Article

Wheels in the Head: Ridesharing as Monitored Performance

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Abstract

For-profit “ridesharing” services (or *soft cabs*) offer on-demand rides much like taxicabs, but are distinguished by an affective framing which emphasizes that drivers are “friends with cars, on demand” rather than “cabdrivers.” This reframing is achieved through the insertion of smartphones as social interfaces between drivers and passengers, restructuring social interaction through an *allegorithm* (the productive co-deployment of a socially relevant allegorical script and a software-mediated algorithm). Much of the affective labor of ridesharing drivers consists in maintaining this affective framing and internalizing the logic by which their performances are monitored through the work platform. In this article the writings and videos of three ridesharing drivers will be drawn on to illustrate the ways drivers develop and evaluate their own performances as ridesharing drivers.

Introduction

I’m taking Amanda from the Mission to Sutter and Webster. She’s friendly. Sits up front. Tells me all about her wedding next summer in Martha’s Vineyard. I don’t know what to say. I’m only perpetuating the conversation out of courtesy. But it’s awkward. We are from different worlds. (Dessaint 2014a: 5)

With this story, Kelly Dessaint begins the first issue of *Behind The Wheel*, an autobiographical account of driving for Lyft, a for-profit “ridesharing” (or *soft cab*) service, in San Francisco. Although ridesharing services offer on-demand rides much like taxicabs, they distinguish themselves from taxis by emphasizing the friendly, social aspect of the in-car interaction. Crucial to the ability of Lyft, and its primary competitor, Uber, to distinguish themselves from taxis in this manner has been the insertion of smartphones into the social interaction between drivers and passengers. Ridesharing apps streamline communication and payment, while shaping the behavior of both drivers and passengers through monitoring (particularly through a reputation metric, the “ratings system”) and the control of pricing and information. Though taxicab driving, like other service occupations, has always required that drivers engage, not only in the work of driving, but in the *affective labor* of achieving and maintaining the affective and emotional conditions for particular forms of social interaction (Hochschild 1983; Hardt 1999; Anderson 2015), the affective labor of ridesharing drivers takes on an additional urgency, as the founding distinction between ridesharing and regular taxicabs, and as the particular object of the monitoring to which drivers are subjected.

Ridesharing apps mediate relationships between drivers and passengers; as Adriana de Souza e Silva argues, such *social interfaces* transform the physical space in which social interaction takes place into a *hybrid space* simultaneously physical and digital (de Souza e Silva 2006). Through the mediation of particular interactions by social interfaces, the rationality of mobile digital communication—increased connectivity, interactivity, and openness to digital surveillance—infuses other interactions taking place within the same hybrid space (Hulsey and Reeves 2014). In the case of ridesharing, this infusive effect is actively deployed as an interactional frame (Goffman 1986), insofar as participants are invited to see this “ridesharing” space as something novel, fundamentally distinct from a traditional taxicab, first and foremost on account of the app’s intermediation; a space enchanted by the transformative magic of new technology (Gell 1992).

At the same time, the exposure of hybrid spaces to digital surveillance opens up these sites to new forms and tools of control. Already, the hybridization of space by mobile connected devices has become intricately tied with the precarization of work through a proliferation of freelancing websites and mobile apps that break up traditional jobs into a series of temporary “gigs” or tasks (Standing 2011); “ridesharing” services like Uber and Lyft are among the most prominent, and controversial, of these new work platforms (Hill 2015). The mobile and dispersed character of app-based gig work, conducted away from direct company supervision, means that supervision is delegated to customers, the workers themselves, and the software they use to do their jobs. In this context workers deliver a *monitored performance* (see introduction to this special issue), a performance that is verified and evaluated through the monitoring software pervading the hybrid space of work.

As with the “technologies of enchantment” described by Gell, there is a crucial link between the compelling power of a technology beyond the control or comprehension of its users, and the “acquiescence” of participants in “the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed” (Gell 1992: 43). Though for Gell this acquiescence, and this enmeshment, was to a unified social order, in this case it is acquiescence to a frame through which participants make sense of the activity taking place in the hybrid space enchanted by the social interface. More than mere acquiescence, what such performance demands is a willing engagement, a personal investment in the affective framing of the work involved.¹ Much of the affective work of ridesharing drivers (and passengers, though this article will focus on the former) consists in the maintenance of the “ridesharing” frame, by embracing the company narrative and internalizing the logic by which their performances are monitored. Dessaint’s anecdote, above, reveals the potential strain underlying the performance of friendliness under such circumstances.

In this article, I examine the monitored performance at the heart of the work of ridesharing. The “ridesharing” frame serves as a link by which drivers make sense of the way they are monitored through an *allegorithm* (the productive co-deployment of a socially relevant allegorical script and a software-mediated algorithm). Because drivers lack full and clear information about the algorithms which monitor them, they use the allegorithm to expand on and infer what their performance should be, as well as turning to each other, through forums and social media, to learn and share the “guidelines” of the job. In particular, drivers obsess over the meaning of the ratings system through which their performance is evaluated by passengers. Difficulties of the work—rude passengers, poor treatment by the companies, and the need to make money—introduce cracks into the ridesharing frame. Drivers respond in numerous ways, from doubling down on allegiance to the ridesharing allegory, to developing counter-frames which challenge the ruling allegorithm. Thus, though this is a story about the control of human work through the invisible boundaries and protocological effects of algorithms, it at the same time emphasizes the continuing need of these systems for human participants to buy in, embrace the affective framing, and put on the needed performance.

¹ cf. Akrich and Latour (1992: 261) on “subscription.”

Below, the writings of three ridesharing drivers will be drawn on to illustrate the ways drivers develop and evaluate their own ridesharing performances. These were selected from a survey of blogs, videos, and self-published writings of ten ridesharing drivers from a range of US cities; the survey, in turn, is part of an ongoing study of the work memoirs produced by taxicab, limousine, and ridesharing drivers (cf. Anderson 2015).

Kelly Dessaint drove for Lyft and Uber in the city of San Francisco. A writer, and publisher of the long-running zine *Piltdownlad*, he began blogging² about his ridesharing experience in July of 2014, publishing some of his stories as two issues of his zine (Dessaint 2014a, 2014b). Commuting to San Francisco from the neighboring, less expensive city of Oakland, Dessaint became a full-time driver, relying on ridesharing for his income.

Well, I like driving. And I enjoy dealing with people. Sure, there are a lot of stinkers who get in my car and treat me like a servant. The drunks are particularly annoying. But I've had some amazing interactions with folks and, after awhile, it gets addictive. You never know who's going to get into your car. (IDriveSF 9/22/2014)

Randy Shear, aka "Uber Man," has driven for Uber since 2013 in the Midwestern cities of Indianapolis and Oklahoma City. In July 2014 he began posting videos about Uber on his "Uber Man" YouTube channel.³ Gaining followers and influence in the online ridesharing space, Shear has since started a Facebook group, the Uber Man Driver Network, which serves as a forum for discussion among ridesharing drivers. Over the course of his career, Shear has varied between full and part-time driving; he has supplemented his driving income with other work, such as flipping used cars, and, increasingly, through income from driver referrals⁴ and his YouTube channel.

Uber has helped me face my issues with social anxiety, because I'm forced to meet new people, I'm forced to interact with them, have conversations, deal with all kinds of situations that, you know, you probably would never normally expect doing something like this.

So, we can start there... it gives you the opportunity to really interact with people, to get to know people on a really personal level, um, and that's something I love, you meet people from all walks of life. (UberMan 5/1/2015)

LaToya Tavernier drives for Lyft in Boston, and has posted videos about the experience since June of 2014 on her YouTube channel, "Toya T."⁵ A graduate student in sociology, Tavernier drove part-time during the summers and breaks, and occasionally during the school year; during her time as a ridesharing driver Tavernier defended her dissertation and taught at a Boston-area college.

What I love about being a Lyft driver is you get to meet tons of different people... this older Indian woman, who I think I would have never had a random conversation with, was talking with me about the weather, ... and we had a full conversation the entire time, from the time I picked her up to the time I dropped them off at the airport. And she was telling me all about her kids and where they've lived ... and I thought that was very, very

² At www.idrivesf.blogspot.com, hereafter "IDriveSF."

³ <https://www.youtube.com/user/randyshear>, hereafter "UberMan."

⁴ Both Uber and Lyft encourage drivers to increase their earnings by signing up additional drivers to the platform, for a referral fee. This pyramid-like scheme allows drivers to supplement their ridesharing income, while helping the soft cab platforms deal with the problem of massive driver turnover.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/user/lat2001>, hereafter "ToyaT."

cool, it made my day to have this kind of conversation with someone that I came across in my car.

... Another pro about it—is the money! I mean come on, that’s why you’re doing the driving, right? (ToyaT 7/20/2014)

Though these three drivers cannot be representative of the full range of ridesharing drivers, there are some differences among them which shape their experiences. Dessaint and Shear are white men; Tavernier is a black woman. Each drove in different cities, in different regions of the US. While Dessaint and Shear relied heavily or solely on ridesharing income, Tavernier used it as a side job to supplement her teaching income and pay off credit cards.

Nevertheless, in their writings or videos, each of these three drivers shares several basic concerns: the joys and frustrations of the job; tips and strategies for making money and dealing with passengers; and anxiety over the rating of their “ridesharing” performances. It is hoped that, by drawing on the words of these three drivers, a sense of their unique personalities can be communicated, along with their individual trajectories and experiences as ridesharing drivers.

Ridesharing in Soft Cabs

Transform your car into a vehicle for human connection, and earn some extra money along the way. (Lyft onboarding material, 2015)

For-profit “ridesharing” is largely the creation of three San Francisco-based startups (Lyft, SideCar, and Tickengo), which, starting in 2012, offered *e-hailing* services allowing passengers to “hail” drivers using smartphones.⁶ Though earlier e-hailing services had coupled with existing in-cab technology (i.e., taximeters, GPS, and electronic waybill systems: cf. Anderson 2014, 2015: 257ff), the more recent generation has replaced the traditional fixed taximeter with the *soft meter*: networked e-hailing software on the driver’s smartphone which calculates the fare using GPS (Fitzgerald Rodríguez 2015). “Ridesharing” services took advantage of the ad-hoc possibilities of soft meters to promote a form of BYOD taxi service, relying on drivers who provide their own cars (and personal rather than commercial insurance) and use their own phones (and service providers) to link to the company app.

The name “ridesharing” was initially a legal ploy to evade the stricter regulation under which taxicabs operate; before this, the term had been restricted to carpooling and similar activities from which drivers did not make money (Anderson 2014). However, the name also proved to be a branding success, and ridesharing companies quickly gained a hipper, friendlier image than that of the taxicab. Lyft, for example, cultivated a friendly image by encouraging drivers and passengers to “fistbump” at the start of each ride, and by having drivers affix fluffy pink mustaches to the front of their cars to playfully distinguish them from other vehicles. Through these rituals and signs, passengers are invited to perceive Lyft, not as an unlicensed taxi service, but as “your friend with a car, on demand.” The mediation of driver and passenger interaction through a smartphone application has been central to this rebranding.

The name “ridesharing” remains meaningful in the discourse of ridesharing drivers, and plays a crucial role in distinguishing their work, and their work identity, from that of “cabdrivers.” Here, the term “ridesharing” will be retained for the performance which drivers put on, but for their vehicles the more fitting term of *soft cabs* will be used.⁷ Much as the *taxicab* was created by the introduction of the taximeter

⁶ Uber, initially a limousine-dispatching service, jumped into the ridesharing market in 2013 and quickly became the dominant player.

⁷ Other proposed replacements for “ridesharing” include “Transportation Network Companies,” introduced by the California Public Utilities Commission (see Anderson 2014) and “ridesourcing” (Rayle et al. 2016); such names

into hired cabs just over a century ago (Hodges 2007), so is the soft cab the product of the soft meter. Both forms of meter are intended to rationalize passenger-driver interaction by delegating the troublesome issue of fare calculation to a non-human device; yet where the older assemblage appealed to the mechanical, analog rationality of the hard, fixed (inspected, sealed) box of the taximeter and its visible read-out, the new soft-cab assemblage appeals to the permeable, digital interconnectedness of the networked “smart” device. While traditional taximeters supported an interventionist regime of periodic inspections by companies and regulators, the soft meter exposes the cab and its inhabitants to an array of new surveillance techniques, of which algorithmic performance monitoring is the most notable. In its roll-out, the soft cab has come bundled with the move to supplant traditional regulatory models with software-enabled protocological control (or “regulation by software” (Grimmelmann 2005); the complex, sedimented cultural image of the taxicab is to be cleared away, replaced with a purified site more in tune with the depoliticizing aesthetic of the “soft city” (Harvey 1990; cf. Raban 1988 and Skelton 2013).

The link between affective framing and algorithmic control in the soft cab can be outlined from the short list of studies undertaken so far on Uber and similar services (viz., Anderson 2014, 2015; Lee et al. 2015; Rosenblat and Stark 2015; Glöss et al. 2016). Loosely following Lee et al. (2015), there are three ways in which soft-cab platforms use “algorithmic management” to monitor and control the performance of drivers:

Control of work and pay. As a dispatch service, Uber, Lyft and other soft-cab companies connect drivers with passengers, using a combination of location, rating, and time logged in. Companies set pricing by time and distance, and determine the percentage of the fare (usually between 70 and 80 per cent) which drivers receive. While taxicab fares are often fixed by regulation, soft-cabs platforms use dynamic pricing (aka “primetime” or “surge pricing”), calculated by closely guarded proprietary algorithms for the express purpose of influencing driver and passenger behavior. Companies actively experiment by introducing changes in pricing, pay incentives, and income guarantees, which are introduced, altered, and retracted to test the impact on drivers and passengers (Anderson 2014; Lee et al. 2015; Rosenblat and Stark 2015).

Control of information. Continuing a decades-long trend of increasing information asymmetry in hired vehicle dispatch technology (Anderson 2004), soft-cab services seek to constrain and influence driver behavior by strictly controlling the information made available to them through the app.⁸ A driver’s app shows an image of the driver’s car, alone on an empty map, to which is sometimes overlaid algorithmically-determined dynamic pricing areas (“surge pricing” for Uber, “primetime” for Lyft), meant to draw drivers to specific regions in hope of better pay. Drivers are not given clear descriptions of the algorithms determining allocation, dynamic pricing, and driver monitoring; nor are they informed when these algorithms are altered to better manipulate driver behavior (Glöss et al. 2016, Rosenblat and Stark 2015).

Monitoring performance. Soft-cab apps track drivers’ performance through several metrics, notably acceptance and cancellation rates, and a five star rating system (discussed below). Algorithms flag underperforming drivers for warnings or “deactivation,” soft-cab speak for “firing.” The lack of clarity in the enforcement of these ratings systems creates a sense of paranoia among drivers, who are forced to find ways to make sense of the ratings by which they are evaluated (Anderson 2015; Lee et al. 2015; Rosenblat and Stark 2015).

reduce the complex technological, regulatory, and cultural assemblage of the soft cab to an aspect of the dispatch technology, while neglecting the role of labor altogether.

⁸ Different companies of course use different apps, offering different choices and kinds of information. However, there has been a convergence toward an increasingly conventionalized form (exemplified by both Uber and Lyft) with a similar set of expected signals, messages, and actions, as divergent designs (e.g., Sidecar) have dropped out of the market.

In place of clear explanations of the complex and often changing workings of the algorithms, drivers and passengers are offered what gaming theorists Alexander Galloway and McKenzie Wark have called an *allegorithm*. Developed to explain how players of computer games make sense of the complex “under the hood” algorithms underlying gameplay, it refers to the productive co-deployment of a socially relevant *allegorical* script and a software-mediated *algorithm* (Galloway 2006, 2012; Wark 2007). Through the *allegorithm*, players without knowledge of, or access to, the inner workings of game software are still able to develop a sense of the assumptions and logical operations by which game algorithms assign meanings to persons, things, and interactions, and outline the boundaries of meaningful activity, within the game.

Allegories, as extended metaphors, articulate deeper meaning into everyday images and/or experiences, providing explanatory context and bridging over uncertainty and contradiction. In the *allegorithm*, allegory anchors the framing narrative, the storyline that participants buy into—for instance, in video games, players think of themselves as adventurers slaying orcs, or as pilots of asteroid-blasting spaceships, while they may appear—to anyone not immersed in the story of the game—to be doing nothing more than pushing buttons on a computer. The *allegorithm* works by convincing game players to embrace a narrative framing (“this is what we are doing”), through which they internalize the hidden or poorly understood protocological effects of the software monitoring, evaluating, and delimiting their performance.

The soft cab’s “ridesharing” allegory makes sense of algorithmic management by establishing key correspondences. The strictly controlled information, and constrained set of choices offered by the app, create a delimited field of effective action which is interpreted as the space of individual freedom. Shifts in driver ratings, up or down, are to be taken personally, as objective measures of the driver’s performance. And the hybridizing presence of algorithms themselves—or as Rosenblat and Stark (2015:8) put it, the “appeal to the concept of algorithms”—delineates the enchanted ridesharing space from that of the taxicab, contaminated with old technologies and performances.

As will be discussed below, ridesharing platforms provide only a thin stream of information by which drivers can judge and monitor their own behavior, or evaluate the ways in which they are being judged by the company. Even with the most important metric by which drivers are judged—the “rating system”—drivers are left largely to guess as to how their rating came about, or at what point they will be “terminated” for a low score. In this context, the *allegorithm* becomes all the more important as a means by which drivers can make sense of their own performances. To take the wheel, and play their assigned role in the soft-cab assemblage, drivers must have the proper “wheels in the head” (Stirner 1993) with which their own performances can be guided.

Performance and Frame-work

The Lyft Driver Code:

1. We welcome warmly, be it with a smile or a super secret handshake.
 2. We create inviting spaces, and encourage passengers to sit up front or wherever they’re most comfortable.
 3. We uplift others, and try to make days better with simple acts of kindness.
 4. We have fun. Lots of it. We let passengers DJ, and treat each ride as if we were driving a friend.
 5. We are a community. Before Lyft, we were just here. Now, we’re here for each other.
- (Lyft onboarding materials, 2015).

The “ridesharing” framing of the soft cab provides drivers with an image to live up to, a set of performance rules. As allegory, this image asks that drivers see the correspondence between their own performances—giving smiles or secret handshakes, creating inviting spaces and having fun—and the

outcomes on the platform, as they are rated well or poorly by passengers, or flagged by monitoring algorithms for behavior outside of desired patterns.

“Performance” is not simply a dramaturgical metaphor; performances are performative (Butler 1993, 1999), producing and reproducing the identities of participants. Performance theory emphasizes the way subjects are produced, challenged, and recognized in action; rather than positing pre-existing, stable subjects, it allows for a genealogy of subject formation in the interactional and cultural context of meaningful frames, roles, and symbols (Butler 2010). Performance signifies by aligning with or against these received frames of meaning, which are themselves reproduced or transformed through performance (Butler 2005). Performances are thus never wholly novel nor merely reactive. Yet performance cannot be reduced to an effect of interpretation or discourse; it is also lived and felt, and performative as a *doing* more than simply a representing (Dowling 2012).

Performance, and its evaluation, also involves the metacommunicative work of maintaining the frames through which performances are understood, that is, *frame-work*. Frame-work includes acts of identification and recognition of self and other as participants in a shared understanding, along with the affective work of creating and managing the feeling of an interaction. Both drivers and passengers take part in this work. With the app, passengers *hail* drivers; when accepting hails, drivers accept this interpellation into the role of “ridesharing driver.” Passengers, in turn, recognize the performances of drivers through their interaction and through the ratings and comments system of the app. As will be seen, drivers affectively invest (Grossberg 1992: 81ff) in the role and in the value of their performance as ridesharing drivers.

Evaluative discourse plays an important role in the negotiation of the meaning of a given performance; such meaning is never permanently fixed, but remains subject to re-evaluation after the fact. Identity grounded in performance is only as stable or enduring as the technologies and interaction rituals through which it is established. It is this dependence of performance on continuing evaluation and re-evaluation which gives performance monitoring its power. Evaluations and re-evaluations of performance—such as the copious blogs, videos, and writings in which ridesharing drivers explain, share, and defend their driving performances—are themselves performances, meaningful and productive acts of “giving an account of oneself” (Butler 2005).

Jon McKenzie charted the development and interaction of three distinct fields of “performance” studies: the study of cultural performance, drawing on ritual and the theater to interrogate the context and efficacy of social action; performance management, by which employees of firms are monitored and motivated to produce desired corporate outcomes; and “techno-performance,” the measurement of the effectiveness of technological devices at achieving given tasks (McKenzie 2001). In soft cabs, all three of these fields of performance come together in the technological measurement of the driver’s success in playing a social role, for the purpose of realizing the corporate goal of a measurable, demonstrable metric of customer satisfaction. The customer’s satisfaction with the driver’s “warm welcome” and creation of “inviting space,” however, becomes measurable only through the ratings given by passengers to drivers after the trip. The driver receives this feedback, not directly from each passenger, but through the aggregated rating which is shown on their own app; it is up to the driver to infer the connection between this techno-performance rating, and their performance as “ridesharing driver” in interaction with passengers.

Ridesharing drivers thus perform for their passengers; they perform for the app and the rating system; they perform, of course, for themselves, and for other drivers through driver-focused websites, video channels, and social media. They monitor their own success through the metrics used by the company to evaluate and give feedback on their performances, while at the same time turning to a community of other drivers to provide a broader, richer understanding of the role and script they are to follow.

Passengers, like drivers, deliver a performance, and seek to make sense of the role they play in the car; yet they are less algorithmically constrained by the ratings system, and so have less compulsion to play by the rules of the game. They may embrace the narrative framing of ridesharing; or they may fall back on the available and widely known interaction framework of the taxicab. Thus, ridesharing drivers must work to define themselves, and to defend the ridesharing algorithm, against the enduring cultural image of the taxicab and of its driver.

Ridesharing and its Other

The soft cab gains its soft image, in part, by clearing away the accretion of signs which have attached to the taxicab over many years. Passengers identify approaching cars and their drivers with photos on the app; the physical meeting on the street only takes place after the digital encounter between driver and passenger, as profiled, named entities, has already taken place through the app. This makes it possible for the old, physical technologies of veridiction, such as badges, cab numbers, ticking taximeters, and permanent trade dress (e.g. bright colors and taxicab signage on the vehicle), to be replaced by fleeting gestures like the fistbump, removable “U” or “Lyft” decals, and, occasionally, by the smartphone mounted on the driver’s dash.⁹ The absence of all the old signs helps reinforce the branding of the soft cab as a new experience. And yet, ridesharing drivers report continually being asked the same question by passengers:

I’ve had a lot of passengers ask me, what’s the difference between a taxicab and an Uber?
(UberMan 5/1/2015)

This is not just a passing question, but one that ridesharing drivers must continually answer, not just for their passengers, but for themselves. How is this work different from that of driving a cab? Shear gives an answer which closely follows Uber’s brand framing:

When I get into a cab, when I used to get into a cab, the conversation was minimal. I mean it was, you know, the driver didn’t—if you could even understand their English, “where you going?” You know? And you tell him where you’re going, and for the most part, that’s the extent of the conversation, I mean there are times where I was actually able to carry out a conversation with the driver but for the most part, it was very impersonal, you know, it was just business. Which is fine, you know that’s what it is, right? But Uber, there’s a totally different atmosphere here, guys... Passengers talk to me. We have great conversations, for the most part. Not everybody talks to me, but for the most part I have great conversations with my passengers... (UberMan 5/1/2015)

Much depends on this founding distinction, between cabdrivers and ridesharing drivers, and between the kinds of interaction which are imagined to take place in taxicabs and in ridesharing cars. Note that Shear invokes, not only the affective interaction expected of both passengers and drivers, but the character of the driver, as a source of this distinction; it is imperative for drivers who embrace the ridesharing narrative to *not be like cabdrivers*. Shear outlines the qualities that mark this excluded Other: “impersonal,” “just business,” and—as an inescapable undertow—foreign.

Tavernier expands on the same subject, noting that, unlike cabdrivers, ridesharing drivers are to be thought of as “regular folk.”

⁹ Cautious drivers, however, mount the phone below the window line so as to avoid notice by police, taxi drivers, and the public.

I think it's great that it's regular folk, uh you know it could be a young person, old person, man, woman, and I think that for the most part, uh taxi drivers are mostly men and they're usually immigrant men? And that's not like an issue, but I feel like, um, conversationwise, that it helps because I feel that, uh, the type of conversation that I'm able to have with some of my passengers, if they want to engage in conversation, is very different than I think, than a conversation that you would engage in or not engage in with a, um, a taxi driver, that may not speak English well, that may not be very interested in talking to people in their cab because it's about, you know, [*snaps fingers*] it's about the money, they have to pay their bill, they have to pay their hack licenses, and um, there's really just no time to talk on that. (ToyaT 6/19/2015)

Cabdrivers, then, are seen as overly intent on the money, to the point of neglecting the social aspect of interaction in the cab; the message of this to ridesharing drivers is to focus more on social interaction and less on money (the automation of payment through the app in fact makes it possible for money never to be discussed during a ride). Yet, like Shear, Tavernier invokes another element of the cultural image of the cabdriver, as an immigrant with poor English skills. The same topic arises when she complains about drivers with poor English trying to be hired to drive for Lyft; self-consciously, she quickly moves to excuse herself from nativist readings of this discourse:

And again I am not bashing anybody, I am the child of two immigrants myself, I'm an immigration scholar, so don't come at me saying that I'm a nativist, and I'm against immigrants, what I'm saying is that if you can't get a job at McDonald's... where you have to be able to speak to customers, and engage with customers, and answer their questions, um, then Lyft is not a good idea for you... (ToyaT 9/12/2014)

The point here is not to blame these individual drivers for falling into a nativist narrative; this narrative is endemic to the soft cab. The power of such discourse inheres, not so much in individuals, as in statements, in articulations, in ready-made culturally available positions, like smooth, already worn paths that are easily followed, and which in their ease and apparent naturalness obscure the very reproduction of inequality which they effect. It would be more difficult, rather, for this nativism not to be invoked, since it forms the core of the marginalized cultural image of the cabdriver in the United States (Hodges 2007), to which the role of "ridesharing" driver is explicitly framed in opposition. As Sarah Sharma, writing of the racially encoded public image of the taxi and its driver in the wake of 9/11, put it:

The taxi figures prominently in the dark corners of the Right as a roving terrorist cell while it is elevated to an idealized 'public sphere on wheels' in the bright sensibility of the liberal imagination. In the first account the driver needs to be eradicated and in the second account the embodied driver is strangely absent. (Sharma 2010: 183)

In embracing the ridesharing framework, soft-cab drivers make both of these moves at once: the cabdriver is "eradicated" from the scene as a dangerous, asocial Other; while the ridesharing car, an "idealized public sphere on wheels," is piloted not by a "cabdriver" but by a "friend with a car." This purification of the cabdriver from the cab-like vehicle is achieved, not only through the shared embracing by both driver and passengers of the "ridesharing" narrative; but through the protocological effects of the app, its interface and its metrics. It is interesting that, just as the insertion of smartphones into social interaction has been said to cause "absent presence" by allowing users to be physically present while socially elsewhere (Gergen 2002), here the insertion of the smartphone app into the social setting of the hired car produces a different kind of "absent presence," that of the cabdriver, who is not-present in the body of the "not-a-cabdriver" driver.

The taxicab and its driver continue to haunt the framing of affective interaction within the soft cab. Shear, describing the difference between Uber and a cab ride, illustrates how passengers react to his performance as not-a-cabdriver; yet this leads to an uncomfortable question:

...and during the course of the trip, as you're communicating back and forth with your passenger, you know, I have had several passengers say, hey, you know what? You've got a wonderful personality, you've got a very, very strong business sense, I can tell that you're a motivated individual, I can tell that you're very intelligent, um, you know why, why do you do Uber? (UberMan 5/1/2015)

If you are so intelligent and motivated, with a great personality and business sense, why are you in the low-status, low-pay occupation of driving a taxi? But don't you see, responds Shear, this isn't a taxi...

Performance Metrics: the Rating System

The SideCar community sets and enforces high standards for safety and quality. Drivers and riders rate one another and people with low ratings are removed from the SideCar community. We believe that by giving the community the capability to monitor itself we can build trust and safety to a level impossible to achieve through either the marketplace or government alone. The combination of these features and processes provides consumers with a greater degree of security and safety than taxi or limos.¹⁰

Soft cabs use several tools to monitor drivers and influence their performance. The most important tool is the five star rating system, an average of one-to-five star ratings given by passengers after each ride. Drivers are also tracked for their acceptance rate (the percentage of ride requests which they accept) and "reliability" rate (the percentage of rides accepted, then completed without canceling). The latter two of these ratings measure the driver's performance-as-efficiency in achieving specific ends (accepting almost all requests, and almost never cancelling rides once accepted), and are used by the soft-cab companies for specific purposes (primarily, for determining whether drivers qualify for guaranteed hourly income promotions, and whether they should be deactivated for gaming the system).

The first, and most important, rating, however, is much more amorphous in form and purpose. On different platforms, passengers are variously told to rate the "driver," the "ride," or the "experience." Drivers, in turn, are given little detail beyond the basic "ridesharing" framework with which to understand how they will be rated and what the role they are to perform consists of (beyond "treat each ride as if you were driving a friend"). What they do know is that a low rating leads to termination: "perform, or else" (McKenzie 2001)!

The Lyft rating system is draconian. It breaks down like this: 4.9 to 4.8 is "awesome." 4.7 is "okay" and "needs improvement." If your rating hits 4.6, they revoke your driving privileges. So every four-star review brings your total number down a notch. (Dessaint 2014a: 27)

Although drivers and passengers rate each other, the ratings are much more crucial from a driver's perspective. Passengers do not have ready access to their own ratings, and suffer little consequences (except, possibly, a delay in finding a driver) from low ratings. Drivers, in contrast, are kept informed of their ratings, and can lose their job if they fall too low. For drivers, the ratings system serves as a sword of Damocles, continually hanging overhead, reminding them of the company's power to summarily remove them from service. As Dessaint puts it:

¹⁰ SideCar company blog, www.side.cr.

Nobody enjoys being judged. But constantly feeling threatened with “deactivation” is downright humiliating. The rating system employed by Lyft and Uber focuses on only one aspect of a driver’s performance: passenger satisfaction. And it’s not easy making people happy. Even when the ride has gone perfectly, there’s never a guarantee the passenger is satisfied. All it takes is one drunk passenger on a power trip and you’re deactivated. (IDriveSF 10/31/2014)

Companies are not consistent in how they treat the ratings system and its cut-off point for termination. Online forums such as *uberpeople.net* abound with rumors reporting different rating thresholds (from 4.6 or 4.5 down to 3.9) and deactivation for low ratings is reputedly handled differently in different cities, based on average driver ratings in those cities. Nevertheless, the upshot is that drivers, not really knowing at what point deactivation occurs, obsess over their ratings. Even drivers with high ratings—like all three of the drivers featured here—worry:

Even though I have a 4.89, the last two percentage points fluctuate daily. Sometimes it’s 4.93, sometimes it goes down to 4.85. It’s unlikely I’ll be in trouble any time soon, but I worry about my rating all the time. (Dessaint 2014a: 27)

Tavernier was given the position of Lyft Mentor (a driver who does on-the-spot evaluations for applicant drivers, and provides some advice on their first ride) due to having one of the highest driver ratings in the Boston area. Nevertheless, she too obsesses with raising her score:

I also have a just over, I think, 4.91 rating, which just for some reason will not pick itself up! To five, I would love to have a five, again, but um, 4.9 is awesome according to Lyft. So I’m cool with that, so happy I’m a mentor driver, cause I think I have accomplished a lot. (ToyaT 9/19/2014)

When Dessaint started driving for Lyft, drivers had to wait for a next-day “driver summary” email to find out how much money they had made, and how their passengers had rated them. He describes the stress of waiting for feedback, and the agonizing this led to as he mentally reviewed his past performance:

I work late and come home late. But I can’t sleep late because my head is filled with dreams about my Lyft summary, which is the only way to find out what I made the day before and what’s happened to my rating. Sometimes the summary is in my inbox before I wake up. Other days the email doesn’t arrive until the afternoon. (IDriveSF 10/31/2014)

The ratings system has an estranging effect on the in-car interaction between passenger and driver. Though drivers must rate passengers immediately after the trip, passengers can wait and rate drivers later. This displacement means that, while passengers may feel obligated to be friendly to drivers in person, at a distance they can give a poor rating without suffering affective feedback from the ratee. All three drivers recount this dissociating experience of wondering who, out of their seemingly friendly and happy passengers, nonetheless gave a poor rating. There is no direct way for drivers to know which, of any number of passengers, left them good or bad ratings; and unless passengers leave comments specifying the causes of their dissatisfaction, drivers are left guessing as to what aspect of the “experience” was found wanting, and by whom:

It’s soul crushing when my rating takes a dive. I spend my first waking moments wracking my brain trying to figure out what could have gone wrong with my rides the night before. It’s not easy making people happy. Even when the ride has gone perfectly, there’s never a guarantee that the passenger is satisfied. (Dessaint 2014b: 21)

Tavernier shares her frustration when a passenger leaves her a “safety flag” comment. Not only does she consider this unfair, it will now remain on her profile and potentially impact future riders’ impressions of her:

Oh, the comments that passengers are allowed to give! Now, I think it’s a great idea that the passengers can rate you and you can rate the passengers too. One thing I don’t like about it is that if you give people the option, and they’re the kind of people that feel that they need to, I don’t know, give comments for no, for no reason, they just feel that they need to just give their opinion on anything, it doesn’t help! (ToyaT 7/30/2014)

“Uber Man” Shear has been driving for well over a year, and his rating is a very stable 4.82 (“which honestly,” he points out, “as a veteran driver, that’s reasonable. It’s very good!”). He shares his sense of disappointment after a passenger gives him a poor rating:

So you rate someone three stars. You have no idea how much that three star affects someone.... I don’t know why the person rated me bad. I still hold a 4.82 rating. Really, that one rating, it’s not gonna affect me at all, but personally it does affect me, because I take [*takes deep breath*] my job a lot more seriously than most people probably do. I’m very proud of Uber, and I’m proud of what I do. So, my rating reflects what my customers think about me, and I want my customers to like me, um, because I try to be a good driver for them. (UberMan 8/30/2014)

The sense of personal injury which drivers suffer from a low rating, and the threat of deactivation which an overall low rating poses, keeps drivers’ attention focused on the ratings system. Ratings thus form the kernel of the identity which drivers form out of the work they do. Nevertheless, the rating system’s arbitrariness and lack of context leave drivers in search of more input into just what sort of performance they need to give. To gain this knowledge, they turn to the online community of ridesharing drivers.

Learning and Preaching the Guidelines

Guys, I understand, you wanna research, you want information, you don’t want to just jump into this without knowing everything, I get that. But there was nobody to help me, and that’s why I brought this channel to all of you, this channel, the Uber Man Driver Network, I brought these to you guys so that you didn’t have to feel alone, and do this with no information at all, other than what Uber gives you, which we all know, is kind of ridiculous. (UberMan 5/18/2015)

The occupational culture of cabdriving has long been passed from driver to driver at “colleague contact points”—cab lots, taxi stands, hotel lines, after hours bars, etc. (Stannard 1971). For soft-cab drivers, few or none of these physical meeting places are available. Instead, drivers rely heavily on driver-focused social media and online forums to learn driving strategies, and to gain a standard by which to evaluate their own performances through comparison with other drivers. Though some soft-cab platforms provide official online forums for drivers (e.g, the “Lyft Lounge” Facebook group), most online interaction sites have been self-organized by drivers. These range from a plethora of Facebook groups (some with specified affective performances, such as “Happy Uber Drivers,” or “Uber Disgruntled Rideshare Drivers”) to web forums such as UberPeople.net and TheRideshareGuy.com. Each of the three drivers featured here are contributors to this online discourse, most notably Randy Shear through his YouTube channel and Facebook group, the Uber Man Driver Network. These sites not only provide a source of community and information for drivers, but make up for an institutional lack of such support from the companies.

The great thing about being a Lyft driver is actually the community... The Facebook community is a great way to learn about different things that worked for other people, and they always are very open, and are quicker to answer questions than customer service [laughs] is at Lyft, unfortunately. But it's so great that you can start a conversation with someone who's a driver in Austin or North Carolina or something, and encourage each other, and give each other tips. (ToyaT 7/30/2014)

Dessaint tells how he used online forums to develop his own ridesharing knowledge, along with other drivers who shared information such as how to “chase the surge” and measure their own performances against each other; Dessaint was helped in this by his wife, who monitored social media while he was driving (e.g. for Saint Patrick's Day, “She says other Lyft drivers are stocking up on barf bags.” (Dessaint 2014a: 8)). “Uber Man” Shear is one of the most prominent advice-givers, “preaching” (in his own words) on subjects such as how to use the passenger app to see what other drivers are doing; how to react to surges; and how to avoid burn-out. Shear describes the framing and monitoring effects of the ridesharing platforms as “guidelines” within which drivers are able to, and are expected to, create their own performance:

This is a beautiful industry, because it is custom contoured to your life. I mean, you can make and shape this business any way you see fit. Uber gives you a set of guidelines, and some rules, you follow the rules when it comes to the guidelines, guys, you [*waves finger instructively*] manipulate that however you need to so long as you're still following Uber's [*air quotes*] “recommendations,” okay? (UberMan 6/20/2015)

All three drivers, nevertheless, also experienced conflict through the online forums. To rebut online claims that he had lied about his daily income, Shear posted videos in which he held his phone up to the camera to show his summaries and payouts. Tavernier received flak from other drivers on a Lyft site for criticizing a company policy; Dessaint was kicked out of Lyft's Pacific Drivers Lounge for a blog post in which he ridiculed the “cult-like” behavior of online Lyft drivers, especially in regard to the pink mustache which is Lyft's symbol:

In the Lounge, the faithful worship the pink mustache. They post selfies with their mustaches and even travel with small versions called cuddlestaches, which they photograph in distant lands. They wax poetic about the difference they're making in the world by driving for Lyft. Many drivers post screen grabs of their daily and weekly summaries, showing off how much money they earned, highlighting long drives with Prime Time tips added (“Score!”) and favorable comments from passengers. All of which are followed by hashtags like #fistbumps or #lyftlove. (IDriveSF 7/22/2014)

The controversy raised by this blog post—including storms of comments and tweets by both supporters and detractors of Dessaint's criticism—illustrates the importance of these online forums for the construction of driver identity. By sharing their experiences and interpretations of the the algorithm, drivers expand the thin signal of the rating system into a broader, richer script—a set of guidelines—to guide performance, and to found identity and a sense of meaning in their work.

Still, they have to maintain this framing in the presence of another set of performers: passengers.

Disenchantment and Critique

Hopped up on Ativan and Philz coffee, I spend most of my time behind the wheel biting my lip while the people in my backseat carry on conversations. When I do get a chance to talk, it's hard not to unleash a flurry of repressed chatter. (Dessaint 2014b: 9)

The affective labor of keeping up the “friendly” performance of a “ridesharing” driver can be hard work, particularly since passengers are under much less pressure to maintain the “sharing” veneer of the ride. Although all three drivers report that the majority of their passengers behave in a positive or at least acceptable manner, the ones who do not take a heavy emotional toll. Cabdriving sociologist James Henslin (1967) described the “non-person” treatment, by which passengers routinely treat cabdrivers as if they were not actually present; Dessaint reveals the awkwardness of encountering this phenomenon as a ridesharing driver:

Their voices go lower. It’s obvious I’m no longer part of the discussion. I focus on driving. Watch for errant pedestrians and wobbling bicyclists. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel at the lights. (Dessaint 2014b: 6)

Uber advertises itself as “Everyone’s Private Driver,” while Lyft describes itself as “Your Friend With a Car.” Dessaint drove for both companies, which put him in a perfect position to experience the difference these framings make on passenger behavior: whereas Lyft passengers tend to sit in the front seat and engage in conversation with the driver, Uber passengers are more distant. Dessaint finds himself altering his own behavior in response, shifting from “friend with a car” to “private driver” depending on which service he is hailed through:

It’s obvious Uber is much busier than Lyft. But the disconnect is palpable. Everybody sits in back. After that first couple, nobody else says a word to me. They tell me where they’re going and stare at their phones. I even pull my passenger seat forward to give them more legroom. Turn off the stereo. (Dessaint 2014b: 19)

Though he makes more money on the Uber platform, Dessaint can only stand it so long before he switches back to Lyft, where he feels more free to talk:

After awhile, the silent treatment gets to me and I switch back to Lyft. I’m actually relieved when the next passenger sits up front. We have a lively conversation about my Uber experience... (Dessaint 2014b: 19)

In the Midwest, Randy Shear encounters a different variability in passenger behavior: class. Rate cuts in early 2015 dropped Uber rates well below those of most cab services, and the result, Shear feels, is an increase in the number of poor, often rude, and occasionally dangerous customers:

Since the rate cuts, I have driven strippers, people that I’m certain were either buying or selling drugs, I have been in some seriously sketchy situations and some very sketchy neighborhoods. Places I’ve not been to before with Uber. People that I have not driven around before with Uber... In general, um, this used to be a gig where I drove around upper class people [*shrugs*] and middle class people. And don’t get me wrong, again, I’m not [*grimaces*] trying to downtalk anybody... (UberMan 1/25/2015)

Shear reports that the new, cheaper clientele order him about and treat him with less respect than his earlier customers:

This is not what I signed up for. Honestly I do not feel like a professional rideshare driver anymore. My clients have asked me to purchase drugs, I have been hit, I’ve been slapped, I’ve been talked down to, I’ve been made fun of. This is not the way it was designed to be. This is not what Uber was, a month and a half ago... (UberMan 1/25/2015)

In violation of the friendly “ridesharing” narrative, some passengers treat Uber drivers to the same “affective dumping” (Brennan 2004) to which cabdrivers, as mobile, fleetingly-encountered Others have long been exposed. Experiences like this undermine Shear’s pride in being an Uber driver:

And I seriously feel like, when these people are talking to me in the manner in which they speak to me, a lot of times it just makes me feel bad. I feel like a minimum wage worker. That’s the way these people see us now. (UberMan 1/25/2015)

Shear seeks a solution by switching from the low-price UberX service to a more expensive option, UberSelect: he finds that, not only does he make more money, his wealthier passengers treat him better. At the same time, as part of a shift towards seeing himself, and insisting that others see him, as a “professional” driver, he is less willing to act submissively towards demanding passengers:

But I’m starting to put the passengers on notice. Giving them a little bit more attitude to let them know that we’re not, uh we’re not gonna sit here and just “yes sir, yes sir,” you know? Fuck you, sir, [*hand gesture*] I don’t give a shit, ‘kay? There’s a million more passengers where you came from. (UberMan 2/16/2015)

Ridesharing companies encourage drivers to mark the “friendliness” of the ride by offering treats such as gum, candy, or bottled water to passengers. Dessaint reports being grilled by passengers for not having bottles of cold water available; at the end of the ride, certain of a bad rating, he wants to “curl up in a fetal position and rethink this whole ridesharing deal.”

The incessant need for drivers to please passengers for a good rating is ridiculous. Why anybody would spend more money than what they already drop each week on gas, maintenance, insurance and car payments is beyond me.... Isn’t providing a basic service all anybody really wants or needs? In what reasonable universe does somebody get penalized for not handing out treats unless it’s Halloween and their porch light is on? (Dessaint 2014b: 28)

Dessaint comes to respect and even envy the position of cabdrivers who, though subjected to much of the same treatment as ridesharing drivers, do not have to fear control by the rating system:

After driving for several months and dealing with all sorts of idiotic behavior from passengers, I’ve developed a great respect for cab drivers and their plight. Maybe they act the way they do because people suck and it’s just a natural progression of being on the shit end of the service industry. In some ways, I think cabbies have it better because they aren’t subjected to an unfair rating system. If I don’t like how a passenger is treating me, I can’t just kick them out of my car. I’d end up with a low rating, which would impact my ability to continue driving. (Dessaint 2014b: 31)

When Shear started his YouTube channel, he endorsed Uber’s recommendations that drivers keep treats and bottled water to hand out to passengers; he even kept a stocked cooler full of waters in his car. Months later, after Uber reduced the rates of fare (and thus, his income), Shear laughs at his earlier gullibility, and advises new drivers not to bother with treats for customers:

Have fun cleaning up some bubble gum that you gave someone and they threw on the floor, cleaning it off your carpet, guys. It’s not worth it! It’s not worth the money! And honestly, my rating hasn’t really changed much because of it, so screw that, I don’t screw with the ice and draining the ice... (UberMan 12/6/2014)

Shear takes note of the trend towards increasing regulation of ridesharing, which he welcomes as a mark of “professional” status which will, he hopes, bring drivers some respect; he also insists that drivers (and passengers) should recognize that, although fun, ridesharing is in fact a job, and “you are in this for the money:”

We are not somebody’s rug to be beaten, we’re professional drivers. Maybe not all of us are licensed yet, you know, with the cities, but it’s coming, it’s happening. And here, we’re going through the process to become more professional drivers. But the fact is, guys, you deserve to be treated with some respect, you’re out here working your ass off, people think sitting in your car is easy, any of us that’s been around a while knows that this is a difficult job. It is a job, you are in this for the money. (UberMan 2/11/2015)

Faced with the frustrations of the job, drivers question the legitimacy of the ratings system, and of the demands placed on them to consistently perform more than “a basic service.” Why should you treat people as friends when you are not treated as one in return? When the algorithm no longer convinces, the enchantment fades, along with the all-important distinction between ridesharing and cabdriving. This might help explain the extraordinarily high burn-out rate of soft-cab drivers; a report commissioned and vetted by Uber showed half of all drivers quitting within a year of starting (Hall and Krueger 2015). Even Shear, who remains committed to the job, by insisting on “professional” status, re-evaluates his own performance in new terms, posing a challenge to the dominant “friends sharing rides” allegory of the soft cab. This alternative narrative could give drivers a basis on which to challenge algorithmic management, and demand better treatment: though Shear himself has been critical of a growing union movement among soft-cab drivers, he did support a short-lived attempt to develop an alternative, driver-controlled platform (UberMan 2/20/2016). Without the allegory, algorithmic control is not enough to keep drivers from developing a will

not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them. (Foucault 1997: 28)

Discussion

Both Uber and Lyft, like many taxicab companies, argue that they exert minimal control over drivers, who should thus be classified as “independent contractors” rather than “employees” (Anderson 2012, 2014). Unhappy drivers have brought lawsuits challenging this. In an order denying Uber’s request that one such suit be dismissed, US District Court Judge Edward Chen made the unusual move of citing Foucault:

Uber drivers... are monitored by Uber customers (for Uber’s benefit, as Uber uses the customer rankings to make decisions regarding which drivers to fire) during each and every ride they give, and Uber’s application data can similarly be used to constantly monitor certain aspects of a driver’s behavior. This level of monitoring, where drivers are potentially observable at all times, arguably gives Uber a tremendous amount of control over the “manner and means” of its drivers’ performance. Cf. Michel Foucault [*sic*], *Discipline and Punish* ... (a “state of conscious and permanent visibility [] assures the automatic functioning of power”). (Chen 2015)

Certainly, soft cab companies exert considerable control over drivers through the dual function of the algorithm. Yet there is a limit to the applicability of the disciplinary mode of subjectification described in the quoted passage. It has been argued that the disciplinary society Foucault described is in the process of dissolving, supplanted by a society of control (Deleuze 1992). Whereas discipline emphasised the interiorization of social rules and expectations by an enduring subject, control focuses instead on discrete,

measurable effects and outcomes, made possible by the capacities of new technology for continuous oversight, and the operationalization of “big data” by algorithms which learn and act faster, and more consistently, than humans. The all-seeing panopticon of disciplinary society is replaced by the myriad, partial perspectives of *oligoptica*, “in which the multiple apparatuses of tight, limited and specialized control, compete, co-constructing not some uniform new subjectivity and space but multiple subjectivities and spaces” (Murakami Wood and Ball 2013: 60-1; cf. Latour and Hermant 2004). If all that matters is how these partial, fragmented subjects can be tracked, nudged, and directed in their movements and choices, what does it matter what they are thinking (Lianos 2003)?

The algorithmic management of the soft-cab driver works through just such an oligoptic apparatus, tuned to the partial identity of the working driver. The centrality of the algorithm to the soft cab’s functioning shows the continued importance of thoughts and interpretations within the oligoptic context. The meaning, to passengers and drivers, of the “ridesharing” performance still requires that the algorithm linking this performance to the metrics that monitor it is embraced by participants. As projects of surveillance and subjectivation developed in the traditional workplace (Gilliom and Monahan 2012: 89ff) break out into the mobile realm, the affective work of monitored performance will remain central to both the policing and the contestation of the continuing flexibilization of labor in algorithmically monitored sites of work. Though the “ridesharing” algorithm of the soft cab shows signs of coming apart, similar performance-monitoring oligoptica will also have corresponding algorithms, which will be just as crucial to the functioning of the new forms of control as have been those other, grander “wheels in the head,” supporting Church and State, which Stirner thundered against so long ago. Though monitoring algorithms may not be comprehensible to monitored subjects, the frames through which they are made sense of, and acquiesced to, require frame-work, and so are vulnerable to being contested, dismantled, and replaced.

Epilogue

The writings and videos of Dessaint, Shear, and Tavernier provide some insight into the joys, frustrations, and indignities of ridesharing driving. Readers may wonder: how has this job worked out for them? Where are they now?

When the first draft of this article was submitted (September 2015), there was a neat diversity in the trajectories followed by the three drivers: two kept driving, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and one quit. However, as of this writing (February 2016), further rate cuts, and growing controversy over driver-company relations, has led all three drivers to take an increasingly critical stance toward ridesharing, expressing not only dissatisfaction, but disenchantment with the promise of the friendly “ridesharing” experience.

Shear passed through ups and downs, from his initial enthusiasm as “Uber Man” in 2014, to his growing criticism (and multiple threatened deactivations) in 2015. Throughout 2015 he remained passionate in his commitment to Uber, and to keep “preaching” and offering advice and information to his fellow drivers:

Uber can terminate me tomorrow, they can tell me for any reason to go screw myself, and you will not hear me say anything too horrible about Uber as a company because it’s been nothing but great for me, and it has changed my life...

Guys, I’m sorry this video went so long, but I’m very passionate about it, and you can bet I’m going to keep preaching it. (UberMan 5/1/2015)

Yet, after further rate cuts, conflicts with Uber (he threatened to sue Uber for missing referral payments), and bad experiences with passengers, Shear has become increasingly critical: “this makes me not want to drive at all” (Uberman 2/7/2016).

Although she attempted to keep up ridesharing a few days a week alongside her regular teaching job, Tavernier found this to be difficult: ridesharing allows for a flexible schedule, but still requires time and affective investment. Thus, she has been a sporadic driver, spending weeks or months off of the system, returning occasionally during school breaks or to earn money towards a vacation. She has continued to post occasional ridesharing updates to her channel, but has lost some enthusiasm after Lyft introduced changes such as reduced rates and referrals, and tougher requirements for driver incentives. In a post on “Changes to Lyft 2016: The Good, The Bad, & The WTF,” she writes:

I feel like they’re kinda moving in this, you know, very money grubbing, not really looking out for their drivers kinda way... They’re not really living up to, um, to the name that they created, this friendly, very driver-friendly, um, kind of company. (ToyaT 1/27/2016)

Dessaint had been the first to grow disenchanted. Feeling that “I’m worth more than 4.94 stars” (Dessaint 2015b), he quit both Uber and Lyft, spent a week in taxi school, and became a San Francisco cabdriver. He continues to write about his experiences as a driver, with a regular column in the *San Francisco Examiner* and an upcoming book deal. Reappropriating the abjected role of “cabdriver” as a positive new identity, Dessaint has constructed a counter-narrative, a challenge to the dominance of the “ridesharing” algorithm, with which he can respond when passengers inevitably ask him, “So, why aren’t you driving for Uber?”

I want to tell [them] I actually enjoy being a cabdriver. I feel more connected to The City than I ever did with Uber and Lyft. And I admire the veteran cab drivers, many of whom are longtime San Franciscans. They have the best stories. Becoming a cabdriver was like joining a league of disgruntled gentlemen and surly ladies. The buccaneers of city streets. Taking people’s money for getting them where they need to go. (Dessaint 2015a)

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