

THE BRAND WAR BETWEEN CARS (SOV'S) AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT: THE CASE FOR A PRIVATE ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORT NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the challenges we face as a result of car use and the projected increase in cars on our roads. It also looks at the barriers we face in our efforts to mitigate or reverse the effects of this trend. We look at current academic thinking and the limitations surrounding the ability of academia and traditional models to help in solving transport problems. The paper then goes on to suggest possible solutions and ways of overcoming these challenges, specifically making a case for a private, Alternative Transport Network (ATN). It will also be argued that the model of the ATN is manifestly in the long and short term interests of both the public and private sector and of all who use transport in our cities.

The business case for and operational model of an ATN are not in the scope of this paper.

1 INTRODUCTION

The brand war between the car and public transport is a war the public sector cannot win. As a result there currently exists a need and opportunity for an Alternative Transport Network (ATN).

The distribution of modal use between cars and alternatives to cars (bus, bicycle, train, walking) does not reflect the most socially desirable mix. The single occupancy vehicle (SOV) as a means of commuting at fixed times to and from work is the most distinctly distorted example of modal bias.

The overwhelming reason for this impractical culture is the social status and personal space a car offers. These soft factors are not the first decision factors that dictate a person's choices but they are to some degree neglected by traditional transport thinking. Yet such intangible factors are a very real challenge to green transport and alternative modes. In this paper we look at ways of addressing them.

The reason cars have an inherent, culturally driven and higher status than public transport and sustainable alternatives is in large part, due to the fact that cars are a very effective means of demonstrating wealth, and that car brands are marketed very intelligently by car companies. By contrast, the public sector in South Africa has not managed the brand of government agencies and para-statal effectively. This has as much to do with management as it has to do with the brand communication strategy of the public sector.

We will argue that the challenge of developing alternatives, or competing with the car brand must be owned, managed and marketed by the private sector in order for it be effective. However, there is still an important role for the public sector; that of supportive legislation and regulation. Additionally, the public sector needs to support a private sector ATN by means of infrastructure and urban design.

An ATN targeting those that can afford to commute in cars would have to be exclusive in order to increase the status and “sexiness” of the ATN’s brand. This somewhat uncomfortable reality will be discussed further below.

Such a network is an even more important model to design and implement for the developing world as this is where car related problems are projected to be most severe.



Figure 1: Cars, the Cause of Congestion

2 THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Increases in the rate of urbanization, population and income are causing numerous systemic risks to society as a whole, not least of which is the effect these mega trends have on the number of cars on our roads; the increase in total kilometres travelled and subsequent congestion and emissions. The most severe consequences of these are costly increases in commuting times, climate change, and exposure to energy price and supply volatility. Therefore there is an inevitable and urgent need to mitigate the challenges we face which relate to cars or more specifically, single occupancy vehicles.

There are no obvious solutions. If there were these solutions/models would be implemented. Our inability to implement seemingly helpful solutions effectively is part of what makes the given solution impractical.

As mentioned there is an even more urgent need to meet these challenges in so called emerging market cities. This is because the growth rate of the given mega trends are most severe in such cities. Studies also suggest that modal bias is also heightened where there is high inequality. Our cities will suffocate and collapse if nothing is done.

The problems we face relate to market distortions that result in an inefficient reflection concerning the most desirable travel behaviour. The barriers we refer to or choice factors

are generalizations of the spectrum of thought that makes up our decision making that lead to our behaviour. The aim of the suggested solution is to create a bridge between the barriers or modal bias that is not desirable to what we really want as individuals and for society as a whole.



Figure 2: Negative Consequences of GHG Emissions

3 ACADEMIC THINKING

There is a growing body of literature on social, economic, cultural and environmental factors affecting travel choices. Yet progress to incorporate this body of knowledge within practical transport planning and modelling has been slow (Derek Halden Consultancy, 2003).

For a long time, car use was predominately explained through behaviour models that focus on factors such as speed, cost and time. These so-called hard factors are arguably some of the most obvious and significant factors and not coincidentally the easiest to measure hence its overemphasis in conventional transport models. However, even a single soft barrier (status, comfort, security) may be enough to prevent a public policy from having its desired effect. Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour is by far the most common and influential theory used to explore transport choices. Although the strength of the Theory of Planned Behaviour is its simplicity and wide applicability, the theory has typically been used to examine behaviours pertaining to simple binary choices. The theory is therefore too simplistic.

The car is much more than a means of transport. Car use is not only popular because of its instrumental functions; other motives seem to play a similarly important role, such as the feelings of power and superiority etcetera. The motivations of human behaviour and the barriers to behavioural change are extremely complex. It is rare and almost impossible to study the interactive effects of the full range of simultaneous interventions available. Research centred on the individual usually ignores the interactive relationship of behaviour in its social, cultural and economic dimension, thereby missing the possibility of fully understanding crucial determinants of behaviour. This raises the question; how do we provide evidence which has credibility, when evidence is lacking, given the full spectrum of variables involved that are so difficult to measure?

Bridges to modal shifts include improvements to alternatives such as: the management & administration of alternatives; technology and marketing; and making car travel less attractive to name a few. Essentially, if there is a gap between what is socially desirable for mode choice and what people desire, then it is necessary to understand and address the factors which define this gap (Derek Halden Consultancy, 2003). Furthermore, choices are

context specific and policies will only be effective if they correctly target the gaps in market efficiency.

Dependencies or needs vary, particularly when it comes to soft factors. Surveys suggest that personality types that would make up the given market place have significantly different attitudes to modal choices, and solutions for each, differ. Barriers also differ for different types of travel behaviour and for different segments of the population, hence monolithic top down solutions tend not to work as desired. The market place is too diverse. This can be seen for example when trying to deal with soft factors in real world pilot scenarios; pre-screening research and creating subsequent tailor-made solutions or products for the different sub groups is more effective (Cairns (2004). The intricacy of this interaction and diversity in barriers are important priorities for further research and inclusion in transport thinking, models and policy

Encouraging car drivers to switch voluntarily to public transport is a potentially long and complex exercise. For society to develop a more acceptable, economically beneficial and environmentally sustainable approach to travel, a broader approach is needed to understand and manage travel behaviour.

The idea of what a car is needs to be challenged. As mentioned, cars are much more than a means of transport. But when people envisage future transport they think more of public transport and a car free commuter system -however there are many short term barriers that need to be overcome to realise this acceptable vision. No single barrier or type of barrier is most important in itself. Instead, as mentioned, objective, subjective – soft, hard – conscious, subconscious – factors all interact. If the external constraints are too great, people will become discouraged. People simply may not be able to act. Likewise, no matter how favourable the external circumstances, some powerful psychological and normative barriers to behaviour will prevent these from being realised.

4 BRT AND PRACTICAL BARRIERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Typically, car users consciously perceive public transport as amongst other things; inaccessible, uncomfortable, unsafe, perhaps more time consuming and only for the poor, what is more, many would not even know how to use public transport, even if they wanted to. One may say that BRT will solve most of these challenges, which while the buses are still new and stations shiny, it does. Cost inefficiency aside, BRT still faces severe challenges. The biggest of these is of course low density. This creates considerable problems with respect to accessibility which is part of the *first and last mile* gap an ATN would need to fill. Too many barriers remain for BRT to have its desired affect and hence, by itself, it is not sustainable.

ATN's have their own challenges many of which are shared with ordinary public transport models; cost, accessibility/density, time, effort, habit, personal space and flexibility to name a few. These are all challenges that an ATN must overcome to stand a chance against the car culture.

5 A CONTRARIAN SOLUTION

In order to create a convincing case to car users and the car culture as a whole, we need to create an exclusive and private alternative transport network. It is imperative that one caters for status in the alternative. If one thinks of how much money is spent by car users on excess power, speed, size and car brands, we see how important status is to people and how valuable this want is. Creating or supporting a somewhat elite transport system

maybe uncomfortable for many to consider but this is the reality and must be accepted if one is to make any inroads. If the traditional thinking prevails, we will never overcome the problems related to car use, they will simply get worse.

As mentioned, cars are a primary means of demonstrating wealth, so the ATN has to differentiate itself in this way. It's cool to ride a bike if you can afford a car, but people need to see that you have the choice. This is the reality that we are dealing with and need to recognise. So while there are many other challenges, it is the brand of the ATN that is the single most important ingredient of its success.

6 A VISION OF WHAT AN ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORT NETWORK COULD LOOK LIKE

We see a long term vision of an exclusive zero-emitting, private transport network that targets people who currently use cars. The network should be made up of retrofitted private train carriages, luxury buses, school buses, walking buses (security escorts), bicycle services and facilities, carpooling communities as well as access to communal cars. The network will also use and facilitate the use of existing public transport systems in order to help make existing public transport more accessible and convenient to the network users. This multi modal system will be brought together by hubs or meeting points where the modes seamlessly interlink.



Figure 3: People Moving out of Cars

The business case requires that this is an exclusive/closed network, due to the potential income streams generated by a subscription based system. The business case is not in the scope of this paper. A closed network also adds to the brand and status of the ATN.



Figure 4: Bicycle rental depot

The hubs themselves would be designed to maximise the experience of the commute, with tailor-made facilities for all of a commuter's needs. Facilities could include any combination of the following: locker rooms, study centre, internet café's, wireless hotspots, video conferencing facilities, bike racks, showers, communal car lots, meeting rooms, coffee, shops, gyms, bike rentals, car charging docks, car battery rental etcetera.

The commuting experience will be faster, more fun and sexier than the current experience of a car in traffic. It will give time back to its users, in a clean and green way that decreases congestion and emissions in the city as a whole.

An alternative transport network coupled with public sector actions will make inroads into the status of the car or at least undermine the current culture of the affluent commuter's modal choice.



Figure 5: Alternative Commuters (Boris Johnson, right)

7 THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR

The public sector cannot politically be seen to be acting directly in this space. This is in spite of the fact that there are many obvious positive externalities, such as; job creation, decreases in GHG emissions, commuting time and resultant increase in the competitiveness of the given city, as well as diversity and resilience in transport infrastructure etcetera.

There are further reasons why this work cannot be directly taken on by the public sector but should be done in conjunction with the private sector. The public sector is not nimble enough to handle the need for dynamism in such a nuanced new industry. There is no algorithm to implement this, no framework that allows one to simply join the dots; it's a unique task that requires private sector adaptability.

The public sector has also shown a poor understanding of brand. Its focus on supply and tendency to neglect the exact needs of the consumer make it a poor agent of implementation. However, there is a vital role for the public sector to play and it would in fact be impossible to make a successful ATN without working together.

7.1 Public Campaigns

Much like the very effective campaigns and legislation put in place in the tobacco industry, there is a vital role for the public sector to play in communicating and educating the public at large as to the real costs of car use. This is not to say cars should be demonised like cigarettes, but only to articulate the negative aspects of the SOV commuting culture and impart the benefits of the alternatives.

7.2 Congestion Charges Incentives and Disincentives

These are only a medium to long term solution as one has to have legitimate alternatives before one tries to force people out of cars. Over time congestion charges and taxes do work, but the intent to change must be coupled with an alternative that can absorb this shift. Without the alternative or change in behaviour, congestion charges do less to change behaviour and can merely act as an additional revenue stream for the government. There is an argument for taxes being used to price in the real costs of car use but then the pool of capital needs to be used to offset the production of GHG to have any effect on net emissions.

7.3 The Built Environment

By laws governing parking, density and vehicle access, needs to work integrally with the growth path of an ATN. It is important that, like congestion charges, or to add another example, dedicated lanes, the action is timed so that its intended affect can be absorbed into a solution. There is little point in building an airport shuttle from the Cape Town CBD without a smarter *first and last mile* feeder system, parking or simply a pick up and drop off point. The danger of poor planning is that by the time accommodating these mandatory needs is complete; the consumer can become a disillusioned with the public option. Timing is key! This is why working together is so important for the various interventions to have their desired effect.



Figure 6: Bike Station

8 CONCLUSION

Due to rising population levels, income and rates of urbanization, there is an urgent need to overcome the car culture and take pre-emptive action against increasing pressure on our transport infrastructure.

Traditional transport thinking will not answer these challenges. This paper has outlined how and why an exclusive ATN could go a long way to counteract these challenges in a realistic and practical way.

An ATN should be run and controlled by the private sector, but must work with the public sector in respect to public communication campaigns, incentives and disincentives as well as being supported by public micro level public sector decisions with respect to the built environment and urban infrastructure. Interventions should be coupled with solutions to absorb the intention to change behaviour.

It is not the intention to make solutions sound obvious and to undermine the thinking that has gone into the large top down infrastructure projects. Nor do we simply want to lay out a utopian theoretical solution that has not been tested. We simply want to state the direction in which we need to be thinking and need to explore. We need to overcome the idea that we can use a public solution by itself to overcome the greatest transport challenge of all, the car.



Figure 7: Another way

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