

THE
BRAVE NEW YORKER JULY 29, 2019 ISSUE

CITIZEN, THE SMARTPHONE POLICE BLOTTER

Some use the app to avoid trouble spots and get earthquake updates; rubbernecks use it as a go-to guide to crime scenes and rampaging squirrels.

By **Antonia Hitchens** July 22, 2019

The other week, in Los Angeles, when Dodger Stadium swayed for thirty seconds in the fourth inning of a game during a 7.1-magnitude earthquake, many residents opened Citizen, a crime-tracking app, to find out what was going on. (Earthquake detection is a precarious science; after a 2009 quake in central Italy, authorities tried to prosecute a group of seismologists for failing to predict it.) In Los Angeles, phone lines were jammed, but Citizen warned its L.A. users to “drop and take cover.” “Aftershocks are expected,” read one of its iPhone notifications. Andrew Frame, who launched Citizen, in 2017, sees the app as “a global safety network” that crowdsources the 911 emergency system to anyone with a smartphone. While the city’s mayor, Eric Garcetti, took to Twitter to implore Angelenos to leave 911 lines open “for emergencies only,” Citizen, which is user-powered, posted videos of downtown Los Angeles, trembling mid-tremor, taken from a rooftop.

“Why shouldn’t you know what’s going on in your city?” Frame, a thirty-nine-year-old high-school dropout from Las Vegas, asked recently, in a conference room at Citizen’s headquarters, in Manhattan. “PROTECT THE WORLD” was printed in black on a wall. He worked for Cisco in the late nineties, before founding Ooma, a company that makes an Internet-telephone device, with Ashton Kutcher as its creative director. Last week, Citizen, which sends out two million notifications a day, was the tenth most downloaded news app for the iPhone. It functions as a hyperlocalized police blotter. “What

chance do crime and corruption have when technology unites the forces of good?” reads one of its taglines. The result is an amalgamation of alerts about fires, crimes (from the violent to the extremely petty), urban idiosyncrasies, and natural disasters.

A red dot on a map on the phone screen indicates that an incident is in progress; if you tap on it, Citizen gives you the option of sharing the information on social media; “reacting,” with an emoji or a comment; or adding your own footage, by live-streaming from the location.

“It creates autonomy,” Melissa McIntyre, a New York user, said. Last summer, she and her fiancé, Ken Lin, helped find a hundred-and-three-year-old man in a wheelchair whom Citizen had reported as missing during a thunderstorm.

“I would look at the app every now and then with just morbid curiosity,” Lin said. “It felt voyeuristic.” The pair successfully reunited the old man with his family; they made the local news, with “Good Samaritan” on the screen under their names.

McIntyre said that, although the app bombards users with “the reality and negativity of our society, that’s real life for a lot of people.” She enumerated: “Woman being attacked by a broomstick. People fighting outside IHOP at four in the morning.”

Using Citizen is like opening a map app, except, instead of seeing coffee shops or gas stations, a user sees postings of bits of mayhem. Some use it as a warning of where not to go; rubberneckers race to the scene. A recent week in New York—the app is also available in San Francisco, Baltimore, and Philadelphia—included alerts such as “couple attacked with a screwdriver” in the East Village, “man brandishing a firearm” at the Applebee’s in Bedford-Stuyvesant, “sailboat in distress” off Williamsburg, “woman hurling luggage at cars” on Ludlow Street, and “individual throwing chairs and making threats”

at the Park Slope Y.M.C.A. Animal entries are common: recent examples included “lizard on leash” near Union Square and “squirrel preparing to attack” in Carroll Gardens. Some are less reliable: “tiger loose in street,” reported in Washington Heights, turned out to be a raccoon.

Frame’s most personal experience with Citizen concerned a pet. “I got a notification that there was a carbon-monoxide leak at my address,” he said. Although he doesn’t admit to being a cat guy, he sprinted out of the office to check on his cat, and found firemen at his building. “They went up and brought the cat down in a bag,” he said. “The app saved my cat.”

The company has seventy full-time employees, who work around the clock harvesting information from police, E.M.S., and fire-department scanners. The company’s analysts—who include former journalists, former first responders, and former tech executives—process the raw data and push it out to the app’s network.

An early version, called Vigilante, appeared on the App Store in 2016, but it was banned after three days. The N.Y.P.D. contended that crimes in progress should be handled by the police, “and not a vigilante with a cell phone.” The team re-branded as “Citizen” before launching.

Although Citizen is marketed as a means to protect communities, Frame talks about it as an example of a more modish preoccupation—self-care. He took out a marker and wrote “selfish” and “self-less” on a whiteboard. He drew a line between the two words. “The world is making a transformation to a much more selfless place,” he said. “If an old woman falls down across the street, many people run to help her. I help her up. I feel amazing after. It’s empowering. Small good deeds and acts of benevolence make me feel good, even if I don’t share it with anybody. I got that dopamine hit.” ♦

This article appears in the print edition of the July 29, 2019, issue, with the headline “Police Blotter.”

Antonia Hitchens is a former member of The New Yorker's editorial staff. [Read more »](#)

Video

*Alexandra Bell Looks Back at the Central Park Five Case
Thirty years after the notorious crime and wrongful conviction, an artist looks at the responsibilities of journalism.*

CONDÉ NAST

© 2019 Condé Nast. All rights reserved. Use of and/or registration on any portion of this site constitutes acceptance of our User Agreement (updated 5/25/18) and Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement (updated 5/25/18). Your California Privacy Rights. The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Condé Nast. *The New Yorker* may earn a portion of sales from products and services that are purchased through links on our site as part of our affiliate partnerships with retailers. Ad Choices