

Dockless bikes generating loads of newfound data

By Enrique Gili, Sierra

This past spring, clusters of brightly colored dockless shared bikes (DSBs) began to proliferate on San Diego's city sidewalks like tulips after a spring rain. They were put there by companies—such as Lime, Ofo, and Mobike—seeking to disrupt the status quo of California's omnipresent car culture. As a result, thousands of DSBs ended up scattered around commercial districts and residential neighborhoods.

Dozens of markets—from major metropolitan cities like Minneapolis and Dallas to college campuses like Arkansas State University to South Lake Tahoe—have similarly bike-strewn landscapes as a result of the DSB wave, which added 44,000 bikes to U.S. streets in 2017.

The companies behind DSBs are united in their eagerness to capitalize on the so-called sharing economy (which has exploded since the dawn of Uber and Airbnb) by changing the way people travel and commute.

Yet for all the well-documented controversy surrounding DSBs, one overlooked aspect is the rivers of data their systems generate. Since each bike is equipped with sensors, and each cyclist carries a GPS-enabled smartphone, any given fleet of DSBs is collecting multiple terabytes of user information.

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