

Connected Communities

Networking communities

Mobility, nationalism and the historical geographies of connective infrastructures

Peter Merriman & Rhys Jones



Background

Executive Summary

This document provides a synthetic review of how transport infrastructures and mobility practices have been seen to help and hinder the cohesion of local, regional, national and trans-national communities in different geographical, historical and cultural contexts. The main research review is in four sections, covering 'Infrastructures, technologies, materialities', 'mobile practices', 'scales', and 'politics'. The review outlines the importance of both material infrastructures and mobile embodied practices in networking communities at different scales, as well as emphasising the plural and contested nature of communities. The report outlines the key findings of the scoping exercise on a future project to examine the role of transport infrastructures and mobility practices in networking Wales as a national community. As an integral part of the project a workshop was held at Aberystwyth University with a multi-disciplinary grouping of leading international scholars who have undertaken research on the past and present role of transport infrastructures and mobility practices in connecting communities. The findings of the research review and scoping exercise were presented at the workshop, and the presentations at the workshop have informed the final version of this report. Finally, the project outlines a series of recommendations for future research and outputs from this project.

Researchers and Project Partners

Peter Merriman (PI)

Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences at Aberystwyth University

Rhys Jones (CO-I)

Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences at Aberystwyth University

The international workshop involved the participation of twelve leading experts on mobility and transport.

Key words

Mobility
Community
Transport
Connectivity
National identity
Politics
Scale
Space

Networking communities: mobility, nationalism and the historical geographies of connective infrastructures

1. Research Review

This review investigates how transport infrastructures and mobility practices network and connect communities at different scales in different geographical and historical contexts. The project investigated foundational questions about what qualify as communities, and it examined how communities are connected at different scales, i.e. what connects? and by implication, what divides communities? The review is focussed around four key themes – infrastructures, technologies, materialities; mobile practices; scales; and politics. Subsequent sections outline: the key findings of a scoping exercise on a future project on Wales; the format of the international workshop; the recommendations for future research and action; the outputs achieved and planned; and a bibliography of key publications in the area.

1.1 Infrastructures, technologies, materialities

How are communities constructed and maintained? What holds them together and forces them apart? Practices, affects and social relations are vital to the construction and maintenance of communities at different scales, but as a large number of scholars in the social sciences and humanities have shown, material things are also vital to the constitution of social relations and communities (Miller 2005). Within the discipline of transport history, material things have been consistently – although often uncritically and unproblematically – positioned as the focus of study, but recent years have seen scholars from a broad variety of disciplines adopt more nuanced and conceptually sophisticated approaches to the infrastructures, architectures and materialities

of mobility, communications and transport networks (Latour 1996; Graham and Marvin 2001). Different kinds of infrastructures and spaces – from roads and railways, to air routes, the internet and mobile telecommunications – have very different materialities, spatialities and temporalities, enabling different kinds of connectivity, sociality, and proximity to emerge (Urry 2002, 2003, 2004; Adey et al. 2012). They may have been used and transformed over centuries (e.g. many roads), or they may be purpose-built for particular kinds of modern mobility (e.g. mobile telephone networks). They may have a strong visible presence in our changing environment and be clearly signposted, or they may be hidden or leave few traces in the air, on the earth's surface, or on water. Infrastructures take very different forms and have different materialities, and different spaces of mobility, transport and communications clearly connect, divide and network communities in very different ways in different geographical contexts, depending on whether we are talking about bridges (Sidaway 2001; Bishop 2008; Löfgren 2004, 2007), airports (Pascoe 2001; Adey 2008), roads (Merriman 2007, 2009a; Hvattum et al. 2011), railways (Schivelbusch 1986; Revill 2012), or telecommunications infrastructures (Graham and Marvin 1996, 2001). What is clear is that transport and communications infrastructures have long been vital to the workings of the economy, society and politics; and the security of infrastructures is a major contemporary concern of governments, security agencies, businesses and non-governmental organisations (see, for example, the work done by the UK Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructures). This project has revealed many different examples of the ways in which transport and mobility infrastructures have been constructed as a way to network nations,

sediment territories, and forge new empires and trans-national links; strategies which are particularly evident in European transport and cross-border initiatives (Sidaway 2001; Jensen and Richardson 2003; Löfgren 2004; Van der Vleuten and Kaijser 2005; Badenoch 2007; Schipper 2007, 2008), but also the history of colonial rail networks and air routes (Millward 2008; Pirie 2009, 2012; Aguiar 2011). Of course, transport and communications infrastructures form part of the mundane background of our everyday environments, being central to what Thrift and French (2005) refer to as 'the automatic production of space', but as Edensor (2002, 2003, 2004) has emphasized, such familiar things as street furniture, road signs, road markings and vehicle types form key elements in the 'banal' reproduction of national identities (after Billig 1995).

1.2 Mobile practices

Over the past few decades, a number of powerful arguments have entered the popular imagination about the relationship between modern communications, globalisation and place; namely that: modern forms of communication have led to a 'shrinking' world (Janelle 1969; Harvey 1989), and that globalisation is eroding the distinctiveness of places and eroding local senses of community (Relph 1976; Augé 1995). In response to these narratives, an increasing number of anthropologists, geographers, historians and sociologists have challenged overly simplistic accounts of the impact of globalising processes, technologies and practices on communities, societies and formations of place; highlighting the very different levels of mobility social groups and actors may have (Massey 1994), the long history of the processes under examination (Thrift 1995; Merriman 2004, 2009b), and rethinking places, spaces, societies

and communities as dynamic, open and relational assemblages (Thrift 1996; Urry 2000; Merriman 2004, 2012; Massey 2005). Communities, then, are not simply framed as spatially bounded entities which are fixed, stable or under threat. Rather, communities are increasingly approached as dynamic, practised or networked socio-spatial configurations, which are assembled in an ongoing manner (Jones and Merriman 2012). Practices of mobility and communication – from commuting by car to communicating by letter or e-mail – are important components of the assembling, disassembling and maintenance of communities at different geographical scales, whether these are communities based upon existing familial and friendship networks, social markers of identity, pastimes, or geographical ties. What's more, different mobile practices entail very different embodied practices and engagements, giving rise to highly distinctive affective regimes. The embodied practices, experiences and rituals of air travel are clearly very different to those of rail or car travel, while the practices of driving a motor car are different from those associated with being a passenger. This project has examined the broad range of research which has been undertaken by social science and humanities scholars on the embodied practices of mobility, examining how different modes of mobility may facilitate very different practices and community formations at different scales.

1.3 Scales

Transport, mobility and communications frequently cut across and transcend geographical scales, requiring academics to rethink the ways in which particular practices are 'placed'. A new infrastructural project or a pattern of movement may be seen to be of local, regional, national and/or international

significance, connecting local and regional communities, networking a nation, or forming part of a trans-national network. National, trans-national and regional infrastructures are inevitably routed through local(ised) landscapes and communities, while the contested nature of infrastructural projects and mobility practices often reveals the diverse ways in which communities may be imagined. Research on colonial transport networks has revealed the very different ways in which colonial air routes and railways networks are imagined by politicians, colonial administrators, transport officials, and local peoples (Millward 2008; Pirie 2009, 2012; Aguiar 2011), while the scoping study has revealed the very different local, regional, and national imaginations which can gather around infrastructural projects.

1.4 Politics

There is no question that both the opening and closure of transport infrastructures matters to communities, whether they come together in protest about a local road (McKay 1996; Routledge 1997), oppose the closure of local rail or bus services, question the impact of national transport policies on the environment (Wall 1999), or propose new routes and infrastructures as development opportunities. The research review has shown how transport and mobility have long been contentious and contested topics attracting widespread political debate, ranging from discussions surrounding railway closures and road building policies, to government attitudes to immigration and fuel taxation. Politicians have long recognized that effective transport and communications infrastructures are vital to the networking of nations (Jones and Merriman 2012), regional development (Hebbert 2000; Merriman 2007, 2011), and

the forging of empires (Millward 2008; Pirie 2009, 2012; Aguiar 2011). The project has examined the different ways in which transport schemes became embroiled with both formal government political debates and with the ideologies of radical nationalist organizations.

2. Scoping study

Alongside the research review, we have conducted a scoping study to assess the feasibility of a large scale research project on the ways in which transport infrastructures and mobility practices have been positioned as central to the maintenance and erosion of Welsh national identity and Welsh national communities (including linguistic communities). Pilot research was undertaken to assess the quality and quantity of material in a number of archives, including: 1) The National Archives of the UK in Kew: spending eight days examining files of the Welsh Office, Ministry of Transport and other departments on the M4, Severn Bridge, railway closures, North-South air routes, and the A470; 2) The National Library of Wales: spending five days assessing archival and published materials, including files held in the archives of Plaid Cymru, the Association of Welsh Local Authorities, and the Welsh Language Society; 3) Glamorgan Archives: spending one day examining the archives of the National Industrial Development Council (1932-1946) and the Rail Passengers' Committee (Wales) (1968-2003).

The scoping study revealed the very different local, regional, and national imaginations which gather around infrastructural projects such as roads and bridges, with the M4 motorway and Severn Bridge being simultaneously praised for the benefits they would bring to the South Wales and south-west England economy, and

criticized for strengthening economic and social ties with England rather than between areas of north and south Wales. The scoping exercise has also revealed the different ways in which Welsh communities are imagined and may be seen to be networked, whether by new roads, air links, existing railways or bilingual road signs (Merriman and Jones 2009). The scoping study has allowed us to start to identify the different attitudes of formal political parties (Plaid Cymru, Labour and the Conservatives), lobby groups, and radical nationalist groups to transport infrastructural projects in Wales, undertaking a feasibility study for a larger project on the importance of transport policies to the emerging politics of Welsh nationalists from the 1920s onwards.

3. International workshop

An international workshop entitled “Networking communities: mobility practices and connective infrastructures” was held on Monday 3 September 2012 at Aberystwyth University. This event brought together twelve leading humanities and social science scholars who research on mobility and transport – representing the disciplines of geography,

history, literary and cultural studies, and sociology – as well as the local organisers (PI and CO-I) and additional local participant-observers. The workshop speakers were:

Peter Adey

Geography,
Royal Holloway, University of London

Marian Aguiar

English, Carnegie Mellon University

Georgine Clarsen

History, University of Wollongong

Tim Cresswell

Geography,
Royal Holloway, University of London

Colin Divall

History,
University of York & National Railway Museum

Rhys Jones

Geography, Aberystwyth University

Peter Merriman

Geography, Aberystwyth University

Gijs Mom

History of Technology,
Eindhoven Technical University

Iwan Rhys Morus

History, Aberystwyth University



Kimberley Peters

Geography, Aberystwyth University

Gordon Pirie

Geography, University of Cape Town

Cotton Seiler

American Studies, Dickinson College

Mimi Sheller

Sociology, Drexel University

John Urry

Sociology, Lancaster University

The findings of the research review and scoping exercise were presented at the workshop, and the workshop feedback and participant presentations have informed the final version of this report.

4. Recommendations for future research and action

A number of key areas for future research and dissemination have emerged from the research review, scoping study, and international workshop. In particular, we have identified the following needs:

- To develop research projects which examine the specific ways in which transport infrastructures and mobility practices have either facilitated or hindered constructions of community in different cultural contexts and at different scales.
- To develop research projects which are sensitive to the banal and mundane ways in which transport infrastructures are enrolled into 'group-making' projects, whether by local communities or in the formation of regional or national identities.
- To develop research projects which examine the histories (as well as the geographies) of connectivity, and the ways in which changes

in transport and communications have shaped communities.

In order to fulfil these recommendations we intend to undertake the following:

- To develop a large-scale research project which examines the ways in which transport infrastructures and mobility practices have been positioned as central to both the maintenance and erosion of Welsh (and, in contrast, British) national cohesiveness and community.
- To disseminate the findings of the historical scoping study on Wales to a range of academic and non-academic beneficiaries, including specific departments in the British and Welsh governments, non-governmental organisations concerned with transport, community, the environment and Welsh affairs, and the general public through the Welsh media. Dissemination to non-academic audiences will occur after the academic papers from the project are submitted for review.

5. Outputs

A series of further outputs are being produced from this research project.

Completed to date:

The PI has completed one book chapter on the role of roads in connecting communities at different scales and in different geographical and temporal contexts:

Merriman, P. (in press) 'Roads', in P. Adey, D. Bissell, K. Hannam, P. Merriman & M. Sheller (eds) *The Handbook of Mobilities*, London: Routledge (completed and submitted in August 2012).

In preparation:

We are currently preparing a series of academic and non-academic outputs based on the project. Firstly we are drafting two journal articles based upon the research review and scoping study:

- The first of these is a full-length critical review article on the role of transport infrastructures and mobility practices in networking communities for the international journal *Progress in Human Geography*.
- The second focuses on the debates surrounding the proposed construction of a north-south motorway in Wales, and the ways in which this was promoted as a means to unite Welsh communities. This is likely to be submitted to either *Cultural Geographies*, *Journal of Historical Geography* or *Political Geography*.
- We are currently editing the transcription of the keynote panel at the International Workshop, in which Tim Cresswell, Colin Divall, Gijs Mom, Mimi Sheller and John Urry spoke on the key themes of the event. We are planning to submit this panel for publication in a journal, and we have already had an invitation to publish this in *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies*.
- Once the two journal articles are completed we plan to draft a policy briefing and press release based upon the findings of the scoping study and paper two on transport in Wales.

References and external links

- Adey, P.** (2008) 'Airports, mobility and the calculative architecture of affective control', *Geoforum*, 39(1), pp.438-451.
- Adey, P., Bissell, D. McCormack, D. and Merriman, P.** (2012) 'Profiling the Passenger: mobilities, identities, embodiments', *Cultural Geographies*, 19(2), pp.169-193.
- Aguiar, M.** (2011) *Tracking modernity: India's railways and the culture of mobility*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Anderson, A.** (1983) *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso.
- Appleton, J. H.** (1962) *The Geography of Communications in Great Britain*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Augé, M.** (1995) *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Badenoch, A.** (2007) "Touring between War and Peace: Imagining the 'Transcontinental Motorway,' 1930–1950," *The Journal of Transport History* 28, pp.192–210.
- Billig, M.** (1995) *Banal Nationalism*, London: Sage.
- Bishop, P.** (2008) *Bridge*, London: Reaktion Books.
- Cresswell, T. and Merriman, P.** (eds)(2011) *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Edensor, T.** (2002) *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, Oxford: Berg.
- Edensor, T.** (2003) 'M6 – Junction 19-16: Refamiliarizing the mundane roadscape'. *Space and Culture*, 6(2), pp.151–168.
- Edensor, T.** (2004) 'Automobility and national identity: representation, geography and driving practice'. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 21, pp.101–120.
- Graham, S. and Marvin, S.** (1996) *Telecommunications and the city*. London: Routledge.
- Graham, S. and Marvin, S.** (2001) *Splintering Urbanism*. London: Routledge.
- Guldi, J.** (2012) *Roads to power: Britain invents the infrastructure state*, London: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D.** (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hebbert, M.** (2000) Transpennine: imaginative geographies of an interregional corridor. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 25, 379–392.
- Hvattum, M., Brenna, B., Elvebakk, B. and Kampevold Larsen, J.** (eds)(2011) *Routes, Roads and Landscapes*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Janelle, D.** (1969) 'Spatial reorganization: a model and concept', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 59, pp.348-64
- Jensen, O.B. and Richardson, T.** (2003) *Making European Space: Mobility, power and territorial identity*, London: Routledge.
- Jones, R. and Merriman, P.** (2009) *Hot, banal and everyday nationalism: bilingual road signs in Wales*, *Political Geography*, 28(3), pp.164-173.
- Jones, R. and Merriman, P.** (2012) 'Network nation', *Environment and Planning A*, 45(4), pp.937-953.
- Latour, B.** (1996) *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*. London: Harvard University Press.

- Löfgren, O.** (2004) 'Concrete transnationalism? Bridge building in the new economy', *Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology*, no.43, pp.59-75.
- Löfgren, O.** (2007) 'Island magic and the making of a transnational region', *The Geographical Review*, 97(2), pp.244-259.
- Massey, D.** (1994) *Space, Place and Gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Massey, D.** (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage.
- McKay, G.** (1996) *Senseless Acts of Beauty*. London: Verso.
- Merriman, P.** (2004) 'Driving places: Marc Augé, non-places and the geographies of England's M1 motorway', *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 21(4-5), pp.145-167.
- Merriman, P.** (2007) *Driving spaces: a cultural-historical geography of England's M1 motorway*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Merriman, P.** (2009a) 'Automobility and the geographies of the car', *Geography Compass*, 3(2), pp.586-599.
- Merriman, P.** (2009b) 'Marc Augé on space, place and non-place', *Irish Journal of French Studies*, 9, pp.9-29.
- Merriman, P.** (2011) 'Enfolding and gathering the landscape: the geographies of England's M1 motorway corridor', in Mari Hvattum, Brita Brenna, Beate Elvebakk, and Janike Kampevold Larsen (eds) *Routes, Roads and Landscapes*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp.213-226.
- Merriman, P.** (2012) 'Britain and 'the motorway club': the effect of European and North American motorway construction on attitudes in Britain, 1930-1960', *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies*, 2(1), pp.106-133.
- Merriman, P.** (in press) 'Roads', in P. Adey, D. Bissell, K. Hannam, P. Merriman & M. Sheller (eds) *The Handbook of Mobilities*, London: Routledge.
- Merriman, P. and Jones, R.** (2009) 'Symbols of Justice': the Welsh Language Society's campaign for bilingual road signs in Wales, 1967-1980, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 35(2), pp.350-375.
- Miller, D.** (2005) *Materiality*, London: Duke University Press.
- Millward, L.** (2008) *Women in British Imperial Airspace, 1922-1937*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Pascoe, D.** (2001) *Airspaces*, London: Reaktion.
- Pirie, G.** (2009) *Air empire: British imperial civil aviation, 1919-39*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Pirie, G.** (2012) *Cultures and caricatures of British imperial aviation: passengers, pilots, publicity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Relph, E.** (1976) *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion.
- Revill, G.** (2012) *Railway*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Routledge, P.** (1997) The imagineering of resistance: Pollok Free State and the practice of postmodern politics. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22, 359-376.
- Schipper, F.** (2007) "Changing the Face of Europe: European Road Mobility During the Marshall Plan Years," *The Journal of Transport History* 28, pp.211-228.
- Schipper, F.** (2008) *Driving Europe: Building Europe on Roads in the Twentieth Century*, Amsterdam: Aksant.

- Schivelbusch, W.** (1986) *The Railway Journey: The Industrialisation of Time and Space in the 19th Century*. Leamington Spa: Berg.
- Sidaway, J.D.** (2001) 'Rebuilding bridges: a critical geopolitics of Iberian transfrontier cooperation in a European context', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19(6), pp.743–778.
- Thrift, N.** (1990) 'Transport and communication 1730–1914. In R. A. Dodgson and R. A. Butlin (eds), *An Historical Geography of England and Wales* (Second Edition). London: Academic Press, pp.453–486.
- Thrift, N.** (1995) 'A hyperactive world'. In R. J. Johnston, P. J. Taylor and M. J. Watts (eds), *Geographies of Global Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp.18–35.
- Thrift, N.** (1996) *Spatial Formations*. London: Sage.
- Thrift, N. and French, S.** (2002) 'The automatic production of space'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 27, pp.309–335.
- Urry, J.** (2000) *Sociology Beyond Societies*. London: Routledge.
- Urry, J.** (2002) 'Mobility and proximity'. *Sociology*, 36, pp.255–274.
- Urry, J.** (2003) 'Social networks, travel and talk'. *British Journal of Sociology*, 54, pp.155–175.
- Urry, J.** (2004) 'Connections'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22, pp.27–37.
- Van der Vleuten, E. and Kaijser, A.** (eds) (2005) *Networking Europe: Transnational Infrastructures and the Shaping of Europe, 1850–2000*, Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications.
- Verstraete, G.** (2010) *Tracking Europe: Mobility, diaspora, and the politics of location*, London: Duke University Press.
- Wall, D.** (1999) *Earth First! and the Anti-Roads Movement*. London: Routledge.
- Warnaby, G. and Medway, D.** (2008), Bridges, place representation and place creation. *Area*, 40: 510–519
- Williamson, T.** (2003) The Fluid State: Malaysia's National Expressway. *Space and Culture*, 6(2), pp.110–131.



www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk