

Uber Vows to Stop Using Greyball Tool to Thwart Authorities

By Melissa Levin, J.D. Candidate 2019 | March 13, 2017

In a recent line of scandals for the ride-hailing giant, Uber is feeling the heat for its use of a secret program, which operated to deceive law enforcement and identify undesirable riders.

The program used a tool called Greyball, which collected in-app data for various purposes, including identifying officials attempting to enforce bans in cities like Paris and Las Vegas, as well as in countries such as China and Australia.

After initially defending the system just a few days ago in the [New York Times](#), Uber has changed its tune. Uber’s chief security officer Joe Sullivan [explained](#) that the company is “expressly prohibiting its use to target action by local regulators going forward.”

Although [Uber argued that the program](#), which its legal team led by Salle Yoo had approved, was created to deny ride requests to users violating the company’s terms of service, the company also admitted it used the tool to thwart city regulators.

Here’s how it worked—Enforcement officials involved in the sting operations meant to catch Uber drivers would buy dozens of phones, creating numerous accounts to order rides, and subsequently ticket drivers and impound cars. Uber was sick of shouldering these costs, so they used Greyball to tag certain users. When someone with a tagged account called a car, Uber would show that no cars were available.

Uber could still face legal ramifications for its use of Greyball. [Peter Henning](#), a law professor at Wayne State University, noted that the legal community is still somewhat unclear about the legality of the program. The tool could be considered a violation of the federal Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, or, depending on local laws, intentional obstruction of justice.

Uber, appraised at nearly \$70 billion, has already weathered numerous other storms this year. #DeleteUber is one such scandal; a reported 200,000 people dropped the service after the company was accused by many of trying to profit from a taxi strike in New York City, inspired by President Trump’s first immigration order.