

Kicks, pranks, dog pee: The hard life of food delivery robots

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

UCLA environmental law professor Sean Hecht was walking across the

campus one recent night when he photographed a uniquely modern urban transport scene: a snarl of food delivery robots that couldn't figure out a way around a pile of discarded electric scooters.

Bystanders tried to help by moving the scooters but became irritated at the lack of response, probably not realizing that the Starship Technologies bots—deferential to their AMD Ryzen cores—weren't going to budge until the humans stopped crossing back and forth in front of them.

"One student said, 'We're trying to help you here,' which I thought was amazing," Hecht said. But also, "people were asking why they didn't just break the robots and steal the food."

"Difficult situation on campus," Hecht tweeted wryly. "Traffic jam of automated food delivery robots, apparently all stuck behind a carelessly discarded scooter. I just observed a couple of students clearing a path out of pity for the robots. This is our future, I guess."

Twitter jumped on Hecht's post with enthusiasm: pro- and anti-bot, pro- and anti-scooters, anti-lazy students who couldn't just get their own food. Some said they would have helped the bots. Others said, no way, no help. Some joked about turning the bots over onto their backs.

It's not easy being a delivery bot in America.

They have been rage-kicked by angry pedestrians, urinated on by dogs, whacked by heavy glass doors, pranked and blocked with mischievously placed barricades. They've been left stuck in ditches and banned, on and off, by cities including San Francisco and New York, concerned about sidewalk congestion and job loss, among other things.

They've become popular subjects of online fail videos showing them

crashing down stairs, crashing into a fire hydrant and shooting up a ramp too fast. And crashing.

That's why, as delivery bots proliferate and new robot startups enter the already crowded field, companies have gone out of their way to seek municipal and university approvals to operate their delivery bots. The companies have joined urban planning groups and offered to report problems such as dangerous sidewalks, partly in an effort to avoid the municipal pushback encountered by Bird and other electric scooter startups.

As Kiwibot co-founder David Rodriguez put it: "We've started working on new ways in which we can use our sensors and cameras for palpable digital mapping of the public right of ways." Carl Hansen, government relations head at Los Angeles-based Coco, put it a little more accessibly: "We're notifying [cities] about obstacles on the streets, sidewalks that are in bad shape and might cause injuries."

It's all part of a charm offensive portraying bots as safe, polite, cute and deferential. Some companies' models have LED screens that can display messages and emoji (like shocking pink heart eyes); some are able to talk to pedestrians to offer free samples or ask for help pressing a traffic signal's push button, for instance.

"It's important that we help prepare cities for our bots," Rodriguez said. "What we're doing now is working together in terms of regulation so that this happens in a coordinated way, not the way that electric scooter companies did it. It's better to seek permission than ask for forgiveness."

Kiwibot has been serving as one of the mobility innovators working with L.A.'s Urban Movement Labs, a public-private partnership where companies, communities and local government work together, as the group's lofty language says, "to make Los Angeles the transportation

innovation capital of the world."

"We are also working with Carnegie Mellon University to provide some advice on what kind of bots would be most appropriate for urban settings," Rodriguez said. "We need to have small robots that are not going to compete with wheelchair users or cause right-of-way problems. And the top speed of a robot, we think, shouldn't be more than the speed of a human walking."

The companies spend a significant amount of FAQ real estate talking about all sorts of potential safety and privacy concerns.

Starship Technologies' answer to "Are Starship robots safe for pedestrians?": "Absolutely!" Starship notes that its robots have traveled more than 4 million miles in 20 countries and 100-plus cities, encountering millions of people.

Coco assures that "video data is securely stored on the devices and deleted every day. It would only be reviewed in the event of an accident or other emergency."

As co-executive director of the Emmett Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the UCLA School of Law, Hecht has more than a passing interest in these things. Determining the effects of bots and scooters, both positive and negative, is not a simple task.

"If it turns out that scooters are mostly replacing walking trips, then there is no environmental benefit and people get less exercise," Hecht said. "For delivery robots, it's a matter of convenience for people, but I think there are plenty of cases where it probably is a little silly for somebody to get something delivered in a [robot](#) if they could walk a quarter of a mile and order the same thing."

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