

# Home video security systems increasingly linked to US police departments in violation of democratic rights

By Kevin Reed  
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Home video security systems across the United States are increasingly being integrated with police and law enforcement systems that access an expanding network of residential photos and recordings. In many cases, video streams and images are being uploaded into cloud storage accounts, categorized and shared via “neighborhood crime” databases that violate the basic democratic rights of the public.

In the case of Ring—known as Ring Video Doorbell before the company was acquired by Amazon in February 2018—more than 400 police department partnerships have been established with the home security system across the US over the past year. According to a report in the *Washington Post* on Wednesday, the police department agreements allow authorities to obtain video streams from Ring homeowners in particular geographic areas and across specific timeframes.

Although these law enforcement requests can be declined by homeowners, most consumers agree to the user terms thinking that they are, in the words of a Ring marketing campaign, “making their neighborhood a safer place.” The Amazon relationship with police departments also includes promotions—based on the number of downloads of its Ring Neighbors apps within a jurisdiction—whereby the equipment is given away for free in exchange for consumers signing up for the online services for as little \$3 per month where video streams are stored in the cloud.

Amazon Ring’s most popular system—a doorbell with a wide angle high-definition and night-vision video camera connected in real-time to a mobile app—has been installed in millions of homes across the country. While the Ring marketing message, along with that of

law enforcement representatives, is that this expanding network of cameras is a shield against “criminals, intruders and thieves,” the reality is a vast expansion of illegal surveillance of the public.

Amazon’s purchase of Ring for more than \$1 billion in early 2018—and the subsequent reduction in price of the company’s most popular doorbell product from \$150 to \$50—has been hailed by Wall Street as central to the company’s strategy of taking over the “smart-home” market.

At the time, investment analyst Daniel Ives wrote, “The trifecta of [home virtual assistants] Alexa, Echo, and [premium retail shopping membership] Prime should enable Amazon to further penetrate the consumer, expand Prime membership and retail spending patterns, while widening the company’s consumer competitive moat with the Ring acquisition putting further fuel in this smart home engine for Amazon.”

Of course, the investment community and Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos—who has seen an increase in his personal wealth by \$45 billion since the Ring acquisition—said nothing about how the business goal to “penetrate the consumer” includes the significant threat to democratic rights posed by the “hyperlocal, social networking” features of its home security technology system.

As with the use of facial recognition and other biometrics technology for police surveillance, the growing network of home security cameras connected to law enforcement is being built up without public discussion, oversight or approval by any government body. Meanwhile, as pointed out by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the public’s “perception of crime

and danger in their neighborhoods” is being preyed upon by companies like Amazon by “creating products that inflame our greatest anxieties about crime.”

Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, a professor and author of the 2017 book *The Rise of Big Data Policing*, told the *Post* that by playing on consumer fears about home security Ring has created “a clever workaround for the development of a wholly new surveillance network, without the kind of scrutiny that would happen if it was coming from the police or government.”

The Ring system works by sending a notification to the smartphone, tablet or computer of the homeowner when the doorbell rings or there is motion detected near their front door by the video camera. This means that every mailman, census taker, gas company meter reader or door-to-door salesperson is being flagged by the security system as suspicious or a potential vandal, thief or burglar.

Meanwhile, the Amazon Neighbors app, along with other similar products, is a free download which lets individuals share, view and comment on alleged crimes, vandalism, suspicious events, unknown visitors and safety concerns in their community. Neighbors who do not have any Ring products can also download the app for free and review the number of reported incidents, including the video and photos captured, in the vicinity of their homes and businesses.

Essentially, what this means is that a vast database of images and video of people going about their daily activity is being collected in every neighborhood across the country and this database is increasingly accessible by police investigators on-demand.

According to the *Post*, “The Neighbors feed operates like an endless stream of local suspicion, combining official police reports compiled by Neighbors’ ‘News Team’ with what Ring calls ‘hyperlocal’ posts from nearby homeowners reporting stolen packages, mysterious noises, questionable visitors and missing cats.”

The *Post* also quoted Evan Greer, deputy director of the digital advocacy group Fight for the Future, who said, “It’s a business model based in paranoia. They’re doing what Uber did for taxis, but for surveillance cameras, by making them more user-friendly. ... It’s a privately-run surveillance dragnet built outside the democratic process, but they’re marketing it as just another product, just another app.”

The Ring Neighbors app users who post video and photos of suspicious individuals at their door remain completely anonymous. Users are also notified when another police department is added to the surveillance network with the message, “Your Neighborhood just got a whole lot stronger.”

Police departments across the country have responded ecstatically to the Ring phenomena because it gives them “the upper hand.” In the high-tech Orwellian world of Amazon and law enforcement artificial intelligence technology, the conversion of every front door into a spy window and every resident into a government informant is the epitome of “neighborhood safety.”

The proliferation of home video security systems and their conversion into instruments of state surveillance demonstrates that the much-touted Internet of Things (IoT) technology revolution is being developed by the ruling elite under capitalism into an infrastructure for the purpose of monitoring the public and suppressing political opposition.

As was shown previously with virtual assistants such as Amazon’s Alexa and Apple’s Siri that have—unbeknownst to users—been listening in on and cataloging the content of the private conversations, the expansion of connected devices envisioned by IoT advocates is taking on more and more the character of the apparatus of a police state.

The only way that the liberating potential of the convergence of interconnected wireless sensors and automated and intelligent digital systems can be developed for the benefit of all humanity—instead of the descent into dictatorship and barbarism—is through their application as instruments of the socialist revolution and the overthrow of capitalism by the international working class.

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