

JONATHAN BRAY



Are we in last days of public transport?

There's a strong school of thought that a disruptive technology will emerge that turns the world of public transport upside down

► Once upon a time the future of transport was supposed to be all about hovercars and jetpacks. Close your eyes and think of *The Jetsons* (or ask Siri to do it for you). It gave thinking about the future a bad name because that future never arrived. But now the future does seem to have arrived. Everyone is semi-permanently jacked into their smart devices - including miraculously thin tablets of aluminium and glass - that talk back. And for hovercars and jetpacks read cars that drive themselves and drones. It's all in danger of being a little bit overwhelming - what's a traditional industry like public transport to do?

Given the range and quality of the speakers at last week's *Smarter Travel 2015* conference in Birmingham was a good opportunity to reflect on what the future of the industry might be. As screenwriter William Goldman said, 'nobody knows anything' about what success looks like in the future. However, with the benefit of some of the excellent speakers at the conference - step forward John Whitelegg (Stockholm Environment Institute), George Hazel (Scottish Enterprise), Sampo Hietanen (ITS Finland), Professor David Metz (UCL) in particular - and my own thoughts, here goes...

We are living in the last days

There is a very strong school of thought that says the traditional public transport industry is living in the last days. It's the next sector that will see its traditional business model bushwacked by what is known as 'disruptive

technology' or 'disruptive innovation'. This is where outsiders to traditional business (but backed by a tidal wave of investors' cash) use IT to offer new products and services that sidestep the conventions, traditions and business models of incumbents. They largely ignore how the ecosystem of these sectors have evolved over the last hundred years and go straight to the consumer with an offer that the consumer likes, or at least finds hard to ignore. They don't care about your traditions, your successes and failures, your unwritten understandings, your regulatory frameworks (except where they really have to). The only thing they care about is offering the consumer a product that is sticky, that works, that can't be ignored.

Uber is the first of the horses of the apocalypse to appear. From nowhere. Six years ago it didn't exist. Now it's valued at \$40bn. And the bad news for the traditional public transport world is that you don't know when the next horseman of the apocalypse will arrive - and in what form. But arrive they will because it's not just tech companies that are circling high above public transport's cosy little world, there's the massive global energy, telecoms, credit card, automobile companies potentially entering into who knows what alliances. You are already in their laser sights and you don't even know it, never mind when they will press the trigger. And there's a mountain of money available to them because worldwide transport is a market with more zeros behind the dollar

sign than is fathomable.

The proponents of this view say they know what you are thinking right now. You are thinking that yes this has happened in other markets: retailing, telecommunications, banking and so on. But transport is different, always has been and always will be - the wheels on the bus will keep going round. And they smile and say - no, transport isn't different. That's what every sector says before what at first looked like little dots that appeared on the horizon and then got bigger and bigger as they got closer and closer until the horizon was blotted out.

Some of the proponents of this view say that in the end there will be around 15 global mobility companies offering you access to collective transport, hire bikes, zero emission cars and pods - wherever you are in the world. Paying for it in packages, by the hour, pricing varied by demand, by quality, by journey time, by your personal preferences. Or as a discounted, or a free add-on, to a wider lifestyle or retailing offer. Free with the price of your theatre ticket, or your shopping, or as a loyalty incentive, or basically just to destroy the competition (that's you by the way).

These mobility companies will be so much wealthier, powerful and better informed than local government that they will start to pull the strings of transport planning in the same way that big developers and the supermarkets outgun local authority planning departments to the extent that local government caves in. Or cities might start using what leverage they have on these mobility companies (in terms of regulation and taxation) to ensure there are concessionary options on mobility packages for vulnerable or deprived groups (such as the unemployed).

The implications of all this hurt the head. But they include what kind of regulatory framework do we need for this new world or do we do what we usually do and regulate years too late in a half-hearted way only after large corporations have barged their way into positions of dominance and have determined the landscape in a way which suits them. And

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where exactly does all this leave the traditional bus service? Perhaps on busy core corridors it becomes a road-based mass transit system. But, except on mass transit corridors, in an era of Uber, car sharing apps and networks, and on demand autonomous vehicles, does the bus have any future at all?

And relax... kind of

But, others say there is a danger of 'millennial fever', that the advocates of the 'last days' view are blinded by the artificial light (and the potential financial rewards). They are rushing round the public transport village raving about a vision that may turn out to be nothing but a crazy dream. After all the IT just isn't there yet to allow the simple act of travelling on a bus from A to B to be sorted out by an electronic bazaar on your mobile phone between rival mobility companies that don't exist yet. And anyway getting on a bus isn't like buying a fridge or travelling to New York. What's wrong with a complete lack of choice and the complete simplicity of one network, one ticket, one price? Seems to work just fine in London and most other major cities round the world. Does it really matter for most people that buying a transit ticket in Berlin is different from buying one in Paris? It's not top of anyone's list of global or personal concerns. Indeed why are we allowing ourselves to be

mesmerised by screenglow in the first place. Is this all our vision of the future is now? A future in which mobility companies get to decide where the traffic goes, that they don't want or need the poor to travel, that they will keep the profits whilst the public sector pays for the infrastructure. Mobility companies orchestrating a race to the bottom on pay, conditions and public safety by turning transport into automated contest to see who will do the job cheapest. One app to rule us all.

Is this the best we can do? Why don't we put an area and its citizens first? Make sure technology is the servant of the populus not the master. The Germans are busy making cycle, taxi and car hire an add-on to the municipal public transport offer - indeed something wider still where they own the utilities too. They are making mobility a civic benefit not a corporate game of monopoly.

There's another argument against 'the last days' theory too - that despite all the social and technological change that has come and gone over the decades the more things change the more they stay the same. Our streets are still full of Victorian and Edwardian buildings, most cars are the result of a series of incremental upgrades of the Ford Model T, most people's travel needs remain fairly basic and predictable. Indeed for all sorts of good reasons the IT sector is historically dynamic

and the transport sector historically is conservative. Transport may continue to be a sector where change is incremental.

As for ultra low emission vehicles - ladies and gentlemen, I give you the bicycle. A healthy means of transport that is growing in popularity everywhere you look. All the billions the public sector is pumping in round the world to support ultra low emission vehicles and autonomous vehicles so that people can clog up the streets with hi-tech pod cars. Er, why don't we spend a fraction on that on transforming the urban realm into the kind of places we all would actually prefer to live in and where all those short journeys we mostly make could be made on foot or bike?

Usually the aim of writing a column is to simplify something complicated into a simple argument. But the future is both too complicated for that and still up for grabs. The only sure thing is that those who aren't thinking about it now have no chance of shaping it. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is director of the PTEG Support Unit. Before joining PTEG in 2003, his background was a mix of transport policy and transport campaigning.

