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## An Uber Ethical Dilemma: Examining the Social Issues at Stake

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**An Uber Ethical Dilemma: examining the social issues at stake**

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# An Uber Ethical Dilemma: examining the social issues at stake

## Introduction

This paper engages with the social issues emerging from the increasing reliance upon app-driven services as they pertain to precarious labor and ethical standpoints in a digital era. Popular ride services such as Uber have been lauded for bringing much needed transportation services that are superior to expensive taxis or unpleasant or inaccessible public transit:

In five years, the app economy will be worth \$6.3 trillion, up from \$1.3 trillion last year, according to a report released today by app measurement company App Annie.

...

Mobile commerce's huge footprint includes purchases through retail behemoths like Amazon and Alibaba, as well as paying for services such as Uber rides or travel booked through a travel app — basically any monetary transaction through an app that holds your credit information. The assumption also relies on the continued transition from in-person purchases to ones done through apps. (Molla 2017)

While these companies are indeed immensely popular, questions remain as to just how much of a problem-solving panacea the apps they produce actually herald and to what extent their 'disruption' breaks more than it fixes. Especially because Uber ride prices are artificially low for the moment while subsidized by investors in these initial stages (Smith 2016), unlike taxicabs.

A lack of labor regulation and initial subsidization from investors may present a significant savings to the user, but one may ask if these practices are sustainable as a 'gig economy' (Sundarajaran 2015). Adding to the temporary nature of this work are plans to switch to driverless vehicles. So, structuring one's life around stringing together multiple gigs (that have little protection and no benefits) all to assist in the obsolescence of one's trade, may prove devastating to labor forces. At present, a handful of organizations largely unfettered by regulations now broker the labor of an increasingly contingent workforce. Simultaneously, these same companies fight for control in a new frontier of information and communication technologies (McAlister 2016). In this context, how are we to consider and act upon the issue of a digitally mediated wealth divide, or, as Greenfield (2015) puts it, a 'socially corrosive mobility'?

The popularity of rideshare services like Uber has created an inaccurate sense that public transit has become superfluous (Millsap 2016). However, as many studies (LeBlanc 2018) have suggested, ride hailing services are not a substitute for public transit. Public services are mandated to be accessible in many ways Uber is still not, such as to: a) underserved communities b) the vulnerable (physically or otherwise) c) those without credit cards or smartphones. Publicly accessible transportation, especially in the US context in which Uber originated, is already embattled, and ride hailing services have served as a rationale to choke

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3 off resources to publicly accessible services (Jerch, Kahn & Li 2016). As instances of the false  
4 equivalency between ride hailing and public transportation systems grow, support for public  
5 transportation systems dwindles and history has shown that once support for public  
6 infrastructures crumble, they are that much more difficult to revive, revitalize, and reinstate.  
7 From a social justice perspective, divesting in public transit because needs are being met for a  
8 certain section of relatively affluent individuals promises further inequality with respect to  
9 mobility and the benefits therein. Moreover, widespread reliance on private vehicles has done  
10 nothing to aid traffic congestion and efficiency.  
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14 As a result of over three years of ongoing research and analysis, this article is a comprehensive  
15 assessment of a number of social issues facing the integration of practices both signified and  
16 enacted in an economy driven by apps such as Uber. We are at a watershed moment of  
17 policymaking at a time when digital divides are being simultaneously negotiated and relitigated.  
18 This environmental scan covers many issues that are currently in flux and evolving. This  
19 discussion focuses primarily on the U.S. context, given that the company and its practices  
20 originate from Silicon Valley and are thoroughly embedded in the nation's labor ideologies and  
21 debates regarding corporate libertarianism, privatization, and regulation.  
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24  
25 In a relatively short time, consumer knowledge and sentiment about Uber and what it has come  
26 to mean has evolved and grown. In this case, the consumer is just one of the stakeholder  
27 groups woven into the mainstream discussion. It bears some reflexive examination that the end-  
28 user groups serve as data points at the end of iterative cycles of development. That is, public  
29 stakeholder groups are largely the guinea pigs of this form of development, with the product  
30 unleashed in the world in many versions that may be shaped all too late in the process by  
31 ethical concerns. More pertinent for the purposes of discussing the ethical issues, one must  
32 start by mapping out the current situation, who is involved, and the social issues that have  
33 emerged in the stakeholder groups discussed here.  
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37 The discussion of policy implications, priorities, and a roadmap forward is essential for focusing  
38 the efforts to bring much needed attention to the social justice, media justice, and ethical  
39 nuances of the digital divide. Due to the much lauded 'disruption' this genre of platform services  
40 has now lent to the everyday communication of goods, services, and people, entire systems  
41 have gone unchecked and unfettered. The policy regimes are simply not in place, nor are tax  
42 structures, labor regulations, and assessments of impact on public infrastructures. When,  
43 however, a mode of transportation transitions from a novelty to an everyday mainstay,  
44 becoming woven into the general economy, decision-makers have a responsibility to ensure  
45 that the resulting disruption is as ethical and just as possible.  
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49 Ideologically, there is a point of tension between governmental/regulatory bodies, 'innovators'  
50 (Lehdonvirta 2015), and users. Stakeholders of all stripes are scrambling to keep up with the  
51 pace and problematics of digital innovations and an inclusive critical dialog on app-driven  
52 services has yet to become a priority. An analytical framework from a social justice perspective  
53 stands to catalyze action on a number of pervasive issues surrounding digital ethics and policy.  
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3 This paper will discuss a number of ways in which current ride hailing practices are problematic  
4 and amount to a race to the bottom. How do these specific practices, encompassing issues of  
5 labor, the digital divide, and public infrastructures, contribute to the increasing corrosion of the  
6 social contract if left unfettered? For the standing reserve of labor that enable ride hailing  
7 services, do current practices promote upward mobility or are they merely enriching the brokers  
8 of these services?:  
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10  
11 According to analysis by experts at MIT's Center for Energy and Environmental Policy Research  
12 (CEEPR), Uber and Lyft drivers make a median profit of \$8.55 an hour before taxes, once  
13 insurance, maintenance, repairs, and other costs are factored in. That means 54 percent of  
14 drivers earn less than their state's minimum wage and nearly one in 10 actually lose money on  
15 the job.  
16

17 ...  
18 A first draft of MIT's research earlier this month mistakenly set Uber and Lyft drivers' median  
19 profit at \$3.37, but that number was heavily criticized by both Uber executives and economists as  
20 "deeply flawed." As a result, the figure was revised up by Zoepf, and he promised a "thorough  
21 revision" of the paper. The new analysis was released on Monday and included the median \$8.55  
22 per hour figure.  
23

24 ...  
25 "Regardless of the exact percentage, the fact that a significant portion of Uber and Lyft drivers are  
26 making less than minimum wage is a serious problem that needs to be addressed," Moira Muntz,  
27 of the Independent Drivers Guild, which advocates for app-drivers in New York City, told  
28 ThinkProgress. "Even in New York City, where most drivers are full time, Uber and Lyft drivers  
29 are making less than minimum wage after expenses. As a result drivers are working longer and  
30 longer shifts and the economic desperation is palpable." (Barnes 2018)

31 Such disparities are not unusual--think of the Industrial Revolution. However, as Vincent Mosco  
32 and Catherine McKercher (2009) have written, the information/knowledge economy has not yet  
33 experienced a labor revolt akin to that of the Industrial Revolution. Ride hailing services are a  
34 prime example. On the service side, drivers typically earn less than the minimum wage. On the  
35 user side, issues of gender and race result in the marginalization of vulnerable groups. On the  
36 platform side, too, software engineers are subject to sexism and racism.  
37

## 38 39 Building the boat while sailing

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41 This paper contributes an analysis of the digital economic landscape, with an articulation of  
42 issues and stakeholders specific to the digital divide in the form of media justice, social justice,  
43 and ethics. Because the phenomena is emergent and amorphous, it is even more important to  
44 highlight key issues, talking points, and recommendations so that we may prioritize our efforts  
45 and direct our energies appropriately according to the interdependent stakeholder relationships.  
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49 A study of ride hailing apps is very much in the spirit of Schutz's (2012) painting 'Building the  
50 boat while sailing.' Policy must change and adapt to new revelations about the ride hailing  
51 companies, their services, and daily changes to their impact on the broader public. The focus of  
52 this paper is to boil down the baseline elements of how Uber has worked as a concept, its  
53 attendant social issues, and where that leaves policy and the public good at the end of the day.  
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## Stakeholder groups under discussion

This article examines the social issues and policy implications arising from the consideration of five primary stakeholder groups:

- Drivers
- Developers
- Riders
- Corporation (Uber)
- Government (regulators, infrastructure)

The intended audience of this paper, which derived from a presentation at the Conference on the Partnership for Progress on the Digital Divide, includes researchers and policymakers at the forefront of social issues facing our world. This paper covers not only emergent phenomena in a digital age, but also the specific policy implications of what this digital era presents in terms of affordances, constraints, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

## Digital divide (media justice)

For a slim shard of the world's favored, a bleak prosperity prevails... Their days are largely given over to the pleasures of friendship, conviviality and hard work; they arrange their brunches, vacations, hookups, gigs and pregnancies via app, and get around all but effortlessly, still delighted that the new autonomous Ubers relieve them even of the hassle of interacting with a driver. (Greenfield 2017, pp. 293-294)

There are a number of ways an uncritical and unconditional acceptance of the Uber service may exacerbate a digital divide. This section primarily focuses on the rider stakeholder group to discuss the needs that have not been addressed in already marginalized populations of the imagined end-users. The populations that are most vulnerable in terms of the digital divide include the geographically under-resourced and underserved, the young, elderly, and physically challenged, and undocumented persons.

Possible approaches to better remedying and serving these populations are discussed also in the policy implications section, covering ways that we might design our future to be inclusive, equitable, and just.

## The young, elderly, and physically challenged

There is little incentive for a private company such as Uber and those who drive for it to serve those with limited income or mobility (Mirani 2014). For a large proportion of the population, driving is simply not an option due to age and/or physical ability. Around the world, a public transit mandate is essential, as the elderly and physically challenged often rely on transportation services that accommodate wheelchairs and have other vehicular enhancements. For those who are in need of safe, consistent transportation, but may find themselves mobility-impaired, public infrastructure is an essential and ethical service for a democratic society.

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4 Children and their caretakers are also underserved by ride hailing apps. Youths under 18, for  
5 example, are not permitted to ride unaccompanied on Lyft and Uber at all. For parents with  
6 infants, whereas a bus may be mandated to accommodate strollers, a random car hailed on any  
7 given day may not even have a safety belt of adequate length to accommodate a car seat. In a  
8 problematic attempt to address this particular issue, Uber has provided the Uber Car Seat  
9 option, which, '...provides uberX vehicles equipped with a car seat... A \$10 surcharge is added  
10 to uberX pricing for Uber Car Seat trips. A child is too big at 48 lbs. or 52 inches' (Uber Help  
11 n.d.). This option is further restricted to children over 12 months of age. Even for those families  
12 who do meet all requirements, the per trip surcharge would render this service cost prohibitive  
13 to many.  
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## 18 Under-resourced and underserved

19 In an era of digital redlining, lack of access to devices and technical specifications also implicate  
20 geographies of exclusion. In addition to the cost of the ride, smartphones and their plans are  
21 themselves costly. A transportation service that requires riders to use both a mobile computing  
22 device and credit card presents a convenience, but is also exclusionary.  
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26 Even so, the issues are not as easily remedied as simply putting a mobile device into every  
27 hand. Much like the One Laptop Per Child movement that oscillated between vision and reality  
28 (Kraemer et al 2009), the issue at hand is not just about access to standalone devices. Rather,  
29 devices are merely gateways or 'dummy terminals' that provide access to the truly valuable  
30 network, society, and broader webs of significance. Having access to smartphones, credit, and  
31 credit cards as a baseline requirement to participation in the platform economy not only  
32 exacerbates an already existing digital divide; it creates new fissures in the physical social  
33 fabric. Point to point travel that is private already contributes to urban decay and lack of  
34 everyday engagement and inclusion, as is well documented in Greenfield (2017).  
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38 Moreover, the mobility of those who do not live centrally, or in less desirable areas, is at the  
39 behest of driver availability and willingness. This vulnerability may be regarded as a type of  
40 digital redlining. A rider can be left without a ride if they do not live within desired range/location.  
41 This could exacerbate the bleeding out of marginalized population zones, further entrenching  
42 privilege and contributing to the increasing polarization of wealth we are seeing even in Silicon  
43 Valley's own increasingly dystopian landscape. Ride hailing services cannot be a replacement  
44 for public transit.  
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## 48 Public infrastructures: towards social justice and away from 49 corrosive mobility

50 In the context of a discussion about Google self-driven cars, Ethan Zuckerman questions the  
51 US' problem with public goods and mutes:  
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3 How did we reach a state in America where highly speculative technologies, backed by private  
4 companies, are seen as a plausible future while routine, ordinary technologies backed by  
5 governments are seen as unrealistic and impossible?  
6 ...we don't have influence over what services Google does and doesn't provide, and our  
7 investment is an investment of attention as recipients of ads, not taxation. (Zuckerman 2013)  
8

9 Reflecting the hegemony of private transportation, a working paper by the National Bureau of  
10 Economic Research (NBER) (Jerch, Kahn & Li 2016) argues that privatizing public bus services  
11 could save \$5.7 billion a year in the United States. Studies espousing the privatization of public  
12 services as a cost cutting measure also point the finger at the wastefulness of public services,  
13 serving to discredit unions in the process as well (Millsap 2016). The rhetoric is eerily familiar  
14 and effectively advocates starving the public system, then criticizing that public transit is broken,  
15 which ultimately results in further funding cuts. This is damaging rhetoric because rather than  
16 individuals acting in a vacuum, corporate libertarian discourse (Mosco 2014) does not  
17 acknowledge how we are a networked society (Castells 2009) and actually a web of  
18 interdependencies, especially for transportation and mobility.  
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22 Taxes pay for roads and other public goods that Uber uses. Uber avoids contributing to tax  
23 regimes around the world, yet diminishes popular support for local regular jobs and revenue  
24 systems through its service. As the company has said, 'Our corporate tax structure is probably  
25 the least innovative thing about Uber. It's the standard approach adopted by most multinational  
26 companies'(O'Keefe & Jones 2015).  
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30 What pro-privatization studies fail to convey are the interdependencies between public services  
31 such as transit, the preservation of a functional national workforce, and the construction of the  
32 very roads upon which Uber cars drive. Additionally, mass public transit does what individual  
33 passenger vehicles cannot do, which is relieve congestion by taking cars off the road (LeBlanc  
34 2018).  
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### 37 Examining the Full cost 38

39 The Digital Sublime can be very seductive (Mosco 2004), especially if it comes with the promise  
40 of saving billions of dollars, which ostensibly transmutes into less need for taxpayer money  
41 overall, and subsequently tax cuts followed by full privatization. However, policy makers have an  
42 obligation to examine the full cost of transactions for the public interest. This entails more  
43 rigorous research and less reliance on convenient numbers. The cost cutting rationale  
44 espoused by those who would advocate privatizing public transit, is extremely short term.  
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47 A better approach to analyzing the myriad factors impacting public services would be Squires'  
48 (2013, p. 104) concept of 'full cost' economics, which takes into account not only the costs to a  
49 given firm (internal), but also the social and environmental costs (external):  
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52 As an equation, if the full cost can be quantified, it is expressed quite simply as follows:

- 53 • Full cost = *internal* cost (firm) + *external* cost (social and environmental)  
54 (Squires 2013, p. 104)  
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3 When discussing transportation, it is essential to weigh the total costs because the environment  
4 and landscapes are implicated. As a software company, there is everything to gain by avoiding  
5 public accountability, but this lack of social reciprocity is the digital age equivalent of an  
6 extraction industry centered around raw materials and pillaging of the earth. At the end of the  
7 day, the private transportation model for everyday uses, especially commuting, do nothing to  
8 take cars off the road and relieve congestion. In the Marshall McLuhan sense regarding Laws of  
9 Media (1988), adding cars to further clog up roads would be a classic case of reversal for what  
10 might otherwise be lauded as an innovation.  
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### 13 14 In sickness and Uber Health 15

16 A recent development marketed as an attempt to address the dire state of affairs in the US  
17 health system has been branded as Uber Health. This initiative seeks to formalize the pre-  
18 existing practice of taking an Uber to the hospital in the role of an ambulance, sometimes  
19 through explicit partnerships with care providers (O'Donovan 2018). There are many reasons for  
20 and problems with why riders already use Uber to get to and from hospitals and other medical  
21 providers in the United States. What is already occurring is that people call 911 for non-  
22 emergencies because they do not have health insurance. In addition to the inefficiency of that  
23 practice, it speaks to the already stratified state of access to healthcare.  
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26  
27 Taking an ambulance to the hospital may cost hundreds of dollars, and possibly over \$1000.  
28 Considering how cost prohibitive medical assistance can be, this factor causes many to instead  
29 take matters into their own hands and seek out lower cost alternatives, such as an Uber or taxi.  
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32 As with regular Uber, Uber Health is a delegation of all risks to the drivers and riders.  
33 Elsewhere, governmental health systems that are able to bargain with providers achieve an  
34 economy of scale in terms of costs across the board. Also, the drivers themselves (i.e.  
35 paramedics/ambulance drivers) are trained and skilled in the provision of medical attention.  
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38 While this article cannot be a comprehensive critique of the inefficiencies in the US health  
39 system as a whole, it is important to discuss some cursory problematics of Uber Health at first  
40 glance.  
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### 43 Lack of driver training and preparation 44 45

46 In order to become an Uber driver, there is a low bar to entry (be over 21 years old, pass a state  
47 and federal background check, have 1 year of driving experience) (Uber.jobs n.d.). Once on the  
48 job, any number of situations may present themselves due to the random nature of those who  
49 require rides from one location to another. There is a dire lack of training for this increasing  
50 population of precariously 'employed' drivers who do not have any classification besides being  
51 independent contractors. The driver's own vehicles are not held to any reliable standard, use  
52 the driver's own insurance, and the condition of the vehicle itself varies vastly. As far as licensed  
53 taxi drivers go, they themselves are barely equipped to handle the variation in clientele in terms  
54 of training and preparation, nevermind lay people who end up driving for Uber. Indeed, the lack  
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3 of driver training and preparation are indicative of the lack of long term plans for human drivers  
4 in general. Looking into the future, the human drivers are merely a stop gap measure in  
5 anticipation of automated (driverless) cars.  
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8 Liability issues also abound. Considering the diverse range of people a rideshare driver may  
9 encounter at any given point, there is relatively little training and preparation to become an Uber  
10 driver. Moreover, drivers are using their own personal car insurance to operate rideshare  
11 vehicles in a decidedly commercial fashion. As the rideshare company can claim to act merely  
12 as a type of 'matchmaking' app, this arrangement means that all of the risks are undertaken by  
13 the driver and rider. In at least one case, an injured UberX driver was left to assume the  
14 consequences of a major car accident after alleging that Uber had assured him of insurance  
15 protection (Lieberman 2015).  
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## 19 The Gig Economy as symptom of kleptocracy

### 20 The myth of the freelancer as freedom

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25 'Uber, but for [food, shelter, sex...]' has become part of the regular lexicon. Drawing attention to  
26 the social, economic, and environmental damage of these kleptocratic practices casts a pall on  
27 the promise of a bright, utopian meritocratic future where we supposedly all win and all boats  
28 rise. Calo and Rosenblat (2017) with their critique aptly named, 'The Taking Economy: Uber,  
29 Information, and Power,' join an increasingly large chorus of analyses that inform policymaking  
30 through legal and ethical concerns of new and as of yet largely unregulated industrial practices.  
31 The tension between entrenched industries and new 'disruptive' upstarts have shown up  
32 headlines around the world. The U.S. audience appreciates a classic David and Goliath  
33 narrative, even in stories like how Uber and Lyft are 'destroying Chicago's cab drivers' (Ciolli  
34 2017). However, the narrative of rideshare drivers taking on entrenched taxi cartels is too facile  
35 and unidirectional. In contrast, the desperation was palpable in the case of one New York taxi  
36 driver (Bellafante 2018) who committed suicide to demonstrate how ride hailing services have  
37 financially devastated and disrupted their livelihoods.  
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42 A particular--though not at all rare--story is of people who have made the decision to drive for  
43 Uber due to a life-altering event such as injury, layoff, retirement, or unspecified debts. That life  
44 event may not have not been conducive to holding a regular full-time job with benefits, including  
45 any form of health coverage in the United States. Moreover, for those who do have health  
46 insurance, coverage does not guarantee access to affordable health care, as the deductible  
47 model almost entirely ensures that a person seeking even rudimentary treatment will need to  
48 pay hundreds if not thousands of dollars up front before coverage becomes apparent. This is a  
49 troubling state of affairs, given that numerous households are potentially one accident away  
50 from bankruptcy.  
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54 Where this issue intertwines with the gig economy is the myth of the freelancer who is ultimately  
55 liberated by the flexibility afforded by being an independent contractor, as opposed to an  
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3 employee restricted by the prescripts of a single employer. The devastating narratives of actual  
4 wages hit a fever pitch in early 2018 with the publication of data stating that the hourly wage of  
5 an Uber/Lyft driver amounted to \$3.37/hour (Levin 2018b). After a critical response from the  
6 Chief Economic Officer at Uber about the widely publicized data, the author of the MIT study  
7 revised their analysis to a wage range of \$8.55-\$10/hour (Winick 2018). However, that figure is  
8 still below minimum wage and is immensely variable considering tips and local costs of living.  
9 Numerous studies continue to show that more often than not, the worker in this case is in the  
10 position of desperately cobbling together a living wage with these myriad flexi-jobs to stay afloat.  
11 One must ask if this is the freedom largely envisioned, and who ultimately benefits from the  
12 perpetuation of this myth.  
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17 Despite and likely because of the proliferation of precarious labor, there have been disparate  
18 attempts to unionize rideshare drivers, as in the case of Seattle (Isaac, Wingfield & Scheiber  
19 2015), and recently Millennials have been showing an increased interest in the formation of  
20 unions after a long-term decline in workforce unionization (Chen 2018). Scholz (2017)  
21 advocates 'platform cooperatives', which work with the platform and worker-owned cooperatives  
22 to 'rethink unions, and build a better future of work.' The questions in his book, *Uberworked and*  
23 *Underpaid*, remain in terms of how digital labor may be regulated, with much dependent upon  
24 how collective organizing at the local and global levels take place.  
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28 Indeed, the precariat is not progress, and the struggles this large, multi-sector workforce face  
29 are something akin to those encountered in the adjunctification of the professoriate, where 70%  
30 of college professors are contingent labor (American Association of University Professors n.d.).  
31 As with adjunct professors, there is a common misconception that these workers are merely  
32 topping up a base income earned elsewhere, so they do not require any livable wage or benefits  
33 in the contingent labor they are performing. While there is likely a small minority that fits the  
34 stereotypical description, the data on these labor forces show that most are stitching together a  
35 basic income through many precarious jobs.  
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### 38 A temporary stop-off on the way to autonomous vehicles

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42 These increasingly neo-feudal conditions are allowed to continue under the rationalization of the  
43 'free market', in favor of the celebratory discourse of the 'Gig economy'. The embodied nature of  
44 its workers who require food, shelter, health care, and a living wage are only a temporary  
45 inconvenience on the way to the utopian imaginary of driverless cars dotting our sky.  
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49 Kai-Fu Lee (2018) predicts that autonomous vehicles will replace human-driven cars in about  
50 15-20 years in the US and even less time in China if they continue advancing in AI research as  
51 they have been to date. He also cautions that we are not ready for the massive societal  
52 upheavals on the way to that vision. Due to the inconsistencies in law from state to state, Uber  
53 has already been experimenting with autonomous vehicles (cars and trucks) in various locations  
54 with minimal hindrance (Bonnington 2018).  
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3 The long game is to starve out any real alternatives to these services, such as licensed taxis  
4 and public transit, all the while using big data/machine learning to create fully automated routes.  
5 Eventually, the vision is for driverless cars. Then where will the drivers be, who have leveraged  
6 themselves in the meantime?  
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## 10 Ethical issues and Policy Implications

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13 Indicative of the app-centered media age in which we live, hardly a day goes by in which Uber  
14 has not made headlines in the mainstream media. The ethical issues have been challenging to  
15 wrangle, due to the number of parties implicated and lack of precedent. Were it not for the sheer  
16 number of ethical grievances coming to light in recent years, the demand for a comprehensive  
17 analysis of the issues at stake would not have the same urgency that it does today. This section  
18 identifies some of the major ethical issues that intersect with multiple stakeholders discussed in  
19 this paper, which each deserve their own analyses, critiques, and action going forward.  
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23 Advocating for a focus on the ethical dilemmas associated with the Uber service sets the stage  
24 for a broader critique of the platform/gig economies and their lack of regard for the social good.  
25 It is particularly challenging, because a service such as Uber enjoys widespread popularity while  
26 also being immensely problematic for those with the least power and mobility. For those who do  
27 have the decision-making power, it is important to make instrumental decisions that are not only  
28 popular, but also ethical.  
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31 With a company as powerful and pervasive as Uber, it is already difficult to operate without  
32 touching or being touched by the organization and its practices. As Uber transitions from being  
33 a company to an institution, and moving ever closer towards fulfilling the role of a utility or  
34 essential service, it is more important than ever to make sure that people who hold the keys to  
35 power in law and policy do not capitulate too easily to the interests of a private corporation that  
36 is not beholden to a duty to serve the public.  
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40 The ethical challenges here largely touch upon the predator/prey dichotomy that have been  
41 symptomatic of the broader culture in which Uber has been developed. The cases surrounding  
42 gender-based violence for riders (Levin 2018a), drivers (Levin 2017), and Uber's developers  
43 (Fowler 2017); racist practices by drivers (Newcomer 2016); systemic sexism and racism in the  
44 company still coming to light (Ge et al. 2017); and privacy issues arising from unethical  
45 treatment of user data (Hill 2014)--all speak to the profoundly troubling social issues that  
46 continue to plague the company. The convergence of these pressure points serve to highlight  
47 the position of trust inherent for a service like Uber to function and its effect on the vulnerable,  
48 underscoring the need for ethical oversight. Without adequate measures to curtail and critique  
49 these designs while they are being conceived, we will only encounter these problems out 'in the  
50 wild', at which point it is often too late to put the proverbial genie back in the bottle, especially  
51 concerning issues of data and privacy.  
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## Designing the future

When we look at ethics, social justice, diversity and inclusivity, the effort to etch those facets into policy must include both company culture and their creations. A service like Uber serves to structure and restructure the way we do things like communicate and get from point A to point B. Gender issues, as in many companies, have presented dysfunction in both the rank and file as well as the 'product' produced. The argument goes that without diversity from the start of the product cycle, from concept through to implementation and maintenance, the product (which is already inscribed with the norms and values of the designers and engineers), will reflect similar biases. What better way to show what a society values than how it enables the mobility of different people and their various bodies?

Social media movements like #deleteUBER only individualize social issues and put the onus on the rider to decide whether or not to use the service. Solutions that address the roots of systemic issues need to come into play. In a networked society full of interdependencies, the solution has never been to boycott. The recommendations here refer to the ethical considerations forwarded in this paper and serve to open up dialogue to further discuss the persistent issues facing a precarious future.

One major change would be to treat Uber like a taxi company as opposed to a web service. In December 2017, such a ruling was made in the E.U. (May 2017). Another direction to pursue would be to demand stronger partnerships with the municipalities in which rideshare companies operate, in order to work towards linking public infrastructure with ride hailing operations rather than competing with them. The methods of payment must be accessible and not serve to exacerbate further inequalities in wealth and mobility. Related to mobility, the use of surge pricing according to demand for transportation services is harmful and predatory, and must be brought under control or eliminated altogether. Protections for public infrastructure, increased (not decreased) investment in public transportation through data gathering, and channeling revenue to socialized services through tariffs would cause ride cost to resemble taxi costs more closely. In the case of Uber Health, measures taken to make the cost of medically trained personnel available would also appropriately reflect costs. In essence, localities where Uber benefits must themselves more explicitly benefit through increased partnerships and regulatory policy.

## Conclusion

As a reflection deriving from the conference on the Partnership for Progress on the Digital Divide, this paper is a necessary opportunity to think through whether we are headed in the right, just, and ethical direction. For decision makers and those attempting to formulate ethical policies around ride hailing services, the task ahead is formidable. Corrosiveness, by its very nature, is not readily apparent. Stewardship is not immediately recognized, and perhaps never obviously rewarded. However, ethical practices must be built into the DNA of any organization, permeating its practices, personnel, and products.

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3 With Uber rapidly becoming part of everyday life and a regular part of the public lexicon, this  
4 paper was a comprehensive examination of the ethical dilemmas that already manifest in the  
5 creation of a digital divide, their implications for public infrastructures, and the Gig Economy as  
6 a symptom of kleptocracy rather than liberation. The approach is multi-pronged with many  
7 interlocking pieces when examining communication technology from media justice, social  
8 justice, and ethics perspectives.  
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11 Who is predator and prey in this gig economy of the Wild West? In its most ideal form, the  
12 purpose of policy and regulation is to make things more regular, civilized, orderly, and peaceful.  
13 Perhaps our practices may even be kinder in an otherwise cruel world. Despite all the  
14 technological progress occurring every day, one must ask what the ultimate purpose of  
15 innovation and advancement should be? If we are able to draw attention to how things are  
16 getting worse for those already most vulnerable, should we not attempt to mobilize in order to  
17 bring those harms to a halt? The situation is evolving, but this article asks the primary question,  
18 given the issues and people at stake, is this the society we want?  
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22 Much like getting to choose the paint color for a car already in the parking lot, true change  
23 cannot come as a result of consumer choice. It is a common deflection to place the onus on  
24 comparatively powerless individuals when discussing systemic issues. The choice should not be  
25 between Uber or Lyft, but rather between a healthy society or a toxic one. We have the  
26 opportunity at this juncture to ask for the kind of society we really want. This paper is a critique  
27 of the fundamental norms and values driving what amounts to a race to the bottom. The  
28 optimistic kernel to take from this exposition is that this does not have to be our destination.  
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