Connecting Dispersed Communities on the Move

Juliet Jain
University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

Glenn Lyons
University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

INTRODUCTION

Travel assists the development and maintenance of social networks from the local to the global by connecting people to places. The time spent travelling has tended to be regarded by many analysts as a necessary sacrifice to achieve this connectivity. Accordingly, the expansion or dispersal of communities has been a function of journey times, limited in turn by journey speeds in the face of increasingly congested transport networks. Yet in a world being transformed by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), this article contends that there is now a need to examine more closely the presumption that travel time is "wasted" and indeed to consider how, with the aid of ICT, this time might be being used to sustain or even encourage the dispersal of communities.

The article considers existing debates surrounding travel time use from transport studies and the social sciences to develop an agenda for conceptualising travel time use in relation to dispersed communities. The first section summarises concepts of spatial regions and regional-based activity that inform the study of mobility and transport. It argues corporeal travel remains necessary to sustain social and business networks that interweave local, regional and global geographic spaces. The discussion moves on to the experience of travelling and travel time use in the second section. Here, research into travel and mobile technologies illustrates the positive utility of travel time, and how mobile technologies reshape spatial connections on the move. The final section considers new modes of enquiry to explore this research area.

SUSTAINING DISPERSED COMMUNITIES

Travel and communication infrastructures facilitate regional connectivity in bringing together people, objects and places (copresence). Each academic discipline approaches regional division and connectivity with differ-

ent assumptions about society, urban design, and the role of technologies (Amin & Thrift, 2003; Graham & Marvin, 2000).

Social science debates exploring ICTs concentrate on the historical technological shrinking of time-space that has enabled the emergence of new global industrial relationships and employment practices (see for example Castells, 1996; Harvey, 1990). The telephone supports and maintains locally and regionally distributed kinship networks, particularly where the opportunity to travel for face-to-face meetings is limited by time and money (Licoppe, 2004). Yet, in an age of mediated communications (phone, email, etc.), copresence remains an important function of social practice (Boden & Molotch, 1994; Urry, 2003). Thus, as Urry (2002) argues, the relationship between copresence, social networks and mobility infrastructures warrants a more detailed understanding.

Discussions about copresence and accessing activities assume spatial separation and zoning of activities (e.g., central business districts and suburban housing). Planning and analysing industrialisation and urbanisation established the notion of spatially zoned activities (Harvey, 1990; Lash & Urry, 1994). Notably, the home-work-leisure relationships produced through a time economy (the division of paid labour and leisure time) frame discourses of produced space, i.e. urban space that is planned in relation to the economy and fixed capital investment.

The time economy, based on clock time as a quantifiable mechanism for measuring output, is central to concepts of productivity, values of time, and the ordering of everyday social practices (Adam, 1990; Thompson, 1967). Work at the factory and office has developed around predefined hours shaped by work-related legislation (e.g. nine to five, Monday to Friday), as well as at specific locations. "Work time" then implicitly frames the notion of "free time"[1].

More recently, these traditions of "working hours" have started to dissolve with the development of global trading, the Internet, and call centre service provision (e.g. shopping and banking), etc., where working hours have extended to correspond with international time zones

and the move towards a 24 hour culture (Krietzman, 1999). The information age is leading towards new employment practices and management structures (e.g. contract work, a growing mobile work force, and teleworking), which suggest a blurring and break down of traditional time-space boundaries (Castells, 1996; Lash & Urry, 1994).

Copresence remains a central part of everyday life *despite* the potential of mediated communications (letters, email, phone, the internet, etc.) for substituting the need to travel to places to see people, and impacts on everyday and less regular transport requirements, schedules and expectations of punctuality. Urry (2002) argues face-to-face communication, or being in a particular place, are embedded in social and cultural practice and obligations, and notions of social inclusion. Boden and Molotch (1994) argue from research into workplace communication that face-to-face contact is important at a number of levels including the non-verbal and informal talk. Rituals of copresence are institutionalized in many other aspects of life such as weddings, demonstrations, parliament and the legal system (Urry 2002).

Yet, until recently social scientists have paid little consideration to the mechanisms by which copresence is achieved. Urry (2002, 2003) argues the importance of developing a "sociology of mobility", and there is a move towards understanding the urban as constituted by flows of mobility (corporeal and virtual) and nodes of intersection (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Graham & Marvin, 2000). Travel time use has mainly emerged in the analysis of the experience of driving (for example Miller, 2000).

In contrast, activity modelling in transport studies has sought to address behavioural questions surrounding the transport demands produced by copresence and the movement between the "activity" locations. Activity modelling, with transport economics, focuses on destination and travel mode choice and value of travel time savings (see for example Metz, 2002; Mokhtarian & Chen, 2004). Here travel time is conceived as unproductive or wasted time, or at least as time that could be "better spent" if not required for travel. This assumption has led to two main research trajectories. Firstly, quantifying travel time "budgets", and, secondly, calculating monetary values for units of travel time and how much people are willing to pay for travel time savings (e.g. for evaluating investment into high speed trains or toll roads).

The notion of a travel time budget argues that there is a limited amount of time that people are prepared to, and indeed do, commit to travelling, which implies that faster (and flexible) travel enables more (or better quality) activities to be accessed over greater distances (Mackie et al., 2003; Mokhtarian & Chen, 2005). How much time is given to a destination activity also reflects on how much time people are prepared to travel for the activity (Schwanen & Dijst, 2002).

Transport economists calculate the values of travel time savings to inform investment in to new or improvements to transport infrastructures that reduce travel times (Hensher & Goodwin, 2004; Jara-Días, 2000, Mackie et al., 2003). In debating existing research, Mackie et al (2003) argue the average value of business time is four times that of non-working time, and different modes (car, bus and train) carry relative values of time. Jara-Diaz (2000) argues that travel time savings enable increased levels of economic output through greater time spent on production, and that time savings improve quality of life.

In summary, where time is equated with production and a time economy, travel time use is perceived as a quantifiable resource. Concepts of copresence, along with the activity modelling approach, provide a rationale as to why people come together at specific locations and times. However, the focus on connecting spatially separate activities and reductions in travel times has lead to a lack of understanding of the mobile subject (the traveller) and how travel time is and can be used. The incorporation of mobile ICT into everyday social practice specifically provides a new trajectory for travel time use. The section below develops the argument of mobile ICT and mobility to explore the question of connection to multiple regions in relation to travel time use and traveller identity.

TRAVEL TIME USE IN THE INFORMATION AGE

The discourse of travel time is at the brink of change. In the UK, rail companies have integrated laptop sockets into train design and are exploring on-board "wi-fi" connections. Concern over mobile phone use while driving has changed UK legislation. While grappling inconclusively with the positive utility of travel time in transport models, transport planners and providers recognise the importance of travel environment design in affording a space to work and communicate (see Cohen & Harris, 1998; Mackie et al., 2003). New methodologies are required for evaluating this development.

Emerging from debates about travel budgets, Mokhtarian and Chen (2004), consider how travel time might be a positive utility, beyond accessing the destination. They argue that the physical and psychological experience of travelling (e.g. driving), activities conducted while travelling, and travel time as "time out", all contribute to travel time having a positive utility (see also Mokhtarian et al., 2001; Pazy et al., 1996). Their arguments points to a need for transport studies to develop its understanding of travel time use.

Other studies in the social sciences consider travel time as part of wider mobility debates. The positive utility of travel time is identified in a number of mobile practices

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