Michael De Kort was frustrated.

The 41-year-old Lockheed Martin engineer had complained to his bosses. He had told his story to government investigators. He had called congressmen.

But when no one seemed to be stepping up to correct what he saw as critical security flaws in a fleet of refurbished Coast Guard patrol boats, De Kort did just about the only thing left he could think of to get action: He made a video and posted it on YouTube.com.

"What I am going to tell you is going to seem preposterous," De Kort solemnly tells viewers near the outset of the 10-minute clip. Posted three weeks ago, the video describes what De Kort says are blind spots in the ship's security cameras, equipment that malfunctions in cold weather and other problems. "It may be very hard for you to believe that our government and the largest defense contractor in the world [are] capable of such alarming incompetence and can make ethical compromises as glaring as what I am going to describe." In response to De Kort's charges, a Coast Guard spokesperson said the service has "taken the appropriate level of action." A spokeswoman for the contractors said the allegations were without merit.
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A Web site normally reserved for goofy home-movie outtakes and Paris Hilton parodies may seem an odd place to blow the whistle on potential national security lapses that require complex technical explanations. But receiving millions of hits a day and carrying the intimacy of video, YouTube.com and other sites have become an alluring venue for insiders like De Kort who want to go directly to the public when they think no one within the system is listening.

"This is an excellent example of the democratization of the media, where everyone has access to the printing press of the 21st century," said Dina Kaplan, co-founder of Blip.tv, a site that hosts grass-roots television programming.

Kaplan, like others, was hard-pressed to think of another video like De Kort's. "We have some people that come to mind that like to complain about government conspiracies," she said. "But in terms of something truly substantive and credible, nothing springs to mind."

De Kort knew his strategy for raising concerns about communications and surveillance systems on a 123-foot Coast Guard patrol boat was unorthodox. That was the point.

"My thought was, 'What could I do that would be novel enough that it draws attention to itself, and through drawing attention to itself, something gets done?'" De Kort said in an interview from his home in Colorado. He is unemployed after being laid off by Lockheed Martin days after he posted the video. Lockheed said that the video did not influence the decision to lay off De Kort and that he had had been notified earlier this year that he would be out of a job.

As of late yesterday, his video had been viewed more than 8,000 times. That is low by YouTube standards, where a 42-second clip of a cat on a wheel received more than 800,000 views. But it is higher than might be expected for a video that features nothing more than a bearded, middle-age engineer talking into a camera and periodically glancing down at his prepared text.

The video also has caught the eye of people in high places. De Kort's video has been covered by defense trade magazines, and yesterday, Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.), ranking Democrat on the Homeland Security Committee, wrote a letter to the Coast Guard asking for an answer to De Kort's "extremely distressing" allegations.

"I want to make sure that the product we paid for is a product that does not jeopardize our men and women in service," Thompson said.

The Department of Homeland Security's inspector general's office had launched an investigation into De Kort's allegations before the video was released, and spokeswoman Tamara Faulkner said that inquiry should be completed in the next few months. Although De Kort said he believed the Coast Guard was not cooperating,
Faulkner said she did not know of any problems.

Both Lockheed Martin and the Coast Guard have said the ship is safe. Eight of the cutters are now in use, and all were converted from obsolete ships as part of the Coast Guard's $24 billion Deepwater program to rehabilitate ships.

"We've been aware of [De Kort's] concerns for some time," said Mary Elder, spokeswoman for the program. "In each case we've reviewed them and taken the appropriate level of action. The Coast Guard takes seriously any concerns related to safety and national security."

Margaret Mitchell-Jones, spokeswoman for the consortium between Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman that runs Deepwater, said Lockheed Martin had investigated and "found the accusations to be without merit."

"Anybody with a webcam and something to say, regardless of whether it's true or not, can say it on YouTube," she said, adding that the company would not ask the site to take the video down.

Another Lockheed Martin spokeswoman confirmed that De Kort had worked for the company and had been an engineer on the Deepwater project.

De Kort said he realized within about a month of beginning work on the ship that the project had serious flaws. Among them, he said, was that the ship's surveillance system had blind spots that exposed crew members to the possibility of attack. He also said that the ship's supposedly secure communications system was susceptible to eavesdropping and that some of its equipment will not work in extreme cold despite a requirement that everything function at minus 40 degrees.

De Kort said he tried to alert the chain of command at the Coast Guard and at Lockheed about the problems but was rebuffed by supervisors who told him to keep quiet because the program was behind schedule and over budget. De Kort was eventually transferred off the project, and he was laid off earlier this month. A company spokeswoman said he was laid off for financial reasons, but De Kort insists it was in retaliation for his complaints.

"The formal systems that whistle-blowers are expected to use have failed. That's why you're seeing people be creative like this," said Danielle Brian, executive director of the Project on Government Oversight. "This is a tremendous way for someone brave enough to do it to say something directly and not have to go through a filter."

Other watchdog groups were less impressed.

Patrick Burns, spokesman for Taxpayers Against Fraud, said suing for fraud is ultimately a lot more effective than being "the serious guy in a room full of clowns."

"I recommend buttoning up your lip, Xeroxing paper and filing a case," Burns said.
On YouTube, Charges of Security Flaws

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