EFFICIENCY

POSTRATIONAL.

WWW.CYBER-WASTE.IO
INFO@POSTRATIONAL.NET

EFFICIENCY

Looking at the design of Uber's user interface reveals a logic that underpins many of the digital services that dominate discussions about the gig economy and contemporary consumer culture. As you open the app, the parallel road lines of the wordmark give way to an almost childlike, gamified urban landscape with you, the user, right at the centre. Presenting cartoonish car avatars nearby, it asks you, open ended, 'Where to?', then bends the urban landscape to your will, summoning to your feet a car that has effectively vied with competitors for your custom and is ready to transport you on your journey. Uber's promise is to place you, the customer, at the centre of the world, a sort of omnipotent urban deity. The reason they can do this is because their technology, they claim, makes your mobility more efficient. This utopian promise is double-sided: for the drivers, they too sit at the centre of the screen in the form of a treasure map tailored just for them, one that finds sources of revenue quickly and puts the driver in control of their earnings with supposedly minimal effort.

The language of efficiency and smartness accompany many on-demand digital services widely used today. By cutting out (or actually, replacing) the complacent and cumbersome middleman, whether it's a licensed taxi operator, public transport network or the traffic-clogged roads, services like Uber,, Ola, Bolt, Lyft, DiDi and countless others promise efficiency and simplicity. Digital first direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands also promise quality products and essential daily items that really matter to you, delivered direct to your door – from razor blades to houseplants, mattresses to vegetables. By becoming new types of middlemen, connecting customers to providers digitally, firms such as Amazon and Facebook remove barriers to transactions and seemingly make new efficiencies throughout the distribution process. Often described as platforms, they create new types of marketplaces with new demands and behaviours. They themselves control access to, and the terms of engagement with, any customer/competitor/provider. Similarly, firms like Uber (through its Uber Eats division), Deliveroo, Just Eat, Doordash and many more have created a new layer of middlemen that connects customers to restaurants by claiming to deliver food more efficiently and conveniently than the provider or diner could achieve themselves. They decouple meal-making from meal-eating, with couriers expected to close that gap as quickly as possible.

The slick self-portrait of a frictionless, efficient service utopia belies these apps' wastefulness. Research has shown that the presence of Uber in cities adds to traffic and accidents and increases pollution, adding an estimated 69% more climate pollution than the trips they displace.1 While placing the customer at the centre of the universe, the algorithm that compels employees/ contractors / drivers/ delete-as-appropriate-pending-latest-local-legal-battle to cruise the streets to signal their availability creates congestion and wastes human energy in cities worldwide on a massive scale.

This increase in the density of mobility services isn't limited to precarious taxis by another name: e-scooters and bikes have crashed onto cities like a tidal wave. In 2018, a series of photographs went viral showing enormous graveyards of colourful bikes in cities around China.3 In 2019, the Mayor of Paris announced new regulations and measures to curb the e-scooter wars that had spilled onto the streets since they first arrived a year before.2 In both cases, this initial surge in breathless highly-capitalised service supply outpaced demand at such a rate that cities were inundated with bright, heavily branded bikes and scooters, as various mobility services entered into a gold rush to capture the new market. What started as a fairly benign question about bikes littering the streets soon turned into an overwhelming cascade of urban trash.

And in the case of food delivery services, the business model is so unworkable on its own unit economics that in most cases, everyone involved seems to lose money: the restaurant, the customer, the underpaid courier and the delivery firm itself. This story of 'Doordash and pizza arbitrage' shows this brilliantly.

Of course, these phenomena don't arise from nowhere, but are born from specific economic and historical conditions and contexts. As many have observed, the rise of the gig economy is in many ways an extension of long-term trends in an economy driven by profit-seeking in the face of competition, including the turn away from more secure industrial employment towards a more flexible labour market and leaner business models. These trends combined in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) – in particular low inflation with rising asset prices despite low profitability, as well as the advances of the previous decades of technological innovation and the mainstreaming of smartphones – to create the perfect conditions for new, well-branded expressions of the gig economy to emerge, with its many competing businesses.4

As Evgeny Morozov observed back in 2018, such competition generates masses of waste that runs counter to the 'techno-populist rhetoric' of efficient coordination that benefits society.5 In the case of China's bike graveyards and, to a lesser extent Paris' e-scooter wars, this is made highly visible as intense competition gives way quickly to a collapse in the market. In the case of brands like Deliveroo, the lockdowns that accompanied the pandemic fuelled demand for takeaway meals, and caused their valuation to soar, despite the company remaining unprofitable on the unit economics of every meal delivered. Amazon took a 16% stake in the business. And yet its recent IPO has already been labelled 'London's worst IPO in history,'6 with billions wiped off its initial valuation in days.

This wastefulness of money as well as time casts the opening image of this text, where the omnipotent customer is at the centre of a newly-created efficient world of on-demand delivery, in a different light. Financial advisors and lawyers make vast sums of money from consulting fees, and early investors pumping up pre-IPO valuations by championing the radical, world-changing coordination technology, inflates the perceived value of these companies and helps them sell their investment at highly inflated prices. In the case of Deliveroo, its IPO appears to have attracted 70,000 retail investors buying into the hype of a product's highly exaggerated worth. The real customer here is not the person ordering takeaways or hailing cabs through efficiency, but the investor who can offload their stake at the highest possible value before it starts to fall.

In the case of something like Uber, backed by the immense wealth of Sovereign Wealth Funds, deep pockets mean the company can afford to subsidise taxi rides while trying to change the law to make their model viable. The waste in this case - of money and legal fees - runs alongside a service that produces harms on the streets; pollution, accidents, lost human potential and social precarity are all direct and wasteful consequences of this waiting game.

Perhaps more importantly, there is a human consequence to these expectations of rapid delivery and efficiency. Amazon promises the most efficient, customer-friendly services the world has ever seen, and their Prime offer of next day delivery on almost anything appears to customers like magic. Of course, this is set against very well-documented appalling working conditions in their 'fulfillment centres'. Couriers and delivery drivers, not only from Amazon nor even just delivery apps but many logistics firms, have to meet punishing targets, and are encouraged to pay to augment their working environments to keep up the pace. Nowhere has this been more bleakly revealed than the now infamous reports of delivery drivers forced to keep their own excrement in the vans or run the risk of missing their targets and losing their income, something the firm has only very recently admitted in public.7 These features are not only the preserve of self-presenting technology firms: the practice of scientific management and separating knowledge and execution of tasks have been around for decades. Gavin Mueller talks here about its origins in the US military, arguing that efficiency is only a side-effect of these practices, which were more concerned with predictability. If predictability is indeed a more important driver than efficiency, and if the firms flooding the market with these services are themselves rarely profitable but a vehicle for investors to speculate and sell, the question of why we accept so much human waste in the service of something that is not really efficient is worth considering. As the pandemic shifted focus from office deliveries to home deliveries, as the cardboard mounds build next to the municipal bins and become increasingly visible in domestic day-to-day life, whether sale and return clothing or takeaways, it is worth listening to the reports of delivery drivers and considering the waste that is produced in getting things quickly to your door, way before the packaging is left out for recycling to deal with.

Endnotes:

1. Anair D, Martin J, de Moura M, Goldman J (2020), Ride Hailing's Climate Risks, Union of Concerned Scientists link
2. Taylor A (2018), The Bike-Share Oversupply in China: Huge Piles of Abandoned and Broken Bicycles, The Atlantic (here)
3. Taylor A (2018), The Bike-Share Oversupply in China: Huge Piles of Abandoned and Broken Bicycles, The Atlantic (here)
4. Srnicek N (2017) Platform Capitalism; Montalban M, Frigant V, Jullien B (2019), Platform economy as a new form of capitalism: a Regulationist research programme, Cambridge Journal of Economics 2019, 1-20
5. Morozov E (2018), From Airbnb to city bikes, the 'sharing economy' has been seized by big money (here)
6. CNN (2021), London needed a win. Instead it got its worst IPO in history, (here)
7. Lee T (2021), Amazon admits its drivers sometimes have to pee in bottles, Ars Technica, (here)

WWW.CYBER-WASTE.IO
INFO@POSTRATIONAL.NET