Travel-Time Use in the Information Age

'Travel Time Use in the Information Age' is a three year research project funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). This is a joint initiative between the Centre for Transport & Society at the University of West of England, Bristol, and the Centre for Mobilities Research (CeMoRe) at Lancaster University.

The principal aim of the research is to explore the different ways in which travel time can be used, especially with new mobile technologies (e.g. mobile phones and wireless computers), and how this alters the established convention that travel time is 'wasted time'. Considering the positive utility of travel time may provide a way of challenging the need to increase the speed of travel, where slower travel may mean more sustainable travel.

Four overarching questions will guide the research:

1. Is travel time, savings in which have been taken to constitute the main benefit of new transport schemes, misrepresented in transport appraisal?
2. Could enhancements to travel time use enabled through information and communications technology (ICT) be helping to perpetuate a culture of (hyper) mobility?
3. Does the notion of productive travel time use point towards an opportunity for collective transport modes to secure greater market share?
4. What are the logistical and design constraints upon productive travel time use?

Background and Justification

What we can do with our time while travelling has changed. Increasingly people own and use mobile ICTs such as mobile phones, wireless laptop computers and PDAs while travelling. Such ICTs provide for personal and work communications and entertainment. The Sony Walkman and car audio systems are established examples of ways in which travel time and travel spaces are transformed and personalised by technology. Product developers continue in their efforts to support and exploit our 'mobile society'.

There are also other traditional ways of using travel time that are likely to remain in place alongside these new technologies. For example, reading and working with paper documentation, conversing with or observing fellow passengers, sleeping, eating and thinking.

Where travel can be combined with other activities, travel time becomes productive. While this is sometimes recognised (see illustration), the concept challenges many established conventions on how travel time use is measured and understood.

Traditionally, travel time has often been assumed to be unproductive or wasted time. This has significantly shaped the current (UK) transport system. 'Value of time' studies provide economic arguments for increasing journey speeds. The notion of a fixed travel-time budget (an issue still hotly contested) offers an explanation for the trend of faster travel over greater distances.

There is little research into what people actually do with their time when travelling. Measuring the demand for travel is based on activities at destinations rather than incorporating activities on the move. Understanding how people use their travel time and how these activities give travel time a value is important for future transport policy and investment and the design of travel infrastructures and facilities.

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Methodology

The research uses multi-disciplinary approaches to bring together theories and methods from transport studies, sociology, and studies of ICTs, to enrich and enliven understandings of society and transport. The study aims to investigate new methodological approaches for researching the relationships between society, personal travel and ICTs.

We are seeking new understandings about how people use their travel time on buses, trains, planes and in the car and aim to develop a methodology for researching people on the move. The research will use focus groups and interviews in leading to a larger scale survey or surveys.

The research also involves consultation, via interviews, with transport policy makers, transport operators, travel facility providers, and technology companies to explore how these different groups perceive and treat travel-time use. Contributors to this part of the study will be invited to a 'stakeholder' seminar (see below) to explore the emergent findings of the first phase of the work and to identify the threats and opportunities that this new understanding gives rise to.

Following the 'stakeholder' seminar, the research project intends to develop, in consultation with stakeholders, future scenarios that will enable (more) productive use of travel time. These scenarios will focus on conceptualising future travelling environments and arrangements of mobile technologies that are conducive to undertaking valued activities on the move. Transport policy makers, transport operators, travel facility providers and technology companies will be invited to participate through focus groups to develop and examine these scenarios.

Outcomes and Benefits

The research anticipates revealing that travel time is used and experienced in many ways that will challenge the notion travel time is wasted time. The findings will open up a new understanding of 'travel time' for academics and transport practitioners.

Thus, the benefit of the research will be to present new evidence and questions for the evaluation of time-saving schemes and cost-benefit analysis. The research will also lay a foundation for future research in this area, and present new methodologies for researching people on the move. The future scenarios work may also help identify business development opportunities for public transport.

Research Dissemination

The focal point for disseminating interim research findings from the study will be a 'stakeholder' seminar. This is a one-day seminar where the professional stakeholders will have the opportunity to meet with the research team to discuss the research findings and develop new ideas through workshops. An interim report will be circulated to stakeholders before the seminar. A specific aim of the seminar is to explore ways in which travelling environments could be improved so that those

travelling by public transport can make more productive use of their time.

The intention is to produce a number of different reports and publications for transport practitioners and academics. These articles will distil the key findings of the project and provide a series of recommendations directed at the transport industry, policy makers and the research community.

How can I, and/or my organisation, become involved in this project?

We are asking policy makers, transport providers, travel facility providers, technology companies and NGOs to become 'stakeholders' in this study to ensure that the research assists in the development of transport policy and contributes to how transport providers plan for the future. As a 'stakeholder' you can contribute by:

- being interviewed or contributing to a focus group;
- participating in a transport professionals' stakeholder workshop; and/or
- supporting a survey of the travelling public (e.g. authorising us to collect data on buses, trains or planes/airports).

Contact Details

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