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Neighborhood Watch Goes Rogue: The Trouble With Nextdoor and Citizen

Hyper-local apps like Nextdoor and Citizen aim to keep you apprised of what's going on in your neighborhood, but they also thrive on drama, which can be dangerous for our more vulnerable neighbors.

By [Christopher Smith](#)

July 8, 2021

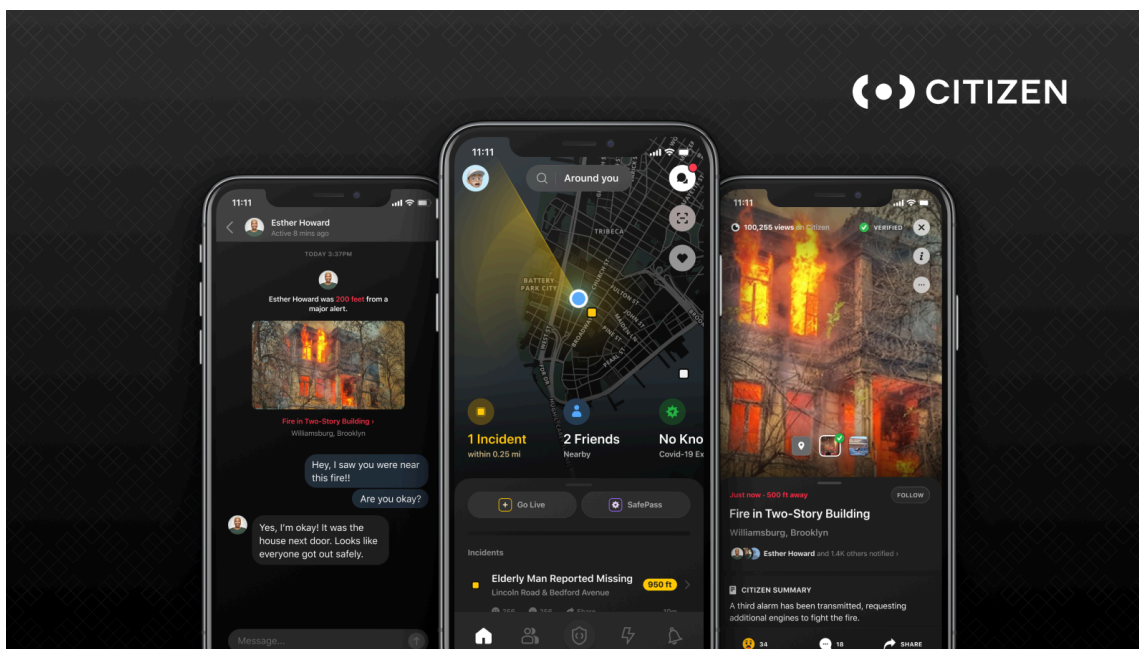


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In 2013, online sleuths [combing through](#) publicly available photos and videos of the Boston Marathon bombing locked in on potential suspects, including a high school track star and his coach, who landed on the cover of *The New York Post*.



The allegations ripped through 4chan, Reddit, and other forums. One problem: these citizens detectives were wrong, and their wild speculation prompted the FBI to release details about the actual suspects, “in part to limit the damage being done to people who were wrongly being targeted as suspects in the news media and on the internet.” Reddit later apologized on behalf of its community.

Eight years later, conspiracy theories still run rampant online, but the problem is no longer relegated to the smaller corners of the web. Apps like Citizen and Nextdoor, which ostensibly exist to keep us apprised of what’s going on in our neighborhoods, buzz our smartphones at all hours with crime reports, suspected illegal activity, and other complaints. But residents can also weigh in with their own theories and suspicions, however baseless and—in many cases—racist.

It begs the question: Where do these apps go wrong, and what are they doing now to regain consumer trust and combat the issues within their platforms?

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'Tap Into Your Neighborhood'



For a lot of people, apps like Nextdoor and Citizen are as commonplace on their smartphones as rideshare or food delivery apps. Launched in 2011, San Francisco-based Nextdoor aimed to turn neighborhoods into hyper-localized social networks. People joined groups to ask about everything from suggestions for landscaping services to the best places to get pizza.

But they could also alert each other to “suspicious” behavior in the area. As residents in Oakland, California, soon found out, suspicious often translated to Black.

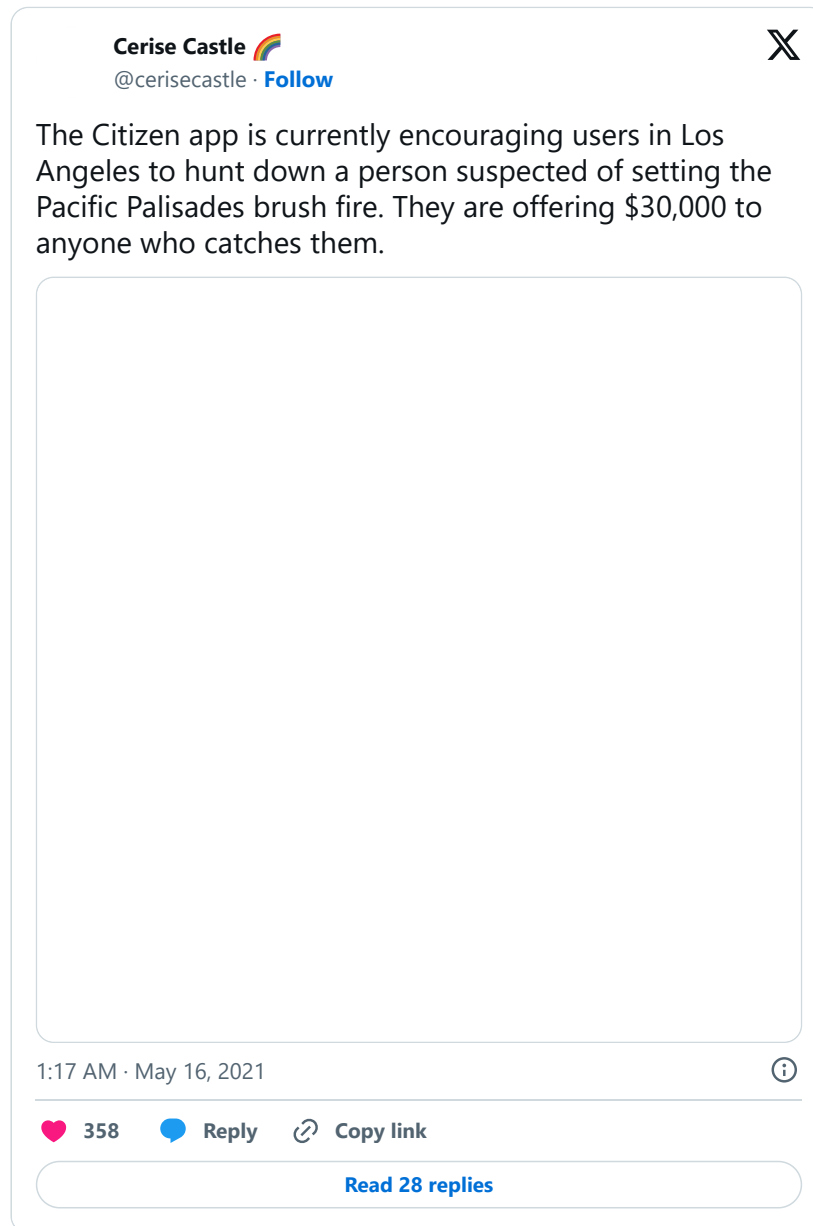
Citizen, meanwhile, debuted in 2016 in New York City. Then known as Vigilante, it was pulled from the Apple App Store within 48 hours of its launch amid concerns that the app encouraged people to descend on crime scenes and take matters into their own hands. It relaunched in 2017 on iOS and Android as Citizen, with the company insisting that “any reckless or dangerous behavior will not be tolerated.”

Citizen has since expanded to more than two dozen cities around the US, most recently in Atlanta. It relies on publicly available emergency services data, like 911 calls, and lets users contribute real-time photos and video from the scene, as well as add comments. Zoom in and out on a map of your area for a quick look at what’s been happening there recently, from gas leaks, car crashes, and fires to more violent crimes. Footage is provided to local TV stations for free, *The New York Times* reports.

But Citizen recently saw an unwelcome return to its vigilante roots when it blasted out a photo of a man it said was a California wildfire arson suspect. “Citizen is offering a \$30,000 reward to anyone who provides information that leads to the arrest of the arson suspect in Pacific Palisades,” the alert said. As LA-based reporter Cerise Castle noted on Twitter at the time, people broadcasting live via Citizen OnAir following the alert were asking app users to “hunt this guy down,” even as tips about the man’s involvement in the fire fell apart in real time.

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At the time Castle tweeted, the Citizen alert had 1.4 million views. The man in the alert was later detained by police but released, as there was no evidence connecting him to the crime, according to SFGATE. Another man was arrested and charged days later, forcing Citizen to issue an apology reminiscent of the mea culpa Reddit released in 2013.

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In a statement to PCMag, Citizen emphasized that it's working to provide stronger moderation through its in-house analysts, who have law enforcement training. "Notifications that are sent to large groups of users require an additional layer of review for accuracy as well as management approval," the company said.

Citizen pointed to the successes of the OnAir feature before the Pacific Palisades incident, citing its usage in aiding victims of a fire in Queens, New York, where users contributed to a GoFundMe campaign set up to help them find new housing.

But this incident comes as Citizen prepares to expand its reach and offer law enforcement-type services. A *Fast Company* reporter said last month that she was offered a trial of Citizen Protect, a \$19.99-per-month service that connected Citizen users with virtual concierges for quick assistance in an emergency after uttering a safe word.

Mentions of Citizen Protect on the company's website are scant. The company told us that "it's still in testing. We don't have anything further to add at this point."

Vice's Motherboard also reports that Citizen may launch its own security force, which would be dispatched to Citizen users at their request. But can Citizen keep that data private? A recent incident, also reported by Motherboard, in which details of 1.7 million incidents recorded by the app, suggests otherwise.

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The flurry of notifications from Citizen gives users a sense of urgency, and perhaps unease. Some have noticed how many Citizen alerts are for fairly minor issues. On Twitter, one woman shared part of a conversation with her Lyft driver, who was glued to reports from the Citizen app. She suggested he delete it.



Christopher Smith · Jun 28, 2021

@infinetwords14 · Follow

Lobbing this to the TL:
Have you or someone you know, had a negative experience using Nextdoor or Citizen? If so, I'm working on an article and would like to talk to you for it. Anyone interested, feel free to shoot me a message.
[#journorequest](#)

Sarah Boyette

@TheSarahBoyette · Follow

I once had a Lyft driver who had the Citizen app going and I basically spent the whole ride decoding the calls and explaining why basically none of them actually threatened public safety (i.e. they were all low-level domestic violence calls—any PD could tell you)

2:15 PM · Jun 29, 2021

1

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Another Twitter user had similar complaints about Nextdoor notifications for her Manhattan neighborhood, which “didn't seem to be very solution-oriented or even helpful.”



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“It is useful to know about/discuss some issues, but I agree so many are just excuses to rant about the same things vs. intending to inform or find answers. When people use it like Twitter, doesn't encourage me to engage,” someone else chimed in about Nextdoor.

The 'Karen' Problem

Even if you don't have Citizen-branded SUVs zooming around your neighborhood, you might have ill-informed neighborhoods itching for drama in the name of safety.

As the pandemic took hold last year, Nextdoor saw an 80% increase in activity. People were looking for toilet paper and offering to help neighbors get groceries, but they also lashed out, forcing Nextdoor to release a statement warning people not to be racist, particularly toward Asian-American users.

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Algorithms Still Have a Bias Problem, and Big Tech Isn't Doing Enough to Fix It

By mid-June 2020, as protests following the murder of George Floyd emerged in cities around the country, Nextdoor posts advertising protests were removed by moderators while those advocating violent behavior against those protesters remained, The Verge [reported](#). “@Nextdoor needs to publicly deal w/their Karen problem,” Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) tweeted, referring to white women who flip out and call the police over minor issues, many of which involve people of color.

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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez   · Jun 3, 2020



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I see a lot of corporations releasing bland statements w a hashtag.

No. This moment calls for transformation.

Your statement should include your org's INTERNAL commitments to change, particularly if you've been called on it before.

Give people change.

forbes.com/sites/alexreim...

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  

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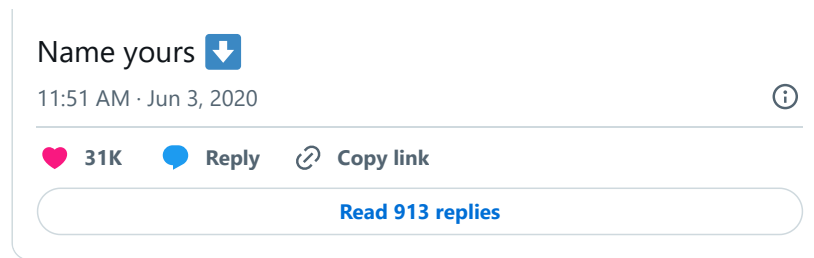
Yes, I will name names.

[@amazon](#) needs to stop integrating Ring cameras w/ police depts & selling facial recognition tech to ICE.

[@Nextdoor](#) needs to publicly deal w/ their Karen problem

Commercial banks need to stop lobbying against the Community Reinvestment Act





Nextdoor CEO Sarah Friar promised at the time to “better educate our neighbors on what is — and is not — allowed on our platform, drawing a firm line against racist behavior, racial bias, and racial profiling and removing comments and members who violate the rules.”

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That included the removal of the Nextdoor “Forward to Police” feature, which let people send posts to local law enforcement. “After speaking with members and public agency partners, it is clear that the Forward to Police feature does not meet the needs of our members and only a small percentage of law enforcement agencies chose to use the tool,” Nextdoor said.

Amazon's Ring made a similar change earlier this month. Previously, police departments could request footage from private Ring home security camera owners via a portal. But amid pushback from civil liberties groups, Ring announced that requests for footage must be made publicly.



Earlier this year, Nextdoor also launched a training program for Neighborhood Leads and Community Reviewers—a group that's about 100,000 strong as of this writing—with tools on inclusive moderation and anti-bias education. Starting in April, it also rolled out alerts that appear when people try to use “language

that could be offensive or hurtful to people of all backgrounds," which encourage them to edit their thoughts.

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Facebook to the Rescue?

Not one to let a popular fad pass it by, Facebook is eyeing a feature that might give Nextdoor a run for its money. Last fall, the social network rolled out a beta test of Neighborhoods in Calgary. It expanded to all of Canada in May, with a rollout in select US cities expected soon.

The goal, Facebook says, is to connect people with their immediate neighbors, help them engage with local groups, and discover new places and get recommendations. To join, you'll need to be 18 or older and



confirm your neighborhood, much like Nextdoor.

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But Facebook has struggled to contain misinformation on a global scale. Facebook Messenger posts were blamed for inciting violence in Myanmar, for example, and the company was forced to limit message forwarding on WhatsApp to crack down on COVID-19 lies. Is it also ready to moderate your most ridiculous neighbors?

In theory, community apps like Citizen, Nextdoor, and Facebook Neighborhoods bring people together at time when many of us turn to the internet and our devices to make connections. But it's a fine line between staying on top of what's going on around us and harassing the people who live and work there with ill-advised posts and even calls to 911. The companies themselves have a financial incentive to keep us engaged (Nextdoor just filed to go public), whether its users are building strong community ties or overreacting to doom-and-gloom notifications. Can we trust them not to lead us into the abyss, or is it on us not to get caught up neighborhood drama and our baser instincts?

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About Christopher Smith

Contributing Writer





Christopher A. Smith is a freelance writer who previously worked in film and television post-production before turning to writing, a profession to which he has always aspired. His work has appeared in the Huffington Post and WonderHowTo, among others. He hails from the borough of Queens, New York, and enjoys being immersed in the numerous cultural offerings the city has. He's also an avid traveler and enjoys the quiet comforts of reading.

[Read Christopher's full bio](#)

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