

Why the Flock Backlash Has Gotten So Intense

David A. Graham

This is an edition of The Atlantic Daily, a newsletter that guides you through the biggest stories of the day, helps you discover new ideas, and recommends the best in culture. [Sign up for it here.](#)

As corporate names go, Flock is cleverly flexible. It evokes the many cameras that compose the company's surveillance system and also a group of sheep, protected by a watchful shepherd. The recent backlash against the company, however, more closely resembles a flight of starlings, seeming to erupt out of nowhere and move as one unified body.

Flock Safety's cameras are a network of automated license-plate readers (ALPRs), which snap images of passing cars and feed them into an AI-powered-data system. The company has contracts with police departments and government agencies as well as with some private companies. The crime-fighting power of such a tool isn't hard to grasp: It allows law enforcement to track vehicles' movements over any area where the readers exist. The privacy concerns about such a dragnet are just as easy to fathom.

The company has existed for nearly a decade and has been growing steadily in recent years. But something has [turned in the past couple of months](#). People are pushing cities to cancel contracts and in some cases have taken matters into their own hands. Individuals have clandestinely sawed down the poles that hold cameras or splashed paint over them. [In one notable example](#), a Florida man obstructed the devices simply by holding up cardboard placards, a low-tech solution to a high-tech challenge. The pushback against Flock, like the [pushback against data centers](#), does not have a clear partisan bent. Critics include some of the most obnoxious voices on both the right and the left (Tucker Carlson, Hasan Piker), and defenders include technocratic wonks of different political persuasions.

Politicians are catching up. Yesterday, the Florida Department of Transportation announced that it was [revoking](#) permits for ALPRs on all state roads. (This means that cameras on locally maintained thoroughfares are still allowed.) On Thursday, Texas Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican, [halted state funding](#) for Flock. An anti-surveillance advocacy group has [tallied](#) 169 canceled contracts with Flock so far this year—90 of them last month alone.

Labeling the anger at Flock as a reaction to ever-present surveillance in contemporary society seems accurate, but this doesn't explain why it's happening right now. Not only has Flock been around for some time, but ALPRs are even older. My colleague Conor Friedersdorf was sounding the alarm a decade ago. "Your diminished privacy is their product. And the police are their customers," [he wrote](#) in January 2016.

Some anger focuses on governments that spend huge amounts (including money obtained through [opioid settlements](#) whose funds were earmarked for community aid) on technology during a moment of economic worry. More damaging to Flock's reputation has been a series of cases of police officers allegedly [abusing their access](#) to the system to [stalk people](#), typically current or former love interests. (Flock says that such uses are "unacceptable" and has created some guardrails around data access.) Writing in *The Atlantic* last month, [Charles Fain Lehman argued](#) that Flock can be a valuable tool and merely needs better regulation to address bad behavior and maximize privacy: "In our surveillance-saturated society, police cameras can help make the criminal-justice system both fairer and less punitive—if we let them."

That seems to beg the question. Flock is useful because it is ubiquitous. Reforms such as strict data-retention limits would only marginally answer privacy concerns, and anything more drastic would undermine the system's efficacy. As *National Review*'s Charles C. W. Cooke noted, no one doubts that Flock works. "Lots of things would reduce crime if implemented," [he wrote](#). "That doesn't mean that

those things are necessarily a good idea in a free republic.” Impositions on privacy to reduce crime are a particularly tough sell when crime is dropping sharply: Recently released FBI statistics show that violent crime dropped nearly 10 percent last year, part of a consistent trend since it spiked in 2020 and 2021. Preliminary statistics suggest that 2026 might be even safer. When safety is a less urgent concern, people are less willing to sacrifice privacy for security.

Moreover, the Flock backlash fits into a broader moment of anger—at corporations in general, and at tech companies and artificial intelligence in particular. “Americans feel they have less and less control over their own lives, and they increasingly blame large corporations,” the *Financial Times* columnist Rana Foroohar [recently wrote](#). Anxiety about AI and surveillance is big and abstract, and the companies and people pushing these anxieties are far away from most Americans. Polls show widespread apprehension about the growth of AI—a [Gallup poll this summer](#) found that about half of Americans think AI will do as much harm as it will good; another 39 percent said that it’s mostly bad. But people don’t have a lot of ways to communicate those fears.

Flock cameras, like data centers, provide a physical, local manifestation of this larger complex, against which people can direct their disgust. In other words, Flock protests are reactions to privacy concerns and particular alleged police abuses, but they’re also a way for the public to channel frustrations that it has few avenues to express. You could say that it’s a way of killing two birds with one stone.

Related:

Here are three new stories from *The Atlantic*:

Today’s News

1. A whistleblower says that the [U.S. Postal Service’s planned system to verify that mail-in ballots go only to citizens is flawed](#) and has not been fully tested. The system, whose use is currently blocked by a federal court, was created because of a March executive order; the anonymous federal official who filed the complaint alleges that if even one ballot cannot be verified, the system could reject the entire batch.
 2. The United States [launched strikes on Iran for the second time in three days](#), targeting the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, according to U.S. Central Command. The military said that the strikes were in response to Iran’s attempted attacks on ships and U.S. forces in the region.
 3. Army Secretary Dan Driscoll [submitted his resignation yesterday](#) to President Trump after months of tension with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. Driscoll had raised concerns with Hegseth about Army readiness and modernization efforts and about Hegseth’s firing of senior generals.
-

Evening Read