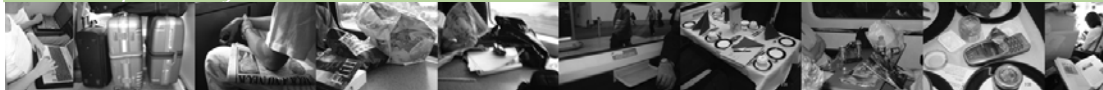


Travel-Time Use in the Information Age

Workshop January 2006



Research Summary 3: Ethnography

The following journeys were closely observed (participant-observation or shadowing a passenger): West Coast mainline, both cross-country and to London; East Coast mainline; Cumbrian rural bus service; urban bus services in Bristol, London and Lancaster; Thames Valley commuter train; South East commuter train; Nottingham Express Transit tram; Oxford-London express coach service; Manchester airport train. Other journeys were also recorded, including air and car travel, but in less detail.

Key findings

1. Travel-Time is stretched and compressed (as an experience) by travel activities.
2. Travel-Time is made in permeable travel spaces - objects and people flow through and make a difference.

Time & Space

Stretched/Compressed travel time

People practice a range of activities when travelling, from sleeping to crossword puzzles, and these activities lengthen or shorten the experience of travel time. Travel-Time Use therefore affects travel time. An activity alters the experience of the journey, making time ebb and flow. So the people and objects that you engage with produce stretched time and compressed time.

Hardened space

Public transport routes are fixed (with occasional minor variations). Frequent travellers gain tacit knowledge of fixed routes, but inherent anxiety of first time travellers. Some tickets attach the traveller to a specific route and time ('sticky tickets') whereas other tickets are more flexible enabling the traveller a choice. Car commuters take same route unless reason not to (e.g. congestion, desire a change, need break between work/home). Overall repetition of journey leads to a hardening of the space.

Permeable space

The public space of buses and trains is permeable to sound, smell, temperature and light/dark, and the effect of people moving through the shared space, and the things people bring with them into the vehicle. Sighted travellers can observe others travellers and staff, and the world through the window. Cars are also permeable but not normally subject to internal movement. There is often little control for the individual traveller over such sensory experiences.

Technology

Infectious objects

People bring things onto trains and buses, and into their cars that colonise and reshape, or infect, the existing space and place for the duration of their journey.

Computers	Either for work or entertainment, laptops are visibly in use on rail journeys or on longer coach journeys, but not on buses. Laptops dominate table space, where available. Laptops become problematic when competing for space on tables set for food (e.g. breakfast), or where others are also competing for table space
Mobile phone	Some travellers are 'serial phone users' for work or personal calls and text messaging, whereas others use it minimally to confirm proximity of arrival or to advise of delays. Serial phone users can dominate the sound-space.
Paper	Newspapers, books and magazines play a very important role for commuters on buses, trains and coaches with apparently very little gender difference, except perhaps in the choice of book. Newspapers have to be contained and managed in shared space, as they expand and overflow into other passengers' space.
Luggage	Security of larger luggage is problematic, particularly if there is not enough proximate storage space. Luggage often spills out, or does not fit available space on buses and trains. Luggage becomes part of the travellers' gaze, checking its presence at intervals. Coaches separate large luggage from passenger, like airlines, and remove the responsibility. Low-level easy access buses enable child buggies to be wheeled into 'disabled' spaces, but often there is competition for the limited space. Children do not easily fit travel space and adult expectations.

Making travel time/space

Sound	Sounds punctuate and interrupt journey time, and cause distractions. Some demand attention and become irritating if not responded to (e.g. unanswered phone ringing). People manage the sound of their personal equipment in different travel settings.
Smell	Food smells, often very invasive, connect to the notion of experienced time, and the temporal organisation of the day. Other smells permeate and affect the experience of time.
Visuals	Windows provide the sighted with a permeable boundary between the vehicle and the passing scenery or roadscape. Often forms an essential backdrop for thinking and/or relaxation. Most commuters on bus, coach and train select window seats alone (unless travelling with others), and then fill up spaces in between. Upstairs on a bus, which has the best visual experience, seems to be more of a social space, where people travel with friends/family.