

1. Videos

Making use of travel time

By
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People approach their travel time in various ways as time budgets for transportation increase. When it comes to choosing a means of transport, travel time in itself takes a back seat to the way in which people perceive time spent commuting and the type of activity in which they engage during the journey, explains Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin.

Our goal today lies in deciding whether travel time is time well spent. Because travel time has long been overlooked in scientific studies of transportation and is now becoming a key factor in the field of mobility.

The conventional conception of travel time: a waste of time

First, what is the conventional conception of travel time within socio-economics of transportation? Travel time is most often regarded by economic theory as an added cost required to get access to destinations and activities that people will conduct along their journey. As a result, it has long been assigned an economic, monetary value, that in a way corresponds to the price of such activities in terms of travel time. This rational paradigm requires users to minimise their travel time to make the most out of the activities done once they reach their destination. This concept is rooted in the assumption that travel time has no inherent value. It is a kind of interstitial and wasted time that is pointless. This concept has a direct impact on the chosen means of transport: according to such a theory, if individuals seek to reduce their travel time, then they will automatically choose for the fastest form of transport. This model has clearly been challenged and criticised, both from a theoretical and empirical standpoint.

Challenging this model

1. Travel time: a life experience in itself

First, from a theoretical standpoint, research in the field of transport economics began in the 1990s to review the usefulness — or at least the main utility — of travel time. Studies showed that travel time had a positive utility, not only because of the activities done during the journey, but also because of what characterizes of these journeys. Examples include the pleasure to travel, to enjoy the scenery, etc. Other disciplines—notably sociology and geography—explored the issue further, showing that travel time could offer inherent value and even turn the travel space and time into a living environment in

itself.

2. The increase in time budgets for transportation

Other studies explored more empirical data. One of the reasons why this issue of travel time is coming more into focus was the clear increase in time spent commuting on a daily basis. Conventional analyses of travel time are mainly based on the theory of a constant time budget, i.e. time people spend travelling on a daily basis. This was seen as constant in time and space, — a hypothesis known as the “Zahavi conjecture”. In Europe, a number of mobility surveys have shown an increase in time spent commuting in countries such as the UK, the Netherlands, France and Switzerland. This increase in travel time raises questions as to whether that time is indeed pointless or wasted. Which leads us to question what is at stake during such journeys: How can we label this time? Do people really want to minimise their travel time? How does this travel time affect everyday transport choices?

The five decision processes while travelling

First thing to determine is what to do when travelling. Clearly, we move from one place to another, but that is not all, because, while travelling, we engage in a whole range of various activities, which Michaël Flamm has divided into five main groups of typical decision processes: productivity, relaxation and transition, sociability, escape and emotion. The productivity factor has been highlighted in other studies, particularly those describing travel time as a sort of mobile office environment for some people. In this respect, time is used to work, whether in public transport or in a car. These activities show that appropriation must no longer be considered solely in regards to travel time, but also to travel space. This space can be turned into an extension of the home environment. This is all too clear among long-distance commuters, for instance, who use their train journey to finish ones night, get ready, put make-up on, have lunch or dinner, turning their travel space into personal space. At times, these decision processes can contradict one another. For example, some people intending to work during their journey may bump into somebody they know. In this case, the sociability issue conflicts with that of productivity. There can also be contradictions between relaxation and sociability; or between relaxation and productivity, etc.

Different perceptions of travel time

Describing the activities performed during the journey is not enough to fully convey the way people make use of their travel time because this approach does not take into account how people experience and perceive their travel time. This perception may be described as a form of continuum between time to kill and an enjoyable time, that is a very negative perception and a very positive one. Some people, for instance, will say “I can’t wait to get there” and feel like the journey takes forever. To kill time they will do things that have no particular meaning to them, that are simply designed to speed up this time they are not making use of, such as playing with their smartphone or computer. At the other end of the spectrum, there is an extremely positive perception of travel time, which is seen as time outside of the daily routine, which can be used to carry out activities that would not be possible to carry out without that travel time. There is nothing extraordinary about these activities: they might simply involve reading a book, listening to the radio or music. Yet the perception is different: “This is time I have every day that I would not have if I didn’t commute.” Between these two extremes perceptions, there are people who occasionally try to take advantage of their travel time by catching up on other daily tasks, such as eating and working.

Factors that influence how people appropriate travel time

A systematic analysis of the available literature on all issues affecting how people make use of their travel time reveals three key factors:

1. Material conditions

The first of them, material conditions, covers the actual means of transport used, including the comfort and ergonomics of the chosen form of transport, as well as available facilities, passenger information and cost.

2. Personal conditions

There is a wide range of miscellaneous personal conditions. Examples include passengers' knowledge of the network on which they are travelling or whether or not they suffer from travel sickness: All of these factors can influence the way in which people use transportation time.

3. Situational conditions

Finally, situational conditions refer to the situation in which the journey takes place: whether a passenger is travelling at rush hour, whether travel conditions are good or bad, etc. Appropriating different means of transport will vary according to the people and objects involved in the journey. It is also true that we still know relatively little from a systematic standpoint about the different factors influencing the way in which people appropriate their travel time. A brief study of available information on the subject reveals that the majority of studies focus on specific types of transport or specific situations, particularly in terms of modes of transport. We still have much to learn about how time is appropriated when travelling by car, for instance. Most studies cover time spent travelling by train, which gives a very limited view of how people appropriate their travel time.

Using public transport to allow more free time

According to my recent research into alternative mobility solutions and the habits of long-distance commuters, it is clear that the potential to allow more free time is a crucial factor in choosing the means of transport and, in particular, in choosing a form of transport other than the car. It is obvious in qualitative studies, which observe people and ask them about their habits. However, it can also be shown from a quantitative standpoint and that is worth noting. People in this category will tend to choose public transport, particularly because it gives them time to engage in other activities. They will choose travel times that are objectively longer but are subjectively more rewarding, allowing them to make much better use of their everyday schedules.

The search for quality time: a source of satisfaction

In conclusion, the main element is that travel time clearly has an inherent value. This underscores the importance of seeking a better understanding of the factors that affect the appropriation of this time, not only in public transport — and in particular on the train — but from a more general standpoint, with respect to all available means of transport. Furthermore, time spent travelling should not automatically be considered useful in the sense that it provides an opportunity to engage in other activities. It should also be approached in the way it is perceived and how these activities contribute to making use of travel time, i.e. if they are used simply to kill a time seen as pointless and wasted or if they are seen as adding value to the travel time. Travel time must not be seen as time well spent solely because it

provides a means to develop other activities; it is also important to take into account people's perceptions in developing these activities: That is: will they engage in activities simply to make time go by faster because they feel time travelling is time wasted or that the journey is "too long", or will they really make the most out of this time, if they perceive it as a source of satisfaction and pleasure? This naturally opens up a whole range of opportunities for transport operators, to find out how they can attract and secure passengers' loyalty so that they fully enjoy their travel time.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Change in practices
- Representations
- Rhythms of everyday life



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Stéphanie Vincent holds a doctorate in sociology and is a lecturer in urban planning and development at the Institut d'Urbanisme de Lyon (Université Lumière Lyon 2) and a member of LAET. Her work focuses on mobility practices at the interface between life trajectories and spatial planning. Since September 2023, she has held a junior chair in fundamental research at the IUF, where she is developing work on mobilitarian socialization, i.e. the way in which dispositions to the use of modes of transport are acquired, transmitted and transformed under the effect of the parameters of gender, social origin and living spaces.

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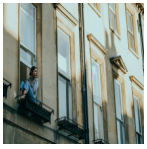
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