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TUESDAY | 01 JULY 2014 United States , World

Can Uber taxi protests stop technology's advance?

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Last week taxi drivers blocked Washington DC in protest at Uber, the ride-sharing app. Anja Popp asks if cabbies should be fighting this battle or moving their operation forward into the modern era.



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A cacophony of horns and taxi-less ranks greeted downtown DC on Wednesday, *writes Anja Popp*. Roads were blocked by cab drivers, in protest of what has been labelled as "unfair competition" from app-based ride sharing service, Uber.

In scenes not dissimilar to [those in Europe earlier this month](#), the taxi vs Uber battle is well underway. Londoners too fell victim to the frustrations of the industry when 10,000 cabbies staged an hour-long protest against the transport app, blocking central London.

The tension from this war behind the wheel has been unfolding for some time, but in unified protests across the world taxi drivers are demanding equal treatment. Regulate them like you regulate us.

And indeed, in some places the protestations are being heard. Virginia on the east coast of America is one of a handful of states where Uber has been banned.

Not that this has stopped them. Uber is still operating in the area, despite The Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles claiming they are breaking the law and acting not as a ride-sharing program but as an unlicensed taxi company.

Industry frustration

Car-sharing services like Uber do not need a commercial license to pick up passengers, meaning they are not restricted by the same regulations as normal taxis, and therefore can offer more choice and lower prices. This has led to frustration in the industry that business will fall at the rate that the meter rises in rush hour.

Uber was born in San Francisco in 2009, and has rapidly expanded across the globe, now available in 140 cities across 39 countries. It has become a popular alternative for people looking for a ride, and has lured in custom using discounted ride offers and easy-to-use technology.

In unified worldwide protests, taxi drivers are demanding equal treatment: regulate them like you regulate us.

Uber claims to be a tech company that takes a fee for putting passengers and drivers together. The model has been a phenomenal success. So much so that

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Silicon Valley has a new billionaire. At least on paper.

Uber Chief Executive Travis Kalanick is now head of a business valued this month at \$18.2bn. Even if he only owned 5.5 per cent of Uber's shares, he would still effectively be a billionaire. Not a bad money pot for a company founded little over four years ago.

Unsettling incidents

As Uber's profits and success increases, so, it seems, does the anger of the taxi industry.

Cabbies are specifically targeting UberX - where regular people give rides to others using their private vehicles. Although Uber conducts its own background check of their drivers, they do not go through the same extensive check or vehicle inspection from the police department as regular cabbies do.

It is claimed UberX drivers working 40 hours per week earn over \$90,000 a year in New York, compared to around \$30,000 for a normal cab driver.

This has led to some unsettling incidents in the United States. Earlier in June, an Uber driver in California was arrested for allegedly kidnapping a drunk woman. Uber are also under the spotlight for refusing to accept liability for the death of a six-year-old girl who was killed by an Uber driver. It says it is not accountable as he was not commissioned for an Uber ride at that point.

Other accusations in America include text stalking from a driver, assault for allegedly hitting a customer and sexual assault for fondling a passenger.

But you only need to do an internet search of the names John Worboys and Christopher Halliwell to know the perils of getting into a car with a stranger are not exclusive to Uber.

Mounting pressure

Although little change has been seen from the Uber protests in Europe, American states are slowly relenting to the mounting pressure from the taxi

industry.

Colorado is the first state to pass a law requiring background checks, vehicle inspections, and mandatory insurance for the Uber drivers once they are logged into the app.

The mayor of Boston, Marty Walsh, has also come out voicing his desire to regulate Uber drivers. His comments came shortly after a "rolling rally" where taxi drivers beeped their horns continuously for an hour outside Uber's Boston office.

Others have blocked Uber's operation from the outset. After its launch in Brussels in February, Uber was soon banned, with officials threatening to fine drivers €10,000 for picking up passengers via the app.

Continuing to grow

However, as more authorities concede to the demands of cabbies and threaten to ban the use of the app, Uber continues to grow, seemingly unfazed.

After the recent protests against Uber in London, Uber reported an 850 per cent rise in the amount of downloads of their app. It seems while the taxi industry may be worried about the safety of the company, the people who actually use the service are not.

The taxi vs Uber battle is reminiscent of Blockbuster vs Netflix years ago - and we all know who won that.

Uber claims to be creating 20,000 jobs per month, improving the environment and reducing drink-driving. The wages of an Uber driver are three times that of a normal taxi driver. For an UberX driver working at least 40 hours a week, it is claimed they earn over \$90,000 a year in New York, compared to around \$30,000 for a normal cab driver.

No wonder one taxi firm in Las Vegas banned its drivers from moonlighting for Uber in their spare time.

Flexible work

Many Uber drivers are capitalising from the flexibility of the work, driving as

a bit of extra cash from their day job. One Uber driver I used in Washington DC is a staffer for a senator during the day, and takes Uber jobs in his personal car before nights out to fund his evening. Drivers simply choose when they want to work and which rides they want to take.

Users know their driver and have their number plate and phone number before they get in the car. Then, once the ride is over, they are encouraged to rate their driver. Any driver who under-performs risks being dropped by Uber.

This type of regulation has been used successfully for other popular peer-to-peer tech services, such as eBay and Airbnb - although critics claim governmental regulation is the only means to ensure safety.

The taxi vs Uber battle is reminiscent of Blockbuster vs Netflix years ago - and we all know who won that. Modernity and technology prospered, while Blockbuster went into administration.

In the days where people want services to be at the touch of the button, many are asking whether taxi drivers should be concentrating on fighting this battle, or moving their operation forward into the modern era.

Anja Popp is an intern with Channel 4 News in Washington

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