

Security Starts at Your Door: Social Media, Racial Inequality, and the Rise of Video Sousveillance in Urban Environments

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The rise of consumer-level surveillance cameras and home security systems in suburban neighborhoods have given rise to new forms of sousveillance (the inverse of surveillance, describing a bottom-up approach to watching) technology like Amazon's Ring and its corresponding social platform application, Neighbors. The app is meant to facilitate collaboration and safety, as Ring owners upload videos taken from their camera and communicate with users in the same or neighboring communities and law enforcement. Although there are millions of active users, as well as an increase in interest from law enforcement, there is little research examining this new form of sousveillance and its impact on social and racial inequality, as well as threats to the Fourth Amendment. As more Ring users upload surveillance videos to social media, are these camera systems stepping on other individuals' rights by denying privacy, anonymity, and consent to be recorded, especially in neighborhoods with diverse people from varying economic and racial backgrounds? To tackle this concern, data was collected from Neighbors, focusing on Biscayne Park, a small village in urban Miami-Dade County, recently in the news for police misconduct and racial profiling. Two hundred seventy-seven posts dated from March 2018 to February 2019 within a 3-mile radius of Biscayne Park were analyzed, categorized, and plotted on a map. The data shows that over 42 percent of posts on Neighbors are based only on suspicion and not supported by evidence suggesting a crime. From the suspicion-only posts, 50 percent of the subjects are people of color, 30 percent are white, and 20 percent are unidentified. While this research is exploratory, the findings support the argument that normalizing video sousveillance through social media is a potential threat to those being watched, and highlights the underlying societal tensions regarding fear of outsiders, particularly people of color.