

# The Citizen App's Gamification of Vigilantism

The crime-reporting app has big plans: live broadcasts, for-hire private security details, and a growing user base of freaked-out customers. It's building a paranoid, profitable future.



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Jacob Silverman /  
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Citizen, the crime-reporting app that got its start under the name Vigilante, is expanding. At the moment, it is hiring two producers for OnAir, a live broadcast program that's designed to turn crime and disaster reporting into high-octane infotainment. The listing warns that “candidates applying for this position should be comfortable with 12 hour workdays, 5 days a week”; responsibilities include “reaching out to users (via Protect, phone, email) to gather additional information that *could* confirm/validate claims made in chat/user videos.” It's that hesitant “*could*”—emphasis theirs—that stands out. Citizen's biggest problem has always been that it's less a place to confirm facts than a platform for rumors that might metastasize and turn dangerous—or virally profitable.



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To get a sense of what Citizen and its corporate backers want—what it might become as it scales beyond simple transcriptions of police scanner reports to a fully featured, video-rich social network and media center—it's helpful to survey recent coverage of the app and to poke through some of the company's own media and job listings. The vision that emerges is grim, almost like *Running Man*, the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie about a game show where criminals try to escape from people sent to hunt them down. Citizen seems to aspire to nothing less than a vertically integrated, 24-hour news-and-reporting network for crime, which, by offering constant notifications, live media, and premium protection services, including in-person private security, hopes to monetize the fears of an uncertain public—the same public

it's supposed to be informing. If Citizen's vision for itself succeeds, the next big social network will be one that turns people into surveillers—and potential suspects—in a constantly monetized livestream of supposedly crime-ridden urban life. Using fear as a revenue stream, the company seems less concerned with promoting care for one's fellow citizens than redefining crime, broadcasting it, and securing its most wealthy users against it. For the rest of us, well, we can try to enjoy the show.

The app has been notorious almost since its inception. On Citizen, which disseminates frequent notifications drawn from police scanners, user reports, and other sources, one can feel as if danger is ever lurking, from violent crime to fires to exploding manhole covers. The app is purportedly designed to promote safety and situational awareness, but it creates something else: paranoia and uncertainty. Many of the incident reports sent out are unconfirmed or later refuted. Reliability has meant little for the app's popularity: It's frequently among the top five apps in the news section of Apple's app store, and it reported five million users last year, when its usage began to surge during protests inspired by George Floyd's murder.

Rani Molla, writing in Recode, dubbed Citizen part of “fear-based social media,” along with Nextdoor and Amazon Ring's Neighbors. These networks promote a culture of surveillance, mutual suspicion, and a tendency toward reporting homeless people and nonwhite people who don't seem to “belong” in a given neighborhood. Operating under a patina of information-sharing and transparency, they instead exploit the fears of their users and help perpetuate narratives about rising crime that are either false or that misrepresent a reality more nuanced than their partisan promoters claim. (Sources close to Citizen have called it “an anxiety sweatshop,” where employees are expected to produce frequent reports to drive users to pay for products that include a “digital bodyguard service” called Protect.)

This fixation on crime is nothing new, a constant through decades of “if it bleeds, it leads” newspaper reporting, *America's Most Wanted*-style television shows, and law and order fearmongering among conservatives and liberals alike. What differentiates Citizen is not just that it attempts to dramatize crime to sell advertising or push policy, but that its entire reason for existing seems to be to create a potentially false impression of disorder. To that end, as a tool to track social justice protests or police violence or any other incident with a political valence (which, really, applies to all crime), it has deep potential for bias. And at a time when activists and politicians are debating the size and role of policing in American life, Citizen is offering to deputize

regular people to report crimes, hunt down criminals, and hire private security guards to protect them from whatever danger lurks on the way from their car to the coffee shop, which served as a test run for one of Citizen's private security offerings. None of this seems productive or socially beneficial; it's hard to think of a positive use case for an app built on lawlessness masquerading as a new form of self-appointed authority.

Last month, Citizen offered a prominent example of the consequences of a business model fed by violent paranoia and vigilantism: The company's CEO, Andrew Frame, personally directed—or produced, one might say—a manhunt and extended live broadcast for a man whom the company had falsely fingered as an arsonist in Los Angeles. Invoking the man's name and image for hours, egging on users to submit information, bombarding local users with notifications, and offering an escalating reward that topped out at \$30,000, Frame demanded that his team help hunt down its suspect, according to a cache of Slack chats and other documents leaked to Motherboard and The Verge. “FIND THIS FUCK,” Frame wrote to his team. “LETS GET THIS GUY BEFORE MIDNIGHT HES GOING DOWN.”

Fortunately, the manhunt didn't end in violence, but it was—or should have been—a major embarrassment for Citizen. Instead, as Motherboard reported, the app remains on the Apple and Google app stores, despite violating store policies with its ersatz bounty hunt.

In typical Silicon Valley style, Citizen—which is backed by some of the industry's biggest venture capital firms—is transforming its failure into success, calling the debacle a step forward. According to Motherboard, “While Frame showed some contrition, he sees the bounty experiment as a ‘massive net win,’ a step on the way for his app to become a private safety network that is ‘going into what the government is failing to do,’ which is, in the company's mind, failing to keep people safe.”

Citizen's desire to integrate its digital platform with real-world security efforts is well into its testing phase. Recently, a Citizen-branded security vehicle was seen tooling around Los Angeles. Further reporting confirmed the company had contracts with at least two private security companies to provide on-demand security to consumers worried about their safety.

Citizen also plays an active role in its content generation. It operates a street team with undercover employees posing as users. Dressed in regular clothes, they're sent to fires and crime scenes and other incidents to film video and generate broadcast material that will boost engagement. In May, Citizen broadcast another manhunt, of a sort, this time for an autistic boy who had gone missing in New York. What Citizen didn't reveal at the time was that the users leading the search were part of its street team. They eventually found the boy and put him in their car to take him home (one of several actions that raised ethical eyebrows). Later, the company produced a cheery video of the boy being reunited with his family, all thanks to the app.

Fear-based media, a company culture of overwork and intentional deception, and a desire to privatize law enforcement—none of these elements augur well. The growing Citizen empire—the company has taken in \$133 million in investment—reflects a mix of socially regressive policies, outdated attitudes toward crime, and perverse incentives to report more crime in order to attract users to its paid offerings. Even its seemingly benign announcements—say, of a residential fire—do less to promote safety than to promote voyeurism, allowing us to gawk, over live video and in a rowdy chatroom, at someone else's misfortune.

But none of that seems to matter for Citizen or its wildcat CEO. As Frame told his employees in the aftermath of the disastrous failed manhunt, things are going well: “The investors have never been more excited.”

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