Photos from stolen laptop lead to man's arrest

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In this image provided by Joshua Kaufman, a man later identified as Muthanna Aldebashi is seen via a webcam on a laptop owned by Kaufman. Kaufman, of Oakland, Calif., says he retrieved the laptop Wednesday, June 1, 2011, a day after police arrested the 27-year-old man in the photographs. Muthanna Aldebashi is being held on a charge of suspicion of possessing stolen property. Kaufman says a burglar broke into his apartment March 21 and stole the laptop. He says he activated theft-tracking software that tracked its location and took screenshots and photographs of its user. (AP Photo/Joshua Kaufman)

(AP) -- When he couldn't get help from police, Joshua Kaufman went online and used Twitter and a blog to help track down his stolen laptop.

His efforts were successful and the computer was returned Wednesday - the latest example of people, not police, using technological tools to help find their own stolen property such as cars, cell phones and digital

cameras.

It helped that just before the laptop was stolen, he had installed theft-tracking software.

The images from that software that arrived in his inbox were grainy, low-lit and intimate: a man curled up on a couch, sound asleep; the same man propped up against pillows on a bed, shirtless.

Kaufman took the images to police, who did not help him. So he went online, publishing the pictures on Twitter and in a blog titled "This Guy Has My MacBook."

"People who followed me on Twitter retweeted it. It got picked up by social media and the press. It went super viral," he said. On the same day that he posted his website on Twitter, police came calling.

Police on Tuesday arrested a 27-year-old cab driver, Muthanna Aldebashi.

Kaufman had just moved to a new apartment in Oakland when a burglar broke in, taking the laptop, a bag, an electronic book reader, and a bottle of gin on March 21. He activated theft-tracking software, which began sending photos taken by the computer's built-in camera of the unauthorized user three days later.

"I wasn't sure if it would work because I never tested it before," he said. Most of the images "were honestly really boring photos - people staring into the screen. But some were definitely more humorous."

Among them was a screenshot of the man logging onto his Gmail account, which showed an email that appeared to include the name of a business, Kaufman said. A quick Internet search revealed it was a cab

company in nearby Berkeley, which Kaufman assumed was the man's workplace.

Kaufman submitted the information to police, but said they were unwilling to help and didn't respond to numerous follow-up emails.

"I know a stolen computer is small in the larger scheme but it would be nice to feel like you actually cared," he tweeted three days after the break-in.

Kaufman said he turned to the Internet because he became "frustrated and thought I should try and get some attention from the media." He posted some of the photos, including captions such as "I really don't want to know what this guy is doing with my MacBook" for the image of the shirtless man in bed.

Kaufman said he received a call from Oakland police spokeswoman Holly Joshi on the day he included a link to his blog. Joshi said she first heard about the case after receiving calls from media outlets Tuesday.

"From that point on, they seemed to be on my side completely," he said of police. "They were apologetic, and they continually told me that they would be doing something about it immediately."

Joshi blamed the large volume of theft reports Oakland police receive - about 2,400 a month for three theft investigators - and human oversight for the department's failure to follow up on Kaufman's leads.

"It was filed away," Joshi said. "It had leads, so it shouldn't have been filed away."

[Police](#) arranged a cab ride from Aldebashi and nabbed him when they recognized his face, according to Kaufman. Aldebashi was being held in

an Oakland jail on $20,000 bail, according to the Alameda County sheriff's office.

The laptop's return was the culmination of a one-man crusade of online sleuthing, social networking and moments of voyeuristic creepiness aided by the software called Hidden.

The software - part LoJack, part nanny cam - is equipped with location positioning software. A representative for the product's London-based developer, Flipcode Ltd., did not immediately respond to emails from The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Many portable electronics, including some digital cameras, are now equipped with wireless Internet capability and automatic geographic tagging on any photo taken - a helpful tool when trying to see where a thief has been hanging out. It's a step beyond the LoJack system invented two decades earlier that emitted a signal from a stolen vehicle.

Joshi said investigators did not know whether Aldebashi burglarized Kaufman's apartment, noting that stolen merchandise often changes hands. Aldebashi was scheduled to be arraigned Friday.

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