

# Who's Watching Your Porch?

Ring offers a front-door view of a country where millions of Amazon customers use Amazon cameras to watch Amazon contractors deliver Amazon packages.

By John Herrman

Published Jan. 19, 2020 Updated Jan. 20, 2020

There's always something happening on the porch.

In Massachusetts, a young man waits for his date at her doorstep while her father grills him. "Bye," the daughter says as she leaves for the evening, adding an indignant "oh my God."

In Killeen, Tex., two men, one of whom appears to be holding a gun, take turns launching themselves, feet first, against the front door.

In Sacramento, Calif., a car speeds past a driveway in the middle of the night, then screeches to a halt. Somewhere out of frame, a woman screams.

A bright meteor illuminates a snowy, quiet suburban street in Columbia, Mo.

In Lake Worth, Fla., a bearded man wanders up a dark driveway and licks the doorbell repeatedly. Then he stands back and stares.

These are just a few of the oddities, horrors and comedies of a new American stage, viewed through legions of digital apertures, courtesy of Ring.

## The Ring of Surveillance

In 2013, Jamie Siminoff pitched a home security product called Doorbot on ABC's "Shark Tank." The device, he said, would allow users to "see and speak with" the people at their doors, using their smartphones. Only one of the investors was interested; Mr. Siminoff rejected his offer.

Still, the "Shark Tank" appearance drew plenty of interest from consumers and, eventually, investors, who together put more than \$200 million into the company that was rebranded as Ring. It was acquired by Amazon in 2018. Today, the company sells a variety of video-enabled doorbells, security cameras, and an alarm system. Asked how many devices Ring has sold, Yassi Shahmiri, a company spokeswoman, replied by email: "Ring has millions of users." According to data from the NPD Group, a market research firm, sales of smart doorbells alone increased by 58 percent from January 2019 to January 2020.

The growth of easy-to-install home-surveillance equipment, and in particular doorbell cameras, has changed American life in ways obvious and subtle. Marketed in part as a solution to package theft, which has grown alongside e-commerce, especially from Amazon, Ring has found an ally in law enforcement.

More than 500 police departments have partnered with the company, gaining access to a service called Neighbors Portal, which allows users to "ask Ring to request video footage from device owners who are in the area of an active investigation," according to the company. (This footage is often shared by law enforcement with media organizations for broadcast segments.) Some police departments assist in marketing Ring devices to local citizens, in some cases offering government-subsidized discounts, according to documents obtained by Vice.

One such arrangement was announced publicly by Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif., in 2017, in the style of a limited-time sale: "The City and Sheriff's Department have negotiated a subsidy with Ring.com," the Facebook announcement said, in addition to "a limited number of \$50 incentives for residents," toward which the city had committed \$100,000. Ring's efforts to court law enforcement have drawn scrutiny from civil-rights organizations for violating the privacy of users and the subjects of their recordings, and for encouraging profiling by race.

The devices have also altered relations between online shoppers and the people who deliver their orders. On Ring Neighbors, a local social networking service run by the company, users share videos of delivery people carelessly throwing packages, or failing to wait for an answer at the door; others share footage of mail people navigating treacherous ice, or merely waving at the camera.

"I've been worried about this," one UPS employee wrote on Reddit. "Those Ring cameras are everywhere now and going up to houses with packages already delivered I'm afraid they'll think I'm stealing them." On a U.S. Postal Service forum, a mail carrier asked: "Anyone else feel kind of creeped out that people are recording and watching you, up close, deliver mail to their house or is it just me?"

Among users, the surveillance is often cast as whimsical. Late last year, Sarah Barnes, a Ring user in Murfreesboro, Tenn., left snacks for her delivery drivers. An Amazon deliveryman, Kyle Smith — who told the “Today” show that people in his position “work like nine to 10 hours and only get like a 30-minute lunch break” — danced happily when he found them. He did not know he was being recorded until the video went viral.



In McDonough, Ga., a dog's locked-out-of-the-house journey is captured by Ring. Ring

## What Are We Watching?

Ring's “millions” of cameras have produced enormous quantities of raw footage. (Ring's services crashed, overloaded, on Halloween in 2017. In 2019, the company boasted that its doorbells had “chimed 15.8 million times” on the holiday.)

Ring encourages users to join Neighbors and share videos with locals, and provides fodder for other neighborhood social networks, such as Nextdoor, where conversations already skew paranoid. The company also selects videos from its users to be shared on Ring TV, a video portal run by the company, under categories such as “Crime Prevention,” “Suspicious Activity” and “Family & Friends.” The videos are, essentially, free ads: The terrifying ones might convince viewers to buy cameras of their own; funny or sweet ones, at a minimum, condition viewers to understand front-door surveillance as normal, or even fun.

In Ring, Amazon has something like a self-marketing machine: Amazon customers using Amazon cameras to watch Amazon contractors deliver Amazon packages. A video posted by Kathy Ouma of Middletown, Del., shows a happy deliveryman accepting snacks on her porch. An Amazon logo is plainly visible on the side of his truck. The Ring watermark hovers in the corner of the screen. The video, posted on Facebook, garnered more than 11 million views.

Ring videos also provide a constant stream of news and news-like material for media outlets. The headlines that accompany those videos portray an America both macabre and surreal: “Screams for Help Caught on Ring Camera,” in Sacramento; “Man pleads for help on doorbell camera after being carjacked, shot in Arizona,” in Phoenix; “WOMAN CAUGHT ON MEDFORD DOORBELL CAMERA WITH STOLEN GUN,” in Oregon; “‘Alien abduction’ caught on doorbell cam,” in Porter, Tex. (it was a glitch); “Doorbell camera captures Wichita boy's plea for help after getting lost.” And then there are videos like one shared by Rob Fox, in McDonough, Ga., in which his dog, locked out of the house, learns to use his doorbell. Mr. Fox posted the video to Facebook and then Reddit, from which the story drew news coverage. Ring contacted him, too, he said, to ask whether the company could use the footage in marketing materials.

Elsewhere, the footage is billed as entertainment. In early December, “America's Funniest Home Videos,” which has been aggregating viewer videos since the 1980s, released a best-of compilation: “Funny Doorbell Camera Fails.” It is composed almost entirely of people falling down.



Ring video doorbells are activated when the button is pushed or motion is detected. Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

## Staring Through the Peephole

While Ring sells a range of different cameras that can be placed in different locations, the dominant aesthetic, produced by the company's peephole and doorbell cameras, is at once novel and completely familiar. Many videos are recorded with a distorted fish-eye effect. At night, the footage tends to revert to gray-scale, calling to mind surveillance footage.

Subjects are sometimes aware they're being filmed and sometimes not. A package thief might show his face to the camera by accident. Another might menace the camera with a mask. These are new scripts, but they borrow from old ones. If you see CCTV footage on a news broadcast, you have some idea of how it got there, and what sort of thing is coming next. The same is true for a camera behind the windshield of a police car, or a blurry aerial shot overlaid with a reticle. Viewers were halfway trained to understand doorbell and peephole surveillance video before the technology was widespread.

"The traditional voyeuristic peephole in film suggests the person being watched is under threat," said Catherine Zimmer, the chair of the film studies department at Pace University and the author of "Surveillance Cinema," a book about representations of surveillance in movies. "The peephole makes the person looking through the peephole into the vulnerable one." One is Norman Bates; the other is Jim Carrey's cable guy.

Ring cameras scramble these roles into something potent and confusing. The subject may be unaware of the camera, or he may be putting on a show; the viewer may be in the house, or may be somewhere else; this peephole records everything that passes in front of its lens, creating video that can seamlessly be shared with law enforcement or the public.

There is, of course, the distinctive perspective. Webcams first showed us one another's computer rooms, and smartphones showed us the world's faces. Ring cameras show us the world as seen from the front door. Watch enough Ring videos and the driveways start to look the same; the front yards become more familiar, the stoops interchangeable. The house behind the camera may as well be yours, or your neighbor's.

Notifications arrive on your phone, whether you're home or somewhere else. Ring is something like a home-security counterpart to the work email account on your personal phone, or the scheduling app buzzing you about a shift, ensuring you can never truly clock out. Home surveillance means you're never quite home, but you're never completely away from home, either.

The presence of a camera at the door creates peculiar new forms of interaction. The father who half-seriously interrogated his daughter's date — in a video publicized by the company and later covered by national news outlets — was at work when his phone buzzed. He conducted his grilling remotely, using the doorbell's voice function. Ring cameras themselves are now being stolen, leaving their owners with a final few seconds of footage — a hand, a face, a mask — before losing their connections.

In a video published to Ring TV under the title "Neighbor Saves Woman from Freezing Temperatures," a woman in a T-shirt, shoulders hunched with cold, rings the doorbell. She's locked out of her house, she says, and is hoping someone could call her husband.

A voice from the Ring device asks who she is; the freezing woman says, "I live across the street." In the video, the door isn't opened and the husband isn't called. Instead, the Ring owner informs the local authorities. The woman outside remains on the stoop, stomping her feet for warmth, until the police arrive. It's an odd interaction for people who are described as neighbors. It's a vision of American alienation, in which human interactions are mediated first by surveillance cameras, then by law enforcement. Or maybe there's a simpler answer: No one was home.

Last viewed by the First Circuit Library on 6/10/2022