Scottish Transport Summit 2017

You might wonder what someone of my generation knows about digital information. And you would be right to wonder. I have all the kit – iMac, MacBook Pro, iPad, iPhone – and I know how to use a fraction of the things they can do; my IT consultant is my 13-year old granddaughter. And that, I believe, is the problem facing the transport industry today. Not my granddaughter – although she would give you a good run for your money – but the sheer mass of information that is available to us, and how to recognise what we can actually use productively and what is just, well, loads of information.

People of my generation are both bewildered and excited by the amount of information available to us, and as Director of Bus Users Scotland my main interest is just how this information can be channelled to help bus passengers and of course I recognise that life as a bus passenger has already been made considerably easier in this digital age.

If I told you that my most dramatic introduction to the possibilities of technology was watching the Queen's Coronation in 1953 with my family on a 405-line grainy black-and-white 14-inch single channel television set you will understand that I am not an instinctive user of the new technology; interestingly, I read in Monday's newspaper that the average daily TV consumption per person worldwide has dropped and is likely to hit around 160 minutes a day sometime next year while the average daily internet consumption is on track to jump from 50 minutes in 2009 to that same 160-minute figure. But please bear in mind that there are hundreds of thousands of Scottish residents and tourists who belong to my generation, and with an ageing population we must recognise that many of them/us will still resort to the printed word to get our transport information.

When I was in my 20s very few bus stops in Scotland displayed ANY information about the buses that served them, because the Scottish Bus Group, my employers at the time, took the view that everything potential passengers needed to know was available in one of these, 416 pages of close-set type, available price 6d (2½ p) from an enquiry office if you could find one that was open. Transport in the 1960s was operationally driven and passengers sometimes seemed to be regarded as something of a nuisance. But if transport operators today want to attract car drivers of my generation to sample public transport with their Concession Cards and Senior Railcards, they must accept the fact that not all will sit down at their computers to find out. Not a 416-page book, though; maybe a leaflet and printed information at the bus stop.

Having said all of this, handling passengers' complaints at Bus Users we work with the bus operators and can often resolve a complaint with access to Electronic Ticket Machine data and CCTV footage.

As a frequent bus and rail passenger I enjoy the fruits of technological innovation –

- I love Real Time Information at bus stops (in spite of the buses that disappear into a black hole somewhere and in spite of the fact that I don't really need it at my city suburban stop with 30 buses an hour, when passengers in so many places around Scotland with hourly or two-hourly bus services really do need to know what is going on)
- I love my Concession Card that I can use on any bus in Scotland
- I love it that my daughter can use M tickets that do away with need for passengers to carry cash for exact fare buses
- I love the spread of in-bus audio-visual information (though this can be let down when humans get involved in the process – like stop names that are unfamiliar even to regular passengers, and stop names that differ completely from the place name on the bus stop flag). Not much help if you are giving a visitor directions.
- I love what Traveline Scotland is doing – continually finding innovative ways to make transport information easy to find and easy to use and – a big AND – it can actually tell you what fare you will pay, something that still seems to be a closely-guarded secret if you try to travel on many of Scotland's buses, and possibly bus travel is one of the few services people are expected to buy without the slightest idea of how much it will cost them
- But I have also sat in long-distance trains that have come to a complete stop in the middle of nowhere and used my iPad to find out what the problem is long before the train crew deigns to tell us (and Scottish bus drivers, God bless them, are not great at sharing any information when we are stuck in unexpected traffic – say when there is a demonstration or a procession or a road traffic accident – when passengers might chose to alight and walk)

For bus operators in particular there is a great opportunity to gain competitive advantage by making good use of digital technology, data sharing and even sensible collaboration with other operators to deliver a superior, even exceptional passenger experience.

Public transport can become more personal with the ability of passengers to choose routes, compare prices and view the current network status electronically. And using public transport is becoming easier with E-tickets, contactless payments and integrated multi-modal ticketing, which I know is one of Transport Scotland's goals on our buses, trains and ferries.

But please don't rush into totally cashless transactions, because there will probably always be those who choose to, or are forced to, pay by cash.

And of course much of what I am saying mainly relates to urban Scotland. There are, we know, different mobility issues and the difficulty of justifying many services financially in the more rural areas, where of course there tend to be more cars per head of population. Some of the high-tech solutions that we enjoy in urban areas may have to be scaled back in these more rural situations.

I read in another newspaper that this week marks the 50th anniversary of the first bank cash machine in the UK, launched in June 1967, appropriately for us, by Reg Varney, best known as Stan Butler in the TV sitcom 'On the Buses'. Today there are 70,000 ATMs across the UK. The article speculated on the future of ATMs – like using finger-vein readers (a digital revolution in every sense) or selfies read by your banking app that then gives you permission to withdraw cash, or even a personalised ATM that gives you the mix of the notes that you actually want, instead of 'Only £20 notes available.

Embrace all of these developments but don't forget those of us who find it difficult to keep up with the digital revolution. My first computer was an Amstrad 8256 (remember them?) which my iMac

and even my iPhone render as prehistoric as that 14-inch black-and-white telly. The speed of change is breathtaking.

I picked up – on the internet of course, rather than the printed newspapers I mentioned earlier – a quote that, probably unfairly, sums up one view of the speed at which things are moving, when it described the 'unstoppable force of digital innovation meeting the immovable force of transport innovation'. I don't accept that. The information that all transport operators collect almost by default is a huge resource that could, can, and already does, improve the public transport experience for all of us users – so, embrace it and use it for the benefit of your passengers. All of them. Of all ages.

Gavin Booth, Director, Bus Users Scotland
15 June 2017