

## **Ride-Hailing Giant Didi Chuxing in the Pandemic: CSR, Private Interest, and Public Value**

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Dated back to January 2020 when covid-19 cases are skyrocketing in many sectors of China, China's ride-hailing giant Didi Chuxing faced a major economic crisis, with active users plummeted to its lowest level since its inception. This crisis results from multiple reasons, but all are associated with the pandemic. Starting from January 23 when multiple cities suspend the public transportation services in Hubei province to mid-February, Didi has stopped its services in more than 50 cities and counties. Even in cities that Didi is still operating, both drivers and passengers are disinclined to travel around cities. Challenged by this unprecedented economic crisis, the company responded by proclaiming a national "corporate social responsibility" (hereafter CSR) campaign. It announced a "volunteer fleet" initiative, which was aimed at offering free transportation services to both front-line health workers and local neighborhood communities who are affected by the suspended or reduced public transportation services. Starting from Hubei, the epicenter of the Covid-19 outbreak, Didi's initiative of volunteer fleets quickly expand to multiple cities of mainland China, such as Shanghai, Beijing, Xiamen, Ningbo, and Nanjing, etc. Didi promoted on its Website that, by February 25, it has provided services for more than 20 thousand front-line health workers (Didi Chuxing, n.d.).

In the past few years, Didi has spent a lot of time, and a lot of money, promoting its images of selfless service, leaving the impression that Didi is concerned about society's welfare more than its business. For example, we have been bombarded with languages of sharing economy, AI-driven new economy, and smart transportations and smart cities. By trading on these attractive and socially good terms, Didi brands itself as a company that would benefit individuals and society at large: it not only produces huge employment, but also opens the pathway to a more sustainable, equitable, and innovative economy. At the core of the ideological work is obscuring the economic incentives of capitalism, or at least, reinventing a familiar mix of commerce and cause in the world of platformization (Slee, 2017)

In line with Didi's previous CSR efforts, the initiative of the volunteer fleet is undoubtedly the most recent and powerful one that emerges as a public relations response to the economic crisis. In the context of city-wide lockdown that public transportation is suspended or reduced, the visibility of Didi vehicles and brands serve as a promotional purpose to marketize the company in this special time. Far beyond that, it also legitimizes and justifies the company by associating Didi with all the positive functions and feelings produced by volunteer fleets, such as social and moral response, individual sacrifice, and collective spirit. This cultural practice contributes to making the company a heroic icon in the pandemic.

As Amanda Ciafone suggests, CSR is a constitutive element of neoliberalism, which seeks to manage the dual production of domination and resistance. This can be done not only through social welfare initiatives but also voluntary codes of conduct (Ciafone, 2019). To ensure safety, Didi actively promotes many self-governing strategies. For example, on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, Didi established sanitary stations for drivers in 106 cities; on February 18<sup>th</sup>, Didi claimed that it installed the barrier between drivers and passengers for free; on February 19<sup>th</sup>, Didi launched its mask recognition technologies to monitor whether drivers wear masks. Many people question whether these methods could prevent the transmission of the virus in practice. However, it should be noted that CSR has never required companies to do something to really solve a problem. Rather, it intends to show Didi has a capitalist responsibility to its business, as well as society to take up social concerns. By co-opting social roles, the real intention underlying Didi's free ride programs is promoting self-governance and getting rid of being regulated by the government.

Why should we still criticize a company when it is trying to be socially good? The answer lies in, CSR is far from merely doing ideological work; instead, it is partnered with economic motivations. In commodifying the pandemic, Didi lays the foundation for the company's resumption of its services later. So, when Didi restarts its services, the company said, "we are back, but we never left." In demonstrating the large quantity of medical workers that Didi has served, Didi intends to add evidence that the company has the capacity to offer safe trips to ordinary people.

Underlying its high-profile campaign is a number of labor issues that go invisible. It is not the company but numerous drivers who are exposed to the potential risk of infection in transporting medical workers. How are drivers paid? What are the relationships between Didi and drivers? and how risks are managed? All these questions remain underreported and unclear. In fact, by drawing upon CSR, Didi could skillfully diffuse public attentions to various forms of labor exploitations.

Viewed in a different perspective, the parallel between the suspension of public transportation systems and the prevalence of Didi free rides produces an impression that private digital platforms are better than public transportation systems in serving the needs of mobility during the pandemic. Circulation and mobility have always been central to the city (Tierney, 2017; Webber, 1963). One key question for scholars to study flow and communicative city is whether or not the organization of space in the context of urbanism should be considered primarily as the result of capitalism economic (re)production. Orthodox materialist theory of social space, following essentially the Marx's capital, argued that the production, reproduction and reconfiguration of space were nothing more than outcomes of capitalist accumulation and class struggle (Harvey, 1990, 2001). David Harvey, as the representative figure, suggests that, the history of capitalism is a studious process of annihilating space by time through the revolutionary advances in communication and transportation technologies. Therefore, the general effect of capitalist modernization is to speed-up the

move of economic processes, and, hence, in social life (Harvey, 1991, p. 20).

The term ‘rapidity’ is deeply connected to the current trend of platform capitalism. Platforms appear to be synonymous with efficiency (Dijck et al., 2018: 23). By creating an image that Didi serves public value toward the common good and by asserting its efficiency, Didi subtly makes a claim that private platforms can substitute for the role that governments and communities play (Dijck et al., 2018). Considering the economic motivations undergirding Didi’s volunteer fleet campaign, this encroachment of the private platform capitalism into the public transportation areas is alarming.

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