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Does transport policy need a nudge?

Spending on transport programmes that focus on influencing the brains of travellers, rather than infrastructure, can be effective

► People are strange. They do what they do for all sorts of reasons. Or often reasoning has nothing to do with it. They do what they do because of emotions, habits, instincts. They certainly don't behave like the economists say they should. You can't rely on them making a rational decision based on the information they have before them - as classical economics would have us construct our world around. Or as one of the chief gurus of 'nudge' theories (of which more later), Professor Richard Thaler of the University of Chicago, says: "Economists assume people have brains like supercomputers that can solve anything. But human minds are more like really old Apple Macs with slow processing speeds and prone to frequent crashes."

This applies to travel decisions too. Transport planning is largely based on the assumption that people will want to travel by the route that gets them there quickest. We plan infrastructure and provide services on that basis. But in reality the pursuit of the fastest way of getting from A to B is not the only neural pathway lighting up when people make travel decisions. There's cost of course. But there's also an alphabet soup of considerations whirling around in there.

People may drive the kids to school (or not) primarily because it extends family time. They might not consider taking a job in one town when they live in another because that's not what their peer group or family group do. They might go on the same bus route even

though it's slow and indirect because they are familiar with where it stops, and going a more direct and unknown way makes them feel anxious. People don't like to feel anxious. People also don't like to feel stupid or scared or out of place. All sorts of cultural, social and psychological factors can come into play.

You might not feel safe in another urban 'manor', you might hate having to ask about how the ticketing system works, you might not like travelling through tunnels, you might not like being surrounded by suits, grannies, men or people you consider your social inferiors or superiors. You might think that people like me travel on this mode of transport and not that mode of transport. You might be subject to a collective conservatism. You might like staring out of the top floor windows of double deckers or a later, slower train with elbow room.

People like pleasure. They trade it off with utility - minutes saved versus minutes enjoyed. You might go the scenic way round, the way you can get a seat, the way that you can get some work done or recharge your phone, or which means you can go to that café you

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like, the pleasingly obscure way. The way that beats the system. You might cycle it or walk it instead - it's a nice day after all. Time passes faster in higher quality environments so a journey that's shorter in clock time can seem longer in the human mind if it's uncomfortable and stressful. So what do conventional time savings mean then? Sometimes none of these considerations come into play because the mind's on automatic - this is how I always do this journey. And sometimes of course for a particular journey there are very few options available (other than for the very time rich or very awkward). People are complicated. They are human beings not zeros and ones that behave rationally in a computer model.

Even if people were the rational consumers of classical economics - which they aren't. They often aren't the informed consumers of classical economics either. For example research on the Underground found that many travelers are infrequent, inexperienced and may make irrational decisions. Many of them want to improve their journey (but not 'take one for the team'). On the Tube two in three customers would make changes to improve their journey experience if they could. To the extent that basic information provision for passengers about when the rush hour was on the Underground (ie. telling passengers what the busiest quarter hours at a particular station were) led to a shift out of those busiest periods of 5-6%. I would have thought that people wouldn't need telling when the rush hour was on the Tube but ignorance and a desire to avoid overcrowded Tube trains meets information and hey presto!

More extensive and sophisticated campaigns around managing disruption associated with improvements to the system have also proved their worth. For example, the withdrawal of the Victoria Line from Seven Sisters to Walthamstow Central and a reduced service on the rest of the line is enough to bring out any line controller in a cold sweat - or a hot sweat for passengers given it took place in August 2015. But through close coordination with operational teams and modeling the potential impacts on passenger flows, followed through by deploying a battery of communications to passengers, from social media to posters, led to high awareness by passengers, positive feedback, a stable pattern of behaviour change and a reduction in

