



I the Threat Report

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Blockchain Developer Gets Busted After Talk in North Korea

Hacker and Ethereum developer Virgil Griffith was recently arrested by US authorities for speaking at a conference on blockchain technologies.

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Months after speaking at a blockchain technologies conference held at North Korea's Sci-Tech Complex in April, Virgil Griffith was arrested. **PHOTOGRAPH:** KCNA/REUTERS

The prominent hacker and [Ethereum](#) developer [Virgil Griffith](#) was arrested by the US government Friday after he spoke at an April conference on blockchain technologies in North Korea. The US government considers his presentation to be a transfer of technology—and therefore a violation of US sanctions.

But Griffith's defenders, including Ethereum founder Vitalik Buterin, describe the arrest as a massive overreaction. Griffith worked for the Ethereum Foundation, and Buterin

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a presentation based on publicly available info about open source software."

But federal prosecutors argue that Griffith, a US citizen residing in Singapore, knew full well that his trip violated US sanction laws. They say he sought approval for the trip from the US State Department, and his request was denied. Griffith made the trip anyway, traveling through China to evade US travel restrictions.

In a [charging document](#), an FBI agent wrote that Griffith "discussed how blockchain and cryptocurrency technology could be used by the DPRK to launder money and evade sanctions, and how the DPRK could use these technologies to achieve independence from the global banking system."

Griffith made little effort to hide his travel plans. He tweeted out a photo of his travel documents and voluntarily talked to the FBI after his trip. He even allowed the authorities to inspect his cell phone.

The Feds say Griffith's electronic communications show a clear intention to violate US sanctions laws. When a friend asked why the North Korean regime was interested in cryptocurrency, he wrote: "probably avoiding sanctions ... who knows."

Later, he told a friend of his plan to help send 1 unit of cryptocurrency (presumably ether) between South and North Korea. The friend asked, "Isn't that violating sanctions?" Griffith replied, "It is," according to the US government.

'Minor Public-Relations Disasters'

Griffith was a well-known figure in the hacking world for more than a decade before

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records—highlighting the downside of using this information to authenticate consumers.

According to his [LinkedIn page](#), Griffith received a PhD in computation and neural systems in 2014. Since then, he has been involved in a variety of cryptocurrency projects. He has been a research scientist at the Ethereum Foundation since 2016.

This story originally appeared on [Ars Technica](#).

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