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The net is closing on burglars

Lizzie Paton reports on the new social networking site that uses webcams to create an online neighbourhood watch

Every minute, a home is broken into in Britain — official figures show there were 710,000 burglaries in the year to September 2010. And, despite David Cameron's strong words last week, giving householders the right to use force to protect their property, government spending on crime prevention is to be cut by 20%.

Many of us, then, are seeking ways to feel safer in our homes, and one company thinks it has a high-tech solution.

A new web-based system called Jabbakam allows homeowners and neighbourhoods to take security into their own hands, using cheap cameras and online social networking.

James Wickes, 50, an IT entrepreneur, came up with the concept last year after he found three men trying to break into his home in Esher, Surrey. Having chased the trio down the street in his pyjamas, he felt frustrated when police made little effort to arrest or apprehend any suspects.

"We think we can depend entirely on the local police force to maintain the safety of our houses, but this is just impractical," Wickes says. "After the



Pete Wigginton, pictured with his children, Max and Poppy, installed Jabbakam cameras, left, after a break-in at his family home in Surrey

break-in, I investigated other security solutions, but I was unimpressed with what I found. Privatised CCTV, alarms, guard patrols — most seemed pricey, unreliable and, to be honest, technologically unsophisticated."

Wickes started thinking about the potential of social networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn. "Why couldn't individuals set up similar accounts that were also accessible from remote PCs, laptops and smartphones, then use them to monitor camera footage taken in and around their homes? And, once this technology was in place, why

couldn't information be used to create shared surveillance systems, allowing authorised friends and neighbours to maintain safe environments around one another?"

With Jabbakam, Wickes believes he has found a rare gap in the dotcom market — a means of creating a digital neighbourhood watch for the 21st century. "And it wouldn't be difficult to implement," he insists.

Setting up Jabbakam in a household is certainly cheap and simple. The IP (internet protocol) camera costs £59.95 and you pay a monthly fee (from £5.95) for online video storage. There's no software installation — you just plug the

camera into your broadband router and an electric socket. Whereas CCTV produces hours of unnecessary footage that has to be searched through, IP cameras are motion-sensitive, meaning that they only capture footage when activity is monitored — this could be your car coming onto your drive, or it could be someone breaking into your home.

Recordings are stored on your Jabbakam internet page, and you get an email alert with a link to each new clip that is saved. These can then be played back, shared or deleted. You can easily control which cameras are shared with friends and when they operate.

Jabbakam launches officially this month, but has been running quietly since the end of last year, attracting 1,000 subscribers in this country, the Middle East and Africa entirely through word-of-mouth recommendations.

Pete Wigginton, 39, from Chessington, Surrey, heard about the system at the school gates in March. His wife was desperate for him to improve security after he came to blows with intruders attempting to climb through his six-year-old son Max's bedroom window — part of a spate of local burglaries.

"I started chatting to a woman whose husband was a cabler," he says. "He had set up a Jabbakam network to prevent thieves from taking his materials overnight, and it was really working — so I got on the internet and liked what I saw."

Wigginton has installed four cameras to monitor his home and garden, and set up a network for his street. "I think it's a great idea," he says. "If we were to club together to buy communal cameras, we could combat the problems we've been experiencing and it would be so much cheaper. I'm not worried about Peeping Toms or invasion of my family's privacy, as I control who can view what from the cameras."

And it's not just individuals who are signing up: Bradwell Marina, in Essex, has installed Jabbakam, while business parks, councils and police forces are interested in using the system to tackle low-level crime in municipal areas.

The prime minister would certainly approve. With his big society campaign, he has called for "neighbourhoods that are in charge of their own destiny, who feel that, if they club together and get involved, they can shape the world around them". The project may still be in its infancy, but Jabbakam could be a good place to start.

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