

A You seem deep in thought.

B Yes, I was just thinking about the last ride I took with Uber and the weekend I spent in London, staying in a great flat right in the heart of the city and really not very expensive at all - I reserved with Airbnb. But I can't help wondering whether this is actually the way forward.

A What do you mean? I think all these new services are fantastic. Today people have more needs and less money, so anything that helps to make it go further is surely something positive.

B I understand what you're saying but in fact isn't this all just a fashion? I mean today it seems the latest craze to find an industry and then tell the world we're going to disrupt it, to become the Uber or the Airbnb of it and then get rich quickly.

A I actually think this disruption is a good thing. For far too long we've had to put up with expensive and inefficient services which aren't using the latest technology at our disposal. I think these new entrants have clearly understood how services and industries could be adapted to the digital age - they were more agile than the existing businesses, saw an opportunity, and took it.

B I've no difficulty understanding that. I also agree that some industries have rested on their laurels for a long time and have been resistant to change.

A I'd say far too long and now they're complaining about these new entrants. There have been protests and legal action all over the world against Uber and similar companies, but surely these new companies will be better for us consumers?

B I see what you mean but when you really think about it, what will be the long-term effect, not just for the new entrants but also for the industries that are being disrupted. And how will governments deal with these new businesses?

A I think governments find this is good, it shows we have innovative companies, people prepared to take risks, be entrepreneurial and create a society for the 21st century. Those that succeed will be able to invest in other sectors and ideas, and so on.

B I beg to differ. I think governments are justifiably worried about all this. From a taxation point of view, how do we tax these new businesses? They need to pay taxes as existing businesses do, if not who pays? In addition, do these disruptive companies really pay for the infrastructure they use? In terms of job creation, I think the jobs created won't make up for those that are lost, and that again is bad news for the economy.

A I still think that this is the way forward. I really believe that today people want something different, something that corresponds to the way they live. Also things that will help their money stretch further. Let's not forget that for most of us, our wages haven't kept pace with the real cost of living. So can you blame people for using services that allow them to maintain a certain lifestyle?

B Well, I don't feel I'm being excessively conservative when I say that this "Uberisation" of society seems dangerous to me. This destruction of the perception of value and the race to the bottom is very short-term. Today it's easy to disrupt an industry, but are those being disrupted and those doing the disrupting on a level playing field? I don't think so.

A I see where you're coming from, but isn't history full of examples of this process? As technology evolves, so do industries, some inventions replace others and the process repeats itself, it's called progress.

B I think this time it will be different. Today we seem to have got out of the habit of paying the true value of a service. And I think that this is the main point: it's easy to disrupt when you don't have the same costs as existing businesses, even more so when being a disruptor is almost elevated to mythical status. These people and companies are riding the crest of a wave today. But where will the real growth come from when we've disrupted everything? When we were at school, we were told that disruptive behaviour was a bad thing - one had to aim for harmony.

Outline Today's latest craze seems to be to find an industry and then disrupt it, to become the Uber or the Airbnb of it, and get rich quickly. For the first speaker, this disruption is a good thing: for far too long we have had to put up with expensive and inefficient services which are not using the latest technology. The new companies provide services that allow consumers, whose wages have not kept pace with the real cost of living, to maintain a certain lifestyle. The second speaker considers this "Uberisation" of society is dangerous: she regrets the destruction of the perception of value and the race to the bottom, and fears that the jobs created will not make up for those that are lost.

Questions

1 Do you use Uber, Airbnb or similar companies? 2 What effects will these disruptive companies have on our economy and society in general? 3 How do you think governments should react to these changes? 4 How would you react if you were working in a company that had just become the target for disruption by a new entrant?