Mobility and Societal Considerations: What's Happening?

By Eric Haggett

I WAS THINKING ABOUT HOW CONVENIENT IT IS to be able to request an Uber, Lyft, or Via at any time from my smartphone—even at 4 a.m. to catch the first flight of the day out of Chicago's O'Hare airport. Then I thought about how much fun it was to be able to pick up an electric scooter lying in the sand at Venice Beach, Calif., download an app on my phone, and zip off along the 2.5-mile oceanfront path to Santa Monica Pier, passing a suited 20-something scooting the other direction, presumably on his way to work. Eventually, my thoughts strayed to the cost of these on-demand mobility options and how little thought I gave to paying that cost, whether for a work-related trip to the airport or for a quick scoot down the beach while on vacation.

Fortunately, I have the luxury of considering these costs only briefly in my decision-making, but what about people who must agonize over every penny they spend? Or what about people with physical limitations? Are these new mobility options even an option for them?

More questions came to mind:

- While there are real and potential benefits to society of increasing mobility options, how do we ensure that these benefits are available to everyone?
- Do we care if these options are not available to some groups?
- If the trend in society is toward mobility-as-a-service, what happens to the segment of society that can't afford those services or are not physically capable of using them? Will this be yet another way in which the "haves" separate themselves from the "have-nots"?

For the lowest income individuals who perhaps cannot afford a smartphone, ride-hailing or renting a shared scooter are not mobility options.

Transportation Network Companies

Transportation network companies (TNCs) provide a transportation alternative to those of us (like me) who choose not to own a car and for whom public transportation is not always a viable option. Additionally, research conducted by Anne Brown, presented in her dissertation "Ridehail Revolution: Ridehail Travel and Equity in Los Angeles" (2018), suggests that "hailing shared rides was common in low-income neighborhoods" as well, and "ridehailing provides auto-mobility in neighborhoods where many lack reliable access to cars."

Whether serving someone who chooses not to own a car or someone who cannot afford to own a car, TNCs serve a need. However, what happens when market forces dictate that the cost of each ride with a TNC must increase?

According to Uber's financial results, the company lost $2.8 billion in 2016, $2.2 billion in 2017, and $1.8 billion in 2018. On top of that, New York, N.Y., recently became the first city to require that drivers working for ride-hailing companies be paid a minimum wage. A representative of New York City's Taxi and Limousine Commission stated that this increase would raise the average driver's earnings by $10,000 a year.

Put into context, for the approximately 80,000 drivers in New York City working for a TNC, this would translate into an additional $800 million in wages or, put another way, $800 million in additional fares for ride-hail users. You could see how this New York rule change might make its way into the rules governing TNCs across the U.S. and the world. To become profitable it seems TNCs will have to raise the cost of their rides, making them a less viable mobility option for low-income people.

The Smartphone Factor

All of this assumes that people have access to a smartphone with the ability to download and use ride-hailing apps. According to the Pew Research Center, while only 5 percent of adults in the U.S. do not own a cellphone, 23 percent do not own a smartphone—about 58 million people. Of the adults in the U.S.

making less than $30,000 per year, 92 percent own a cellphone, but only 67 percent own a smartphone; this compares to 98 percent cellphone ownership and 93 percent smartphone ownership for those making over $75,000 per year. For the lowest income individuals who perhaps cannot afford a smartphone, ride-hailing or renting a shared scooter are not mobility options.

The Population with Disabilities

People with disabilities have even less access to ride-hailing services, let alone micro-mobility options such as shared scooters or shared bikes. A report by New York Lawyers for the Public Interest says that "Uber, Lyft, and other ride-hailing services are virtually 'useless' for people with disabilities because of the relative lack of vehicles equipped to handle wheelchairs and motorized scooters." The report also says "when riders summoned wheelchair-accessible vehicles from Uber and Lyft—the only ride-hailing companies to offer such a service—the wait time was more than four times longer than for regular service." When it comes to micro-mobility options, certain segments of the population will not be able to use these services due to their physical limitations, let alone the cost of these mobility options.

On top of the equipment issues reducing the usefulness of ride-sharing and micro-mobility to people with disabilities, the cost of these services is another important factor. According to the *2017 Disability Statistics Annual Report* produced by the Rehabilitation and Training Research Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics, "the median earnings of people with disabilities ages 16 and over in the U.S. was $22,047, about two-thirds of the median earnings of people without disabilities, $32,479." Additionally, according to the same report, the percentage of people with disabilities who were in poverty was 20.9 percent in 2016, versus 13.1 percent for people without disabilities. These statistics indicate that not only are people with disabilities unlikely to be able to take advantage of advancements in new mobility options due to equipment issues, they are also less likely to be able to afford the costs associated with these services.

The Big Picture

In today's world, where more and more people are feeling marginalized, both the private companies developing mobility technology and services and the public agencies responsible for governing their use need to consider not only the positive impacts of these new mobility options but also their potential to leave a significant portion of the population behind.

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