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Ex-Rutgers student convicted of hate crime, invasion of privacy in webcam spying case

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NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A former Rutgers University student accused of using a webcam to spy on his gay roommate's love life was convicted of all counts Friday in a case that exploded into the headlines when the victim of the snooping committed suicide by throwing himself off a bridge.

Indian-born Dharun Ravi, 20, shook his head slightly after the guilty verdicts were read for all 15 counts, including bias intimidation, a hate crime, and invasion of privacy.

He could get years in prison — and could be deported to his native India, even though he has lived legally in the U.S. since he was a little boy — for his part in an act that cast a spotlight on teen suicide and anti-gay bullying and illustrated the Internet's potential for tormenting others.

Prosecutors said that Ravi set up a webcam in his dorm room in September 2010 and captured his roommate, Tyler Clementi, kissing another man, then tweeted about it and excitedly tried to catch Clementi in the act again two days later. About a half-dozen students were believed to have seen the live video of the kissing.

Within days, Clementi realized he had been watched and leaped from the bridge linking New York City and New Jersey after posting one last status update on Facebook: "Jumping off the gw bridge, sorry."

Ravi's lawyer argued that the college freshman was not motivated by any malice toward gays — a necessary element to prove a hate crime — and that his actions were just those of an immature "kid."

The defence also contended Ravi initially set up the camera because he was afraid Clementi's older, "sketchy"-looking visitor might steal his belongings.

Ravi was not charged with causing Clementi's death, and the suicide remained largely in the background at the trial, though some witnesses mentioned it and the jury was told Clementi had taken his life. Prosecutors were not allowed to argue directly that the spying led to his death; defence lawyers were barred from saying there were other reasons he killed himself.

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Clementi's death was one in a string of suicides by young gays around the country in September 2010. President Barack

Obama commented on it, as did talk show host Ellen DeGeneres.

New Jersey lawmakers hastened passage of an anti-bullying law because of the case, and Rutgers changed its housing policies to allow opposite-sex roommates in an effort to make gay, bisexual and transgender students feel more comfortable.

Testimony came from about 30 witnesses over 12 days, including the man seen kissing Clementi. The 32-year-old man was identified in court only by the initials M.B. Ravi himself did not testify, though the jury watched a video of his interrogation by police.

Ravi and Clementi, both 18-year-old freshmen from comfortable New Jersey suburbs, had been randomly assigned to room together at Rutgers, and Clementi had arrived at college just a few days after coming out to his parents as gay.

A string of students testified they never heard Ravi say anything bad about gays in general or Clementi in particular. But students did say Ravi expressed some concern about sharing a room with a gay man.

On Sept. 19, according to testimony, Clementi asked Ravi to leave their room so that he could have a guest. Later, Ravi posted on Twitter: "Roommate asked for the room till midnight. I went into molly's room and turned on my webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. Yay."

Ravi told police that he viewed only seconds of the encounter via computer.

His friend Molly Wei testified that she and a few other students also watched the live stream of the men kissing. (Wei was initially charged in the case but was later accepted into a pretrial program that will allow her to keep her record clean.)

Two nights later, Clementi asked for the room alone again. This time, Ravi tweeted: "I dare you to video chat me between the hours of 9:30 and 12. Yes, it's happening again." Ravi also texted a friend about a planned "viewing party" and, two students said, went to friends' dorm rooms to show them how to access the feed.

However, there was no evidence the webcam was turned on that night. Ravi told police he had put his computer to sleep. Prosecutors argued Clementi himself unplugged the computer.

According to testimony, Clementi submitted a room-change request form and talked to a resident assistant about what happened. He also used his laptop to view Ravi's Twitter site 38 times in the last two days of his life. He killed himself on Sept. 22.

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