




[<< Back to Article](#)

## Thieves Down Under Duped by Tech

Stewart Taggart  02.12.01 | 8:50 AM

SYDNEY, Australia -- Two burglars are on the lam from police --- and a posse in cyberspace -- after being caught in the act by a home computer webcam.

"Have You Seen These Two Guys?" cries an all-points-bulletin website put together by victim Ivan Lim and his brother Oscar. The site shows photos of two baseball-capped intruders in dark clothes, apparently rifling their house in a burglary early last week.

The alleged brigands didn't realize Ivan, an educational software programmer, had hooked up a motion-sensitive webcam atop his computer. He set it up to keep an eye on the homefront after his house was burgled about 18 months earlier.

In last week's burglary, the thieves entered the house by breaking open a sliding glass door. They then made off with cash, a video camera and a DVD player. Left behind, however, was the ever-watchful computer.

After filing a police report and providing delighted detectives with photos of the suspects on a CD, Ivan and Oscar decided to disseminate the photos more widely. They put up a website of roughly 30 images they claim were taken during the burglary, e-mailing the URL to their friends.

"We told everyone to pass the word on," Ivan said.

By Wednesday, the site had received about 1,000 pageviews. On Thursday, it got roughly 4,000 after a recipient of the widening circle of forwarded mail decided to post something to a local computer-gaming newsgroup.

On Friday, the urban daily *Sydney Morning Herald* carried a story about the brothers. Visits to the site shot up rapidly to 40,000 page views, showing the drawing power of good placement in traditional media.

"Since then, we've gotten a few e-mails from people who said they think they know who the burglars are," Ivan said. "Police also have gotten a few calls."

Meanwhile, other people have e-mailed the brothers, asking how they can establish similar systems.

"It's a simple tool and a very simple idea," Ivan said. "However, for now I think it's going to be used mostly by the computer literate. It may take longer for the less computer literate to catch on, but the potential is there."

The system works by having software compare pictures taken periodically by the webcam with a picture stored as a benchmark. When the two pictures vary by more than 5 percent -- as evaluated by the software -- the webcam starts keeping images it takes rather than automatically erasing them. But the system isn't perfect, Lim says.

For instance, changing brightness in the room caused by sunlight or rain can trigger threshold changes of more than 5 percent. In addition, he'd like the software to ring his mobile phone or reliably e-mail him when motion is detected, so he can then inform police, if necessary.

Lim had the software programmed to e-mail him when motion was detected, but the system isn't yet foolproof because the automatic software may have trouble dialing his ISP, or the call could be terminated by an incoming call. In last week's case, one of the burglars appeared to have knocked out a wall plug, disconnecting the phone.

Cameron Murphy, president of the New South Wales Council of Civil Liberties, says the Lim webcam case appears to be just another step toward ubiquitous surveillance --- with all the privacy issues that entails. Already, security cameras are being installed in many public places without proper controls, he believes.

Now, by extending camera surveillance to private places such as homes, and especially placing resultant photos onto the Web, a Pandora's box of vigilantism, mistaken identities and just plain mixups may be opening.

"If you want to expose yourself to the public over the Internet, fine --- people should be able to do what they want unless they interfere with other people's rights," Murphy said. "But when you put up pictures and expose other people, you are compromising their rights."

For instance, a home webcam might capture police executing a lawful search warrant, firemen searching for the source of a blaze, or passersby forced to break into the house to find a phone to report an emergency.

Already, some interesting legal issues in Australia have been triggered by the use of images snapped in so-called "private" places.

One involved pictures taken by a taxi security camera of a haggard celebrity fresh off a lengthy overseas flight. Another involved an anti-prostitution activist who installed a webcam in his home to capture photos of Johns entering and leaving a legal brothel across the street.

In Lim's specific case, Murphy argues that disseminating the pictures may make it harder for police to catch the criminals, who may now change their appearance or flee the area. And if caught, pre-trial publicity caused by the images ultimately could jeopardize prosecution, Murphy said.

For his part, Ivan appreciates the potential problems, but is unmoved.

"These guys did come into my place without permission," he said. "While I think there can be argument about this (prejudicing a case), I still think I did the right thing. /they did steal my stuff. I think I'm in the right."