

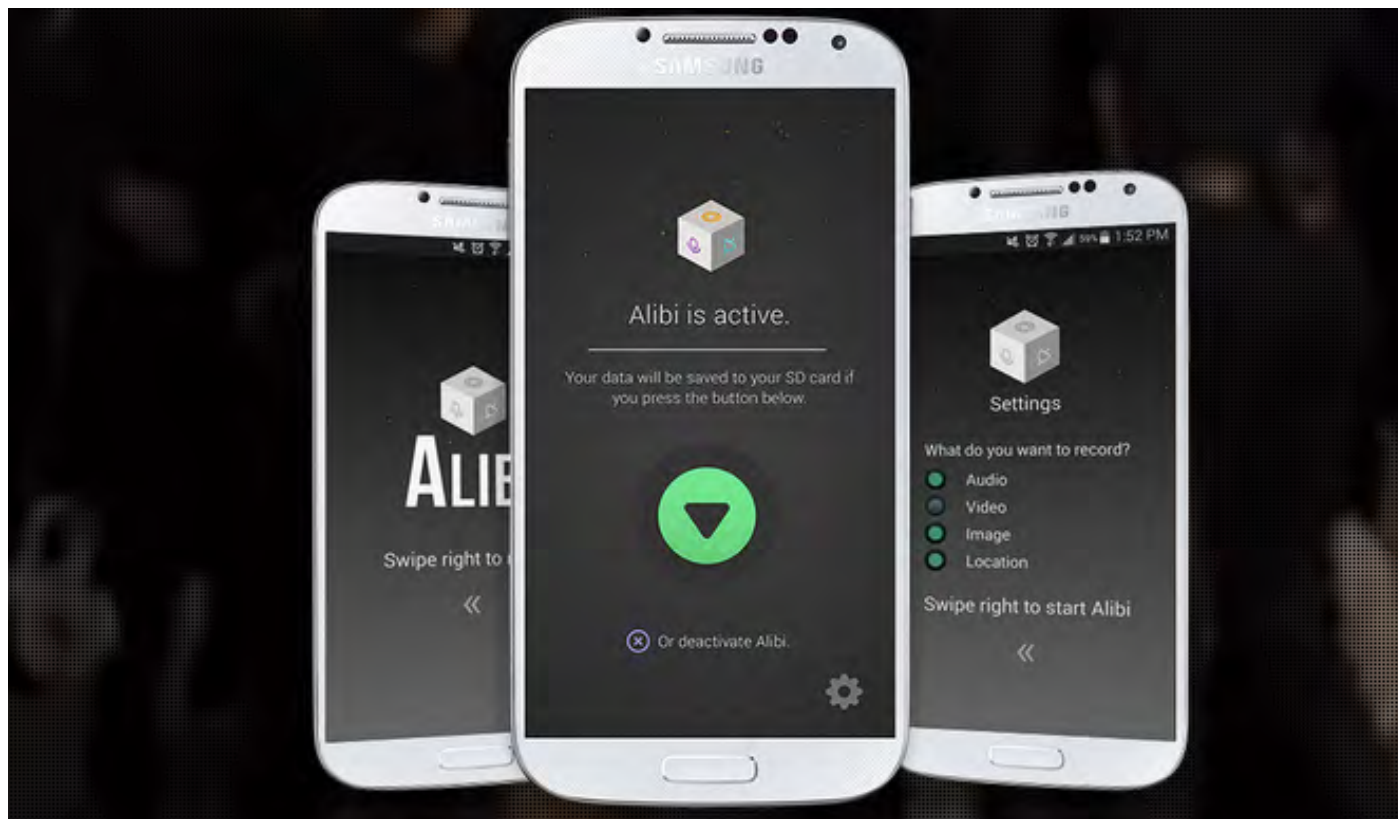
An app that passively records your life so you always have a witness



by **Lyndsey Gilpin** in **Mobility**

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Alibi is an Android app that records the last hour of your life. So if you're in a protest, police altercation, or even a dangerous personal situation, you can always have evidence.



Last year, Ryan Saleh was pulled over in New York City. Two police officers came knocking on his windows, and the one on the passenger's side poked his head in the car, flipped on his flashlight, and started looking around.

Saleh had nothing to hide, so he didn't think much of it. But later, he was recounting the story for his uncle, an attorney, who told him that not only was the officer not allowed to do that, but if Saleh had evidence, he could bring a case against him for it.

It got him thinking. So, he and three other software developers came together to build [Alibi](#), an Android app that passively records all day long. Start it up, and it records audio, geolocation, images, and/or video. Every hour, it deletes what's been recorded unless you save it.

“The idea is that we all walk around all the time with the tools that we need to document our lives, [but] the only real reason we can't is the amount of data that it encompasses,” Saleh said. “The truth is we know what we want to keep after the fact, we don't know before.”

The app couldn't be any more timely, as the sensitivity to police brutality is at an all-time high. There was the shooting death of unarmed [Michael Brown](#) in Ferguson, Missouri; the choking of [Eric Garner](#) on the streets of New York City, caught on video, in which the officers were not charged; and the South Carolina police officer who shot an unarmed black man (which did end in [an indictment](#)).

“We're seeing a lot of this more and more, but for every instance that is recorded, there are 10 that aren't,” Saleh said. And, pulling out a phone and pressing record in say, the instance of a traffic stop? Most of the time, that's going to irk the cop. Alibi is meant to be passive because of that.

Saleh said he sees Alibi as a tool to record many types of situations, including “police overreaching, police brutality, protests...often times we've heard from the comments section they see themselves using it for workplace sexual harassment, bullying in school, car accidents.”

The default setting for Alibi is to record audio, images, and geolocation. Most Android phones pick up a four to six foot radius, and the images are just shy of HD quality. The video is relatively low quality but captures a lot, Saleh said, and the geolocation picks up once every 15 minutes. If you keep audio recording, have it take one photo a minute, and tag your geolocation, there's no measurable effect on battery life. But if you record video, you'll get about 85% of the phone's normal battery life.

Alibi launched publicly in January, and Saleh said it's done much better than they hoped. They get a couple hundred downloads a week, and are now just shy of 10,000 total.

Right now, it's only available on Android. [As of 2013](#), Android had 77.8% of the worldwide market share, while iOS had 17.8%. And in the US, Android accounts for 50% of sales compared to Apple's 40%. That actually works in favor for the "at-risk population" that Alibi is marketed toward, which can benefit from the hold that Android has on the market.

One of the biggest challenges for the Alibi team has been the iOS app. They have an iPhone app basically ready for market, but Apple's SDK doesn't allow users to run a camera in the background. Android is much more liberal about what you can and can't do with the API, but with Apple, any app using resources has to be front and center on the screen. For instance, if you're on a Skype video call and want to check your email, the video will cut out while you do that. When you open up Skype again, it reconnects.

"There's a lot of talk [about] changing this, Apple has hinted at it in all support forums and things like that, but there's never a guarantee," Saleh said.

Alibi is the tenth app he has launched and he said there are always issues with iOS limitations. But if and when this rule does change, he said the iOS version of Alibi will be available within a week or so.

The other pertinent issue with Alibi (and smartphones in general) is the legal issues regarding recording the police. When you first install the app, a disclaimer about complying with local laws pops up. In the US, the laws regarding filming are pretty liberal. Legally, there is nothing a police officer can do to stop someone recording in a public place. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has a ["Know Your Rights" guide](#) for photographers that was updated in July 2014. Private property owners can make rules for photographing, but on public land, anything in plain sight is okay to photograph.

"It's an evolutionary time, people carrying mobile cameras in their pockets and inspecting how policing is done, and there's been some conflicts there," said Jay Stanley, a senior policy analyst for the ACLU. "Photography is a form of power, and a lot of police don't like to be recorded. There's a persistent pattern of abuses where law enforcements order people to stop filming or harass them or worse for filming police actions. On the legal front, courts have made it entirely clear people do have a right to record law enforcement in public."

According to the ACLU guide, which Stanley wrote, cops cannot confiscate or demand to view audio or video without a warrant and cannot delete images. It also says, however, that “police officers may legitimately order citizens to cease activities that are truly interfering with legitimate law enforcement operations.”

There’s really no justification for that, Stanley said, except for police saying the video you take contains evidence of a crime. But if the officer is the one that committed it, that case isn’t legitimate. In DC, the police have a formal policy allowing people to email the video to them rather than hand the phone over.

He added that there have been cases where police are charged with destruction of evidence for taking and destroying phones, because it is completely in an individual’s rights to record and in no case do they have to hand over the device.

“But if your phone is going to be taken, having it streamed to the cloud can be a solution,” he said.

As far as international use goes, Alibi has a significant number of downloads in Turkey and the Middle East, Ukraine, and Russia. Saleh said there’s usership in China, though he’s fairly sure the Chinese government doesn’t know about it yet. He envisions it becoming an issue and the government has the ability to ban it from app stores if they decide to, though that isn’t a huge concern for him. The app is free and users are able to download, share it with other phones, host privately regardless of whether it was bought on an official app store or not.

“The app is meant to be used in confines of law, but it is meant to test the limits of law in places like Russia and Syria and what not,” he said.

About half of Alibi’s users are domestic and half are abroad, and the app is being used about 60% of the time for political use (i.e. protests) and about 40% for personal use, according to feedback the Saleh has heard.

Privacy for the user is just as important. Alibi doesn’t ask for an internet connection, and the team doesn’t know anything about its users besides how many downloads they have. It records and then deletes the data if a user doesn’t save it. If it is saved, the data

officer or someone else has your phone, they don't have the ability to delete it. Saleh said that version 2.0 may have a Dropbox account integration, so users can save files into their directory and have the data replicated on Dropbox's servers for extra backup.

The team plans to host a discussion forum through the Alibi website, so users can share their feedback, requests for improvement, and general use cases. They want to engage the community in a safe way.

"I want this to be a more private community. There is sensitivity around the data being recorded and people do get uncomfortable," he said. "I want this to feel more private and less discoverable."

Though it seems like a niche app right now, as Saleh said, anyone can find themselves in a situation that they wish they could have evidence for.

"The fact is police officers have a lot of power in our society and can abuse that power, so it's hard to make them accountable for it," Stanley said. "To anger a police officer is something a lot of people are afraid to do."

On the other hand, the legal right to record does offer a certain amount of protection and empowerment.

The ACLU recently developed an app called [Mobile Justice](#), which allows you to record and report any instances of police brutality on the go. It's been adopted in California, Missouri, Mississippi, Nebraska, and Oregon. [I'm Getting Arrested](#) is an Android app that sends emergency messages to people in your phone. [Stop and Frisk Watch](#) is a free app developed by the New York Civil Liberties Union to report unlawful stop and frisk encounters. [The SWAT App](#) allows you to record and livestream police encounters, and also informs you of your rights. Similarly, platforms like [Periscope](#) and [Meerkat](#) allow you to livestream video to see the world in real-time through other people's eyes.

"Information is our friend," Saleh added. "And we should be getting as much out there as we can."

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