



The Surveillance State Is Here and Now

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The Police State with full Surveillance State capability is not coming; it is already here. And private citizens are purchasing and installing the apparatus used to build it. Amazon-owned Ring, which sells video doorbells and other security cameras, announced last week that it has “partnered” with more than 400 police departments across the United States to create the Neighbors Active Law Enforcement Map using the video feeds from doorbells bought, paid for, and installed by private citizens.



Ring operates a portal that allows police departments access to the video stream from innumerable Ring doorbells, which are outfitted with cameras to allow users to see who is there before answering the door. The devices are part of the Internet of Things (IoT) and are always connected to the Internet. The IoT is a network of loosely connected “smart” devices that are able to connect to the Internet to upload and download data. The selling point is that you can check your video feed remotely and even use the playback feature to watch past events. Had your garden gnome stolen from your front porch? Rewind, and see which of those pesky neighbor kids is the prankster. UPS says a package was delivered, but it’s not there now? Watch, and see what happened to your package.

On the darker side of the equation, your ever-connected spy-cam is also accessible by the Amazon employees and the police, if your local department has joined Ring’s “partnership” program. All of your comings and goings, all of your friends comings and goings, and all of the traffic in front of your home — and within the range of the camera — are part of the data now available to police without so much as applying for a search warrant. The kicker? You simply agree to allow access as part of an effort to “fight crime.”

Matthew Guariglia, a policy analyst for the Electronic Frontier Foundation — the premier non-profit fighting for digital privacy — described Ring’s surveillance web as “a widespread CCTV network in which police and Amazon ... have access to cameras across the city on everybody’s front doors.” If this were the plot to a dystopian movie, it would be easy to discount it as ridiculous. Instead, it is real and happening now.

In making its [announcement](#) of the program, Ring publicized a list of the 405 police departments currently using the Neighbors Portal, which is part of an application made available to police. This writer would like to say that he is fully supportive of police departments and officers and the work they do to keep peace in our cities and neighborhoods. Having said that, tyrannical, draconian measures can never be justified. Sacrificing basic liberty to purchase some degree of security is always a bad bargain.



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on September 5, 2019

This is that.

The program relies on the social-media aspect of posting videos captured by Ring. As CNN [reported](#):

Ring is generally referred to as a “smart” doorbell with a camera pointed outside the front door. It also sends a push alert and video to a resident’s phone when there is movement on the camera.

That video can be posted on the Neighbors app, which functions like a social media site for certain neighborhoods, like NextDoor. The app allows people in a neighborhood to post information and video about area news or possible crime, and Ring says this makes people safer.

“When communities and law enforcement work together, safer neighborhoods can become a reality,” Ring says in an FAQ about its program. “Law enforcement agencies can share important crime and safety information to keep residents informed. Users can also choose to help law enforcement by providing useful information related to active investigations.”

Sounds innocent — even virtuous — doesn’t it? But as with everything else involving the Surveillance State, the devil is in the details. It is a fact that it would be cost prohibitive for police to install millions of cameras in neighborhoods across America. It is also a fact that doing so would throw up red flags. This scheme is an end run around both of those obstacles. Since the cameras are bought, paid for, and installed by private citizens who live in those neighborhoods, the cost is suddenly reduced to the logistics of maintaining the bandwidth to access the data. And since the devices are owned and operated by citizens who grant access, the police departments accessing that data fly largely under the radar of those concerned about privacy.

Until now.

With the EFF coming out swinging — calling Amazon’s Ring “[a perfect storm of privacy threats](#)” — the scheme is being exposed for what it is. As the EFF Deeplinks post explained, even though reliable statistics — even those from government agencies — show that crime has been on a steady decline for decades, the average person’s perception is out of sync with that reality. Furthermore:

Ring works by sending notifications to a person’s phone every time the doorbell rings or motion near the door is detected. With every update, Ring turns the delivery person or census-taker innocently standing on at the door into a potential criminal.

Neighborhood watch apps only increase the paranoia. Amazon promotes its free Neighbors app to accompany Ring. Other vendors sell competing apps such as Nextdoor and Citizen. All are marketed as localized social networks where people in a neighborhood can discuss local issues or share concerns. But all too often, they facilitate reporting of so-called “suspicious” behavior that really amounts to racial profiling. Take, for example, the story of an African-American real estate agent who was stopped by police because neighbors thought it was “suspicious” for him to ring a doorbell.

Even law enforcement are noticing the social consequences of public-safety-by-push-notification. At the International Associations of Chiefs of Police conference earlier this year, which EFF attended, Chandler Police Assistant Chief Jason Zdilla said that his city in Arizona embraced the Ring program, registering thousands of new Ring cameras per month. Though Chandler is experiencing a historic low for violent crime for the fourth year in a row, Ring is giving the public another impression.

“What happens is when someone opens up the social media, and every day they see maybe a



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potential criminal act, or every day they see a suspicious person, they start believing that this is prevalent, and that crime is really high,” Zdilla said.

To make matters worse, Ring is encouraging users to alert local 911 by sending “suspicious” behavior to the computer-aided dispatch system used by many local police agencies.

While this writer realizes that the term “racial profiling” is politically loaded and largely left-leaning, isn’t it time people realized that the mere presence of a person from a race different from the prevalence of that in any given neighborhood is not necessarily an indication of crime?

With the advent of “Surveillance-as-a-feature” such as that found in Ring, the reality is that millions of cameras will be tracking the comings and goings of everyone within range of those cameras. If that isn’t the perfection of both the “Culture of Surveillance” and the “Surveillance State,” nothing is.

Those concerned about the loss of privacy need to educate themselves as well as their friends and family about the immoral nature of such services and devices. Friends don’t let friends conduct mass surveillance. Period.

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