

# Circular Surveillance

The fabrication of a hyper-fearful  
neighborhood, and the world of  
opt-in policing.

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# When Police Shill Surveillance

**Caroline Haskins** is a reporter focused on surveillance and policing. In this essay, which originally appeared on Motherboard.com titled “Amazon Requires Police to Shill Surveillance Cameras in Secret Agreement”, Haskins chronicles the relationship between Amazon’s home security company Ring and The police department of Lakeland, Florida. This report shows the extent of Amazon’s deep engagement and support of police systems, and illustrates the proliferation of technologically-aided self surveillance.



Amazon’s home security company Ring has enlisted local police departments around the country to advertise its surveillance cameras in exchange for free Ring products and a “portal” that allows police to request footage from these cameras, a secret agreement obtained by Motherboard shows. The agreement also requires police to “keep the terms of this program confidential.”

Dozens of police departments around the country have partnered with Ring, but until now, the exact terms of these partnerships have remained unknown. A signed memorandum of understanding between Ring and the police department of Lakeland, Florida, and emails obtained via a public records request, show that Ring is using local police as a de facto advertising firm. Police are contractually required to “Engage the Lakeland community with outreach efforts on the platform to encourage adoption of the platform/app.

In order to partner with Ring, police departments must also assign officers to Ring-specific roles that include a press coordinator, a social media manager, and a community relations coordinator.

Ring donated 15 free doorbell surveillance cameras to the Lakeland Police Department, and created a program to encourage people to download its “neighborhood watch” app, Neighbors. For every Lakeland resident that downloads Neighbors as a result of the partnership, the documents show, the Lakeland Police Department gets credit toward more free Ring cameras for residents: “Each qualifying download will count as \$10 towards these free Ring cameras.” A Ring doorbell camera currently costs \$130 on Amazon.

Police already have access to publicly-funded street cameras and investigative tools that help them track down almost any criminal suspect. But Ring cameras are proliferating in the private sphere, with close to zero oversight. Amazon is convincing people to self-surveil through aggressive, fear-based marketing, aided by de facto police endorsements and free Ring camera giveaways. Consumers are opting into surveillance. And police are more than eager to capitalize on this wealth of surveillance data.

The result of Ring-police partnerships is a self-perpetuating surveillance network: More people download Neighbors, more people get Ring, surveillance footage proliferates, and police can request whatever they want.

Chris Gilliard, a professor of English at Macomb Community College who studies digital redlining and discriminatory practices enabled by data mining, said in a phone call that this surveillance network can heighten fear of crime and put people’s lives at risk.

“When really powerful companies, or police for that matter, are incentivized to find crime, they’re going to find it no matter what,” Gilliard said. “It’ll ultimately shift the definition of what is a crime and lead to over-policing in some ways. Frankly, [it’s] the broken windows style that tends to harm marginalized communities more.”

## THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

The memorandum of understanding is pitched as “a solution to the Lakeland Police Department to help reduce crime and assist with investigations in your community.” The document, which includes an “Amazon Legal” watermark, was signed by Ring and Lakeland Police Department representatives on December 13, 2018.

The agreement gives the Lakeland Police Department access to Ring’s “Law Enforcement Neighborhood Portal.” This portal is an interactive map that shows police all of the active Ring doorbell cameras in their town. The exact addresses of the doorbell cameras are hidden. Police can use the portal to directly interact with Ring doorbell camera owners and informally request footage for investigations, without a warrant.

Andrew Ferguson, a professor at the University of the District of Columbia School of Law, said in a phone call that products like Ring can remove typical due process. Typically, police have to get a warrant

from a judge before collecting digital evidence. Ring's Law Enforcement Neighborhood Portal, given to police for free as a part of the agreement, lets police request footage directly from Ring owners.

"What people fundamentally misunderstand is that self-surveillance is potentially a form of government surveillance," Ferguson said. "Because the information that you are collecting—you think to augment and improve your life—is one step away from being obtained by law enforcement to completely upend your life."

According to an email from Ring's "Law Enforcement Liaison/Territory Manager," the Law Enforcement Neighborhood Portal can do the following:

The Ring Law Enforcement Portal, is a free service for law enforcement that provides:

- access to the videos and crime/safety related posts on the Neighbors app
- ability to post geographically specific, hyper-local alerts to Ring owners and users of the app
- a map of Ring devices in your community (exact locations obscured for privacy)
- ability to request videos directly from Ring users.
- management of videos shared by users.

**Responsibilities**

**Ring**

- Make the Ring App available to Lakeland residents free of charge.
- Donate Ring cameras to the Lakeland Police Department or area of Lakeland based on the number of qualifying downloads of the app that result from the program. Each qualifying download will count as \$10 towards these free Ring cameras. Ring will seed the program with an initial donation of fifteen (15) Ring cameras.
- Make the Ring Neighborhoods portal available to the Lakeland Police Department, free of charge, including support and training for Lakeland Police Department employees.
- As appropriate, subsidize the purchase of Ring cameras by Lakeland residents as part of a formal subsidy program.

**Lakeland Police Department**

- Engage the Lakeland community with outreach efforts on the platform to encourage adoption of the platform/app.
- Choose how the free Ring cameras should be distributed. There are two options.
  - Cameras will be donated directly to the Lakeland Police Department. Lakeland Police will in

Ring was required to "Make the Ring App available to Lakeland residents free of charge." (Ring's Neighbors app is already free.)

As reported by Motherboard earlier this year, racial profiling is prevalent on Neighbors. Ferguson said that Neighbors, by highlighting alleged threats in different areas, cultivates a sense of fear of one's neighborhood, similar to hearing about crime and murders on local news.

"The [Neighbors] app, it's necessarily going to be people that are looking for the unusual," Ferguson said.

"The unusual doesn't just have to be criminal. It can just be uncomfortable, and you can imagine that in certain neighborhoods, that's gonna correlate with race, it's gonna correlate with class, it's gonna correlate with difference."

The agreement also requires Ring and the Lakeland Police to coordinate on all public communications regarding their partnership. "The parties shall agree to a joint press release to be mutually agreed upon by the parties," the memorandum of understanding says.

According to an email from a Lakeland Police Department, the memorandum of understanding was approved by the Lakeland Police Department's general counsel before the department signed on to it.

IMAGES:  
① SCREENSHOT OF AN EMAIL FROM RING'S LAW ENFORCEMENT LIAISON/TERRITORY MANAGER TO TWO MEMBERS OF THE LAKELAND POLICE DEPARTMENT.  
② MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING OBTAINED BY MOTHERBOARD.

IMPLEMENTATION

Ring asked police officers fill certain roles before it entered into a partnership with the police department. These roles—which include “Partnership Point of Contact,” “Press/Media Coordinator,” “Social Media Coordinator,” “Investigative Coordinator,” and “Community Relations Coordinator”—had job descriptions defined by Ring. These job descriptions are shown below.

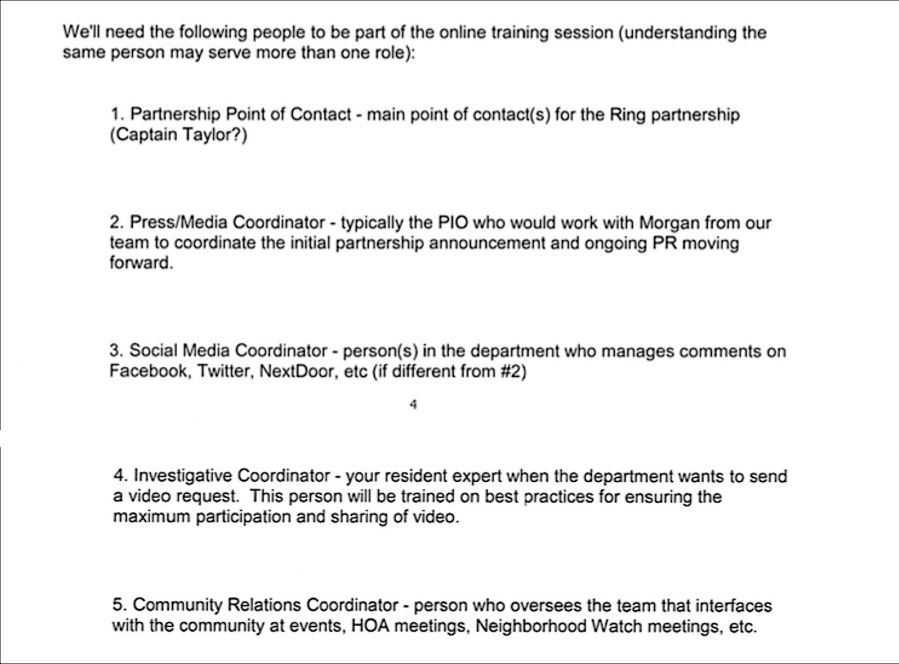


IMAGE:  
SCREENSHOT OF AN EMAIL FROM RING'S LAW ENFORCEMENT LIAISON/TERRITORY  
MANAGER TO LAKELAND POLICE DEPARTMENT OFFICERS.

Ring told Motherboard that these positions weren't required, but an email from a Ring employee to local police says that Ring would “need” the positions filled.

“Involvement by each of these groups is essential for active community participation (specifically on video requests) and overall long-term success of the partnership,” Ring’s “Law Enforcement Liaison/Territory Manager” said in an email to Lakeland Police Department officers.

The emails obtained by Motherboard also reference the organization of two training sessions, which were led by Ring. According to the emails, the first training session was a Law Enforcement Neighborhood Portal webinar, to be attended by only the five people with Ring-specific roles. The second training session was in-person and involved a Ring repre-

sentative coming to the Lakeland Police Department headquarters and speaking to all police officers.

A PRIVATE SURVEILLANCE NETWORK

There is evidence that the number of towns and cities that have partnerships with Ring is far larger than is currently known. An email obtained by Motherboard includes an introduction of a Ring “Account Manager,” who a fellow Ring employee says “has worked with dozens of agencies in Florida.” This suggests that there are dozens of unknown partnerships between Ring and local police departments in Florida alone.

This is also not Ring's only collaboration with law enforcement.

As reported by Motherboard, Amazon and Ring have provided Amazon-branded boxes, tape, lithium-ion stickers, and Ring doorbell cameras to police to craft package theft sting operations.

The explicit goal of these operations is to catch someone stealing a package on a Ring doorbell camera and apprehend them. In Albuquerque, NM, Amazon even provided package loss heat maps to police in order to plan the operation. These operations have occurred in Hayward, CA; Aurora, CO; Albuquerque, NM; Green Bay, WI; and Jersey City, NJ.

The Lakeland Police Department did not return Motherboard's requests for comment.

A Ring spokesperson said in an email that the goal of Ring partnerships with police is to make neighborhoods safer.

“Through these partnerships, we are opening up the lines of communication between community members and local law enforcement and providing app users with important crime and safety information directly from the official source,” the Ring spokesperson said. “We’ve seen many positive examples of Neighbors users and law enforcement engaging on the app and believe open communication is an important step in building safer, stronger communities.”

People often buy and use Ring doorbell cameras under the premise that they're making their individual homes safer. But these people aren't just making choices for themselves. They're consenting to surveilling everyone in their neighborhood and anyone who comes in the vicinity of their home, including friends and family, delivery workers, and anyone else. Ferguson and Gilliard said that it's important to remember the societal impacts of these decisions.

“Amazon has products to sell, and an incentive to get consumers to be fearful and buy their self-surveillance technologies; police have a related interest to obtain surveillance from areas that they don’t have the resources to obtain surveillance from,”

“You can see why it’s in their economic sense. But it raises some problems and troubles and issues that society should have about whether this is the type of self-surveillance world we’re comfortable with.” Ferguson said.

“I think a lot of this goes back to the premise that people often don’t think about how creating a network of surveillance ultimately is bad for society,” Gilliard said.

“It’s not just bad for bad guys, it’s going to be bad for everyone.”

Ferguson said that it’s important to remember that consumers ultimately choose to use Ring products and consent to self-surveillance networks.

“The hard question, the hard trouble, is that this is really about a consumer-focused drive,” Ferguson said. “This is consumers making this choice to create self-surveillance cities.”

IMAGES:  
OPPOSITE — SCREENSHOT OF THE RING  
MOBILE APP, FROM ANDROID AUTHORITY.



# How Ring Transmits Fear to American Suburbs

**Caroline Haskins** is a reporter focused on surveillance and policing. In this essay, which originally appeared on Motherboard.com titled “Amazon Requires Police to Shill Surveillance Cameras in Secret Agreement”, Haskins chronicles the relationship between Amazon’s home security company Ring and The police department of Lakeland, Florida. This report shows the extent of Amazon’s deep engagement and support of police systems, and illustrates the proliferation of technologically-aided self surveillance.



On Halloween 2017, Ring’s servers crashed en masse. The Ring app was nonfunctional. Why? Millions of trick-or-treaters overwhelmed Ring’s servers. Children dressed as ghouls and superheroes executed an accidental denial-of-service attack.

Kids are central in Ring’s marketing strategy, and the company even bragged about how many children they surveilled on Halloween this year.

When the company once known as DoorBot relaunched as Ring in 2014, its marketing strategy promptly changed. The convenient “smart home” doorbell butler was gone, reborn as Ring, a home-security product that doesn’t simply sell fear, but sells the idea that the nuclear, suburban family is a delicate, precious thing which needs protection from a hostile world.

In Ring’s advertisements and commercials—which are spread across *HGTV*, *Fox News*, podcasts, and social media alike—the company tells the public that it isn’t watching their families, but watching over them. Ring wants customers to think it’s a protective father, not Big Brother.

Although Ring is telling families that they need protection from unsafe neighborhoods, they are also radically changing what a typical neighborhood is like.



IMAGE:  
SCREENSHOT OF RING'S PUBLIC INSTAGRAM STORY SHOWING AGGREGATE DATA  
GATHERED ON HALLOWEEN NIGHT, 2019.

Ring has quietly partnered with over 600 police departments around the country and promotes Neighbors, its own neighborhood watch app, where users are supposed to report “suspicious” people.

Ring has also heavily pursued city discount programs and private alliances with neighborhood watch groups. When cities provide free or discounted Ring cameras, they sometimes create camera registries, and police sometimes order people to aim Ring cameras at their neighbors, or only give cameras to people surveilled by neighborhood watches.

We don't have any substantial proof that towns become safer when Ring enters the picture. But when Ring cameras enter a town, it's easy for cities to equate surveillance with being a good neighbor.

## INSIDE RING'S MARKETING WORLD

Ring's marketing materials on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook are a strange mix of installation instruction videos, testaments to how Ring supposedly reduces crime, and family moments as captured through surveillance cameras. It's like a combination of *America's Funniest Home Videos*, *Ellen*, and *Cops*.

In these videos, high schoolers leave for school and say goodbye to their parents. Small children in costumes talk to their parents through the camera intercom. A family plays in the front yard, unknowingly activating the motion-detection feature on the doorbell camera.

Ring dedicated a blog post to a video showing a 19-year-old woman leaving for a date. Her dad demanded to interview her date before allowing her to leave the house. The dad made the man repeat, several times, that he would return his adult daughter before her 10:30 p.m. curfew.

These videos sell old-fashioned notions, depicting the typical customer as a nuclear American family with a patriarchal father figure supervising women and children who are unable to protect themselves.

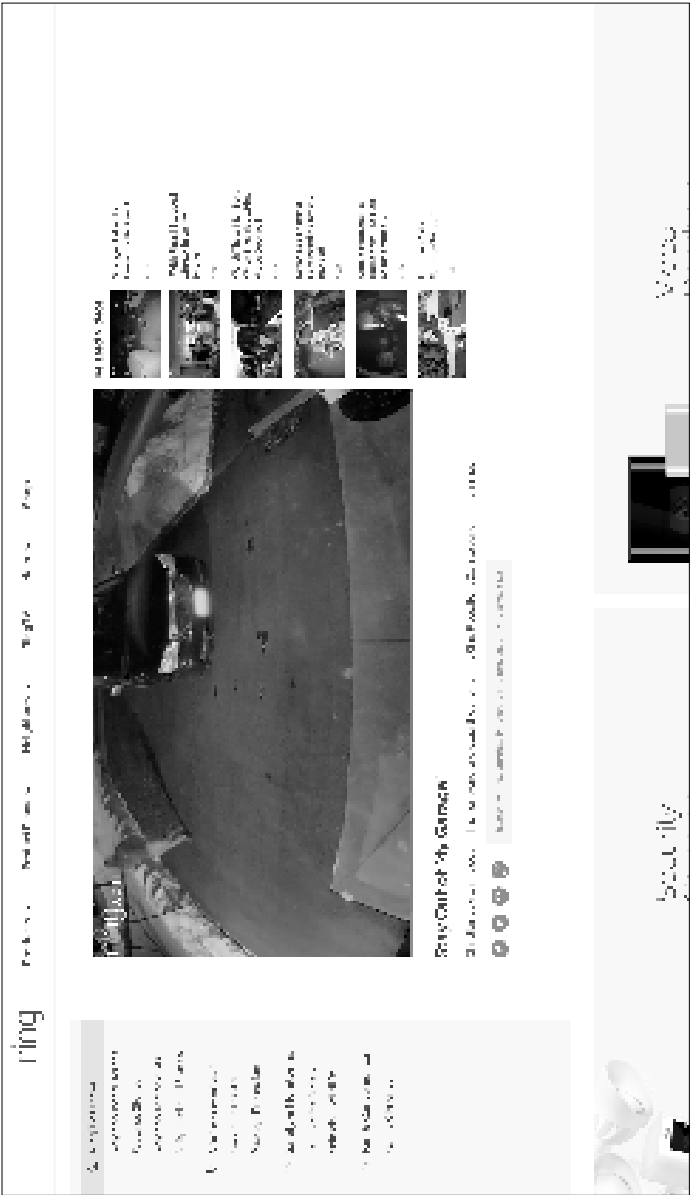
This ethos extends to the influencers that Ring has chosen to sponsor its cameras: At least a dozen popular Instagram accounts, almost exclusively run by white women, have promoted Ring products, according to Ring's tagged posts on the platform. They all appear to be mom lifestyle bloggers who favor a Charleston aesthetic of white houses, linen clothes, and Etsy signs that say things like "Hello" or "No Soliciting."



IMAGES:  
AN INFLUENCER'S POST SPONSORED BY  
RING PROMOTING THE RING DOORBELL.

Ring also has a section of its website called RingTV dedicated to sharing videos hand-picked by the company. RingTV's Fun & Convenience tab is dedicated to videos like "Goldendoodle Puppy Uses Ring Doorbell."

But aside from all the wholesome family videos and cute puppies, the company also uses the RingTV website to try and prove that its cameras as prevent crime.



IMAGES:  
SCREENSHOT OF RING'S TV WEBSITE, SHOW-  
ING A VIDEO OF A CAMERA IN ACTION.



The Crime Prevention tab shows videos depicting people who “stop crime in its tracks” or catch “strangers in the act.” Some of the videos appear to show people apparently considering stealing a package, but not doing so after seeing a Ring camera.

However, it’s unclear how commonplace any of these success stories are. Millions of people own Ring cameras, and the Crime Prevention tab hosts nearly 50 videos.<sup>1</sup>

### THE NEIGHBORS APP, AND THE RACIAL POLITICS OF SUBURBIA

Suburban life is at the center of Ring’s marketing materials, and almost all footage that the company shares is captured at suburban homes.

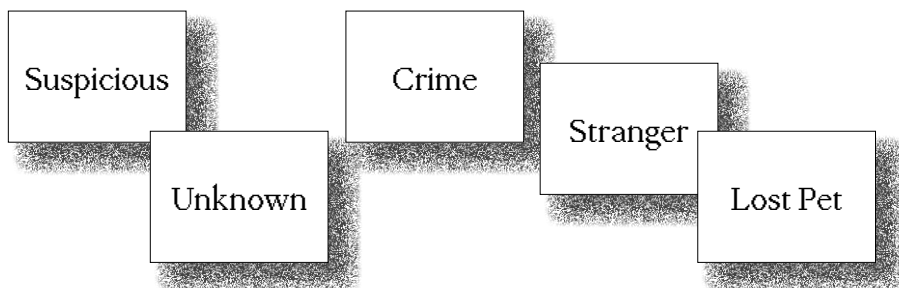
This focus says a lot about what Ring is selling, and to whom: Historically, American notions of the suburban, nuclear family have been built upon the exclusion of people of color.

After World War II, white families fled from urban centers and resettled in homogeneous suburban regions. Redlining practices excluded people of color from getting loans and mortgage payments that would allow them to move into the same areas.

Additionally, as Vanderbilt University historian Sarah Igo writes in her book *The Known Citizen*, Americans associated the sanctity of the suburban home with the right to privacy. Suburbia was meant to be not only a destination of white flight, but a refuge.

Neighbors, Ring’s neighborhood watch app, efficiently encapsulates the mixed politics of privacy within the home and racial exclusion.

The Neighbors app, in its most basic function, allows people to upload footage from Ring products or other security cameras for other users to see. A post can be sorted into one of five categories:



AS OF THE EDITING OF THIS PUBLICATION, THE CRIME PREVENTION TAB OF RING TV HOSTS ONLY 28 VIDEOS.

The Neighbors feed consists of these user-submitted posts and bite-sized alerts posted by Ring about possible dangers around town.

The app was launched in May 2018, one month after Amazon finalized the acquisition of Ring. (It wasn’t the company’s first experiment with mobilizing the politics of neighborhood watches to sell their products. In 2017, Ring offered free swag and discounted Ring products to neighborhood watch groups that promoted Ring and agreed to testify against their neighbors in court, if necessary.)

The Neighbors app has since developed a culture that is completely obsessed with crime and the self-policing of neighborhoods, and users often resort to racial profiling. Similar problems exist on the crime-reporting app Citizen and the neighborhood hub app NextDoor. On Neighbors, all posts are dedicated to crime, and three out of the five possible post categories deal with suspicious, strange, or unknown people.

These options implicitly encourage people to post about people they don’t trust. In practice, this lack of trust is often racist.

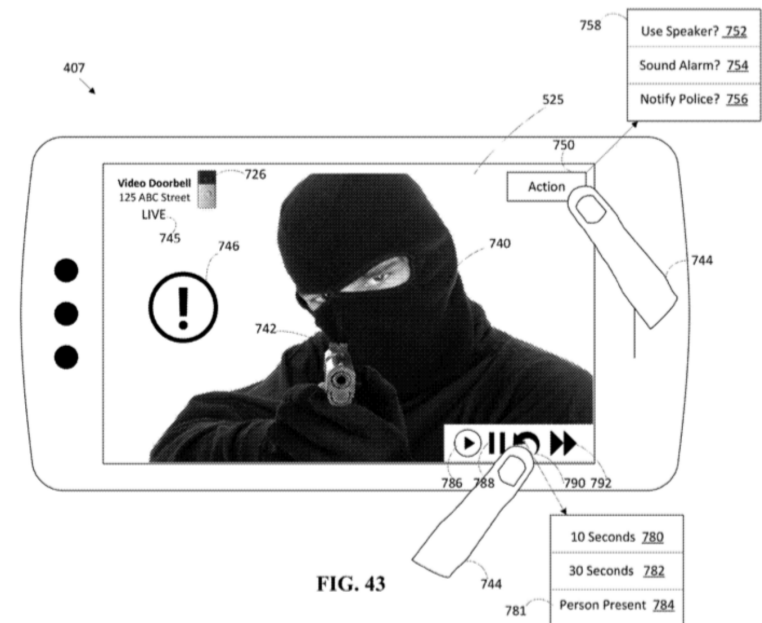


IMAGE:  
ILLUSTRATION FROM A RING PATENT PERTAINING TO THE POSSIBLE IMPLEMENTATION OF FACIAL RECOGNITION SOFTWARE ON IT’S NEIGHBORS APP.



## THE AESTHETIC OF FEAR ON NEIGHBORS

The Neighbors app empowers people to not just watch their neighborhood, but to organize as watchers. Ring markets Neighbors as a “digital neighborhood watch,” which is an accurate description. It encourages people to think about who belongs and who is an outsider. In this way, Neighbors is not just a digital neighborhood watch. It’s a digital gated community.

“So much of it is this shared sense of the people who happen to be on that [app], or who we assume are neighbors like yourself, and watching and policing the dangers in your neighborhood,” Igo told Motherboard. “[Neighbors] also will undoubtedly reinforce some sense of who belongs here and who doesn’t.”

When people take pictures or videos, they determine who and what is worthy of attention. But when people use security cameras specifically, they also determine who is suspicious and who does not belong.

Security cameras carry an aesthetic of suspicion and fear. Footage is often grainy, black and white, or green-tinted due to night vision filtering—but these aren’t inherently “sketchy” traits.

Since security footage is usually shared in the context of crime on local news, all security footage is marred with the appearance of suspicion. Local news tends to over-represent crimes committed by people of color, meaning people of color captured on security cameras are at an especially high risk of appearing to be suspicious.

As more people buy cheap home security systems, the amount of security footage is proliferating. This means that more people appear suspicious than ever before. Even if a person has done nothing wrong, even if they have the wrong address or if they’re dropping off a package, they will appear suspicious.

Neighbors, and apps like it, have empowered people to publicly share footage that they consider unsettling, and people who they consider to be out of place, at a scale that we’ve never seen before.



IMAGES:  
SCREENSHOTS OF RING CAMERA  
FOOTAGE FROM SECURITY.ORG

## INDIVIDUAL DECISION WITH GROUP IMPLICATIONS

There's a crucial, unstated aspect of owning a Ring camera: You aren't just making the decision to surveil your own property and visitors when you buy one. You make a decision on behalf of everyone around you. If someone walks by your house, lives next door, or delivers packages to your home, they will be recorded and surveilled. They don't get a choice. Buying even one Ring camera is a fundamentally communal decision.

Andrew Hager, who was a delivery-person for a meal-prep company in the Portland suburbs, said that he noticed all the "fancy houses" had Ring cameras, especially around Beaverton, OR. (The Beaverton Police Department has partnered with Ring, per documents obtained by Motherboard.)

For a while, he didn't realize that Ring doorbells were actually cameras.

Hager added, more seriously, that he would not have been "blatantly checking the house out" if he knew he was being recorded.

"I feel like if people were watching me, they would've thought, 'Oh, is this guy casing the joint out or something?'" Hager said. "Because you could totally think I was like, 'Oh how much square footage is in here. I wonder how much they pay for this place.' Before the door opens, I'm always looking around."

Hager's fear is justified. On the Neighbors app, users frequently post videos of people looking at their homes, taking pictures of their homes, or lingering around their homes. The captains often speculate as to whether the person is planning a robbery, although they just as well could have been at the wrong address or admiring the house.

"Making sure that packages are okay seems like a pretty common sense goal," Albert Fox Cahn, founder of the anti-surveillance advocacy group the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project and member of the Immigrant Leaders Council of the New York Immigration Coalition, said. "But the problem is that it comes at the price of recording these workers who are delivering them. It's just part of this surveillance web on the job that's depriving workers of autonomy and privacy, and can really have an emotionally toxic effect over the long term."

## THE NEW NEIGHBORHOOD OF RING CAMERAS

Ring has two aims that work in tandem. On one hand, it wants to become embedded in the process of policing. But it also wants to build relationships with neighborhood watches, and to have its cameras to become a feature of neighborhoods.

Ring doesn't only partner with police departments. The company also provides discounts to local neighborhood watches and homeowners associations. According to emails obtained from Olathe, KS using a freedom of information request, all community leaders need to do is reach out to Ring.

"We would ask that a community leader (for instance head of HOA or neighborhood watch president) go to [redacted] to begin the process," a Ring representative told a police officer who asked about local subsidy programs. "The community programs teams at Ring will work with them to create a limited time, zip code specific discount zone."

Ring also provides city-level discounts, if the city agrees to pay up.

Ring will match every dollar committed by a city per the terms of these discount programs. This means that for every \$100 residents save when buying a Ring product, the city pays \$50 and Ring pays \$50.

**Dozens of cities have Ring discount programs, which involve cities and towns paying Ring up to \$100,000 in taxpayer money in order to subsidize Ring camera purchases for their residents.**

Ring will match every dollar committed by a city per the terms of these discount programs. This means that for every \$100 residents save when buying a Ring product, the city pays \$50 and Ring pays \$50.

These city-level discounts have been happening since 2016, according to documents obtained by Motherboard.

By funding these discount programs, cities conflate surveillance and citizenship. For instance, West Hollywood, CA distributed fliers advertising its Ring subsidy program at voter registration events, according to documents obtained by Motherboard. West Hollywood also sold subsidized Ring products "exclusively" to residents in areas moderated by neighborhood watches.

Everyone who bought a discounted camera was added to a registry list with their name and address.

West Hollywood isn't alone. Camera-purchase registries—which Motherboard obtained from Redondo Beach, CA, West Hollywood, CA, and Green Bay, WI—included the names of purchasers and the police patrol areas in which they live.

Documents obtained by Motherboard also show that several cities will loan or sell discounted cameras Ring cameras to residents. In one camera “loan” program in Green Bay, WI, police technically owned all footage generated on all cameras given to residents, per contract documents residents had to sign.

Police from Redondo Beach, CA even used the pretense of camera registries to determine who should get a discount and who shouldn't, according to a city council meeting memo obtained by Motherboard. Police said that they inspected the facades of homes of each applicant, and looked for who had the most “optimal viewpoints that could assist with criminal investigations.”

In a slide presentation obtained by Motherboard, Redondo Beach police said that applicants who offered to surveil their neighbors would get a heavier discount than those who only offered to surveil their own property.

## Moving to a three-tiered matching stipend system

- Gold applicant – 60% stipend
  - Camera placement offers protection of the public area of the entire block
- Silver applicant – 50% stipend
  - Camera placement offers protection of the public area of a neighboring residence
- Bronze applicant – 40% stipend
  - Camera placement offers protection of the public area of the applicant's front door, porch or driveway

IMAGE:  
SCREENSHOT FROM SECURE YOUR CASTLE  
SLIDE PRESENTATION FROM REDONDO  
BEACH, CA OBTAINED BY MOTHERBOARD.

Ring doesn't officially endorse cities requiring people to go on a camera registry in order to obtain free or discounted cameras.

“Ring won't subsidize devices to cities to be used for camera registration programs,” a Ring lawyer told city officials in Peoria, IL, who asked about creating a camera registry program. “If you cannot agree to that, then we cannot do the program.”

“This is getting ridiculous,” the Peoria lawyer said to a Peoria City Manager, after forwarding the email thread to him.

But cities can make camera registries without Ring's permission. The Peoria Police Department unveiled a surveillance camera registry program two weeks before these emails were sent.

“As a policy, Ring does not support any subsidy match program that requires recipients to subscribe to a recording plan or share footage as a condition for receiving a subsidized device,” a Ring spokesperson said in an email. “We actively work with these groups to ensure this is reflected in their programs.”

## THE FANATIC CULTURE OF RING STANS

People decide to buy Ring cameras for lots of different reasons. Ring customer Bryan Herbert told Motherboard that Ring makes his life easier.

“I'm disabled and tend to walk slow,” Herbert said via Twitter DM. “It's nice being able to speak to people at the door and let them know it's going to take me a minute to get there.”

But one thing connects all Ring camera owners: a sense of community.

Digital community is a crucial tenant of Ring ownership. There's Neighbors, where geographic neighbors connect with one another through Ring's platform. But there's also Facebook and Reddit, where user-moderated, fanatic communities for Ring product owners have flourished.

In these groups, people are implicitly understood to have accepted the privacy tradeoffs that come with owning the cameras, and the proliferation of police partnerships. The resulting culture is a combination of a do-it-yourself machismo and intense product loyalty.

The most noteworthy examples are r/Ring, the Ring-focused subreddit, and Ring Doorbell Users Group, the Facebook group for Ring owners. These online communities aren't primarily focused on sharing “success stories,” or sharing so-called sketchy footage on Ring cameras. Users mostly troubleshoot technical problems and answer one another's questions. Often, people who speak too negatively about Ring products are disparaged, even when they face frustrating technical problems with no obvious solution.

The admins of the Facebook group often advocate on behalf of Ring. In one post, the Facebook group admin screenshotted and shared a post, which began by complaining about the quality of Ring cameras.

"Don't get me wrong," the group admin wrote, "I'm sorry that [name redacted] is having issues and feels he must so eloquently announce to everyone that he is GIVING UP."

The admin suggested solutions to fixing Ring products that were often more labor-intensive or expensive than setting up the device itself.

The culture on r/Ring is pretty similarly to the culture in the Ring Doorbell Users Group on Facebook. Dan Sullivan, one of the moderators of r/Ring, said in a phone call that he's been a subreddit moderator for about four years, around the time that DoorBot became Ring.

"I've been leading that disaster for a while," Sullivan said. "It was really an echo chamber when I came across it... There were people who loved it, people who hated it, and there was no one to talk to about it. It's still like that now."

Sullivan said that he tried to engage with Ring's social media team and get them to provide help. Ring tried, but it's mostly stopped engaging.

"Ring used to participate, but then they stopped because people were attacking the employees," Sullivan said.

## HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE WATCHED?

Among the many Ring users that Motherboard spoke with for this article, none expressed privacy concerns, or misgivings about having a camera in and around one's home.

Sullivan, the r/Ring moderator, said that if people are worried about their privacy, they just shouldn't get a camera. It's like Facebook, he said. If you don't like Facebook, just get rid of Facebook.

"I don't have it inside of my house for a reason, but I don't really care who sees what goes on on the outside," Sullivan said. "You could make a list on why you shouldn't have a camera. Obviously these [videos] are going somewhere, being sent to a server somewhere. But I don't have anything to hide. I'm not a criminal, there's no risky things going on at my house. So I'm not worried about it."

Sullivan added that there are benefits and drawbacks to every product. For him, the benefit of catching a criminal on camera outweighs the risk of relying on a private company to catch them.

Several Ring camera owners told Motherboard that they, in part, chose Ring because they wanted cameras that weren't made in China, citing security concerns. Neither of them were concerned about how camera footage and customer data is used.

## WHY WE WATCH OURSELVES

There's one unavoidable fact about Ring: people are *choosing* to use this product. They're choosing to put a camera in their homes. They're choosing not only to watch other people, but watch themselves.

Self-surveillance isn't a Ring-specific phenomenon. The core of self-surveillance has to do with how we understand privacy.

Sarah Igo, the historian, says that "privacy" deals with the threshold between where the individual person ends, and a collective society begins. As a result, privacy concerns are often invoked in situations where people are scared, apprehensive, or uncomfortable about changes happening in their society—technological, social, or otherwise.

As explained by Igo, after World War II, when white people fled to the suburbs, a combination of academic scholarship and popular opinion strengthened the idea that freedom, especially freedom from authoritarianism and fascism, can be found in the right to private property, space, and land.

The American home, in the face of these fears, became a place of safety and tradition. It was a place for families where a patriarchal figure protected his wife and children.

Americans, as Igo describes it, often fear and mistrust objects that mediate between the private home and the outside world. Many people in the early twentieth century viewed the telephone as an unwelcome intruder in the home. Fear of wiretapping was widespread throughout the century. The doorbell, for many, was no exception. Igo writes that people viewed the doorbell as something that empowered the outside world to penetrate and intrude on “domestic tranquility.”

Interestingly, Ring customers believe that the doorbell camera *protects* the home. It doesn’t invade the home; rather, it guards the home. Igo said in a phone call that this isn’t necessarily surprising. Ring doorbells, like all doorbells, mediate the relationship between the home and the outside world.

“Video cameras, security cameras, and so forth is the turning of the home outward to watch, in the other direction,” Igo said. “So I think it’s still connected to this longer history of worry about invasions of the home. To prevent those, you have to look outward and invade the privacy of those potentially right on the street outside.”

“[There’s] this sense that the barrier can also be a window on to who’s on the other side,” Igo added. “And that, at the very least, suggests rising distrust of unplanned interactions.”

## SO WHAT NOW?

Ring has some experienced pushback in recent months. In August [2019], Senator Markey demanded the company answer questions about its data retention and relationships with law enforcement. Then, in November, five senators demanded Jeff Bezos answer additional questions about its data security practices.

Despite this pushback, Ring is not faltering or losing momentum.

It doesn’t hurt that the company has crucial connections to power. Jacqui Irwin, a member of the California state assembly, is married to Jon Irwin, the chief operating officer for Ring. Kira Rudik, Ring Ukraine’s chief operating officer, was recently elected to Ukrainian parliament. Ring has connections in precisely the places it needs them in order to continue operating as it always has.

However, it’s impossible to talk about Ring in a vacuum, as if Ring is the only home surveillance company selling fear and promising security in return.

**Ring is the symptom of a worldview in which crime is an existential threat, and data-capturing technology is the solution.**

For people who subscribe to this worldview, it doesn’t matter that crime rates are actually going down nationwide. The only thing that matters is that they believe crime is a threat.

According to Evan Greer, deputy director of digital activist group Fight for the Future, Ring is a product that’s “incompatible with a functioning community.” If you don’t trust your neighbors, Greer said, it becomes okay to surveil in perpetuity. “That’s a fundamental idea that ties community together: neighbors trust each other, and protect each other, and take care of each other,” Greer said.

**“It just feels like, for Amazon’s business model to succeed, they have to sow distrust and fear between neighbors.”**

Cahn, the privacy advocate, said that Ring and security products like it capitalize on a widespread feeling that we are never safe.

“It goes to some almost society-wide anxiety, that if we can’t prove everything’s okay, at every moment,” Cahn said, “then somehow, something terrible is happening.”

There is no single reason that people choose to watch themselves and others. The people of Baltimore, MD believe that camera footage can be a tool that facilitates justice in a city where justice feels rare. For others, Ring cameras offer the convenience of seeing who is at the door. Some people buy Ring cameras to usher in peace of mind.

Everyone who buys a Ring camera shares one core belief: that Ring cameras are neutral, objective, or even benevolent. However, in a world so overcome by fear that the people believe they must not only watch others, and watch themselves, there's no such thing as a truly benevolent tool.