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Citizen empowerment as a police force multiplier: Reproducing social domination through a 21st century personal safety app

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Abstract

Citizen is a digital mapping platform and personal safety app that boasts over 10 million users in the United States. Through the platform, users can report crimes, map safe routes, or rely on the app's other functions to protect themselves from dangerous situations. Sold on a promise of empowerment, Citizen markets itself as a 21st century technology capable of repairing the ills of our social world. In this article we analyze how Citizen taps into the desire for control and safety and urges its users to actively protect their own communities. As such, we suggest that while surveillant in nature, Citizen revolves around the force inherent to police power, transforming its users via police power by first integrating them into their social platform. Ultimately, Citizen reminds us that police power is not limited to ideological or violent exchanges, but can be a compelling solution to community problems. Rather than a progressive fix to the issues between policing and communities, however, we find that Citizen offers an expansion of police power at the individual scale, reproducing social domination both at the level of capital and the state.

Keywords

Citizen, deputization, empowerment, personal safety apps, platform, police power, policing, security, social domination, state violence

Introduction

Personal safety apps come in many forms, the viability of which depends on a market built around high-profile deaths and signal crimes. One such app catching the attention of both concerned users and technology writers alike is Citizen. Boasting 10 million U.S. users—with a popularity that

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places it higher in the app store than the likes of CNN—and accessible in over 60 different U.S. cities, Citizen is arguably one of the most well-known of these safety apps. Its popularity can be found with social justice organizations such as the black Trans and Queer led organization, *Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative*, and, separately, neighborhood watch aficionados worried about the general disorder on their street. Started in 2016 under the name *Vigilante* and rebranded in 2017 as Citizen, the app operates as a social media networking app for engaging with disorderly events—crime, vehicle wrecks, missing person reports, fires, and terroristic threats to name a few (Citizen, 2021b). Highlighting its involvement with policing, internal emails leaked to *Motherboard* showed Citizen pitching their developmental security response service to the Los Angeles Police Department, who were struggling to respond to calls and claiming to be overrun with property crimes. Citizen received an enthusiastic response in turn (Cox, 2022a).

At its core, Citizen is a two-way system that offers geocoded crime data drawn from media reports and police scanners and published on an interactive map based on users' locations. Importantly, it also encourages users to "crowdsource" crime data, incentivizing them to post their own content, upload photos and videos, interact with other users, and at times, go to the aid of another user in need—a measure that critics see as a return to racialized vigilantism (see Grabar, 2021), but that we associate more so with the choose-your-own-adventure mindset found most often in gaming (see Kim, 2023). Its \$19.99 "Protect" services solidified and enhanced this two-way system by offering a help-on-demand function, connecting users to a Protect agent 24/7. According to the company (2021a), agents can call 911 for the user, reach out to existing emergency contacts, monitor a first date, an evening stroll, or direct users to nearby cooling stations during natural disasters like a heat wave.

The services that it provides—from its "Protect" services to its mapping social notification systems and even its social networking—have all been done before (see Kennedy and Coelho, 2022). And yet, due to its popularity it is worth dissecting exactly how it is selling these products, and ultimately what this *buying* accomplishes. How does this app impact the ways people should think or how to even *be* in their city? And in particular, how does this app resonate with users across a wide range of political topics—some that stand in contradiction to each other? As an app, what role does Citizen play in shaping both how policing is socially desired and politically projected? In other words, what is being commodified? As Loader (1999) wrote 20 years ago, security in its commodified form presents a paradox surrounding the legitimate naming of the police and its clash with the sovereign consumer. Carrying this idea through, does Citizen, with its mix of vigilantism, responsabilization, and order maintenance mark the end product of consumer culture and personal responsabilization? And if so, what does this say about policing—of which Citizen ties its name to?

Such questions require us to engage with the world that Citizen envisions, of how it sees itself as a "force for good in this world" (Citizen, 2021a), and ultimately how and why this surveillant vision aligns more so *with* and reproduces a future *for* policing. To address these questions we highlight how Citizen expects to thrive by taking advantage of the low expectations people have of their city governments and public services, providing them a solution that incentivizes proactive behaviors and not just surveillance. In attempting to tap into this neoliberal common sense, it's important for consumers to understand Citizen as the most obvious solution to their social problems—of insecurity and lack of control. To do this, Citizen hones in on the concept of empowerment.

Questions of surveillance and privacy are important and still remain a concern (see Lin and Baker, 2020), but Citizen's focus on empowering the user draws us toward a larger discussion of the appeal of police power at the scale of the individual and its compulsive nature in reproducing itself. Defined by Neocleous' (2013: 11) "police power exists for the fabrication of order, not the exercise of law." Drawing on Mau's (2023) definition of social reproduction,¹ we find that order here, requires the continued re-production of both the social environment and of state violence. Citizen, as an inscription of police power, reproduces social domination both at the level of capital and the level of the state.

Below we untangle these questions by first presenting how Citizen fits into the larger security industry as a consumable product, drawing on the "consumptive philosophy," put forth by Loader and Walker (2001), to highlight the makings of its paradoxes. However, by selling itself as an empowerment tool, Citizen ultimately performs the two-fold function of police power: (1) the reproduction of forms of social domination (i.e. social reproduction); (2) the reproduction of the world as seen through the state (i.e. state violence). The end result of Citizen's solution to 21st century policing, and how we end our argument, is the spreading of police power beyond the institution of the police—in that it heightens and hardens the concepts of order built around capital and the state via its vigilante capacity. While Citizen sees itself as an historically progressive force, what the app offers by way of empowerment is a future stuck in the present. Citizen, then, offers its users a compulsion *toward* such reproduction—one often experienced as freedom.

Citizen app

Traditionally, the relationship between the police and the public has been defined as a one-way information sharing system—from the police to the public (Heverin and Zach, 2010). This type of system has become problematic for many, as criticism of the police has been directed at police culture, lack of accountability, a general lack of presence from the police, or ultimately the lack of public input (Cordner and Perkins, 2013). Such criticism establishes the security industry's appeal toward participative policies of crime control and prevention as a key response to the associated insecurity that follows the failed promise of policing.

This has created what Koskela (2011) has described as "controlwork," a measure that encourages users to perform surveillance on behalf of the state. In this view, the top-down approach of state control over crime is democratized by surveillance technologies anyone can own, a shift that results in the blurring of practices of surveillance and of whose responsibility it actually is to monitor others. Along with the blurring of responsibility between authorities and citizens comes the blurring of watchers and watched, controllers and controlled, ultimately upsetting the traditional lines established by surveillance theory more broadly (Koskela, 2011).

Attempting to persuade the public to conduct surveillance is nothing new, however, understood within the context that the police alone can no longer guarantee people's safety, "an obligation upon citizens to take action to regulate the conduct of others" becomes "reality" as Sadie Parr (2009) recognizes (p. 367). While conscripting ordinary people into the state security apparatus continues (see Jarvis and Lister, 2010), the state seemingly de-materializes here. It disappears into a web of broader macro-social shifts in the relationships between individuals, the community, the police, and the state—it disappears into a network. In turn, the contract between

citizen and government is broadened beyond the individual regulating *their* own conduct. We see this insistence in Citizen.

Offered as a risk management tool, security solution, and interactive crime mapping platform that effectively eliminates the middleman (i.e. the police), Citizen's popularity is not a coincidence. In a speech given at her husband's funeral, Dominique Luzuriaga Rivera's "nightmare" started with a notification from the app reporting crime and police activity nearby, "I saw that two police officers were shot in Harlem," she says, and her "heart dropped." Rivera's husband was one of two NYPD officers killed during a domestic violence call, and her first notifications came from Citizen, the next call she received was the hospital. Never to let a tragedy go to waste, CEO Andre Frame, made sense of this event through a pragmatic relationship to crime: "there are two things that make people afraid: Knowing exactly what's going on and not knowing what's going on" (Pagones, 2022). The company insists that the mission of the app is not simply to report deaths of police officers or to incentivize usage through its fear-based incident reporting, but that events like these highlight the need for a system of increased police accessibility and information—which is appreciated by the app's growing fanbase. As a resident of Atlanta relates, the newly accessible app "gives people a feeling of being more in control of their surroundings" (Brett, 2020).

What Citizen offers, according to Frame, is the "benefit of community safety, community engagement." In this way, the app's users remain an identifiable demographic. Citizens' patrols, community safety initiatives, "walking with a purpose," and neighborhood watch have come at the behest of the police themselves, entwined with the political and economic forces of revanchism and gentrification wrapped around the ideas of property and people. These campaigns, too, call for "community engagement," inviting the propertied public to participate in helping combat crime in one's own community—creating the desire for neighbors to work *with* the police to protect their limited resources. Writing along similar lines, Revier (2020) describes "carceral visibility"—a resulting assemblage of surveillance curated by the police and disseminated for widespread consumption via new public safety apps. Such imagery is built up by what Reeves (2017: 246) has described as lateral surveillance, where "we will be increasingly expected to police one another using the communications/surveillance technologies that we have on hand."

Driven by the rise of the smartphone—a tool CEO Andrew Frame reminds us, has the "greatest degree of potential energy the world has ever seen"—the crowdsourcing platform has made possible the ideal that "everyone has the right to know what's happening in their communities in real time," the transparency offered by the platform and harnessed by the phone can therefore motivate "change for the better"—according to Citizen. Crowdsourcing, as Howe (2006) defines it, is the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined and usually large group of people in the form of an open call. Platforms, as Langley and Leyshon (2017) see it, are a "socio-technical intermediary and business arrangement" specific to our times (p. 11). Taken as a whole, Citizen functions closer to what Srnicek (2017) has described as lean platforms—those like Airbnb and Uber that rely on user assets to generate profit. What materializes from this networked and individuated combination, as Citizen insists, is the promotion of "citizen policing," a democratization of the communicative lines between the public (user) and the police: "everyone has the right to know what's happening inside their communities in real time." This *is* what "drives change for the better," Frame insists. As we show below, the power afforded policing is propagated by the desires of security and communication,

which are uniquely distributed to users by the capabilities of the platform technologies popular with smartphone usage.

Free of the constraints that characterize the top-down control in policing, the networked information economy linked by the smartphone treats public opinion as universal—granting access to anyone willing to create content for Citizen. Looking to take advantage of this energy, the company drills into the consumer psyche, separating apart, and incentivizing the growth of an industry predicated on harnessing police power for individual use. As Frame reminds us, “this information belongs to the people” (Canny, 2021). Further, while Citizen refuses to release any numbers related to how active its user base is, such functionality showcases an aptitude for freelance crime scene videographers and a platform for a new crop of neighborhood watchers.

The result is a whitewashing of sorts, which allows Citizen to offer a seemingly neutral, yet progressive, addition to the police, by creating a networked public space that, *on your terms*, must be defended. So while distributing labor between the police and individuals has a long history, the popularity of recent reform trends and the concomitant digital developments have carved out a space for the addition of this crowdsourcing style as a progressive solution to disorder (Milaj and Jan Ritsema van Eck, 2020). As the company claims, if you’re worried about how protests will interrupt your travel, or for a safe route through the city, or the violent stalker coming up from behind, Citizen has a feature for you (Morrison and Estes, 2020).

As such, Citizen looks to add its name to the growing list of technologies working toward reevaluating how the public and the police can operate together. Its difference, however, is that it takes its mission toward a “two-way” system seriously, in that it not only offers a chance to communicate with the police, it relies on individual responses to fill out its maps and to incentivize user engagement, which is the unit that it suggests lies true power. In policing terms, Citizen helps the user spread order in a disorderly world by working with the police (as in lateral surveillance) *or*, when necessary, doing it themselves. This type of focus articulates solutions tied specifically to Citizen’s unique platform settings, offering not just the ability to highlight crime, but to monitor and protect *against* police violence, fight crime, or help neighbors during a fire.

Driven by claims of transparency—Frame’s argument is that Citizen “create[s] the transparency” (Ashworth, 2020)—the app makes the case for a “shared system” where everybody has access to the same information in “real time” (Levy, 2020). The goal, as the CEO makes clear in a radio interview upon the app’s arrival in Baltimore (who is under a consent decree with the Federal Government), is to unlock “a closed public safety system” with “community power of information.” Using its option for users to live stream incidents, he suggests this ability to “see exactly how the issue is being resolved” has potential to “restore trust between police and community.” The “beauty” as Frame sees it, is that we are “no longer alone”—even in the face of police violence and corruption.

Empowerment: Community must be defended

But a slick user experience can only take the app so far. Some type of logic must underpin the force behind this technology, or otherwise the user is left asking “what’s the point?” While fear propels the app’s user base, the end goal for its marketing campaign is to reinvigorate a sense of control over one’s own environment. Often layered within a deeply individualist framework, the

empowered subject is generated through personal experience, self-expression, and individual choice. Empowerment, in this sense, helps reframe social problems in light of such for-profit solutions, as concerns that belong in the public domain are reimagined as entrepreneurial opportunities. Empowerment, too, creates active engagement of subjects. The only question is: what do *you* want Citizen to make of *you*?

Adding another wrinkle to a crowded field of apps vying to be the “eyes and ears of the authorities,” Citizen asks their users to become authorities themselves. After all, this is *your community*, the app proclaims, *it must be defended*. It is up to the individual to foster their own sense of self worth: Citizen offers that chance. Such social marketing further embeds itself within the logics of neoliberalism by blurring governmental assistance with responsabilization—offering users a taste of real time responsibility and empowerment in the face of declining governmental assistance. In turn, the energy of the surveillant gaze swivels toward a much more active approach to fending off disorder, as we’ll show below.

Citizen empowerment has been a consistent attribute of citizen policing apps. Reeves (2017) cites former Sacramento police chief Sam Somers’s justification for the adoption of Nextdoor in 2013 as one of citizen empowerment to local crime solutions, for example. Empowerment, thus, has become a powerful tool, as Reeves says, to convert “citizens into resources for the expansion of their surveillance networks” (p. 50). Empowerment, in this sense, serves as a distributed expression of state power.

Let us be clear: this is a social marketing campaign and empowerment is a complex concept, an empty signifier, a desire, and an agenda (Rushing, 2016). While perpetuating the classical response to inequality, crime, and disorder (i.e. work harder, be more responsible), empowerment shines a light on what *you* can do to push back on this creeping tide. But in seeking to tap into such a self-help promotional style of responsabilization, empowerment, in an ontological sense, further reveals itself to be a conventional neoliberal push for individuals to hold themselves accountable for their life circumstances. As Brown (1995) suggests of this concept: “empowerment is a formulation that converges with a regime’s own legitimacy needs in masking the power of the regime” (p. 23). The result of such a focus is the creation of solutions that eschew the structural issues, drives, and desires that shape individual choices for a more primitive and accessible individualized response. The solution—to become empowered—takes the world as is.²

Ben Jealous—former gubernatorial candidate for Maryland, former Head of the national NAACP, and investor in Citizen, reiterates these points: “In this moment, [Citizen] allows people to take greater control of their lives, and to feel, for the first time in their lives, fully informed, in real time, of what’s happening around them.” Citizen’s goal is not simply about creating a more risk-averse subject, but one of empowering them as guardians of their communities. Frame, along with Jealous describe such a scenario (Canny, 2021):

“On day one of Citizen’s launch in Baltimore, a report of “Police Activity” went out to nearby users:

‘Black man, 31 years-old, on the ground, handcuffed,’ Jealous described. ‘He’s been told he looks like a murder suspect, you know, he hasn’t killed anybody.’ Then, a citizen user goes live.

'The beauty of this is that he's no longer alone,' said Frame.

Jealous chimed in: 'He thinks it may have saved his life.'"

As Jealous ultimately surmises, the app "empowers people to navigate their day with greater confidence and safety" (Holder, 2019). It is about activating a certain energy, harnessing it, and directing it toward those moments of disorder. In this way, the surveillance inherent to Citizen captures the tools embedded in control work, while aiming what energy is generated into new forms of policing.

Ultimately, Citizen offers their user different levels of empowerment for different reasons: the first is that by using its "Protect" services, one is empowered to continue living, to keep exercising, to keep shopping, to keep going on dates, to keep consuming; the second via its crowdsourcing platform identity is that one is empowered to act, specifically in ways that re-establish one's own environment and desires of safety. In both, police power is refracted across this discourse of empowerment as we show below.

Social reproduction

The world depicted by Citizen is not one where users should simply observe an event; rather, one must be empowered to act. To understand why one must *be* empowered to act, we first have to recognize what they are acting against. Or, vice versa, why they think they need to be empowered. The answer to that, as is common with security products, is fear (see Altheide and Coyle, 2006). As Citizen reports, 90% of its users say the app makes them feel safer (Citizen, 2022). Such users range from shop owners and socialites to social justice organizations and those concerned with police violence. Whether it is fear of police or fear of the other, the response to the widespread beliefs of insecurity, as Loader pronounced, is the consumptive model of security.

This consumptive model has best been captured by the changing nature of police in the 20th century. As Loader and Walker (2001: 10) write of these changes,

"[w]hile the state remains a significant player in the delivery and regulation of policing, it is no longer the only or even, arguably, the principal institutional actor involved in offering guarantees of security to citizens. Policing increasingly finds itself (and its agents) as one among a multiplicity of policing forms".

Shopping malls, store fronts, airports, health insurance companies, or even personalized VIP protection services now rife with private security personnel highlight this decoupling. According to the United States Department of Labor Statistics (2023b), there are over 1.1 million private security guards in the U.S. compared to roughly 655,000 police officers (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023a). Research conducted by *The Guardian* shows that private security workers outnumber public police officers for the majority of the world's population (Provost, 2017).

This multiplicity is further developed via the responsabilization of both individuals and the community, a key development of the neoliberal state that subjugates its citizens by withdrawing services, highlighting "risky objects," and calling for "active participation" by its citizens (Andrejevic, 2006). Using the "war on terror" as a marking point, surveillance scholar Torin

Monahan makes note of this responsabilization as a cultural phenomenon that solidifies insecurity as a lived experience (Monahan, 2010). The resulting shift in governance creates a subject whose regulation of exposures to risk takes place within one's own consumptive practices and capabilities (O'Malley, 2010). *Buying* security, then, is often determined by the consumer's willingness to choose how they want to interact with the world and manage their risk (Loader, 1999). Thus, a core component of this responsabilization is the insistence on citizens choosing roles traditionally expected of law enforcement.

Introduced the first week of August 2021, and paired with a minute and a half promotional video filled with news reports, quick cuts, and emotional testimonials, *Citizen's* "Protect" service was billed as the "future of personal safety." Drawing on popularized language of the 21st century reformist rhetoric, *Citizen's* (2021c) claims of empowerment are presented in their trailer: "Citizen empowers the helpers, those who demand justice, accountability, and want to leave the world better than they found it." Marketed as "the most powerful safety product in the world" *Citizen* ends its promotional video in blandly revanchist triumph dressed up in humanitarian garb, with an instrumental crescendo serving as a backdrop for cellphone footage of a man in front of a group of unidentifiable protesters proudly proclaiming: "we have the opportunity to save the human race!" From what, we are not told, but we are assured that *Citizen* will be there along the way.

With *Protect*, CEO Andrew Frame suggests, the application becomes a two-way system. Described more clearly on *Citizen's* (2021c) blog, Frame writes:

[Protect is a] personalized mobile protection subscription which uses location tracking to send emergency responders to your exact location or navigate you to a safe space; live texting so you can discreetly trigger help; and *Protect Mode* to connect you with a highly trained agent the moment you feel unsafe.

For a \$20 per month subscription the company offers "real people" in "real-time" coming to your aid with two shakes of your phone. But it is not only this, as the always-with-you techno-body-guard can also employ AI powered technology of its own—which can identify sounds that indicate trouble (such as screams for help) or put you in touch with its community of users. This community, what the company somewhat redundantly calls "Citizen community" and which consists of both users and employees, can help guide fearful users to safe places (a concept driven by the app's map-based function). According to the company's advertisements, this capability has already found missing people and pets, helped disoriented hikers and party goers get home, and made an elderly man feel safer on his nightly walks.

With a special focus on enhancing the safety of women, children, and the elderly, *Citizen* attempts to situate its *Protect* services within the plethora of similarly styled apps designed around risk management (see Stardust et al., 2023). Ultimately, what *Citizen* attempts to capture here is a space in the market for those individuals fearful of what a world full of possible dangers holds, and *Protect* is an attempt to transform this fantasy—real or imagined—of infinite dangers into manageable moments of continuous security. Highlighted by a critical surveillance perspective, what lies underneath techno-fantasies is the material reality that the future is one where the user pays to be tracked and monitored (Kennedy and Coelho, 2022).

Rather than relying on the psychoanalytical transference of fear onto foreign objects (i.e. terrorists, migrants, etc.), Protect exists within a discourse that simultaneously ensures the circulation of these threats and encourages resilience—ceding the market's imperative to keeping things moving—by relying on the atmospheric pressure fear creates. As Andrew Frame reminds us, Protect is not simply designed to be utilized during emergencies, but to give people the peace of mind to go about their daily lives. Put another way, such levels of empowerment embrace the neoliberal demand of individualism and responsabilization, insisting on such possibilities by way of a total information awareness system that connects individuals to both secure lines of travel and instant recourse for any threats one may encounter. Kennedy and Coelho (2022), make a similar argument in regards to bSafe—an app that resembles the Protect services offered by Citizen—noting that nearly half of its user reviews commented on the freedom of movement the app provided. In this way, Protect, like others of its kind, draws us a picture of Monahan's "insecurity subject," the "ideal citizen who can flexibly respond and adapt to the vicissitudes and uncertainties of modern life without relying on the state" (Monahan, 2010: 2).

While the increasing reliance on a discourse of insecurity props up Monahan's insecure subject, it also reifies the liberating possibilities found within freedom of movement—which is what disorder threatens. And while journalists have come out en masse about Citizen's role in creating and exacerbating the anxieties amongst its users—something reflected in Kennedy and Coelho's (2022) analysis of user reviews of Citizen—if we read this app from a policing perspective rather than a surveillance one we are quick to recognize nothing out of the ordinary here. In other words, this is a story as old as time, the battle between order and chaos mapped for the digital age.

We must remember that Protect—and Citizen more broadly—serves a market of users who are intent on solving the issues stemming from the absence of police, relying on basic routine activities theory to support its product: increasing bodyguards decreases chances of victimization. In a recent content analysis of like minded personal safety apps, Maxwell et al. (2020) unknowingly offers us further connections, finding that much like the police, these apps can quell a user's fear of crime, but there is limited reduction in actual victimization (see also Wood et al., 2022). Further, while attempts to reduce risk and victimization can be sincere, these apps are better understood as expanding the reach of the police (Stardust et al., 2022). This is the environment in which Citizen situates itself as a policing technology, one that encourages its users to see the world through the lens of the police. Drawing on Linnemann's (2022) articulation of the horror at the center of policing, we assert that Citizen sells its services not simply as a means toward market freedom and risk management, but as a personalized "means to achieve order in a disordered world," of social production by way of the commodity (p. 25).

Built on the premise that the world is an inherently dangerous and unknowable place, the user is thus beset by what Linnemann (2022) describes as "an objectless anxiety and fear of the monster" (p. 59). Of course, fear and risk go hand-and-hand, yet it is fear that remains the powerful response being expressed by users (see Kennedy and Coelho, 2022). This is a point Linnemann (2022: 13) has convincingly made about our fantasies of the police, writing that it is the absence of police that reveal the "horizons of disorder, chaos, and anarchy." Here, police power is cast as indispensable to this struggle, giving it a central place in our perceptions of the world: "it is the force that brings this world into being, transforming once 'masterless men' into proper political, hence civilized, human subjects" (Linnemann, 2022: 15). The power of fear, then, is two fold: it's

revelatory of the absence of symbolic signs of order (i.e. the police), and acts as a summoning mechanism for visible signs of order (i.e. *more* police) (Linnemann, 2022). Thus, for our purposes, Citizen's Protect ultimately can be read as an extension of policing that summons *both* monsters and the police.

As such, we should read the app's ability to detect a user's distress, whether be it a scream or elevated heart rate (if connected to the appropriate devices like an Apple Watch, of course), as a function resembling techno-police operations rather than panoptic-surveillance technology. Most importantly is the chain of events triggered by this catalyst: first, any official response by the police also results in creating a public alert that will be incorporated into the app's mapped projection of the city, and secondly, it has the ability to notify other Citizen users in the area in order to both redirect users and to call users to help. In this way, Citizen's Protect operates much like the police themselves, justifying their importance by specifically declaring and marking the distinctions between friend/enemy. This is to say, the institution of the police, working in coordination with the users, ultimately reproduces the contours and powers of the police. As such, fear, as a construct, remains a powerful way to understand Citizen both as a consumptive practice and as a policing app.

Protect security: A personal police force in your palm

Taking this consumptive functionality a step further, we find ourselves confronting rumors circulated just six months after Citizen introduced its Protect services: The planned partnership with Securitas, a private security outfit located in Chicago. Uncovered email exchanges between Citizen and the Chicago Police Department expose Citizen's interests in trialing on-demand private security forces for the city (Cox, 2022b). Such a service would operate both as a check-in for users and as private security on-demand. In Los Angeles reports of Citizen testing out this type of personal rapid response service have also surfaced. Marked with the words "Making Your World a Safer Place," employees of Los Angeles Professional Security functioned as rapid-response units, responding to request calls of its users as their all black SUVs with the Citizen logo printed on their sides circled the city. The example Citizen gives is of a user contacting Citizen about a break-in, where a private security company could follow up later with the user—after the report has been filed with the police. Or, on the other hand, if a store owner needs private security simply to keep them safe as they lock up their property at night, Citizen offers itself up as a platform to connect with private firms (Cox, 2022a).

What the market offers is a solution that relies on linking consumptive capabilities with the ideologies of security: what can this extra-legal protection offer you, and can you afford it? Underlining these questions is the consumptive logic to maximize enjoyment and minimize risks. The result is clearly a fetishized form of security that blurs the lines between public and private even further. What is more, private firms offering security for the affluent is nothing new, the Pinkertons, whose storied history is defined by beatings, shootings, infiltrations of unions, and the suppression of worker strikes, have made this abundantly clear (Weiss, 1986). And yet, these private efforts, as Feeley (2002: 322) observes, "have increased *rather than* decreased the reach of government" (emphasis ours). Instead of putting an end to public policing as we know it, such private endeavors, Feeley writes, "expanded, not contracted public social control" (Feeley, 2002). While the contradiction expands police power, the reality is that private providers make no claim

toward being a public service; the resulting innovations within private policing thus highlight how policing has always already existed unequally. If the common motivation is that police aren't here when you need them, then this market solution exacerbates these problems for some, while solving the anxieties of others.

Recent reporting out of *ProPublica* details how these contradictions play out in the mid-size US city of St. Louis. Facing concerns over the number of officers available to patrol areas with the highest rates of violent crime, more affluent neighborhoods have started buying their own protection. And while many across the country speak out with concerns about accountability, the neighborhood associations responsible for funding private forces stress "[t]here's piece-of-mind knowing that security professionals have eyes on our streets and can report and follow up with residents about safety concerns ranging from open garage doors and package theft to suspicious activity" (Myers, 2022). In their report on the private security firm, "The City's Finest," comprised of moonlighting off-duty police officers, journalist Kohler (2022) of *ProPublica* describes the results:

Low-income and minority residents do not have the resources to hire police through a private company, and the department has struggled to provide patrols in parts of the city that suffer high rates of violent crime. . . . Meanwhile, the more affluent neighborhoods, which are less affected by violent crime, have raised millions of dollars to pay companies like The City's Finest for granular attention from the same officers the police department has said it doesn't have enough of.

In other words, policing understood through this lens is revealed to be exactly what many have said of it: it is a measure of property protection rather than social good. Here, the ability for the neoliberal state to offload its public goods onto the private individual works in tandem with the critiques of police posited above. Sold as a "force multiplier to the police department" on one hand, and a form of community policing with the ability to "put a consistent police presence" in whichever neighborhood pays for it, such firms offer little expense to cities, and direct accountability to the purchasers (Kohler, 2022). Founder Charles Betts, a retired city police detective, describes his vision as "essentially an extension of the police department" (Long, 2019), which supports the fact that many private agencies request officers to remain in uniform. And while the company still relies on 911 calls, the ultimate end-goal, claims Betts, is a system to allow residents to bypass the city's emergency system.

We rely on Neocleous' (2008: 349) critique of the public-private distinction as "seriously misleading" here so let us be clear, what is interesting about this is that the police function inherent to Citizen lays bare policing's commodified form. The example provided serves as a possible endpoint for Citizen to cross from digital service to on-the-ground security. Further, it is no coincidence that the ultimate goal of private policing is to have the state's approval. As Neocleous (2008) suggests, we should be treating industry as "a partner to the state, a partnership increasingly organized around the ideology of security" (Neocleous, 2008). The insecurities articulated via the app and the implications that come with expanding its functionality toward personal security is centered around generating insecurities. But, and Neocleous (2008) is uncharacteristically blunt here, in generating these insecurities, a company like Citizen "reiterates the central logic around which the national security state is organized: that citizens need to be afraid and need the

state to secure them” (p. 350). As we move forward with our analysis, Citizen’s focus on empowerment and engagement repurposes the idea of “the state” for personnel use, challenging traditional ideas of security and reifying the issues of commodified order destined to be enforced by police power.

State reproduction

While the technologies used to ensure engagement and the logics designed to capture desire are imperative for the social reproduction inherent to order, we would be remiss not to acknowledge and dissect the ways in which the violent repressive powers of the state are further reproduced via the democratization of police power intended by this techno-solution. In doing so, empowerment—the empty signifier that it is—should be read as a form of solicitation to self-discipline that complies with the dominant logic of systems of power. This is in line with Soss et al. (2011) who, in *Discipline the Poor*, write of how empowerment discourses are intended as remedies to the welfare state, but actually mobilize the power of the state to manage and discipline certain populations. As they found, empowerment serves as a vehicle for productive power of the state more generally. This same function further provides justification for Reeves’ (2017) assertion that such technologies rely on turning users into the raw materials of state violence. But for us, it is also this type of usage that pushes us firmly from Monihan’s insecurity subject and toward Emerson’s (2019) more active, vigilante subject.

The functionality of Citizen speaks directly to Emerson’s vigilant subject. Its mapping function serves to detect unusual items, while its Protect services look to resolve the situation by finding a safer route, offering guardianship, or by calling in the police. Its last aspect—our user—is the driving *force* behind the app. What Emerson (2019: 617) writes of vigilantism, of the fact that it “turns on how individuals are moved by, and respond to, threatening situations that exceed official knowledge,” could be the description Citizen uses in the App store. Activation, then, is situated within the experience of the present. Citizen’s functionality primes the user to be engaged with their immediate surroundings, always already on the lookout for the risky object or of scenarios that may arise that need their attention, more generally. What makes Citizen unique is that the vigilant user holds in their hands the ability to act.

Citizen’s (2021d) “Missing Teenage Girl Found” helps us see how this system comes together. When a young daughter went missing, her mother called Citizen’s on-demand help line, Protect. An agent had the mother record an appeal, which, according to the video, went out to 127,000 Citizen users in a five-mile radius. “I’m just pleading with the community,” she petitioned, “If you know something, please, please let us know.” The next day, a Citizen user posted a comment saying he thought he saw the girl. Flagged by its OnAir programming, the information quickly gets forwarded to the girl’s mother. Ending the segment are the two reuniting on the sidewalk—case closed. Heart and prayer-hands emojis floating up the screen highlight the real-time responses from Citizen’s (2021d) user base. Of course, larger questions remained hidden in the published story: the first being why the girl was missing in the first place. But, as Baker (2021) writes, Citizen wants the user “alarmed (child gone!) and then soothed (child found!), and it wants you to associate the journey from one to the other with Citizen.” Videos like these are what Citizen calls its “Magic Moments”—an attempt at establishing community by sharing the limitless achievements possible when using this technology. In reality, Citizen attempts to tap into the progressive vision

of the “perfect victim,” simultaneously highlighting the inabilities of the police *and* crime media which have historically aligned with the needs of White victims and their families (Slakoff and Fradella, 2019). And yet, by challenging its users, this heartwarming “moment” also serves to reproduce the world in ways that align with its mission.

Much like Yardley et al. (2019) have suggested in their review of the serialized true crime podcast industry, these moments “offer glimpses of traumatic and distressing social realities” (p. 15), and the exposure pulls users from the ether of fantasy and plops them center-stage into the realities of a disordered world; comforting, in this case, but without the escapism posited by true-crime stories. If the story is to be resolved, it is up to you. In short, this is a police story intent on reproducing a coherent image of the real world. The goal set forth is a version of the user who can both perceive dangers and act accordingly. While giving the appearance of transparency, the hegemonic ideas surrounding a dark and dangerous world remain intact. In other words, the way to manage at-risk behavior on an individual level is not to avoid danger, but to run toward it. We see this more clearly in an example that never quite made the “Magic Moments.”

Following the 2021 Palisades wildfire in Los Angeles, CA, investigators suspected arson. In attempts to locate any possible clues, Citizen responded by sending notifications out to its 860,000 LA users a photograph of a homeless man with a \$30,000 dollar reward for any information, along with unsubstantiated claims that this was the potential culprit. Citizen’s OnAir hosts urged listeners to “get out there and bring this guy to justice.” Yet the suspected arsonist turned out to be more smoke than fire. And while the company attempted to backtrack once the actual suspect was apprehended, the frenzied comments by CEO Frame on the company’s Slack made clear the intent:

“FIND THIS FUCK”, “LETS GET THIS GUY BEFORE MIDNIGHT HES GOING DOWN”, “BREAKING NEWS. this guy is the devil. get him,” and “by midnight!@#! We hate this guy. GET HIM” (Cox, 2021).

Revealed in this case of mistaken identity is not a “when keeping it real goes wrong” situation, but rather the revanchist mission inherent to Citizen’s operating infrastructure—everyday people taking back their streets for, Citizen claims, “the good of the public.”

While it is important to deal with the consequences of falsely accusing someone of a crime and aiming mobs of vigilantes in their direction, we also must recognize that if Citizen is a technology for the project of police power, then this manhunt is but a routine function for this type of crime fighting app. As Chamayou (2012: 89) boldly states, “the police is a hunting institution,” “entrusted by [the state] with tracking, arresting, and imprisoning.” Like the police dog (Wall, 2014) and the drone (Wall, 2013), Citizen is another such technology reliant on the user’s desire to hunt.

Its opening advertisement under the defunct *Vigilante* moniker further solidifies this attribute. While this first iteration was condemned by the New York Police Department, and ultimately removed from Apple’s App Store shortly after its release in 2016, its ad (see Baker, 2021) reveals that the intentions behind these notifications go beyond your traditional notification app:

It opens with a woman being followed and then assaulted under a dark expressway in New York City. Her 911 call is picked up by the app, but at the same time, an alert for a “Suspicious

Man Following Woman” is sent out to any users in the area. Arriving jointly with the police, three male Citizen users capture an image of the perpetrator and ultimately rescue the woman from any further victimization.

While its re-deployment as Citizen came with a number of re-branding measures specifically directed toward its focus on vigilantism, not much under the hood has changed. In fact, one could argue that its work with police has directly contributed to its success, even if the app still functions the same as before. For instance, William Bratton, once Citizen’s largest impediment to New York City, now sits on the board. In this way, Citizen’s message to “Protect Your World”—entombed within a discourse of empowerment, as it is—should be read as a call toward action, distancing itself from the typical surveillance application.

The question now is, what is this action toward? This answer should be obvious, given the apps’ chosen name: Citizen.

Citizen: Securitization of community

Inherent to the relationship between an individual and the state is the concept of the citizen. Replicating the top-down approach historic to policing, the rights of the citizen are granted by the state. *Exercising* one’s rights is also evidence of citizenship, and what Citizen obviously sets out to harness is that right—in this case, via the protection of one’s community. Of course, we quickly see how these rights are granted *and* challenged in how they replicate the stratification inherent to state citizenship in the first place. We can return to Kennedy and Coelho (2022: 133) here, who in their study of the reviews of the app, find traces of racism commonly found in similar apps, such as Nextdoor, concluding how “the very design of the app encourages Citizen users to think that risks are endemic in the urban spaces that surround them and that violent crimes perpetrated by presumably racialized others are unsolved and unpredictable.”

We would be remiss, however, to conclude that this is a side-effect of the infrastructure of the application. Rather, as others have pointed out, this form of racialized vigilante justice is not new. Davis (1998) linked neighborhood watches to the circling of the wagons, calling it “frontier justice.” Cohen (2007) noted how this similar style of justice expanded from local frontiers to a nationalist project with the development of World War I. For less than a dollar, loyal citizens could get a badge, participate in raids and hold hostage thousands of young men protesting the American war effort (Cohen, 2007). With minimal economic costs and political liability, the APL helped ferret out radical neighbors, and provides a strong connection to how Citizen sees its users.

Vigilante violence, in this light, is understood as a temporary embodiment of popular sovereignty, where, in the absence of legitimate police, the citizenry engaged in order maintenance in frontier spaces (Cohen, 2007). Historian Slotkin (1998: 174) sees vigilante violence as marked by its own ideology and history, transforming “from an assertion of natural and democratic right to violence to an assertion of class and racial privilege” against the “dangerous classes.”

Embedded in such vigilantism too, then, is a product of deterritorialization of the police: an “ideology of paranoid space” that insists on a “police concept of history” (Feldman, 2004: 74). Seemingly from the recesses of Linnemann’s horror, the ideology of policing about which Feldman writes is one where visible ordered spaces are subverted and intruded by unseen disordered

spaces (Feldman, 2004). Such ideology, then, compels everyday people to assume the role of the police, *becoming* police.

Citizen's solution to the paradoxes of the police is not to call for more officers, but instead to blur the lines between who is and who is not a police officer. In other words, the solution to the state's issues concerning legibility that inform the police's own project toward governability is one that relies on an expanded notion of what Maher (2021: 22) has effectively described as the "pig majority":

"It is the judges, the courts, the juries, and the grand juries. It is the mayors and the district attorneys who demand "law and order" and denounce those who protest police brutality as "mindless rioters and looters." It is the racist media apparatus that bends over backwards to turn victims into aggressors and – above all when the former are Black and the latter white – killers into saints".

Maher is not alone in his assertion. Walcott (2021) similarly adds to Maher's history by helping us connect what Frank Wilderson has updated to the ongoing "ipso facto" deputization of white people. Spawning modern policing, this form of deputization was premised on the revanchist logics of "recovering" and "protecting" slave owner's property and was based on the assumptions that Black bodies were deserving of suspicion and required oversight and authority over. The legacies of which, trace back to the plantation, a space devoid of domesticity and politics, of private and public, as Walcott noted; which became the driving force behind such enmity—its porous boundaries the justification for meting out racialized violence. Such description helps us make sense of the recent vigilantism of Gregory and Travis McMichael, who murdered Ahmaud Arbery—how as Travis McMichael described: "seeing a video of him walking around so nonchalant in that house, kind of, it startled me a little bit. . .going into the house and walking around in there like it's no big deal, that was alarming" (Macaya et al., 2021). Of course, McMichael's testimony echoes the social landscape of anti-blackness to which policing is indebted, where the porous boundaries between police and public become readily apparent. Perhaps then, Zedner (2006: 82) is right in reminding us that the police "no longer walk alone." Indeed, even with its progressive veneers, this is explicit in the promise Citizen makes.

Summary

As seen above, similar to the uniformed officer rushing to the scene, is a Citizen, many in fact, responding to and empowered by the call to defend civilization itself. The world of the police, then, expands outward, a metaphorical glowering blob consuming all in its path; but too, a material formulation that Zedner (2006) reminds us has always been blurry. Beyond the technological glitz and glamor then, we concede, much like Maher, that such a call is nothing new to "America." Police power has always extended its hand through the Citizen.

In stark contrast to the progressive solutions presented by Citizen, our reading of the app's offering ultimately uncovers little new territory. Violence and ideology often define the parameters by which we read the police. However, by reading Citizen through the lens of police power we recognize the power inherent to the ways that state capitalism shapes our desires toward empowerment. Such an ability further replicates the existing unequal order that is tied to the

existence of the police and the subsequent power being tapped into. While even progressive organizations attach their names to this app, Citizen's ability to trace the desires of police power back to the individual in our current neoliberal regime of capitalism is indicative of a larger movement toward police power. One that does not include violence and ideology, but that firmly exists within the compulsive nature of the reproduction of both state and capital. Wrapped up in its risk management services and vigilante usage is the spreading of police beyond the institution, embedding itself in the actions and desires of the "community," necessitating policing as the prerogative action inherent to Citizens, and thus compelling users to see any and every public encounter from the lens of the police. 21st century policing, then, is not just more of the same, but rather an expansion of the same.

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Notes

1. Social reproduction, for Mau (2023), is located in what he has termed economic power, distinguished from ideological and violent power—mute compulsion. By social reproduction, Mau is implicitly broad, it is "all the processes and activities needed in order to secure the continuous existence of social life" (p. 5). Of course, this is a social life "in which social reproduction is governed by the logic of capital to a significant degree" (p. 15), which is "inherent to the privatization of public duties devoted to private rather than social purposes" (p. 15). Of course, these relations involve "domination and coercion, even if juridical forms and political institutions seek to obscure that" (p. 67). In other words, social reproduction is where life happens.
2. Evgeny Morozov (2013) similarly recognizes such an app-based solution as technological solutionism. An infrastructure for problem-solving, Morozov's concept is detailed in length in *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, where he writes of this form of solutionism overtaking governance.

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