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EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION APPS AS EMBODIED RESPONSIBILIZATION

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Mobile media are designed for disruption. Their apps are intended to capture users' attention by interrupting whatever activity they are engaged in, whether online or offline. In this paper I explore what is arguably the paradigmatic disruptive application – the emergency notification app, developed in order to alert individuals to immediate danger while preserving the resilience of the home front as a whole. Drawing on walkthroughs of emergency apps (Light et al., 2018) and an analysis of related materials (Duguay & Gold-Apel, 2023), I suggest how this disruption not only manifests in but also enables three interrelated processes: the dissolution of the national collective into individually-alerted users; the blurring of the distinction between emergency and routine; and the delegation of preparedness responsibility from the state to individual users. I argue that these three processes – facilitated by the seemingly life-saving, deeply personalized disruption of the emergency app – carry critical political consequences. By creating an illusion of personal safety, these processes, which materialize in the hand-held disruption app, allow for a prolonged state of exception and the indefinite protraction of war and danger.

Developed between WWI and WWII and used intensively during the latter, the air raid siren horn operated in two complementary yet distinct ways – first by alerting residents of large cities and later, after its installation in rural areas, by distinguishing spaces under threat from those that could remain calm (Wood, 2021). As nationwide rooftop horn devices, the sirens could serve both as public alert systems and as zoning tools, warning only specific areas that were targeted (or in some cases, other areas during drills). The economic and psychological advantages of this duality are clear: it fosters a collective identity while simultaneously allowing the continuation of routine life in the regions deemed safe (Halevy, 2024). The transition from rooftop devices to a hand-held app appears to follow the same logic. However, an analysis of the Israeli Home-Front Command's (HFC) app[1] suggests that the division of space into a multitude of minuscule polygons;[2] the app's requirement that users mark – that is, be alerted in – no

[1] https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.alert.meserhadash&hl=en, launched 2016.

[2] Some 1700 zones in a country of about 20,000 sq. km., roughly the size of New Jersey.

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more than ten such polygons; and claims that the app is effective in densely populated, metropolitan areas but unreliable in open, rural regions, all stand in contrast to the public consciousness associated with the siren horns.

The socio-technical history of shelters and safe rooms highlights another dimension of the mobile privatization[3] of emergency disruption (Berger Ziauddin, 2017; Deville et al., 2014). Since 1992, Israeli law has required that all new residential units include a room constructed from iron-reinforced concrete. Unlike earlier shelters, which were located in neighborhoods and building cellars – spaces that fostered publicness and clearly marked an emergency condition – these in-house safe rooms allow homeowners to attain safety within seconds, embodying a new sensibility toward securitization. Shapiro and Bird-David (2016) define this shift as "routinergency": the naturalization of emergency as intrinsic to the flow of routine life, effectively blurring the binary distinction between "normalcy" and "disruption." The HFC app similarly materializes this new sensibility, seamlessly embedded in users' mobile phones alongside music, social media and gaming apps – held in their hands, tucked in their pockets, and available for download in consumer marketplaces such as Google Play and Apple's App Store, where users can grade it (*3.8) or track its installation count (1m+). The code of another emergency notification app, Tzofar-Red Alert,[4] is openly available in GitHub, and users engage with the developer to voice complaints and suggest improvements. This platformization and privatization of public infrastructures (Ringel & Ribak, 2024) add another layer to the observation that under routinergency, "modes of dealing with emergent threats may also be considered modes of constituting what 'emergency' *is*" (Shapiro & Bird-David, 2016, p. 651, emphasis in original). In a constant state of exception, users may – or must – decide which disruptions to take seriously and which to ignore, basing their judgement on prior experience, social media insights, or their own risk assessments.

In this way, the reliance on emergency apps is implicated in the delegation of the responsibility for emergency preparedness from the state to the users. Critics of neoliberalism argue that under the guise of emancipation and empowerment, the state has increasingly minimized its commitment to protecting citizens and ensuring readiness for natural and human-made risks and disasters (Rose et al., 2006). Previous research has identified indications of this responsibilization of citizens in texts such as disaster preparedness videos (Ågren, 2024) and financial literacy curricula (Maman & Rosenhek, 2019). These materials emphasize individual responsibility, planning and risk management, framing what is deemed responsible conduct as a moral imperative. App technology further concretizes responsibilization by demanding users' ongoing behavioral engagement: to be properly disrupted, users must download and install the app, define their significant locations, follow its time-sensitive instructions, and monitor alerts for their loved ones. Yet their responsibilization is starkly, literally spelled out in the following section of the HFC app's Terms of Use, where the state explicitly denies its own share of responsibility:

[3] On private mobilization and mobile privatization, see Spigel (2001).

[4] https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.redalert.tzevaadom&hl=en, launched 2014.

The responsibility of the IDF/Home Front Command and the responsibility of the State of Israel

The information on this site is collected, edited and updated by the website system, on behalf of the security authorities. The system works to the best of its ability so that the information on the website is as up-to-date and accurate as possible. At the same time, there may be inaccuracies in the information on the website.

The service is offered to the public "As is". The security authorities will not be held responsible for adapting the service to the user's needs. The security authorities use the best technological tools in order to prevent malfunctions and inaccuracies in the information that appears on the website. The security authorities will not be held responsible for mistakes and errors in the material presented on the website. Also, the security authorities will not be held responsible for changes made to the material presented in this service by the user or a third party. The user alone will be responsible for how he uses the service.

The security authorities will not be held responsible for any damage caused to the user or any third party as a direct or indirect result of the use of the website, including damage caused due to the use of software applications downloaded directly through the website or activated as a result of using the website, including internet applications and including damage caused as a result of the temporary or permanent shutdown of the service.[5]

Buried in the back of the app, this document employs legalese to define the relationship between state and citizen as one in which – in contrast to the title of this section – "the user alone will be responsible." While the app offers a variety of tips that users are encouraged to adopt for their own and their family's safety, the unconscionable contract they must accept makes their responsibilization unmistakably clear. In a sense, the state is at their fingertips; in another, it leaves them to their own devices.

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