

Wacky indoor Amazon drone takes on privacy skeptics

October 2 2020, by Rob Lever



Amazon's new indoor drone can be deployed by a homeowner to check for security issues, but some activists say it may make people inured to video surveillance

It could be the wackiest product yet from Amazon—a tiny indoor drone which buzzes around people's homes as a security sentry.

The introduction of the Ring Always Home Cam planned for 2021 has

opened up fresh debate on the potential for intrusive surveillance and [privacy](#) infringement.

Amazon says the tiny drone is "built with privacy in mind" and operates at the direction of its customers. Nestled in a charging dock, the drone can be deployed remotely and send up to five minutes of video to the user.

But some activists express concerns about the device—part of a family of Ring-branded home security technology which has been scrutinized over its links to [law enforcement](#).

John Verdi, vice president of policy at the Future of Privacy Forum, a Washington think tank, said the deployment may contribute to a "normalization of surveillance" in [everyday life](#) as more consumers install devices that listen and see inside the home.

"When cameras and microphones and other sensors are deployed in private spaces like living rooms and bedrooms, that leads to an acceptance of everyday surveillance," Verdi said.

Nonetheless, Verdi noted that "Amazon has put some thought into privacy protections for this product both in the hardware and in the software policies."

University of Washington law professor and privacy researcher Ryan Calo noted that even the perception of being watched can make people change behavior.

With any form of electronic monitoring, "you feel like there is a social agent in your midst," Calo said.

"A camera like this can make people feel observed and threatens one of

the few remaining opportunities for solitude."



Digital rights activists have questioned Amazon's sharing of doorbell video footage with law enforcement

Calo said the flying cam "could be incrementally more harmful than a regular camera" by allowing someone to monitor other people without their consent.

Although it is marketed as a home device, Calo said it could be used in a workplace as well and "allows the person who controls it to check in on anyone—and there isn't anywhere to hide."

This could enable an abusive spouse to monitor a partner, for example.

British-based privacy group Big Brother Watch was more blunt, calling the cam "arguably Amazon's most chilling surveillance product yet."

Feeling safe or threatened?

An Amazon spokesperson said of the new [device](#): "Our customers are looking for ways to keep their homes and families safe, connected, and secure—and our new products and features, including the Always Home Cam, help do just that."

Amazon, which purchased Ring in 2018, has faced a wave of criticism over its sharing of surveillance footage from its doorbell camera and partnerships with [police departments](#) which have encouraged homeowners to use the devices.

But Amazon said Ring indoor cameras are not subject to law

enforcement requests and have no microphone to record audio.

Calo said that despite Amazon's pledge not to share video with law enforcement, "it may not be up to Amazon—it might be up to a court if police request a warrant."

Separately, some fear these monitoring devices could be surreptitiously used to gather data for marketing by Amazon or its partners.

While it was not clear how data from the drones might be used, Calo said that "Amazon has a long track record of attempting to monetize what it knows about you from search history or purchase history. It's part of their business model."

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