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# Travelling Times

■ *John Urry*

## ABSTRACT

■ This article explores aspects of travelling times. First, it is argued that there is something about contemporary times in which travelling assumes a greater significance within many people's lives, even at a time when more communication devices are readily 'at-hand'. Also, it is shown that there are multiple kinds of time involved in the process of travel and not just the measured clock-time that people seek to minimize in getting from A to B. It is further shown that the problem for travellers and, indeed, for non-travellers is coordinating multiple and inconsistent times through complex communications and scheduling tools. Thus travel time involves sets of activities that require examination since the time is not always wasted, dead or empty. These points are demonstrated with regard to walking, train travel and even car journeys. ■

**Key Words** driving, time, train travel, travel, walking

Journeys are the midwives of thought. . . . There is almost a quaint correlation between what is in front of our eyes and the thoughts we are able to have in our head: large thoughts at times requiring large views, new thoughts new places. (de Botton, 2002: 57)

[The] relationships and affairs of the typical metropolitan usually are so varied and complex that without the strictest punctuality in promises and services the whole structure would break down into an inextricable chaos. (Simmel, 1997: 177)

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## Introduction

This article explores aspects of travelling times. It is argued that there is something about contemporary times in which travelling assumes a greater significance within many people's lives. This is so in a period in which there are enormous increases in the technologies of communication that in principle could substitute for physical travel. Moreover, those travelling do not on average spend much more time actually 'on the road' than they previously did. Also, I show that there are multiple kinds of time involved in the process of travel and not just the measured clock-time that people seek to minimize in getting from A to B. Such times get filled in multiple ways. I further show that the problem for travellers and indeed for non-travellers is coordinating multiple and inconsistent times through complex communications and scheduling tools, and that travelling is different at different times, of the day, week, month, year, decade and so on. Thus travel time itself requires examination since it is not always wasted, dead and empty but can be filled with activities, fantasies and communications as many contributions within literature, art and the cinema have examined.

I locate this article within a 'new mobilities paradigm' within the social sciences (see Sheller and Urry, forthcoming). I argue that the analysis of 'mobilities' as a wide-ranging generic category transforms social science. Mobilities are not merely to be added to static or structural analysis. They require a wholesale revision of the ways in which social phenomena are examined. All social science needs to reflect, capture, simulate and interrogate those movements across variable distances that enable social relations to be performed, organized and mobilized.

This mobilities paradigm treats distance as hugely significant, as almost the key issue in social life, involving complex mixtures of presence and absence. All social relationships involve diverse 'connections' that are more or less 'at a distance', more or less fast, more or less intense and more or less involve physical movement. Social relations are never only fixed or located in place but are to very varying degrees constituted through 'circulating entities' (Latour, 1999). These connections stem from five interdependent 'mobilities' that produce social life organized across distance and which form (and reform) its contours: corporeal travel of people, physical movement of objects, imaginative travel of images upon multiple print and visual media, virtual travel often in real time, and communicative travel through person-to-person messages. And on occasions and for specific periods, face-to-face connections are made as a result of the corporeal movement of one of more participants. People

travel to connect with each other face-to-face but this face-to-faceness is a contingent, embodied performance occurring within certain spaces and times. It is this contingent meetingness that drives physical travel.

As people and objects move around further developing individual life projects, if not spending more time on the move, so much about them gets left behind as traces. These reconfigure humans as bits of scattered informational traces, since individuals increasingly exist beyond their private bodies as information stemming from and relating to them is also mobile. Moreover, mobilities do not just enable other activities but are in part activities in themselves. Different modes entail different kinds of practice, different pleasures and costs, different performances and affordances especially stemming from the material objects and forms of communication activated while people are contingently on the move.

### Travel time

I now turn to consider how mobilities are in part activities in themselves, addressing this particularly through the notion of 'travel time'. In relatively technical literature relating to the nature of transport, it is normal to argue the following:

1. The amount of daily travel time per person remains stable at a little over one hour per day.
2. Economically, the time that is spent travelling is unproductive and wasted – dead time.
3. Activity time and travel time are mutually exclusive of each other.
4. In appraising new transport developments it is appropriate to assume that all the time saved would otherwise have been wasted.
5. People will always prefer to minimize journey times and hence even tiny increases in speed and reduced time are to be given high value.

The first of these is an empirically striking and much debated claim. Thus, to summarize: 'People spend somewhat more than one hour per day travelling, on average, despite widely differing transportation infrastructures, geographies, cultures and per capita income levels' (Schafer, 1998: 459). This average time spent travelling seems to have remained for the past decades at around one hour plus per person per day across whole societies, although once behaviour is disaggregated large variations

are apparent (Londoners spend 30 percent more time travelling than those living in Scotland; Schafer and Victor, 2000: 174).

Increases in the speed of transport (vehicle performance, a willingness to drive faster, high-speed trains, cheap and growing air travel and so on) enable people to travel further within this average envelope of around one hour; this therefore increases their access to more distant people, goods, jobs and services (Lyons and Urry, 2005). So people seem to be willing to travel further but not to spend much more time travelling. Moreover, savings in travel time: 'are the single most important component in the measured transport benefits/disbenefits of most schemes and policies. Hence the methods of valuing them critically affect the measurement of the economic impacts of schemes' (DETR, 1999: 183; Lyons and Urry, 2005; Mokhtarian and Chen, 2004).

Explanations of this apparent constancy of travel time include: biological programming (evolution has meant that humans are biologically programmed to spend a fixed amount of time on travel); utility maximization (an optimum point is reached that reconciles increased travel time to access a larger supply of activities with a reduction in time to undertake such activities caused by increased travel times); and social routine (everyday life is full of settled routines of which travel becomes a part and takes its share of the allocation of time between all parts of the routine). None of these is entirely convincing but my main concern in this article is to establish a number of related points.

First, the time spent travelling is not necessarily unproductive and wasted; there are activities conducted at the destination; activities conducted while travelling, including the 'anti-activity' of relaxing, thinking, shifting gears; and the pleasures of travelling itself, including the sensation of speed, of movement through and exposure to the environment, the beauty of a route and so on (Mokhtarian and Salomon, 2001: 701; Featherstone et al., 2004). Mokhtarian and Salomon's (2001) survey showed that more than two-thirds of the respondents disagreed that 'the only good thing about travelling is arriving at your destination'; while nearly half agree that 'getting there is half the fun'.

Second, it is not reasonable to presume that travel times and activity times are therefore separate from each other and mutually exclusive. There are now many ways in which such times seem to overlap and become undifferentiated from each other (Lyons and Urry, 2005). And this is partly because of new technologies (akin to the humble book in the mid-19th century), which are 'mobile' and hence provide new access to activities that become possible and appealing to those on the move.

Also, new social routines are engendering spaces that are 'in-between' home, work and social life, forming 'interspaces' (Hulme and Truch, 2004). These are places of intermittent movement where groups come together, particularly involving the use of various technologies of communication, such as phones, mobiles, laptops, SMS messaging, wireless communications and so on, often to make arrangements 'on the move'. Some 'meetings' consist of 'underground' social gatherings or 'smart mobs' located in between the formal locations of work or home (Rheingold, 2002). These activities undertaken on the move in different spaces may extend journey times and make longer journeys more acceptable – hence the working day could be said to start at the beginning of the journey. The use of travel time for working could be viewed as part of the long working hours culture within the UK. Thus it may be that there is some shifting away from constant travel time to increases in journey time although this is difficult to research since part of that increase in time spent consists of 'activities' and 'communications' undertaken on the move.

The importance of activities on the move provides one way of justifying and developing the modal shift away from the car system (see Urry, 2004, more generally). The appraisal of transport infrastructures should take into account the multiple activities that can be carried out while travelling upon different modes. *Ceteris paribus* appraisal should favour modes that permit a greater array of 'activities' and 'communications'. The evaluation of different modes of travel thus needs to be based upon a reformed 'moral economy' of a mobile life and multiple activities and communications.

I now explore some of these issues, through a brief consideration of three mobility systems, showing how different time-spaces of movement can be.

### Pedestrian observations

First, walking. Those rhythms of the body, treading and retreading footsteps, are part of and engender many social practices: 'Walking has created paths, roads, trade routes; generated local and cross-continental senses of place; shaped cities, parks; generated maps, guidebooks, gear, and, further afield, a vast library of walking stories and poems, of pilgrimages, mountaineering expeditions, meanders and summer picnics' (Solnit, 2000: 4). Up to the development of what we might call the 'sitting society' in the past two or three centuries, the principal features of life were experienced in and through walking, as both a means of travel

and an embodied activity (we should not incidentally forget squatting; Ingold, 2004: 323).

Moreover, there is nothing 'natural' about walking (Ingold, 2004). Mauss (1979) shows that walking involves specific and societally variable techniques of the body. Walking varies greatly, within and across different societies. There are different ways of moving upright through varied environments, such as the Japanese and European walking bodies (Ingold, 2004). Each kind of walking involves different bodily techniques, each dependent upon different precognitive ways of anticipating how to be in the world that surrounds and constructs one (on the precognitive, see Thrift, 2001).

There are thus many ways to walk, sometimes mundane (to shop), sometimes the basis of unutterable suffering (to go on a forced march) and sometimes an activity of joyous fulfilment (to climb a much loved hill). Each contests the general dominance of 'head over heels', of cognition over groundedness, in the long history of western thought (Ingold, 2004). And one strange 'modern' form is walking for its own sake, freely chosen, sending the bare body off into environments sometimes of danger and foreboding (Thrift, 2001: 46). A 'good walk' here has little to do with the functional achievement of moving from A to B.

Finally, walking is interdependent with many technologies, footwear, clothing, places of rest, paving and pathways, other means of movement, places to walk to, rules and regulations about movement and access, signage and so on. Such technologies intersect with the capacities of human bodies, of strength, height, weight, vision, balance, touch and so on. In combination, they produce different capacities to 'walk the walk', to produce different walking bodies (Ingold, 2004; generally on bodies and technologies, see Shilling, 2005). There are various arts to walking and this I suggest is true of many other kinds of movement.

### **In the railway carriage**

The late 19th-century railway provided new ways of moving like a projectile through the countryside, seeing swiftly passing landscape as panorama, and socializing with strangers (Schivelbusch, 1986). Rail passengers were thrown together with large numbers of 'strangers' within novel, enclosed spaces. These compartments and stations led commentators to believe there was something newly democratic about rail travel. Thomas Cook described travelling by rail as a democratic and progressive force: 'Railway travelling is travelling for the Million; the humble may

travel, the rich may travel' (quoted in Brendon, 1991: 16; Schivelbusch, 1986: Ch. 5). Cook, the 'Emperor of Tourists', maintained that travel 'promotes universal brotherhood' (quoted in Brendon, 1991: 31–2). Rail travel thus involved new sociabilities as men and women found themselves in the company of strangers, even if roughly of the same class.

Simmel observed that: 'Before the development of buses, trains and streetcars in the nineteenth century, people were quite unable to look at each other for minutes or hours at a time . . . without talking to each other. Modern traffic increasingly reduces the majority of sensory relations between human beings to mere sight' (quoted in Schivelbusch, 1986: 75). And forms of social distance and an absence of communications became widespread; Goffman describes the importance of developing 'civil inattention', being in public but minimizing attention paid to others. He specifically highlights how newspapers and magazines allow us 'to carry around a screen that can be raised at any time to give ourselves or others an excuse for not initiating contact' (Goffman, 1963: 139).

From its early beginnings, rail travel has been associated with reading books; Victorian reading habits were significantly developed because of the huge growth of 'railway' reading materials following the appearance of book and newspaper stalls on most stations (Richards and Mackenzie, 1986: 298–303). It seems that 19th-century railway travellers became disorientated by the rapidly moving foreground and turned to reading to cope with new speeds as well as the embarrassment of sitting in an enclosed compartment with strangers.

The railway carriage is a socially organized environment, involving new sociabilities, new activities, new technologies (the book) and new fantasies.<sup>1</sup> The computer or mobile phone screens are contemporary examples of people screening themselves from the attention of others and explaining silence (especially likely to be deployed by women to avoid male harassment; see Edward Hopper's painting *Compartment*). This is therefore not dead or wasted time. Research undertaken for Transport 2000 considered the potential economic value of rail journeys for UK business travel if some travel time was productively used. In 2001, nearly 200 million business and personal business trips were made by rail. The study conservatively assumes that: 'every rail business traveller on strategic routes undertakes one hour of productive work on each business journey – a not unreasonable assumption' (Transport 2000, 2002). Based on this assumption, the value to the economy of this work time is £731 million per year.

In research recently conducted with a sample of 25,000 UK rail passengers we found that just over half spend some of their travel time reading for leisure, and over a third spend most of their time doing so, this being the most popular use of time overall.<sup>2</sup>

Working or studying is the activity most prevalent among those travelling for business purposes; they are more than twice as likely as commuters to spend most of their time doing this, this being the single most likely occupation of business travellers' time. By contrast, leisure travellers are twice as likely to spend most of their time window gazing/people watching. The passing scenery may indeed be part of their leisure experience, reflecting the 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 2002). In terms of communication, while 1 percent of all passengers spend most of their time making phone calls or sending text messages, 19 percent spend some time on personal calls/messages and 8 percent on work calls/messages.

Overall, passengers felt that travel time was not dead time; however, the younger the person the more likely they were to consider such time as wasted (see Figure 1).

We also considered whether passengers planned for their journey: 13 percent planned 'a lot', 41 percent 'a little' and 47 percent 'not at all'. Business travellers are much more likely to plan in advance 'a lot' (20 percent) or 'a little' (47 percent) compared with other passengers. More first class passengers plan in advance a lot (24 percent) than other

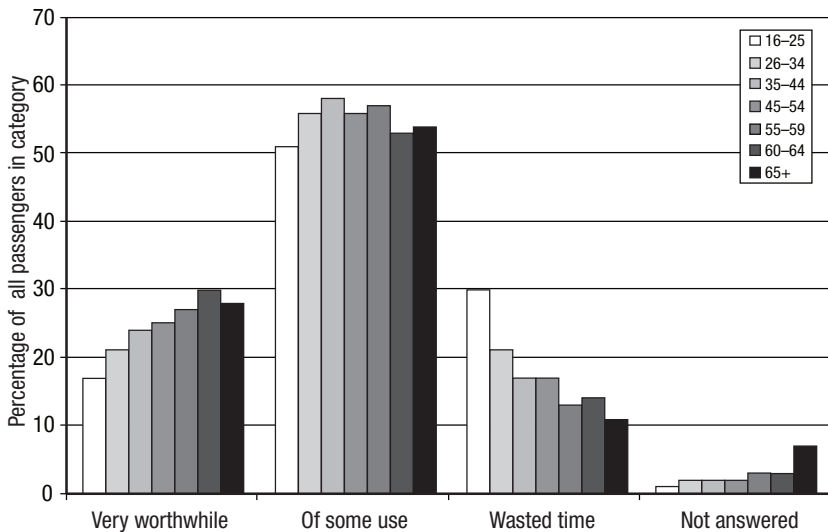
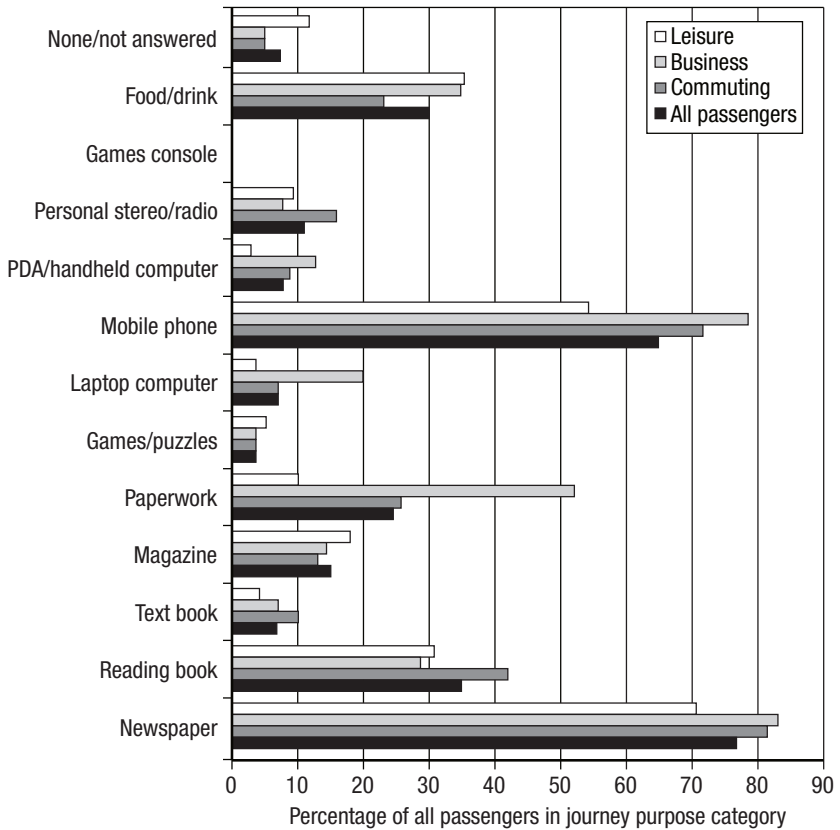


Figure 1 Respondents' opinion, by age, on the 'positive utility' of travel time

passengers (12 percent). Those passengers who consider their travel time to have been wasted are more than twice as likely to have done no advance planning (70 percent), compared with those who consider their travel time very worthwhile (31 percent).

Figure 2 shows, by journey type, what items individuals have to hand when they travel (see Gasparini [1995] on 'equipped waiting'). Over a third of passengers are equipped with a book; over three-quarters carry a newspaper; a third have paperwork and over two-thirds carry a mobile phone. Business travellers are much more likely to have a laptop, PDA/hand-held computer or to have paperwork with them.

We also found that rail passengers travelling with a laptop often do not use them. This corresponds with studies that show that the



**Figure 2** Items individuals have to hand, according to journey purpose, when they travel by rail

Source: Lyons et al. (2005).

technology of 'paper' is still the most important resource for much working (Brown and O'Hara, 2003; Sellen and Harper, 2003). Sellen and Harper, in documenting the myth of the paperless office, show an enduring importance of paper within those working in high tech. In the future, they say paper will: 'predominate in activities that involve knowledge work, including browsing through information; reading to make sense of information; organising, structuring and reminding of ideas; information integration in support of authoring; and activities that involve showing and demonstrating ideas and actions to others (mark up of documents, hand delivery, collaborative authoring and discussion in face-to-face meetings)' (Sellen and Harper, 2003: 207).

Other studies find the mobile phone to be the most useful device for those working on the move, providing important communications with co-workers and clients (Laurier, 2004). Over a fifth of rail passengers thought that having such devices with them made the time on the train a lot better (though nearly half of all passengers [46 percent] considered electronic devices had not made the travel time any better). Those travelling first class were more likely to consider that such communication devices made their time use more effective.

Finally, ethnographic material on the experience and passing of train time shows some interesting characteristics, especially the stretching of and the compressing of time over the course of a single journey (see Watts, 2005). For periods nothing much can happen as time can be said to drag, to stand still, while at other moments there are intense periods of multi-tasking.

### **In the iron cage of modernity**

The car system too involves various activities, some legal, some illegal. The car can be seen as the 'iron cage' of modernity, motorized, moving and privatized (Urry, 2004). And yet this iron cage is a room in which various senses are deployed. Once in the car there is little kinaesthetic movement from the driver. The car does, though, extend the senses so that the car driver can feel its very contours, shape and relationship to that beyond its metallic skin. As Ihde describes: 'The expert driver when parallel parking needs very little by way of visual clues to back himself into the small place – he "feels" the very extension of himself [*sic*] through the car as the car becomes a symbiotic extension of his own embodiedness' (Ihde, 1974: 272). An advert for the BMW 733i promised the 'integration of man and machine . . . an almost total oneness with the car' (quoted in Hawkins, 1986: 67). The body of the car provides an

extension of the human body, surrounding the fragile, soft and vulnerable human skin with a new steel skin, albeit one that can scratch, crumple and rupture once it encounters other cars in a crash. The car is both all-powerful and yet produces massive anxiety, ranging from the fear of accident and death to the frustration of wasting precious slithers of time.

Car drivers are able to control the social mix in their car rather like homeowners control those visiting their home. The car has become a 'home from home', a place to perform business, romance, family, friendship, crime, fantasy and so on. Unlike 'public' transport, the car facilitates a domestic mode of dwelling. The car driver is surrounded by control systems that allow a simulation of the domestic environment, a home from home moving flexibly and riskily through some of the most dangerous environments ever imagined. As one driver said: 'The car is a little bit of a refuge . . . although people can see into the car . . . it's almost as if this is my own little world' (Bull, 2004: 247). The car is a sanctuary, a zone of protection, however slender, between oneself and that dangerous world of other cars, and between the places of departure and arrival.

Part of this is the soundscape of the car, as new technologies of the radio, cassette player, CD player (and now also the TV) have increasingly ensured that this mobile home is filled with sound. Almost better than the 'home' itself, the car enables a purer immersion in those sounds, as the voices of the radio and the sound of music is there, in the car, travelling right with one as some of the most dangerous places on earth are negotiated (on the soundscapes of the car, see Bull, 2004). Other respondents in Bull's research pronounced that: 'I suppose I feel at ease, I put the radio on, put the keys in the ignition and I'm away'; another said: 'I'm in a nice sealed, compact space . . . I like my sounds up loud, it's all around you' (Bull, 2004: 246–7). Music and voices in the car fill the space.

Also work activities once mainly carried out in offices can for some be conducted within cars functioning as mobile hybrid offices (Laurier and Philo, 2001). The car is transformed into an office through its combination with the mobile phone, as well as using the car as a place for files, papers, storage and so on. Work materials can be synchronized and connected to other company members while on the road. The mobile is regularly used to rearrange the day as traffic impedes the smoothly planned series of meetings and encounters, involving a playful opportunism. And even traffic jams can be used to make phone-calls, preparing for subsequent meetings. Team working is achieved by the skilful use of

mobile telephony so as to maintain connections both with those back at the office, as well as with others on the road and with whom a meeting might be possible to arrange.

Often these meetings are held in the many third spaces or 'interspaces' lying along the road network, coffee shops, service stations, cafes, pubs, restaurants and so on. Thus each day these mobile workers are driving, listening, communicating, gossiping, scheduling and rescheduling meetings, downloading information, meeting up, moving on, building networks, planning the next meeting and coordinating a complex choreography in time-space. Activities and travel flow into one another. They are not separate in time or space and therefore there is complex scheduling while on the road, the use of various 'interspaces' and much multi-tasking.

And finally we can note how the car itself is a small café. In the US, there is a multi-billion 'cup-holder cuisine' industry and this is rapidly spreading to the UK with 60 percent of lunches taken on the move now bought from garages. But in the US it is said that 20 percent of meals are eaten inside vehicles. This has led to design changes in cars and in terms of the foodstuffs now being made available. In 2005 in the UK, 145 new car-convenient products were innovated, including Campbell's 'Soup at Hand'.

## Conclusion

I have established that walking, rail travel and car travel are not just means of getting from A to B. They are distinct social practices involving differing kinds of experience, performance and communications. Thus the idea of modal shifts in transport involves shifts between very different combinations of social practice, technologies, communications and sensuous experiences. This further means that there is no simple sense of travel time since the amount, value and use of travel time vary enormously across these three mobility-systems and are to varying degrees intertwined with various 'activities'.

Moreover, various technologies have stemmed from and are interconnected with various forms of movement. These form hybrids that make possible, afford, new kinds of experience, beginning with the highly portable book and newspapers on mid-19th-century trains. More recently, the transistor radio and then the Walkman were forerunners of mobile technologies. The latter was described as: 'virtually an extension of the skin. It is fitted, moulded, like so much else in modern consumer culture, to the body itself. . . . It is designed for movement – for

mobility' (du Gay et al., 1997: 23–4). Other developments include mobile phones, SMS texting, iPod, laptops, personal organizers, Blackberries. These technologies are 'ready-to-hand' components of life on the move. Mobile communications increasingly support a life on the move (73 percent of UK adults had a mobile phone by 2003). Indeed, such technologies are increasingly invisible, prostheses, that are taken for granted, ready-to-hand, part of the background for a mobile, modern, connected life with others. The ready-to-handedness of these machines means that even tiny slivers of time can be made 'productive' (Sherry and Salvador, 2002).

Moreover, these communications blur some distinctions between home, work and away, since people can be said to dwell in part within mobilities and especially within 'interspaces' (Hulme and Truch, 2004). Interspace I take to be the space and time between two or more 'events' resulting from how boundaries between travel and activity time seem to blur (see Lyons and Urry, 2005). Travel time is converted into activity time within 'interspace'. In turn, less of the individual's travel time is used, enabling more travel to occur or encouraging greater use of modes that enable activities to be undertaken en route. Specifically, many people use travel (and waiting) time to keep in touch with their 'personalized network', restoring trust, maintaining 'absent presence', rearranging events and more generally never being fully 'absent' (on 'perpetual contact', see Katz and Aakhus, 2002; on 'connected presence', Licoppe, 2004,).

These are new versions of the importance of the timetabling of social life emphasized by Simmel (1997). Much mobile use occurs in-between events and sometimes this in-between time-space is more important than the actual events (especially with SMS texting). Various social groups spend a large amount of time in transit and they text and call, both for work and for friendship. Much mobile phone use involves arranging and rearranging 'events' on the move, in transit. Townsend argues that: 'individuals live in this phonespace and they can never let go because it is their primary link to the temporally, spatially fragmented network of friends and colleagues they have constructed for themselves' (Townsend, 2000: 95). There is a shift from punctual mode emphasized by Simmel at the beginning of the century to a more fluid mode of timekeeping as times and spaces are negotiated and renegotiated on the move (see Larsen et al., 2006).

And why is this happening? Why does travel time need to be used? It seems that people's daily and weekly time-space patterns are progressively desynchronized and it is necessary for systems to provide

the means by which work and social life are scheduled and rescheduled. Organizing 'co-presence' with key others (workmates, family, significant others, friends) becomes demanding with a loss of collective coordination through regular timetabling. The greater the personalization of networks, what Wellman and his collaborators term 'networked individualism' (Wellman, forthcoming), the more important systems are to facilitate that personalization. There is a spiralling, adaptive relationship effected through 'scheduling systems' available and used on the move. There is a 'do-it-yourself' scheduling society commonplace in at least large cities across the world. And the greater the personalization of networks, the more important the systems to facilitate that personalization while on the move.

Thus there are irreversible changes taking place that are moving social connections towards person-to-person networks requiring specific personalized scheduling systems in order for life on the intermittent move to take place. So travel times involve complex forms of co-presence, of in-between space, using tiny fragments of time and in which arrangements and rearrangements are made and remade. Time on the road, even in the car, seems to be increasingly colonized by many activities including arranging and rearranging travelling times on the move. This is part of the shift from a punctual mode to a fluid mode of travelling and communicating (see Larsen et al., 2006).

## Notes

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1. The carriage and station provide the setting for countless literary and artistic forms: Emile Zola, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Lawrence Durrell, Arthur Conan Doyle, Arnold Bennett, Noel Coward, Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy situate their novels in and around stations and trains. These are places of unexpected social interchange as people's lives from distant parts are contingently brought together, often only for 'brief encounters' before the characters move away (or home) again (Richards and Mackenzie, 1986: 360–4).
2. See Lyons et al. (2005) for the following account for research undertaken with the UK's (former) Strategic Rail Authority – the latter is in no way responsible for the views expressed here.

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