Article

Intersecting Positionalities and the Unexpected Uses of Digital Crime and Safety Tracking in Brooklyn

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Abstract
Citizen is a live crime and safety tracking app in New York City that uses AI to monitor police scanners for incidences that are relevant to "public safety," whilst also utilizing user-recorded footage, as users near a crime, fire, or accident are encouraged to "go live" and film unfolding events. Users comment additional information and post expressive emojis as incidences unravel. In sharing information across a digital network, Citizen functions as both a form of social media and a peer-to-peer surveillance app. Through this lens, my ethnographic research investigates the impact of the digitization of crime and safety as an everyday experience in increasingly gentrified neighbourhoods in Brooklyn. The question of whether technology is a marker of simultaneous inclusivity and exclusivity speaks to the dialectical nature of digital technology, as producing concurrent "good" and "bad" effects. This article explores the ways that Citizen exemplifies these tensions: The app makes users feel safer but also more anxious; Citizen is a place for community information sharing to both productive and pejorative effects, it is used to both surveil one's neighbourhood, instilling fear and mistrust, and to sousveil law enforcement and circumnavigate the NYPD at protests, producing accountability and a sense of safety. Through ethnographic examples, this article further navigates the cultural and local specificities of use, the complex positionalities that are mediated by the app and the consequences this has for those who experience social inclusion and exclusion.

Issue
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1. Introduction

This article opens with an autoethnographic vignette of a walkthrough of the Citizen app, a self-described personal safety network in which the public safety system is opened and AI is used to monitor police scanners for 911 calls that are relevant to "public safety":

Citizen Notification Alert! A warning sign flashes across my phone screen. I swipe to unlock and log into Citizen app, the homepage a dark and foreboding grid map of New York City, awash with dozens of yellow and red dots. I click on the notification: "Two men shot, Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn." A grainy video of red flashing lights from the emergency vehicles at the scene glares back at me. Prayer and angry face emojis ping out of the comments section and float

up my screen. A 9.36 PM update informs me that the person was shot approximately three times. A subsequent update at 9.42 AM declares that officers are canvassing for a man wearing a ski mask that fled southbound on Wycoff. I open the comments section:

> @SammyG7000: NYC going to shit. Almost back to the 80s and early 90s
>
> @Purpleboi: wtf that's right by me
>
> @Brooklynuser783929854: first guns in schools now this [face palm emoji]

I zoom back out to the dark mode map scanning for alerts and see a yellow dot a few miles away. "Car fire on Brooklyn Queens Expressway, Exit 28." A video,

uploaded by Citizen user @thor444, shows what was a car, now a blazing ball of flames with thick black smoke billowing out across the highway. Dozens of other videos of varying quality appear, uploaded by other Citizen users at different times and vantage points; some shot from above, from buildings across the highway, others from under the neighbouring Manhattan Bridge. Others show officers diverting traffic, while a video with a green verified tick, documents the firefighters firing streams of water at the smoking vehicle. All the while shocked face emojis scatter across the screen. I open the comments section:

> @Tinytina50: as if traffic on the BQE is not bad enough…

> @nozy778: Nothin' coming out of there

> @bkbbyy0: Car-b-que

Citizen also utilizes user-recorded footage, as users near a crime, fire, or accident are encouraged to "go live" and film the unfolding events. When a user is close to an ongoing incident, Citizen will ask: "Is this still happening?" It will offer the option of "yes" or "no," awaiting a response in real-time. In addition, users can also self-report incidences if they see something they deem

to be of concern in their area. Other users are notified of this information via alerts (see Figure 1), warnings of potentially dangerous situations happening around their physical location, as Citizen also functions as a map of the city, utilizing geolocation awareness technology (Figure 2). The dark mode map conjures imagery of Gotham and vigilantes, while the app's minimalist eye icon emphasizes that we are watching. As situations unfold, more information floods in, from user comments, further video clips, and uploaded police scanner voice recordings. Emojis expressing shock, anger, and hope bubble across the screen as incidents unravel. Citizen also has magic moments, reporting on local news such as the return of a missing cat or notification of a parade. It is in this sharing of information across a digital network that Citizen functions as both a form of social media and a peer-to-peer surveillance app.

1.1. History of Citizen App

Citizen is currently in 60 different US cities and boasts 10 million active users as of 2021, 2 million of which are reportedly in New York City. Its founder and CEO Andrew Frame made millions moonlighting for fledgling Facebook and was previously arrested by the FBI for hacking NASA as a teenager (Bertoni, 2019). According to Crunchbase, Citizen has amassed $133 million in funding from multiple venture capitalist investors, including
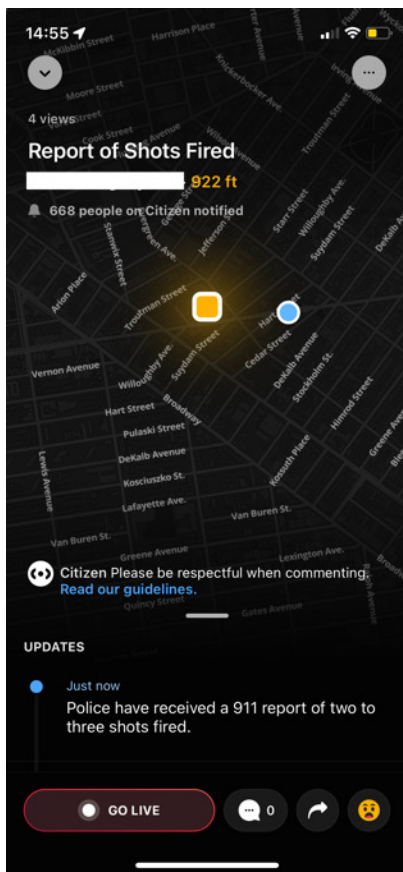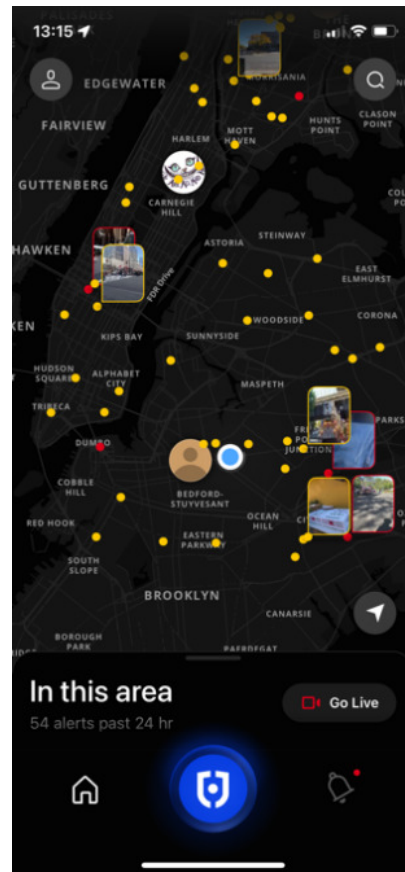

Figure 1. Citizen incident.

Figure 2. Citizen map.

PayPal founder Peter Thiel. Citizen does not advertise and claims that it does not sell user data. However, Citizen has been mired in controversy from its inception, attracting an abundance of media attention across the political spectrum, raising potential dangers, highlighting scandals, and reporting on the app's escalation of privatized security. Citizen was not always named as such. When the app first launched in 2016 it was called Vigilante and was swiftly removed from the Apple store for violating its guidelines on user-generated content apps that risk physical harm. Just a few months later the app rebranded and relaunched as Citizen, although the majority of its features remained the same. Vigilante's #CrimeNoMore was replaced by Citizen's #ProtectTheWorld, as the app purported to move away from crime fighting and to a mission of safety empowerment. The term "Citizen" stirs up nationalistic mythology of the patriotic hero, the law-abiding citizen, proud and dutybound. "Citizen" is both a personal call to action and an inclusion in something bigger, a community of like-minded concerned citizens.

However, it wasn't long before concerns were being raised by the media, reporting that users felt paranoid and fearful, highlighting worries about voyeurism and misinformation, while also acknowledging the potential for accountability and transparency in community and law enforcement relationships (Herrman, 2019). Other articles cited concerns about racial profiling and exacerbating stereotypes of neighbourhoods with high crime, in which whole communities are stigmatized after being placed under greater scrutiny (Murrell, 2020). This is especially perturbing with the affordance of the self-reported crime feature. Experts warn this could have damaging consequences as decisions about who does and doesn't look suspicious often reveal racial biases (Lin & Baker, 2020). In further concerning developments, Citizen was reported to be testing a privatized on-demand security force in LA and Chicago in which a security response team would physically arrive on scene at reported incidents (Cox, 2021a, 2022). These plans were later abandoned. May 2021 was a scandal-filled month for Citizen, as just four days after the LA report, Cox (2021b) further reported that Citizen accidentally exposed user's Covid-19 data, including names, symptoms and self-test results, and another two days later, a hacked data scrape of Citizen was posted to the dark web (Cox, 2021c). Just one day later, Cox again reported that Citizen placed a $30,000 bounty on the head of a wrongly accused homeless man for starting a Californian wildfire. Citizen released his picture resulting in a wrongful detention by local officers. The notification was instructed to be sent out by Andrew Frame himself. Leaked Slack messages from this time show Frame saying: "This guy is the devil. Get him...We hate this guy. GET HIM" (Cox & Koebler, 2021). In an attempt to monetize, in August 2022, Citizen launched Protect, a $19.99/month subscription service that purports to provide you with a 24/7 digital agent, who can monitor your audio and video, message you in real-time, send emergency responders your location, and alert family and friends to your situation: "Today, instantaneous locatability has become the principal capacity of the 'secure' subject" (DeNicola, 2012, p. 91). However, no one I spoke to has bought into this. Digital community surveillance is not new, existing in the form of email chains and listservs (Lowe et al., 2016) before the dawn of apps and social media. Today, Citizen exists against a backdrop of competing personalized and privatized digital security apparatus, from Amazon's digital doorbell Ring, to Nextdoor, a neighbourhood app, where users can buy used furniture and share recipes whilst also warning other users of "suspect behaviour.''

The dialectical nature of digital technology and its production of ambivalent attitudes are well accepted within the field of technology studies (MacRury, 2013; McQuire, 2016; Miller & Horst, 2012). In embracing the ambivalent and often contradictory nature of the digital technology we study, we are best placed to emphasize how it is socially embedded and culturally constructed, revealing the complexities, uncertainties, and nuance that abound human–technology relationships and interactions (Graham, 1998; Rambe & Liezel, 2015). However, that does not necessitate falling into reductive binary framings which abound in surveillance studies. Thus, moving beyond dualistic paradigms of care and control, panopticon and synopticon, this article will grapple with the tensions and ambiguities produced and mediated by the app that don't neatly fit into these categories, rather they overflow into unexpected and culturally specific uses of Citizen, such as resistance, sousveillance and as a community resource. Through ethnographic examples, this article explores how Citizen, as a security practice and a peer-to-peer surveillance app, instils a sense of fear and mistrust about one's neighbourhood, which could result in damaging consequences such as racial profiling. However, this article will also reveal the productive powers of Citizen when used in creative ways, such as to circumnavigate the police at protests and to empower communities with knowledge about neighbourhoods. I am arguing that Citizen has the capacity to create fear and yet consolidate community, to both surveil and sousveil, and to simultaneously recreate and resist existing power structures. These contradictions are often exposed in relation to the complex intersecting positionalities of users, including race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, complicating who benefits from the app and how. Furthermore, anthropological research is uniquely placed to address these complexities and reveal such nuances, due to the nature of long-term immersive fieldwork.

2. Surveillance, Synopticon, Sousveillance

It has been well-documented how Foucault used the panopticon, a technology and architecture by which prisoners do not know if they are being watched, to demonstrate the disciplinary power of institutions (Foucault, 1995). In 1997, Mathiesen argued that Foucault's use of

Bentham's panopticon was insufficient as it had omitted to discuss and pre-empt the rise of the synopticon, an inversion of the panopticon, in which the many watch the few, a practice well observed in mass media. The TV show *Big Brother* was a good example of the synopticon, where contestants willingly agreed to be constantly filmed for the entertainment of others. There has been much scholarly engagement and response to Mathiesen's concept of the synopticon. Lyon (2005) argued that 9/11 exemplified the synopticon, as the world gazed through TV screens at the catastrophe. McCahill (2012) argued that the panopticon–synopticon fusion of mass media reproduces power imbalances in regard to crime reporting, focusing disproportionately on street crime and under-emphasizing white-collar crime. He also acknowledged that the synopticon may have democratizing potential and mentioned the rise of citizen journalism, but then went on to say that is not the case in the context of the media, crime, and criminal justice system that reinforces power imbalances.

However, Mathiesen had not anticipated the "new modalities of visibility engendered by new media" (Bucher, 2012, p. 1164). This is Doyle's (2011) critique of Mathiesen, that the role and form of media have shifted with the rise of alternative media that are critical of security, surveillance, and crime discourse. For example, media outlets like *Vice* and *Wired* often report on the failings and injustices of digital surveillance. Additionally, Doyle argues that Mathiesen, while focusing on the synopticon as a means to control, has excluded the potential for resistance, referencing the proliferation of CopWatch videos and what has now come to be called sousveillance (Mann, 2013), an inversion of the traditional, authoritative gaze of surveillance, in which the public watch those in positions of power. The horrific murder of George Floyd in 2020 at the hands of the police was filmed and posted online by 17-year-old Darnella Frazier, in probably the most well-known instance of sousveillance. This does represent a form of synopticon in the narrowest sense, as the masses watch the few, however, it is not as a mechanism for oppression or control but rather as a means of resistance and accountability. Additionally, Doyle finds fault with Mathiesen for not considering the role of culture and intersecting positionalities, like gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Media draws from and is reshaped by these broader frames of meaning as "these relationships are complex and recursive" (Doyle, 2011, p. 294). Thus, while it may be tempting to categorize Citizen as a synopticon, in that many watch the few, I believe it is an inadequate metaphor through which to view the app, as it omits the possibility of resistance and sousveillance, while also failing to account for the shift to personalised media and the impact of viewer/user positionalities.

Additionally, there has been significant research within anthropology and other disciplines on the dialectical relationship between care and surveillance (Frois, 2014; Zurawski, 2004), specifically within the digital realm (Madianou, 2016; Miller et al., 2021). While this is an important lens through which to look at digital surveillance, this article moves beyond that binary to look at the unexpected uses of Citizen, in all their contradictions and complexities. I am arguing we discard these restricting paradigms and look at the local tensions and nuances that have arisen with Citizen use in Brooklyn, resisting rigid categorization. Furthermore, as this article will demonstrate, these tensions are often animated by intersecting positionalities.

3. Methodology and Fieldsite

This article is based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in New York City from March to November 2022. I was predominately located in Bushwick and Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy), increasingly gentrified neighbourhoods in Brooklyn that border one another, working mainly with artists and activists who had generally lived in the neighbourhoods for a number of years. I undertook participant observation while volunteering at a multi-purpose community space in Bushwick and worked closely with the Black queer owner, Zine, who is a prominent community leader in the neighbourhood and was described to me as "the heart of Bushwick." They have run multiple local political campaigns, including for mayor and congress, worked in community outreach, food and clothes drives, and they are also an artist themselves. I also undertook participant observation at parties, on the subway, at DIY art events, pop-ups, drag shows, at the beach, and in the park, amongst other places. I interviewed over 70 people, often multiple times, both in person, at coffee shops, interlocutors' homes, on long walks, and over Zoom when necessary. I further conducted a five-hour focus group with 10 of my primary interlocutors. My choice in the use of the term "interlocutor," an anthropologically progressive and accepted term for the people I have been working with in the field, is an attempt to address historic power imbalances in the discipline, of researcher and researched, as "interlocutor" infers a dialogue, a two-way relationship of exchange, as opposed to extraction of information. For example, "informant" connotates a provider of information, while "participant" and "respondent" has a tendency to replicate the colonial power dynamic. "Interlocutor" allows for a relationship that isn't purely one-sided but is rather reciprocal; a cultural exchange that "corresponds to the dialogic nature of fieldwork" (TriCollege Libraries Research Guide, 2022). To recruit my interlocutors, I often utilized a snowballing methodology (Low, 2008). This technique lent itself well to conducting research in Brooklyn, as I generally found people to be open and accommodating, inviting me to events and suggesting other people I should talk to. All of my interlocutors have been pseudonymized and all images are either my screenshots or have been shared with permission.

Often my research involved "deep hanging out" (Geetz, 1998), which resulted in excellent rapport and trust between myself and my interlocutors. This is also

important for "holistic contextualisation" (D. Miller et al., 2021, p. 21) as I spent a lot of my research not talking about Citizen and security but rather about my interlocutor's lives, relationships, and histories. As an anthropologist, I needed to conduct long-term fieldwork where I was immersed within a community to best explore culturally specific ways in which digital technology, in particular the Citizen app, was embodied and embedded in people's everyday lives. Furthermore, I have also been conducting online ethnography, both on the Citizen app and more generally across the polymedia environment, reciprocally engaging with my interlocutor's social media. My interlocutors comprised a diverse demographic in regard to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and socio-economic background. I was mainly working with Millennials and Gen Z, as this is where I had access and who I most came into contact with through my work with the community leaders. However, at times I did also speak with people from older generations. Some of my interlocutors were born and bred New Yorkers, others were from upstate, different states, and different countries. Most people I spoke with were critical and sceptical of the NYPD and the current carceral system. Often my interlocutors were my peers and I believe this both strengthens and limits my research. As noted by Donnelly (2018, p. 381) in her research with gentrifiers in Bed-Stuy, she had much in common with her participants, and she cited this as a strength of the study, believing her participants were more candid and open with her and less defensive than they may have otherwise been with a different interviewer. That being said, I also acknowledge that this approach limits the scope of my research. However, as is essential and ethical for anthropological fieldwork, I went where I was granted access and respected community leaders and gatekeepers when they declined to be involved in the research project.

There is a strong emphasis on community and the importance of community in Bushwick and Bed-Stuy. This term is used loosely and crosses purposely by my interlocutors, intersecting between different localities and social relations. Community referred to the surrounding blocks of one's home, the entire neighbourhood, the nightlife community, the arts and activism scene, and the queer scene, to name a few. "Community" also meant reaching out on Instagram for mutual aid, to supplement funds when income was low in order to pay rent, buy pet food, or move out of an unsafe living situation. Communities are rarely homogenous and are often in flux. These intersecting and colliding "scenes" that my interlocutors occupy are not delineated and are often referred to interchangeably. Thus, I am using "community" in the same way my interlocutors do, as amorphous and inclusive.

3.1. Context: Security in the US

The philosopher Brian Massumi discussed the terror alert system in the US introduced after 9/11, arguing that this system was designed to create fear that stimulates direct activation that is lived through the body. As activation reoccurs, fear becomes self-relating, eventually becoming the ground of existence and a way of life (Massumi, 2005). Within the anthropology of security and surveillance, there has been ample research on this normalization of fear and the ways in which security is placed as an everyday concern, embedded in people's lives (Fassin, 2014; Fawaz & Bou Akar, 2012; Frois, 2014; Low, 2008). Masco (2014) argues that, post 9/11, the amplification of terror and fear was utilized as a justification for increasing security apparatus. With this "phantasmagoria of fear" (Maguire, 2014) promoted by the state and media, danger became standardized as a continuous campaign to normalize imminent threats, resulting in a national state of perpetual anxiety and mistrust. This in turn tailored an atmosphere of fear which was used to legitimise technological surveillance practices to protect citizens from both real and imagined threats (Frois, 2014, p. 50). Fear became normative as it was established as a fact of social reality and security was thus positioned as something we constantly engage in. This in turn works to reaffirm any sense of disorder and one's need for protection, as security begets insecurity.

This is something anthropologist Setha Low found in her research on gated communities in the US (Low, 2008, 2019). As emotions of fear were subsumed into the conception of home, insecurity became an everyday concern, which actually worked to heighten feelings of anxiety rather than making them feel safer. She further argues that these emotions are exacerbated by the media and both the local and global discourses on insecurity and crime. Similarly, in Portugal, Frois (2014, p. 46) discusses this "power of security discourse" where CCTV was installed despite expenditure, low crime rates, and local police insistence on its ineffectiveness, but rather due to pre-existing political ideology in which security had been naturalized. While there are certainly differences in the case of New York City, it has been reported that the perception of crime rates is misaligned with actual crime statistics (Akinnibi & Wahid, 2022). This is most probably a result of high reporting on crime in the city and the regular press conferences by Mayor Eric Adams, emphasizing the crime levels in the city (Fitzsimmons, 2022). Apps like Citizen further compound the situation, as they work to confirm that crime is indeed all around. The success of the privatized security industry in the US is also a result of individualism and neoliberalism, as the responsibility of security has been shifted onto the individual, as the state has diminished (Low, 2008). Individual citizens and communities have taken on the role of defending themselves and their homes, and technology corporations have responded in kind. As Goldstein (2013, p. 13) argues, the "security state is the logical counterpoint to neoliberalism's privatization of civil society."

Another consideration that is important to mention in the context of the US is the deeply entwined history

between surveillance and racism, charting back to chattel slavery. For example, Browne (2015) draws attention to the Lantern Laws, under which Black slaves were required to carry lanterns at night as technologies of surveillance in colonial New York that sought to keep racialised bodies illuminated and marked as dangerous. Violent visibility produces the racialized body (Browne, 2015, p. 68) and positions them as an issue of security. Today, technologies of surveillance have been criticised for reproducing racial bias (Nkonde, 2020) and this is something Maguire (2014) also highlights in his analysis of counter-terrorism at European airports, where agents employ pseudo-scientific methods of screening for "suspicious behaviour." He argues that these security decisions are influenced by moralized and racialized knowledge and that what is suspicious is culturally specific. Citizen app is effectively placing that judgement with its users, who are untrained and have feelings of unsafety, as I will discuss later in the article.

4. Citizen App in Bushwick and Bed-Stuy

Ethnographic research is aptly positioned to grapple with the chaos and contradictions of the everyday experiences of using digital technology and my fieldwork has uncovered such intricacies and inconsistencies. Citizen is used for a variety of reasons and by a wide-ranging demographic. Some have described using Citizen for comedic value and trolling, others have stated how Citizen helped them track Covid cases during lockdowns, and others have described their experience of using Citizen with neutrality and indifference. User's opinions and feelings about Citizen oscillate over time and through the different ways that they use the app, describing it as "very informative," "useless," "racist," "a double-edged sword," and "a lifesaver." Some people think Citizen is trustworthy because you can self-report incidences, others think it is untrustworthy for this very reason. Citizen has unexpected uses. For example, I was sitting in the local park in Bushwick with Z. She has lived in Bushwick in the same railroad apartment for the past ten years and regularly runs monthly community salon events, showcasing local artists from her apartment. While in the park, we heard loud sirens, and Z said: "I bet that's on Citizen." It was: Engines rushing to a nearby fire. Z followed up: "I literally got renters insurance which covers fire because of seeing all the fires on Citizen." Other unintended uses were more complicated.

4.1. Protests and Resistance

In the summer of 2020, as the Black Lives Matter protests surged in the weeks after George Floyd's murder, Citizen downloads skyrocketed, surpassing *Twitter*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, and every other "news" app on the Apple charts. While most of my interlocutors already used Citizen prior to the protests, they often noted a change in how they and their friends used the app during this time. Eva is a queer Latinx furniture designer who lives in Bushwick, a place she describes as having a "thick culture." Her mother is Mexican and her father is white, who grew up in Buffalo, upstate New York, a place Eva describes as very white and extremely racist. She grew up in Texas and experienced a lot of racism as a brown kid and frequently witnessed her mother being racially profiled by law enforcement. She also grew up on military bases and had to unlearn the glorification of the US military once she got older and moved away. Eva was very active during the BLM protests and this raised difficult conversations with her family in regards to her disavowal of law enforcement. Her father found it very sobering to realise his daughter was no longer on his side. During the protests Eva was going every day, marching for months. She described her legs getting tan and buff, wanting to be outside as much as possible during Covid and do something that felt powerful. During this time, she was chased by police, hit with batons, and hid out after curfews. Eva used Citizen often during the protests and found it really helpful in seeing what direction they were going in and how to catch up. It was also useful to figure out where police would be, avoid cop traps, and anticipate kettling tactics, in which police form large cordons to contain protesters in limited spaces, often as a means to arrest protesters. Citizen was often used in conjunction with other apps like Waze, a navigation map, before messaging friends over Telegram to communicate their location and that of police.

However, during this time Eva saw activity explode across Citizen, with constant shootings and stabbings, which she found very overwhelming. She heard friends saying that often these reports were false or unfounded and there was a conspiracy going around that the police would make up incidences on Citizen. These incidences were being reported in areas like Bushwick and not in more affluent neighbourhoods of Brooklyn like Williamsburg. Eva saw this as misleading and making it look like certain neighbourhoods were more dangerous or had higher crime rates during the time of the protests. There would also be information about police activity that turned out to be unfounded, in her eyes intentionally generating unnecessary fear. Eva was worried this could create a divide between people and she was angry, so she started going to the location of reported incidences to see for herself what was happening and every time the area was empty, with no people or noise. After these experiences, Eva would only rely on the comments section to verify whether something was true or not, especially in the case of comments from people who stated they were there or they lived upstairs of a reported incident. In early 2021 Eva deleted Citizen. These inconsistencies were part of the reason but also the anxiety the app created, both for herself and her girlfriend, as notifications of supposed violence would jarringly interrupt their day. She is now annoyed talking to people who still have the app because she believes Citizen was created to scare people and is used to stigmatize specific

areas. This is a shift from how the app was originally introduced to Eva, as an informative, important piece of technology in regards to safety.

There is much to unpack here. Firstly, I am interested in how Citizen was utilized for protest mobilization and as a means of resistance, an arguably unintended use of the app. The perpetual opportunism of smartphones (Miller et al., 2021) opens up unexpected uses and the practice of using Citizen to engage in solidarity and march in protest against police violence is an example of this. Eva details how Citizen was used as a way to monitor police presence at protests in order to avoid them, protecting herself and her community. Not only is this a form of resistance, I believe this is also a form of sousveillance, taken at its broadest definition, as Eva used Citizen to track the police. This is powerful in the climate of the summer of 2020 and the sousveillant witnessing of George Floyd's murder. Walsh (2010) also writes about the inversion of an event that would be traditionally surveilled, like a protest, which is then, in fact, sousveilled, in the case of US–Mexico border crossings, where civilian-led sousveillance teams watch for border patrol and vigilante organizations in order to provide care for migrants in the form of water and high-resolution maps. "While they may enhance and extend state control over bounded territories and populations, watching, monitoring, and rendering visible are not inherently exclusionary or repressive acts" (Walsh, 2010, p. 113), but rather can function to undermine authority. Thus, an event that is normally surveilled can be transformed and harassed into one that is sousveilled, while using the very same technology.

In regards to the conspiracy surrounding the police creating fake incidences on Citizen, Eva said she could see that being true but had no evidence to support it, which I also couldn't find. However, there are concerning connections between Citizen and the NYPD. While Citizen claims to have no formal ties with any municipalities, the company's relationship with local law enforcement is murky. For example, the ex-police commissioner of the NYPD, Bill Bratton, now serves as an executive on the board of Citizen. During his time as police commissioner, Bratton championed the use of emerging technology in policing, including COMPSTAT in the 90s, which mapped "emerging crime patterns" using "high-tech 'pin-mapping'" so that police could "quickly identify trouble spots," and PREDPOL in 2007, another predictive policing software, which has subsequently been banned in other cities for "perpetuating police bias by sending patrols back to areas where they've already made arrests" (Miller, 2020). Additionally, in cases of shooting reports, often Citizen posts that ShotSpotter technology has detected gunshots while emphasizing how that technology can also pick up fireworks or cars backfiring. ShotSpotter is an audio surveillance technology that is utilized by the NYPD, in which hundreds of small sensors have been deployed on rooftops and lamp posts, across areas of Brooklyn that are deemed high in gun violence. The fact that Citizen also uses this raises questions about the extent to which they share information and technology with the NYPD. Thus, while Eva's claims of police conspiracy are unfounded, there are definitely troubling connections between the app and local law enforcement.

4.2. Fear, Racism, and Gentrification

While Citizen was used as a form of resistance to great effect, its usefulness was entangled with other emotions. It is revealing that Eva mentions anxiety and the stigmatization of neighbourhoods like Bushwick as reasons for deleting Citizen. And while Eva saw for herself that some Citizen notifications were unfounded (see Figure 3), other people I spoke to had not, describing how the
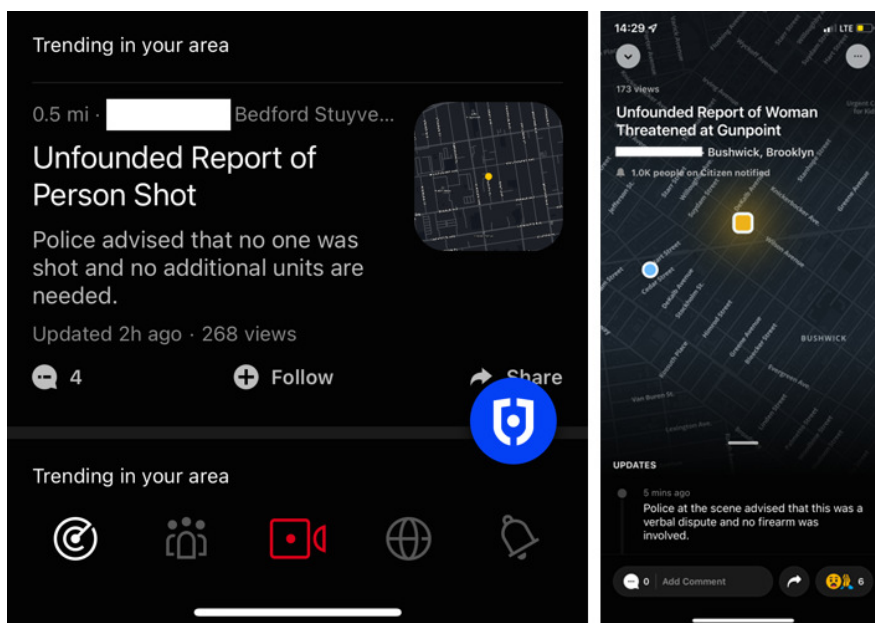

Figure 3. Examples of unfounded notifications.

app made their neighbourhoods feel insecure, mistrustful, and crime-riddled, making them in turn feel paranoid and unsafe. This is significant as, generally, my interlocutors don't spend a lot of time in their apartments. Living space is limited so they like to be out and about, at community events or parties. Thus, when your neighbourhood feels insecure this is impactful, as, extending Low's conception of home to include one's neighbourhood, "the reactive emotions of home have real-world consequences: They restrict participation and limit aspects of social interaction" (Low, 2008, p. 62).

Often due to media reporting, the perception of crime is disproportionate to actual crime rates and Citizen adds to this impression, in a way that is invasive, via notifications, and ever-present, as your phone is always with you as you move around the city. These notifications function as a continual reminder of your potential insecurity, jarringly interrupting one's day wherever you happen to be, be it at work, on the subway or at home in your bedroom, blurring the boundaries between public and private. Due to geolocation awareness, crime, or at least the perception of crime, becomes ever-present (see Figure 4).

Apps with maps are powerful, making users feel small yet significant, creating reference points of relation with the self always at the centre. Citizen creates an overwhelming map of your area that gives the impression that your neighbourhood is constantly under siege and therefore a space to be mistrustful of. As mentioned earlier, there have been concerns about Citizen and the dangers of racial profiling, and these concerns are particularly pertinent in this context. These worries are shared by Zine, the community leader mentioned earlier. They described Citizen as "straight up racist," saying it

reminded them of the crime alerts on their college campus and that they started to dress in colourful clothing so as to not be identified as the generic Black man frequently described on the alerts. Other interlocutors have mentioned the prevalence of racist comments on the app, often accusatory statements directed at people of colour. Citizen asks its users to make time-sensitive moral judgements about who does and doesn't belong, and there is the danger that these judgements are animated by users' fears of a racialised other. This is because people of colour are more often placed into the category of "suspicious" and "criminal" in their own neighbourhoods, as racializing surveillance has the "power to define what is in or out of place" (Browne, 2015, p. 16). This can happen at an accelerated rate in gentrifying neighbourhoods like Bushwick and Bed-Stuy as "policing becomes offloaded to communities whose newest members have varying degrees of familiarity with existing neighborhood composition" (Bloch, 2022, p. 269). Additionally, gentrified areas are over-policed which results in exclusion and displacement, as more people of colour are incarcerated, which in turn further destabilizes communities (Kellogg, 2015). Thus, in streamlining a continuous feed of supposed crime into users' hands and homes, Citizen creates the impression of unsafety in one's neighbourhood, a feeling that can be particularly potent and consequential in the hands of gentrifiers who are new to the community. Furthermore, Zine also raised a similar point to McCahill regarding the lack of white-collar crime being reported on the app, which is particularly pertinent in New York City, the financial capital of the world. Rather, by focusing on violent crime, Citizen perpetuates negative racial stereotypes and reinforces ideas about Black criminality.
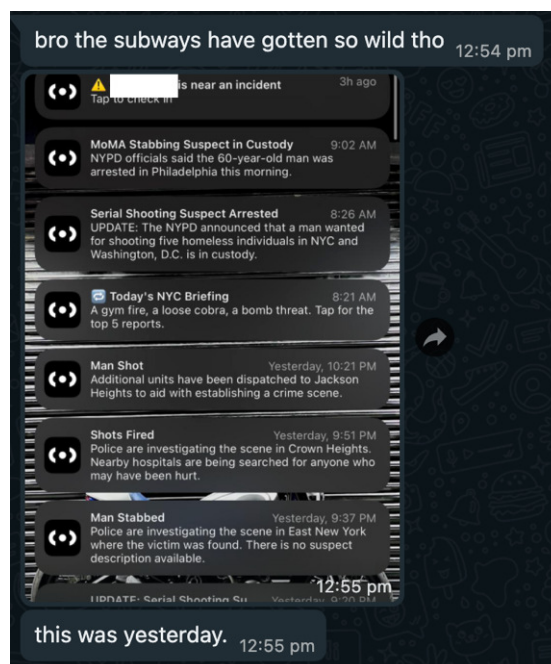

Figure 4. Screenshot of Z's messages about Citizen notifications.

These stories and views from Eva and Zine work to highlight the tensions and nuances that arise with Citizen use in these neighbourhoods. While Eva used Citizen as a form of resistance, to sousveil the police and protest safely, she also felt anxiety using the app and saw how certain neighbourhoods were being made to look more crime filled, be it intentionally or not, creating more fear and mistrust noted by other interlocutors. Whereas Zine points to concerns about racism and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes on Citizen, a danger that is heightened in gentrifying neighbourhoods, in particular when residents report feeling unsafe and insecure.

4.3. Community Potential

Zemmy is a 30-year-old performance artist who has lived in Bushwick for the last 10 years. They are white, gay, and use they/them pronouns. Zemmy describes their politics as nihilistic and produces and performs satirical queer DIY comedy across the neighbourhood. They have taken me to many drag shows, noise shows, and alternative comedy nights throughout Brooklyn. They generally feel safe in New York, citing their male presenting body as a possible reason for this sense of security, although they do say they wish they could leave the house dressed more femininely and not be a walking target. For Zemmy, Bushwick is the only place they really feel at home as it is where all their friends are and there is a real sense of community, stating: "New Yorkers are the best community builders, I couldn't live anywhere else." Zemmy has strong views on the failings of local government, as the city isn't doing anything to help low-income people like themselves, widening the socio-economic divide. They think the NYPD are useless and critique the fact that they still do a bad job when their budget is so large: "There are cops everywhere but what are they actually doing? The guy who shot up the subway had to hand himself in!" They further criticise the NYPD for not looking after people but focusing on, for example, turnstile jumpers on the subway because they can ticket them and make money out of it.

Zemmy sees Citizen as a community-focused space that has the power to make citizens safer. Citizen is one of their most used apps and they praise how it puts the power back into the hands of the people. Zemmy uses Citizen when they see police outside, be their apartment or out at a bar, to see what exactly is going on. They view this information, posted by other users, to be really important, in particular in the case of video footage of incidents as verification. Zemmy referenced the homophobic arson attack on the queer nightclub Pashed which happened in early 2022. They appreciated that Citizen provided detailed real-time information from multiple sources that they wouldn't have found elsewhere, as local news wouldn't have been covering it and if they were, it would be biased. Local news also wouldn't provide updates from neighbours on the level of smoke or police activity, which was posted in the comments section. While Zemmy finds this information about their community's safety essential, they also acknowledged the voyeuristic nature of watching these videos and the presence of biased comments.

Zemmy embraces Citizen app and highlights its role as a community resource. Similarly, to Eva's account, Zemmy uses Citizen as a form of resistance and also as sousveillance, as they keep an eye on police activity and whereabouts through the app. Additionally, Zemmy's account demonstrates the changing role of the media that Doyle mentioned, as Citizen functions as an alternative to the increasingly politicized and polarized news. In putting information dissemination in the hands of the people, Citizen provides a space for local knowledge creation, essential in a time of pervasive mistrust of the media. Furthermore, in the case of Pashed, Citizen is seen as disseminating hyper-local community news that would be otherwise underreported and is deemed trustworthy because it is circulated by that very community. This is essential in the context of the US today and the increasing violence towards the queer community in the form of shootings at nightclubs and ongoing drag bans. Therefore, through ethnographic research, these culturally specific uses of Citizen, as keeping the queer community informed and as a platform for activism, have been revealed.

Zemmy's account shows the community potential of Citizen app, while further reiterating its role in resistance and sousveillance. However, in the case of both Zemmy and Eva, verification in the form of comments or videos from other users is essential in trusting the information provided on Citizen. Furthermore, while Zemmy does reflect on the possible adverse consequences of Citizen, they do so briefly and with more general language like "biased" as opposed to explicitly saying "racist." Conversely, Zine reflected on their previous experience of being racially profiled and applied this to their concerns about Citizen, while also reflecting on how these experiences led to them changing their appearance and how they present themselves to the world. Zemmy uses Citizen as an extension of their community, whereas Zine, as a young Black community leader, is concerned that the very usage of Citizen could result in racism and harm against their community. The balance between inclusion and exclusion of "community" is delicate and oscillating in this context. Moreover, the ethnographic accounts of Eva and Zemmy exemplify the disparate localised and unexpected uses of Citizen, the concurrent opportunities for community erosion and consolidation, and the ways in which these outcomes reify along complex lines of intersecting positionalities, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

5. Conclusion

In moving beyond the restrictive binaries of care and surveillance, and panopticon and synopticon, this article has explored the often contradictory uses of and feelings

towards the Citizen app in Brooklyn. These paradoxes are common within participatory surveillance, as it has been found to both strengthen a community's sense of belonging and instil a sense of fear (Purenne, 2016). By looking at the unintended and innovative uses of technology, it is possible to challenge assumptions about surveillance as purely pejorative, through the productive social value of sousveillance, while also highlighting how these uses are localised and culturally specific. For example, Citizen as a means of resistance, for protest mobilization, and to sousveil the police, has been harnessed by diverse activist communities in Brooklyn who are expressly mistrustful of the NYPD to enact social and racial justice more safely. The dangers of fear-mongering, racial profiling, and gentrification as a result of Citizen are real and pressing, however, these are not the sole understandings and applications of the app, as it also functions as a place for localized information sharing and community building. The way Citizen is viewed and used is greatly dependent on the positionalities of its users, which often intersect, and analysing the app should prioritise these individual, localised, and unexpected uses. Thus, this article has addressed the tensions and intricacies that arise with the Citizen app, as a tool for coexisting social inclusion and exclusion, dependent upon who is using it and how.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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