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The future of free public transport: Dunkirk today, Paris tomorrow?

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New users, development of activities, modal shift, etc. trialling of free public transport in Dunkirk could provide inspiration for urban areas such as Paris. Maxime Huré, lecturer in political science at the University of Perpignan, tells us why.

In collaboration with a group of young researchers in sociology and geography, we wished to carry out a detailed survey on the move towards free public transport in Dunkirk. Dunkirk is a city that had already trialled free public transport at weekends and is therefore preparing to adopt comprehensive free public transport.

So, what are the first lessons drawn from research carried out in Dunkirk relating to weekend travel and therefore concerning leisure travel since this is the main use on non-working days.

Increase in the use of public transport and decrease in vandalism

First conclusion: since the move to free public transport was made, a reduction in the amount of damage and vandalism on buses has been recorded. This is paradoxical if we consider significant increases in the use of bus networks, since buses were used 29% more on Saturdays and 78% more on Sundays. This corresponds to a daily average of approximately 5,000 additional travellers per day on Dunkirk's buses.

New users...

Clearly this increased use is supported by new bus users. Who are these new users, or at least who are those that we have observed within the buses? First, individuals facing significant social, financial issues, who began using the bus network due to it being free are effectively observed. There are also young people aged 16-25 years old who take buses more intensively at the weekend, notably thanks to the increase in freedom that free bus travel offers them, such as the ability to go to the cinema or meet up with friends in the city centre at weekends.

Potentially the most interesting factor revealed as a result of the research in terms of the sociological makeup of new bus users in Dunkirk, is that the elderly were also observed. Elderly, often isolated people take the bus solely to get out of the house, for a breath of fresh air, to rediscover their city as they

told us during interviews, and also to re-establish social links, both occasionally on the bus, which is rather surprising, and with their network of friends and family.

Families can also be observed choosing to take the bus rather than the car, which is a very interesting factor. Why? This is because when travelling to the city centre by car, they faced issues parking their cars. Parking needs to be paid for, with limits to the amount of time you can stay, etc. Free bus travel avoids issues concerning time and money. Hence, families start using the bus at the weekend for leisure travel.

Families who choose not to use their cars at the weekend raise the question of a modal shift between cars and public transport. It is important to note that in Dunkirk cars largely dominate since they account for 67% of all travel modes.

It was observed, via a questionnaire carried out among 400 people, that 67% of new bus users decided not to use their cars in order to travel in Dunkirk city centre at the weekend, which is a very significant figure. A total of 33% decided not to walk, or chose public transport or bus travel over walking, and 15% chose to travel by bike as opposed to public transport. Note that the questionnaire was multiple choice, representing the option to use multiple modes of transport.

The first lesson to take away, in terms of weekend trends in any case, is that a relatively significant modal shift was observed from cars to public transport

...and new activities

So, what activities are new users traveling into Dunkirk city centre by bus at the weekend taking part in? It was observed that the number of bus users increased at the weekends due to people attending events organised by the public authorities in Dunkirk. Notably, events such as Dunkirk's carnival, but also other events such as exhibitions held in the city centre.

Another trend observed concerns feedback from local businesses. A survey was carried out with local businesses, who were very hesitant when free public transport was first introduced, but who are more or less satisfied today as they feel that there has been a slight boost in trade since free public transport was implemented. So, it is very hard to evaluate for the moment, and clearly more time is needed, but we will attempt to see if this trend continues, and if it can be confirmed in a second survey that we will carry out in 2018 and 2019 concerning the implementation of free public transport in Dunkirk, even if this trend clearly depends on the broader context, including, for example, the economic performance of Dunkirk's urban area, and also France's economic performance.

New representations of bus travel and the city

Firstly, what can be reflected upon, and what we have reflected upon, is the fact that free public transport will ultimately have an impact on representations and relationships between users and public services. This is important as today, if we consider the example provided by Dunkirk, buses can be considered as a new public space. A public space within which conviviality sometimes occurs, and within which tension can also occur, tension that can be clearly linked with the over-crowding of certain bus lines, yet we are presented with a new, emerging public space made possible thanks to free travel.

It can also be observed that representations of buses in Dunkirk are set to evolve. Today, they are synonymous with freedom, whilst for some users, buses can represent constraints: time constraints, etc. Today, buses have become a symbol of freedom which was a concept historically linked to cars: the car was defined as a symbol of freedom, at least during the period of the democratisation of the car in the twentieth century in any case, and it is becoming evident that buses will progressively earn this title from users who share their thoughts with us on what buses and free bus travel represent today.

There are also impacts in terms of image, in terms of the image portrayed by cities that opt to implement free public transport. This can be clearly seen in Niort: the Mayor of Niort clearly explained to us that the city's inhabitants are proud to have a free public transport network, as it enables them to project a positive image of their city externally, and to build a sort of identity or pride around this public policy.

Significant impacts concerning image can also be seen in Dunkirk, not only within media outreach of the public policy, but also in the sense of pride held by the city's inhabitants as a result of having free bus travel, and the ability to highlight this on both a national and international level.

What does the future hold for free public transport initiatives and for research based on them?

Firstly, I hope we will see developments in research centred on evaluation. Evaluation of the impacts of free public transport, both the economic impacts: impacts in terms of use, user influx, modal shift, and the impacts in terms of lifestyle transformations.

It can already be seen today that cities which have implemented free public transport initiatives are attempting to share their experiences with each other. This is particularly observed on a European level: we have cities that act as leading figures for these networks, such as Dunkirk in France or Tallinn in Estonia, who really seek to participate in sharing the public policy, sharing the idea, and lending guidance to cities that are currently thinking about adopting free public transport.

On that note, today, a certain number of cities are thinking about adopting free public transport. There are a certain number of citizen groups and associations that are campaigning for free public transport in Grenoble, Amiens, Lille, etc. And today, this is also the case in large cities such as Paris, with a commitment from Anne Hidalgo to reflect on the issue of free public transport in the Paris area, and in Germany, since they are planning to trial free public transport in 3 or 4 cities due to atmospheric pollution.

Recently, the Mayor of Paris announced that she would reflect upon the issue of free public transport for the entire Parisian transport network. If Paris is thinking about adopting free public transport, it is due to the fact that it is struggling to reduce the number of people travelling by car and to fight against atmospheric pollution.

So, is this measure possible for the Paris area?

For a very long time, economists considered that free public transport was only possible in small towns with a population of around 50,000 to 100,000. Dunkirk and Tallinn have largely exceeded this threshold, so it is conceivable for a very large city to adopt free public transport. And if I could allow myself to say that if Paris were to implement free public transport within its network, a network which is significant in size and very busy, then practically any city in the world could adopt free public transport, as Paris poses a number of problems linked to network funding and over-crowding of certain lines; in other words, significant problems that frequently occur in many large cities.

What could be said is that this reflection should take place in the long-term: it is often very complicated for cities, even smaller ones, to adopt free public transport from one day to the next. As such, this type of measure could be reflected on over a period of 5, 10 or even 15 years, since it is important to be able to prepare budgets for the move to free public transport, which will come at a relatively significant cost, all whilst being aware that the network will require investment due to growth in its use. That's the first factor to consider. The second factor is that, during the move to free public transport, trials can be carried out, and I would be tempted to advise cities to carry out trials before making generalisations.

Making Parisian public buses free, before making the tube or tramways free, is perfectly conceivable. As such, moving to partially free public transport, for a targeted group could also be considered. I

believe that Paris has already implemented this for the elderly. It could also be widened to include students, and other target groups and each trial could be evaluated - this seems important to me. Finally, as was the case in Dunkirk, free public transport could be implemented at weekends first, before extending this to all public transport, at weekends and during the week, too.

One of the obvious sticking points for Paris is funding. Here, there are several possible solutions, and I think that the public authorities are reflecting on them. Clearly, one option is to take advantage of restrictions that have been imposed on cars for over 20 years in order to finance free public transport in Paris. For example, a congestion tax could be considered in order to finance free public transport. Funds earned from car parking fees could also be considered as a means to finance free travel.

Free public transport: a virtuous circle

Regardless of what happens and whatever we may observe, and this goes against a preconceived idea, when free public transport is implemented, increased investment is pumped into public transport. Public transport investments are not frozen. Why? Because there are more users who, in turn, request better quality services.

And so, public authorities are prompted to invest even more money into their public transport network, which is what has happened in Dunkirk, since Dunkirk, in addition to providing free public transport to all citizens, plans to invest €65M during its mandate to create new bus lines with dedicated bus lanes, as well as aiming for fixed interval services.

As such, I'd like to say that the future of free public transport networks is pretty buoyant today. I think that it will be one of the themes in the 2020 presidential campaign during regional elections in both France and abroad.

Find the first video “Why are free public transport initiatives gaining ground?” on the Forum Vies Mobiles website.

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Why are free public transport initiatives gaining ground?

Video by Maxime Huré

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