

14 year-old's Twitter prank leads to arrest in the Netherlands

A prank by a 14 year-old Dutch girl on Twitter prompted both her arrest – and broader questions about free speech, as Max Harris discusses.



In April 2014, a 14 year-old Dutch girl, posting under the name 'Sarah' and on the Twitter handle '@QueenDemetriax_', caused a global stir with an online prank that went horribly wrong.

The 14 year-old sent a message to the American Airlines Twitter account reading: "Hello my name's Ibrahim and I'm from Afghanistan. I'm part of Al Qaida and on June 1st I'm gonna do something really big bye." Six minutes later, American Airlines replied by saying: "Sarah, we take these threats very seriously. Your IP address and details will be forwarded to security and the FBI." American Airlines was one of the airlines whose planes were hijacked on 11 September 2001; indeed, two American Airlines planes were hijacked that day.

The American Airlines reply prompted a flurry of tweets from the girl, in which she apologised, requested a lawyer, and initially at least revelled in the attention that her messages had garnered. Most memorably, perhaps, she wrote: "I feel famous omg [oh my god]", after she gained over 30,000 followers on Twitter. She also said: "I always wanted to be famous, but ... not Osama bin laden [sic] famous", and "I'm not from Afghanistan". Soon after, her account was deleted. But this did not stop a wave of copycat tweets, including one reading: "I have a bomb under the next plane to take off".

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Rotterdam police claimed that the girl might face criminal charges, under the offence of posting a false or alarming announcement. However, the girl was released after being questioned by police, and the story received very little press attention after initial fanfare in mid-April, suggesting that no charges were ultimately pressed.

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