


# Everyday Encounters: Antagonism in the Sharing Economy

Posted on December 15, 2016 by Diane Negra

Contemporary service industry jobs, many of them tied to the sharing economy, affect both workers and customers. As Diane Negra and John Russo write in Working-Class Perspectives this week, the combination of digital platforms, automation, and control of workers' behavior undermine the quality of work while also creating conflict between those who provide customer service and consumers seeking assistance.

Much has been written about the growth of the sharing economy where information technology, such as mobile apps and automated software facilitate interactions between businesses, individual workers, and customers. Proponents argue that the system provides greater access to goods and services at lower prices while reducing costs for employers and independent contractors. They also claim that, in the gig sector of the sharing economy, workers gain flexibility because they determine their own hours, tools, and working conditions while raising potential

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earnings.

Regardless of whether we buy these claims about benefits to workers, there are numerous signs that the sharing economy creates antagonism between workers and customers. The apps and automated systems that underlie these new work structures require both workers and customers to rely on technology, yet the systems are often faulty and poorly designed. While these systems promise transparency and trust, they also create tensions. For example, such systems unfailingly include algorithmic performance assessment of service industry workers. As technology writer and software engineer Tom Slee has argued, “Rather than bringing a new openness and personal trust to our interactions, [such shifts are] bringing a new form of surveillance where service workers must live in fear of being snitched on, and while the company CEOs talk benevolently of their communities of users, the reality has a harder edge of centralised control.” The increasing antagonism resulting from the perpetuation of inequality among “stakeholders” has received insufficient attention.

Service industry workers have long operated as the front-line interface with customers, having to respond to complaints about company practices that they don’t control. Now service workers have even less control due to structural and technological platforms. When platforms fail, inconveniencing and frustrating customers, workers have little power to resolve disputes. At the same time given the dependence on technology and lacking access to customer information, they cannot build relationships with customers over time. Indeed, it is almost impossible to contact the same customer service representative twice, so consumers then become obliged to give the same information over and over again. The interactions between customers and workers often predictably devolve, generating frustration, impotence, and anger on both sides and voiceless workers subjected to performance review by customers following interactions. Dependence on technology estranges service workers from customers, undermining the possibility of finding satisfaction on the job because of increased misunderstandings and conflicts.

Just as proponents ignore the way automation undermines the quality of work, they also misrepresent what the sharing economy offers to consumers. Although they claim that automation generates a high degree of efficiency and autonomy to customers, they overlook time-consuming administrative inefficiency and poor customer service. For example, in the gig sector, where a few companies dominate particular markets, companies have little reason to worry about consumer rights. No

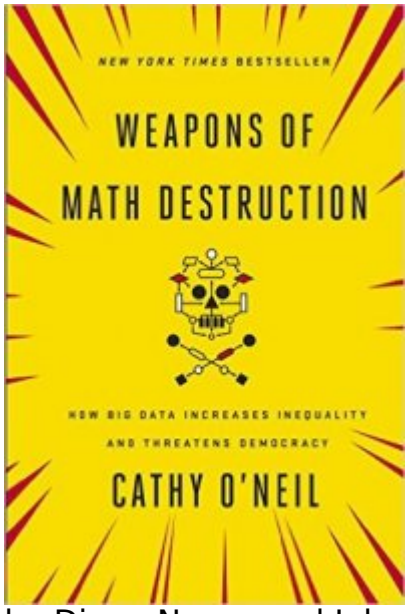
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doubt this contributes to the increasing conflicts and complaints associated with technology and social media in air travel, banking and other financial institutions, cable television and communications companies, insurance and health firms, and universities.

To make matter worse, customers in the sharing economy must go to great lengths to seek basic information and answers to queries. Even when customers succeed in reaching customer service representatives, they are often treated with robotic indifference or a stilted hyper-courtesy that barely conceals institutional disdain. Customer service representatives often speak in a language of faux-camaraderie that couches authoritarian directives as suggestions as in the ubiquitous “Why don’t you go ahead and. . .” Corporations exacerbate the problem by pairing this passive-aggressive treatment with service fees and other administrative charges, so that customers are not only treated poorly, they pay for that privilege. This problem affects less educated and less well-off customers, especially, who may have less access to or experience with technology and the Internet and are less able to afford fees or phone charges.

Some companies will not make themselves available at all, having developed bureaucratic systems that cultivate inaccessibility. For example, Amazon has refused to engage with customers directly by phone. Other companies have trained call center employees to repeat marketing mantras and to speak like machines giving pre-scripted answers that may or may not match a customer query. These bureaucratic obstructions, including automated customer service and phone banks and the outsourcing of customer service “chat” and email services, only deepen the antagonism of customers toward corporations and their intermediaries.

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by Diane Negra and John Russo

The antagonism generated by these practices affects working- and middle-class people far more than it does the elite, who often enjoy preferential treatment through concierge services in hospitals or all business-class airports. Such VIP/concierge services help elites navigate organizations, technology, and services, while most customers must work harder to gain access to restaurants, hotels, sports and other entertainment events, and a range of other services and sites. As Cathy O'Neil in *Weapons of Math Destruction* has noted, "The privileged, we'll see time and again, are processed more by people, the masses by machines."

Non-elites unable to "opt-out" of the antagonistic service economy may find consolation in the techno-future conjured up by Amazon Go, which showcases the pleasures of never having to interact with other humans at all. In glossy ads for what Amazon deems the "world's most advanced shopping technology," checkout is eliminated – as are retail clerks — as shoppers employ an app that simply charges them for the items they select. Privileged relationships with commodities dominate the scene in an ad in which hardly anyone speaks to or even looks at anyone else.

In the past few months, commentators have explained support for Donald Trump in the US or "Brexit" in the UK as expressions of populist rage. One source of that rage may well be everyday encounters of the kinds sketched here. If working-class people feel like they don't matter in contemporary capitalism, that may reflect the

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challenges of working in the sharing economy, with its low wages, limited autonomy, and inherent conflicts, but also the challenges of an antagonistic service culture that mounts daily micro-assaults on people’s dignity and rights.

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