that case, he faces a maximum penalty of 16 years in prison.

The charges could be upgraded to rape, Santa Clara County prosecutor Chuck Gillingham said.

In that case — which led to the FBI sting — a 12-year-old Sunnyvale girl met Sahota online in 2000, according to court records. They exchanged e-mails "about their personal lives, their feelings, and how people should treat one another," according to an

FBI report. "Their e-mail correspondences were not sexual in nature."

The girl told police Sahota described himself as a 21-year-old college student and used the screen name "Surfer Ron."

She said she met him in August 2000 at Fair Oaks Park in Sunnyvale and she told police he drove her straight to a Vagabond Inn, where he allegedly assaulted her.

He instructed her not to tell anyone about the encounter or "they could both get in trouble," according to the FBI report.

Prosecutors accused Sahota's lawyers of pumping a relative of the girl for incriminating information, asking whether she used drugs and was sexually active. They allegedly told the relative, "if she continues to be sexually active with people who end up in jail, then she too will end up in jail," according to a motion filed by prosecutors.

When the 12-year-old girl learned of the interview from her grandmother, she became so depressed she attempted suicide, according to court records.

Sahota's lawyers subsequently agreed to stop pre-trial interviews, according to court records.

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