



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on October 8, 2020

License Plate Scanners: Surveillance on Your Smartphone

License plate scanners aren't just for the surveillance state anymore.

According to a story published by Bloomberg Business Week, your neighbors might have already added the devices to their home security system.

Here's the explanation:

Maryland-based Rekor Systems Inc. has started offering home video surveillance software through a service called Watchman, starting at \$5 a month. In addition to reading a license plate, the system can record a vehicle's make, color, and body type. In October, Rekor will launch what it says is a "first of its kind" mobile app, which will let users scan license plates with their phone camera. The app could come in handy for schools, to "securely identify valid visitors for student pickup lines" or to manage cars in parking lots, among other uses, the company says.



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Yep. You read that right. For about \$5 a month, your neighbors could have technology at their fingertips capable of reading a license plate and recording details about your car. Standing there in front of their house, your neighbor — or anyone with the app — can point their smartphone camera at your car's license plate and immediately give law enforcement and government access to all the personal data attached to your car registration.

Not that you should be pleased that such personal information is searched and stored by police — unless they have a warrant, such a collection of data from your license plate violates the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution — but it's quite another level of invasiveness for strangers walking down the street to be able to access that information on their phone!

Nathan Wessler, a civil liberties attorney, calls out the genuine privacy concerns that come with having license plate scanning software loaded on smartphones and available to most consumers.

"As companies get their software hooked up to more and more peoples' cameras that are already out in the wild, we're going to see these databases grow in really robust ways, which is troubling," Wessler says. "The data can reveal information about how someone's living their life, and all that data is sitting on servers of companies. And there's not very clear legal protection for a lot of that data."



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It's not like Rekor Systems is trying to hide the power (and potential abuse) of their Watchman software package. Here's the company's description of the capability of the app:

Watchman enables accurate automatic license plate and vehicle recognition on nearly any IP, traffic, or security camera. Detection results are displayed on a web-based interface, which can be accessed from anywhere. Installation is quick and easy, making it perfect for businesses of all sizes and homeowners alike.

Wow. When it comes to automatic license plate recognition (ALPR) tech installed on smartphones, you don't want to see words like "everywhere," "nearly any," and "quick and easy" used in the promotional literature!

I have to share just one of the several "use cases" highlighted by Rekor on the Watchman website.

Under the label "Protect your family and property," Rekor promotes the Watchman product with this example of how the product could be used by consumers:

Watchman allows homeowners to increase safety and receive alerts to thwart criminals and keep their loved ones safe. Additionally, Watchman's vehicle recognition allows homeowners to automate common tasks such as garage door opening, turning on/off lights, and locking/unlocking doors.

OK. There are a few problems with this promo, beginning with the notion that the tech will thwart "criminals." In the United States, one is not a criminal until they have been: first, charged with a crime; second, been given an opportunity to answer those charges; third, had those charges presented before an impartial tribunal (judge or jury); fourth, being found guilty of the charges; and finally, having received a sentence from an impartial tribunal.

That, my friends, is what we call due process, and it is what separates us from the totalitarian regimes that round up dissenters and "criminals" without rhyme, reason, or repercussion. We don't want to become such a society.

I propose the following scenario as something maybe readers can relate to that might motivate you to be aware and wary of such surveillance technology.

Two neighbors are arguing for months over some matter and the disagreement has escalated to a heated exchange of words. Now imagine that one of the neighbors subscribes to Rekor's Watchman security system and he knows that he can go out at night and instantly give law enforcement access to critical personal data simply by pointing his smartphone camera at his neighbor's license plate.

This, dear readers, is the reason the Fourth Amendment exists and this is why such powerful and invasive technology is turning our very neighborhoods into outposts of the surveillance state.



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