Uberland: Algorithmic Boss in the New Economy
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Uberland: How Algorithms are Rewriting the Rules of Work. Alex Rosenblat. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.

In *Uberland*, Alex Rosenblat takes readers on a journey through the ride-hailing work culture of Uber drivers: how they work, communicate, and form communities. The author combines interviews, digital ethnography, and participant observation to show how technology, specifically algorithmic management, categorizes workers as consumers of technology yet manages them as workers, changing what it means to be employed in the twenty-first century.

Drawing on interviews with drivers from more than 25 cities in the United States and Canada, Rosenblat explores why drivers work for Uber and what their work experience is like using the app. Uber, a symbol of the sharing economy, has come to represent how technology could create job and entrepreneurship opportunities for American workers after the financial crisis of 2008-2009. It promises that drivers can earn a middle-class income in their spare time as ride-hail workers. How well drivers fit into Uber's business plan depends on which of the three groups they fall into: occupational, part-time, or hobbyist drivers. While Uber claims that the ride-hail model is geared toward part-time work, drivers' stories show a more complicated picture. Rosenblat shows that most Uber drivers in New York work for multiple platforms including Uber's competitors such as Lyft, or Juno. With different motivations, many work for Uber because of its flexibility, while others work for Uber because it is better than other low-wage service jobs or for social reasons. Rosenblat shows that full-time workers or occupational drivers are hurt the most by the ride-hail model because a constant influx of new part-time employees creates a disincentive to collective bargaining, thus keeps wages low. Over time as more drivers enter the market and Uber increases its commission fees, individual drivers earn less. Uber's business model thrives when there is an excess supply of labor and when there are more hobbyists/part time drivers who can absorb the pay cut. This model opens up part-time opportunities for many but hurts full-time drivers.

Despite that they work alone, and the company seeks to classify them as independent contractors, Rosenblat takes readers to visit online driver forums, so-called "virtual watercoolers," where workers act collectively (14). They discuss issues about the platform that they cannot resolve with Uber directly and exchange information about company practices and policies, particularly about any disparities or inconsistencies. They mentor and train each other much like other gig economy workers who turn to online venues to create virtual occupational communities (Schwartz, 2018; Gray and Suri, 2019). Uber drivers rely on online communities for information, and sociality. Because drivers cannot rely on whether Uber would take responsibility for its workers,

they distance themselves from the platform and turn to digital culture to crowdsource information that they do not get directly from the company. Drivers "create a workplace culture and institutional memory that persists even when Uber's practices change" (199).

Similar to other sharing economy economies, Uber claims that drivers are mere end-users, one of several such groups. On the one hand, Uber uses technological, organizational, legal and rhetorical strategies to keep drivers from being considered employees. Uber's treatment of workers as consumers assumes a broader Silicon Valley logic that user data – collected from both drivers and passengers – are a source of value for Uber. This model raises new questions about how we understand employment relationships. Uber has shifted its terms of employment by classifying drivers as independent contractors or customers and end users. Through this approach, problems in employment relationships such as harassment are dismissed under perceptions of technological neutrality. When a problem arises, should drivers be protected under consumer protection laws or labor law? On the other hand, through its technology, Uber practices workplace surveillance such as rating, monitoring how drivers brake, accelerate, follow traffic rules. Described as simply "connecting two groups of end users," Uber's technology however "gives the company vast leverage over how drivers work." (160).

As a middleman, Uber brokers ride requests from passengers, turning its app into a dispatcher for drivers, and it handles payments for both sides. Even though it claims that its technology is neutral and driven by algorithms. The "shady middleman," as Rosenblat dubs the company, engages with practices that are contrary to its position as a hands-off intermediary. It takes advantage of access to data, and changes algorithms at will. Drivers' tips and cancellation fees are pocketed and shown as service fees to drivers. It has increased driver waiting time by using in-app suggestions to nudge drivers to wait for passengers more than the required amount of time (five minutes). The algorithms that estimate the price of a fare are a mechanism through which Uber takes advantage of its middle-man position. Quietly without announcing a policy change, it can decouple what drivers earn from what passengers pay. Uber uses artificial intelligence to stratify what passengers are willing to pay and charges them accordingly. Yet drivers receive the same amount of pay regardless of whether passengers are in fact paying more to Uber. Many times, Uber experiments with its predictive pricing practices but neglects to announce its experiments to workers.

Uber's practices of exploiting consumer data (both riders' and drivers') are not unique but come from a tradition of data exploitation by Silicon Valley companies. When Uber's policies and practices do not square with driver experiences, it is Uber that stands as judge. Drivers have little recourse in negotiating over wrongdoings or inequality in the work arrangement that Uber orchestrated. Algorithms aim to provide "objective data analysis of supply and demand" in reality nudge drivers' behaviors for the benefit of the platform (137). For example, Uber prompts drivers to drive to surge zones in which fares increase to meet higher rider demand, but the zones do not necessarily benefit drivers but the platform. Once drivers arrive in the surge zone, fares are no longer high because other drivers also rush there. Algorithmic management of Uber's drivers shows how platforms

can take advantage of workers. Uber has the power to determine what is paid and what is not or what is tracked and what is not.

Uber operates in a universe of conflicting moral logics. Drivers work for Uber because of the flexibility that technology promises. They also have a sense of what is fair. Meanwhile, Uber operates in a mainstream in which disruption is good, and consumers purchase Uber services in a market context where prices fluctuate according to supply and demand. Through algorithms, Uber can ascertain what price customers are willing to pay, how much drivers get paid, and how drivers work. By using algorithms to manage workers, in addition to framing drivers as customers, Uber is able to negotiate how drivers are treated and whether they are protected as customers or workers. When dealing with regulations, Uber uses different strategies in different cities. Echoing the Silicon Valley belief that regulations get in the way of innovation, which will benefit society as a whole, Uber utilizes gratitude logic to ask consumers and end users to be grateful to the disruptive innovation it unleashes. It shrugs off regulations when regulations get in the way of its business and expansion. This rhetoric, however, covers the power that technology companies have over society.

Since *Uberland*'s publication, Uber has become a publicly traded company, and the state of California has passed legislation that re-categorizes Uber drivers and others employed in the gig economy as workers. But will Uber still engage in the "shady practices" outlined in the book? Will the public and regulators adhere to its narrative of disruptive innovation now that Uber is no longer a startup? If its technology is no better than its competitors', can its access to capital – in fact, a subsidy to consumers – make up for what may ultimately be a flawed business model?

The gig economy is here to stay. *Uberland* is a timely book as technology increasingly intensifies in our daily lives. It reads like book-length investigative journalism, refreshingly jargon-free. It stays truthful to the stories that drivers tell and is readable and engaging. It is suitable for undergraduate classes in sociology of work; science, technology, and society; and consumption.

References

Gray, Mary L. and Siddharth Suri. 2019. *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*. Boston: Eamon Dolan Books.

Schwartz, David. 2018. "Embedded in the Crowd: Creative Freelancers, Crowdsourced Work, and Occupational Community." *Work and Occupations* 45:3: 247-282. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888418762263.