

Statement by Josh Renaud about Missouri investigation

Today, the Cole County prosecutor declined to file charges against me over my discovery of a flaw in a public website run by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education that exposed thousands of teachers' sensitive information.

This decision is a relief. But it does not repair the harm done to me and my family.

My actions were entirely legal and consistent with established journalistic principles.

Yet Gov. Mike Parson falsely accused me of being a "hacker" in a televised press conference, in press releases sent to every teacher across the state, and in attack ads aired by his political action committee. He ordered the Highway Patrol to begin a criminal investigation, forcing me to keep silent for four anxious months.

This was a political persecution of a journalist, plain and simple.

Despite this, I am proud that my reporting exposed a critical issue, and that it caused the state to take steps to better safeguard teachers' private data.

At the same time, I am concerned that the governor's actions have left the state more vulnerable to future bad actors. His high-profile threats of legal retribution against me and the Post-Dispatch likely will have a chilling effect, deterring people from reporting security or privacy flaws in Missouri, and decreasing the chance those flaws get fixed.

This has been one of the most difficult seasons of my nearly 20-year career in journalism. But I have found strength in the prayers and support of my family and friends and so many others across the country.

I'm thankful for the Post-Dispatch, which never wavered in its commitment to me.

And I'm thankful for my colleagues, who stood up for me and kept digging into this story. They found the state's cybersecurity issues went farther than we knew.

My deepest desire is that somehow this situation might be redeemed. And I believe it can be.

Last week, I read with sadness about the state Senate's treatment of Gov. Parson's nominee to lead the health department. The governor decried it as "disgraceful, unquestionably wrong, and an embarrassment to this state and the people we serve."

The governor lamented that "more care was given to political gain than the harm caused to a man and his family."

Every word Gov. Parson wrote applies equally to the way he treated me.

I agree with the governor's prayer that "honor, integrity, and order" be returned to state government.

Since my ordeal began, I have tried to follow Jesus' command in Matthew 5:44 to "bless those who curse you" and to "pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." It hasn't been easy.

But the investigation has run its course. So now I pray Gov. Parson's eyes will be opened, that he will see the harm he did to me and my family, that he will apologize, and that he will show Missourians a better way.