

Uber: As drivers get perks, riders losing patience on privacy snafus

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Negative news about ride-hailing service Uber continues to mount. Uber said Wednesday that an executive in New York City was under investigation for allegedly tracking a journalist's journey without her consent.

That follows reports that a top Uber exec - seriously or not - laid out plans to dinner-party guests for an Uber team to investigate journalists critical of the company, with a million-dollar budget. Actor and Uber investor Ashton Kutcher defended the dinner-party comments on Wednesday, writing on Twitter: "What is so wrong about digging up dirt on shady journalist?"

But concerns among passengers about their privacy and safety is becoming a public-relations problem, and could spell trouble for Uber and its rivals as regulators from Illinois, Florida and elsewhere debate whether to give the ride-hailing apps the authority to operate. Meantime, on Wednesday, Uber unveiled a series of discounts and perks for its restive drivers.

Among the latest developments:

-A BuzzFeed reporter said Tuesday night that recently she was greeted by Uber's Josh Mohrer upon her arrival - via Uber - to an Uber office in New York. "I was tracking you," he allegedly said. Mohrer also sent the reporter information about some of her trips in email. She said she never gave permission to Mohrer to look up the information from Uber's

database.

In a statement Wednesday, an Uber spokeswoman said, "Our data privacy policy applies to all employees: access to and use of data is permitted only for legitimate business purposes. Data security specialists monitor and audit that access on an ongoing basis. Violations of this policy do result in disciplinary action, including the possibility of termination and legal action."

-An Uber driver in New York City was fired last week after sending abusive text messages to a ride-requestor who ultimately canceled the request before the driver arrived. The driver didn't believe the woman had just left a cancer treatment and decided a taxi would be faster way to get to a warm place, according to the New York Daily News.

-A Daily Beast reporter said Wednesday that an Uber driver was fired after he showed her a picture that he had previously taken of her on the street. The driver then contacted her to complain about being fired, having apparently been given her full name by Uber.

-Uber has been come to known for its aggressive tactics, including making controversial statements, attempting to undercut its key rival Lyft by poaching their drivers and heavily criticizing the taxi industry's traditional way of doing business. Where does it all come from? Three of the values that employees are judged on are "fierceness," "super pumpedness" and "scale" (increasing the number of users), Business Insider reported Wednesday. It's all about doing "whatever it takes to make Uber a success, even when it's hard and takes some risk to get there," Uber said.

Billionaire investor and PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel recently called Uber "the most ethically challenged company in Silicon Valley," according to several media reports. Thiel is an investor in Lyft.

-The driver perks program, called Momentum, gives Uber contractors access to a healthcare insurance search tool and discounts on both auto maintenance work and cellphone service. Being the most valuable venture-capital-backed company at the moment probably helps pay for the benefits.

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