Opinion
Surveillance

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Amazon's Ring is the largest civilian surveillance network the US has ever seen

Lauren Bridges

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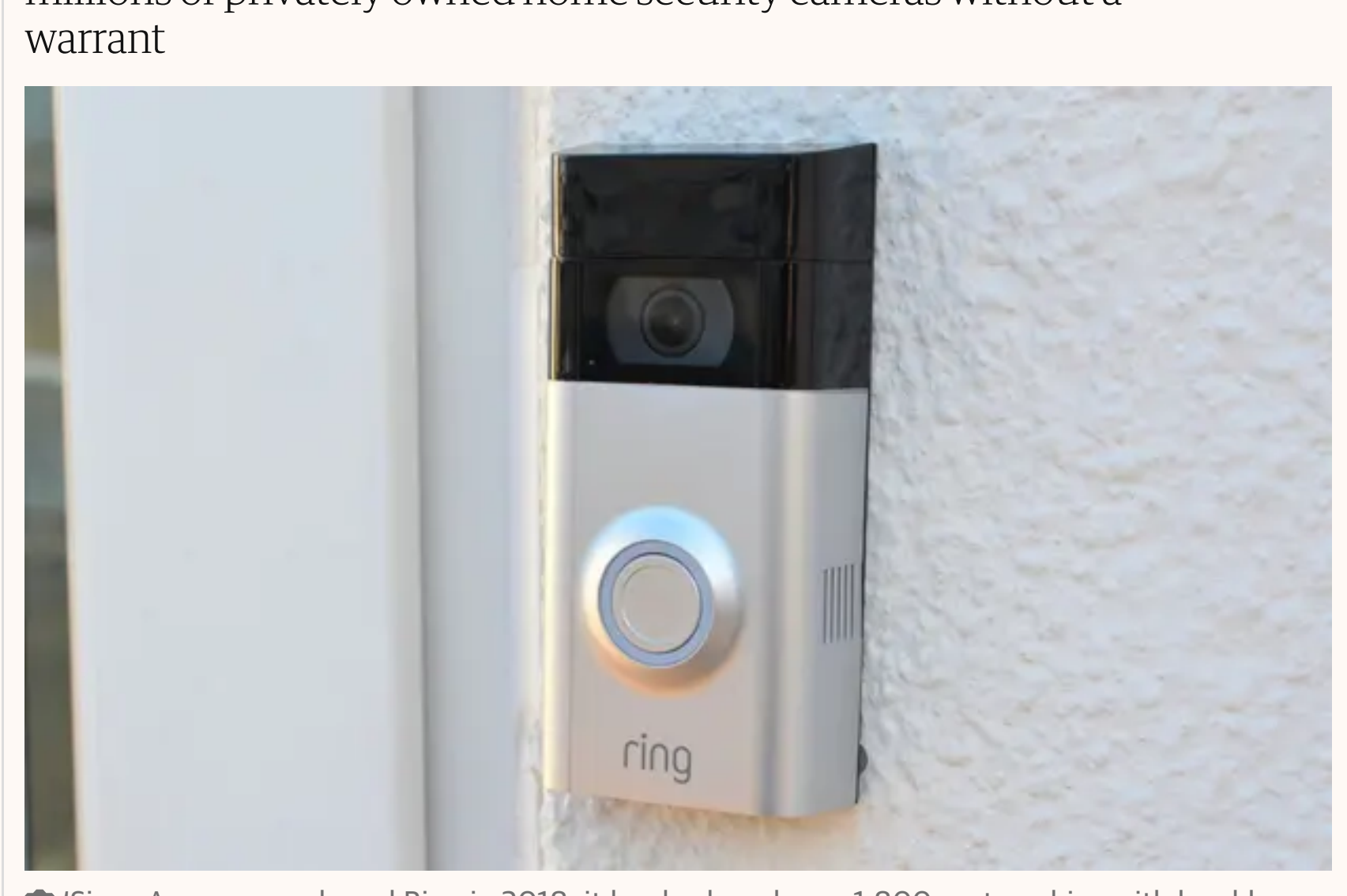
One in 10 US police departments can now access videos from millions of privately owned home security cameras without a warrant



'Since Amazon purchased Ring in 2018, it has brokered over 1,800 partnerships with local law enforcement agencies, who can request recorded video content from Ring users without a warrant.' Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

In a 2020 letter to management, Max Eliaser, an Amazon software engineer, said Ring is "simply not compatible with a free society". We should take his claim seriously.

Ring video doorbells, Amazon's signature home security product, pose a serious threat to a free and democratic society. Not only is Ring's surveillance network spreading rapidly, it is extending the reach of law enforcement into private property and expanding the surveillance of everyday life. What's more, once Ring users agree to release video content to law enforcement, there is no way to revoke access and few limitations on how that content can be used, stored, and with whom it can be shared.

Ring is effectively building the largest corporate-owned, civilian-installed surveillance network that the US has ever seen. An estimated 400,000 Ring devices were sold in December 2019 alone, and that was before the across-the-board boom in online retail sales during the pandemic. Amazon is cagey about how many Ring cameras are active at any one point in time, but estimates drawn from Amazon's sales data place yearly sales in the hundreds of millions. The always-on video surveillance network extends even further when you consider the millions of users on Ring's affiliated crime reporting app, Neighbors, which allows people to upload content from Ring and non-Ring devices.

Then there's this: since Amazon bought Ring in 2018, it has brokered more than 1,800 partnerships with local law enforcement agencies, who can request recorded video content from Ring users without a warrant. That is, in as little as three years, Ring connected around one in 10 police departments across the US with the ability to access recorded content from millions of privately owned home security cameras. These partnerships are growing at an alarming rate.

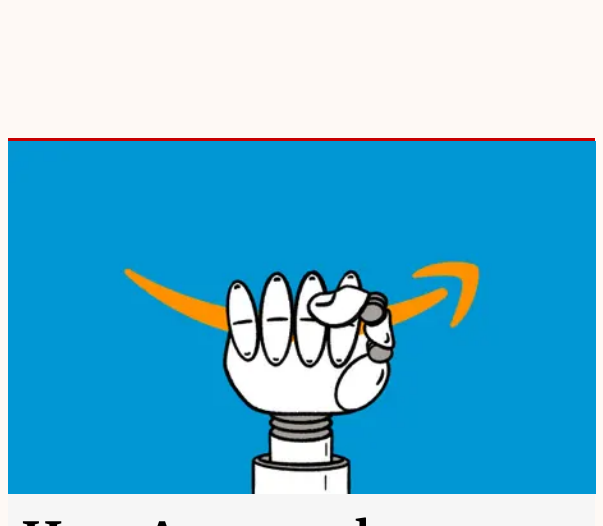
Data I've collected from Ring's quarterly reported numbers shows that in the past year through the end of April 2021, law enforcement have placed more than 22,000 individual requests to access content captured and recorded on Ring cameras. Ring's cloud-based infrastructure (supported by Amazon Web Services) makes it convenient for law enforcement agencies to place mass requests for access to recordings without a warrant. Because Ring cameras are owned by civilians, law enforcement are given a backdoor entry into private video recordings of people in residential and public space that would otherwise be protected under the fourth amendment. By partnering with Amazon, law enforcement circumvents these constitutional and statutory protections, as noted by the attorney Yesenia Flores. In doing so, Ring blurs the line between police work and civilian surveillance and turns your neighbor's home security system into an informant. Except, unlike an informant, it's always watching.

Ring's pervasive network of cameras expands the dragnet of everyday pre-emptive surveillance - a dragnet that surveils anyone who passes into its gaze, whether a suspect in a crime or not. Although the dragnet indiscriminately captures everyone, including children, there are obvious racial, gendered and class-based inequities when it comes to who is targeted and labelled as "out of place" in residential space. Rahim Kurwa, a professor of criminology, law and justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago, argues that neighborhood surveillance platforms such as Neighbors perpetuate a much longer history of the policing of race in residential space.

The concerns of activists and scholars have been compounded by developments in facial recognition technology and other forms of machine learning that could be conceivably applied to Ring recorded content and live feeds. Facial recognition technology has been denounced by AI researchers and civil rights groups for its racial and gendered biases. Although Ring doesn't currently use facial recognition in its cameras, Amazon has sold this technology to police in the past. Following pressure from AI researchers and civil rights groups, Amazon placed a one-year pause on police use of its controversial facial recognition technology, but this moratorium will expire in June.

While pressure from civil rights groups and lawmakers to end Ring's partnerships with police has been building, we need to demand more transparency and accountability from Amazon and law enforcement about what data is being collected, with whom it's being shared, and how it's being used.

Lauren Bridges is a PhD candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania



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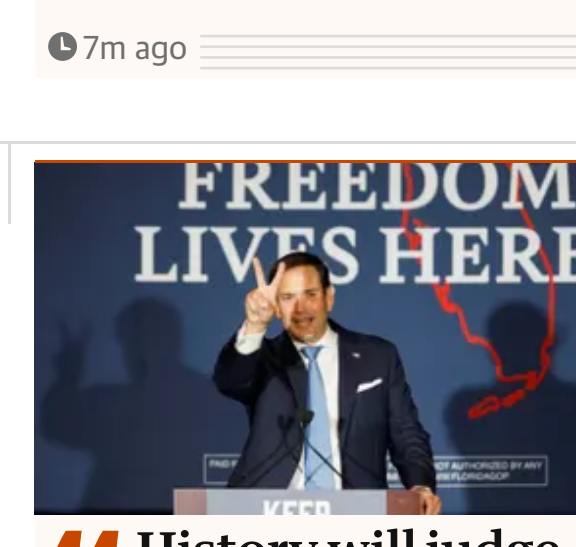
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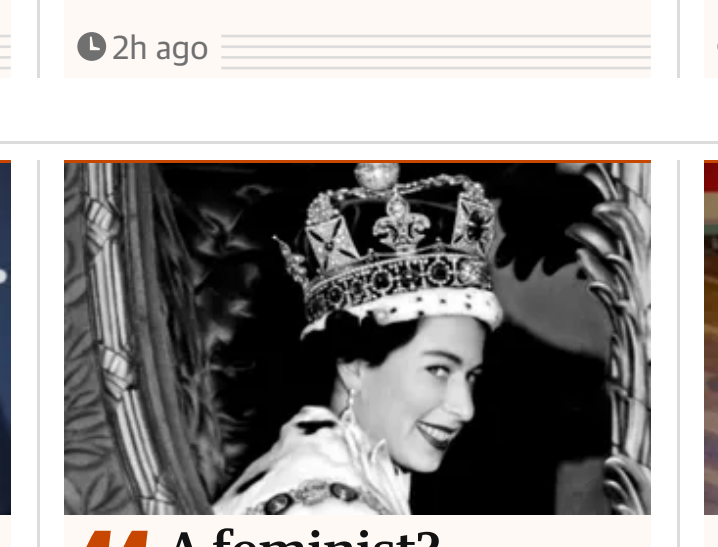
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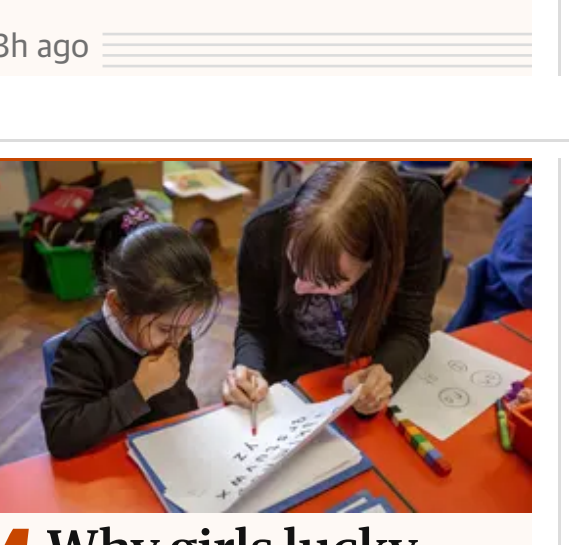
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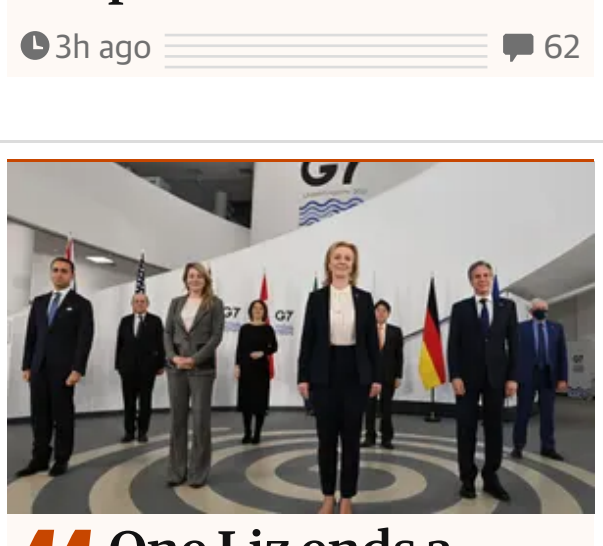
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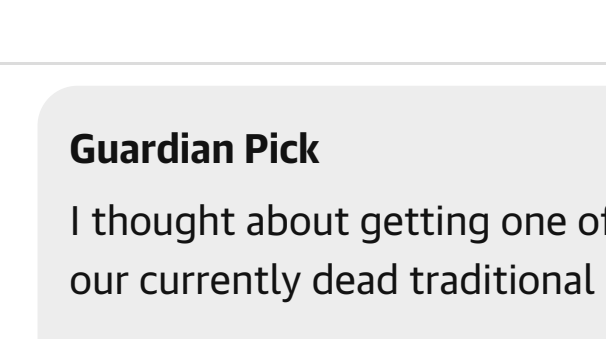
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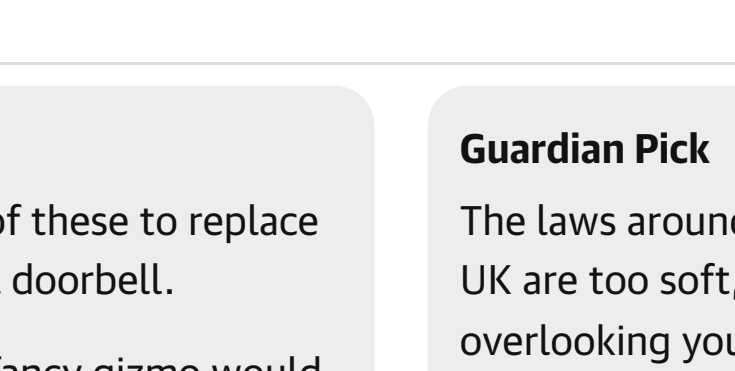
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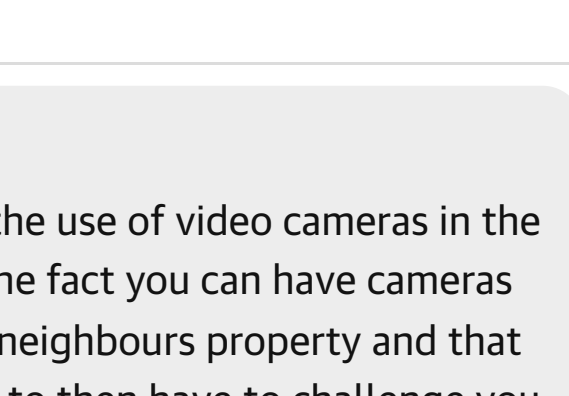
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Guardian Pick
I thought about getting one of these to replace our currently dead traditional doorbell.

In my naivety, I thought this fancy gizmo would send recorded footage to a storage device located in the house, an external hard-drive, for example. After all, this extra hardware would explain the approaching-extortionate price for a doorbell.

Guardian Pick
The laws around the use of video cameras in the UK are too soft, the fact you can have cameras overlooking your neighbours property and that it's down to them to then have to challenge you about them, then take it to the Information Commissioner if required, just seems wrong. The use of fixed point cameras has totally outstripped the law in this area it seems. There is no reason that somebody should be able to

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