Driverless and Door to Door? Autonomous Trucks, Ecommerce, the “Uberization” of Freight and the Future of the American Trucker

The $700 billion per year American trucking industry will likely be a leader in the adoption of self-driving technology. Speculation has abounded about the effects of that adoption. Countless news articles and reports have suggested driverless trucks could result in several million lost jobs. This talk outlines scenarios of likely job loss and creation in trucking. These scenarios highlight the importance of understanding the automation of driving within the overall labor process and the role of policy. I demonstrate that, in fact, the number of jobs at risk because of driverless trucks is just a fraction of what many suggest. Far more important is the issue of job quality, and self-driving technology is just one of several key trends, including ecommerce and the “uberization” of freight, that could dramatically transform freight and delivery jobs in the US for the worse in the coming decades. Together my findings suggest a more fundamental need to move current debates from a focus on trying to predict job losses to one on shaping the development and adoption of new technology to make desirable outcomes more likely.

Bio

Steve Viscelli (Ph.D. 2010, Indiana University) is an economic sociologist who studies work, labor markets and public policy. He is currently a Fox Family Pavilion Scholar and Senior Fellow at the Kleinman Center for Energy Policy and Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, all at the University of Pennsylvania. Steve’s first book The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream (UC Press, 2016) won book awards from three different American Sociological Association sections in 2017. The Big Rig explains how deregulation of trucking and the rise of independent contracting turned trucking from one of the best blue-collar jobs in the US into sweatshops on wheels. He is currently writing a book about policy and the environmental and labor impacts of self-driving trucks.