



Uber Says It's Committed to Making the Service Safer, but Is It Capable?

By Josh Wolford

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On any given day, 'everyone's private driver' Uber is dealing with some sort of problem. These include, but are not limited to, drivers being pissed about fare cuts and how they affect their bottom line, taxi companies being pissed that Uber is skirting past rules and regulations, and cities battling the entire Uber operation both at home and abroad.

These are clearly some big concerns for the company, which continues to raise money at a staggering rate and is now valued at north of \$40 million. But the one Uber storyline that dominates discussion, at least from a purely consumer standpoint, is rider safety.

Rape, kidnapping, and assault tends to attract a lot of attention. Imagine that.

And it's this pressure that has forced Uber's hand in a way. Uber must get serious about customer safety. Over the past year, the company has talked a lot about what it's doing to make rides safer – but is it working? Is there more it could be doing?

Here's a brief rundown of some incidents involving Uber drivers that have occurred in just the past year:

– A Washington DC Uber ride turned into a Keanu Reeves movie when the driver took his passengers on a high-speed chase with police, about 10 minutes of speeding, running red lights, and sideswiping cars, according to the victim. It all started when a taxi inspector tried to flag down the driver. He reportedly told the passengers that it “wasn't a real cop” and then proceeded to turn the experience into an episode of Cops.

– A woman accused her Uber driver of kidnapping and sexual assault, after the driver “took advantage of the situation (she was drunk), and drove her to a cheap motel, which he had visited before, and carried her into the room. He slept the night in the room, and when she awoke, he let her leave, though he asked her to stay, according to the victim,” according to police. He allegedly “fondled her over her clothes and suggested he wanted to have sex, but didn't force it.”

– A woman alleged she was briefly kidnapped over a fare dispute.

– A woman was allegedly raped in the backseat of an Uber driver’s car last July. From the affidavit:

She passed out in the cab and when she woke, the driver was rubbing her breasts. She then fell back asleep, according to court documents, and woke up again to the sound of car doors locking. The cab had stopped and the driver was feeling her breasts and pulling down her underwear down to her knees. She says she asked the driver to be let out of the vehicle, but he refused and at one point asked if he could go back to her hotel with her. In a follow-up interview with authorities, she said [the driver] briefly penetrated her with his finger or another thin object.

– In September of last year, an Uber driver reportedly smashed his passenger in the head with a hammer. According to authorities, it was a route dispute gone bad. The driver pulled over and demanded the passenger exit the vehicle. Once he was out, the driver struck him in the side of the head with a hammer and drove away, leaving him “slipping in and out of consciousness on the sidewalk, suffering from severe fractures and trauma to the head,” according to police.

– An Uber exec used a sort of “God view” mode to track the Uber activity of a journalist. This happened after another Uber exec questioned whether it would be prudent for Uber to go after critical journalists. This whole incident raised a lot of questions about customer privacy, as you can imagine.

– In December, a Boston Uber driver was charged with battery and rape after he allegedly picked up a woman, took her to a secluded area, and beat her and sexually assaulted her.

– A San Francisco driver was charged with assault and battery after hitting a passenger. According to Forbes, “[the driver] picked up his passenger in San Francisco’s Castro District early on Nov. 24, and the two began to argue while riding in the car, authorities said. He pulled over, told the passenger to get out, and when the passenger tried to take a photo of the car, he allegedly punched him in the hand and elbowed him in the chest.”

– A Chicago man allegedly fondled his Uber passenger. “When the woman said she knew how to get to her destination, Patel asked her to sit in the front seat. After she moved to the front, Patel began telling her how pretty she was, and allegedly touched her legs and her breast,” according to the report.

– The safety issues have been international issues as well. Uber is currently embroiled in a lawsuit over an alleged rape in India. Uber just suspended a driver in France over an alleged sexual assault.

– Just this week the story emerged of an Uber driver accused of kidnapping and rape in Philadelphia. Adding to the disturbing nature of the allegations is the fact that Uber just now

suspended the driver, even though the alleged assault took place on February 6. Uber claims that they were not notified of the incident until this week and it suspended the driver immediately, so it appears the police may have forgotten to mention it to Uber.

I'll stop there. 'Brief' may have been the wrong word, but it's important to know what Uber is dealing with here. There are a lot of incidents and sadly, most of them begin with the phrase "A woman claims ..."

In December of last year, following a year of bad press, Uber made a public promise to make the service safer.

"We believe deeply that, alongside our driver partners, we have built the safest transportation option in 260 cities around the world," said Philip Cardenas, Head of Global Safety, in a blog post.

"But we have more work to do, and we will do it. Uber is committed to developing new technology tools that improve safety, strengthen and increase the number of cities and countries where background checks are conducted and improve communication with local officials and law enforcement."

That kicked off a so-called "global review to assess the areas where greater investment is required."

"Our responsibility is to leverage every smart tool at our disposal to set the highest standard in safety we can," said Cardenas. "We will not shy away from this task."

We'll talk more about the technology later, but let's just say that Uber's investments in safety have leaned more toward personnel than tech.

A Safety Update

Which leads us to Uber's new update on what it's doing to improve safety. Phillip Cardenas is back with an update from the Uber safety team, wherein he talks about some actions the company has taken and some it plans to take. Spoiler alert: there are a lot of boards, teams, panels, and audits.

Here's what Uber says it will do and what it has done in terms of responding and reviewing safety-related incidents, on a human level:

SAFETY ADVISORY BOARD

Uber will establish a permanent global Safety Advisory Board to work with us on an ongoing basis. The board will review our safety practices and advise on our roadmap for adding safety features to the platform. As part of this process, we are already engaging

with outside experts to help us create the strongest board possible. We will continually embed their recommendations and independent guidance into our safety roadmap.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Working with law enforcement and security experts, we have created the Uber Quality Assurance program. Off-duty law enforcement and security professionals will audit activity on the platform to ensure that partners are complying with safety standards, including refusing all street hails and acting in accordance with the Code of Conduct. Their reports will help ensure that any issues are dealt with expeditiously.

INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAMS

To quickly respond to safety incidents, we have created Incident Response Teams that are on call worldwide on a 24/7 basis. These are specially trained groups that investigate and respond to serious safety concerns that may occur. The teams are distributed in regions around the globe and are there for those critical moments when a rapid resolution is needed.

Uber has also published a new “Code of Conduct” which outlines principles like non-discrimination, no aggressive behavior, and “human kindness”. Not exactly groundbreaking stuff here.

In the safety update, Uber also touts the fact that all rides are tracked by GPS, that it works closely with law enforcement, and that it’s “confident [its] driver screening program is elevating the standard for the transportation industry.”

What can Uber do to improve safety?

When Uber first made its promise to improve safety, it touched on some new tech that could help.

“Our Safety Product Team is developing more ways to put technology to work to ensure the safety of riders and drivers in key areas. We are initiating research & development on biometrics and voice verification to build custom tools for enhanced driver screening. We are also investing in ways to provide riders the instant ability to communicate with us and their loved ones in the event of an emergency, building on top of our ShareMyETA feature,” said Uber.

Uber even discussed using lie detectors during background checks. None of these tech advances have materialized – at least for the majority of Uber customers.

Other apps are looking to make the process of riding with anyone (Uber, taxis, etc) safer. For instance, an app called AsterRide offers instant alerts that notify friends and family when they're picked up, and sends notifications when they've arrived safely at their destination. Uber should expand on the "ShareMyETA" feature and provide an even more detailed real-time travel log to friends and family of its passengers. They've done this in India, but it's not been shipped to the rest of the world.

Uber has also instituted an SOS button in its app in India, which allows riders to contact local law enforcement directly from the app in emergencies.

For Uber's part, it says it "intends to make these and other new features available in the coming months elsewhere."

The company might want to think about turning to a third party for background checks – which are arguably the most important tool it has for building a fleet of safe, well-intentioned drivers. Uber's current background check process is rigorous, according to the company. But as The Daily Dot points out, there are major advantages to shipping the process out-of-house:

"Moving the process to a third party would create transparency (third parties could create documentation and put it in the public domain for the benefit of interested parties). It also eliminates concerns about potential conflicts. Third parties can focus on determining whether people are safe to drive for the company, period, without having to consider the PR implications or other issues. The use of third-party assurances is common in other industries, and it makes sense for any company that offers a service where strangers provide potentially intimate services."

What can we realistically expect from Uber?

Is it unrealistic to expect there to never be an assault or attempted assault inside an Uber car? Uber, like Lyft, like taxis, involve something inherently dangerous at its core – getting in cars with strangers. It's Uber's job to do all it can to make sure the stranger who's driving you around isn't prone to rape and battery. The problem is that Uber's entire business model – contract drivers using their own cars with minimal training – isn't exactly set up to foster a situation where the company knows enough about its employees to know if they've accidentally hired a rapist. There's a giant disconnect between Uber and its workforce.

Of course, background checks help. But a background check doesn't turn up the intent to assault.

And it's not like Uber is the only transportation company with customer safety red marks on the record. A recent study from the Cato Institute found that in terms of passenger safety, Uber, Lyft, and taxis all offer about the same level of protection.

Then again, Uber's schtick is being a cut above taxis.