

The invisibility cloak of parking



AS WE MOVE INTO THE SECOND DECADE OF THE CENTURY, SIMON FOGG PONDERES THE FUTURE OF PARKING IN A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

Perhaps it is due to the meditative concentration involved in the editing of our weekly e-zine, but I have recently become a rather Zen individual, focusing on the present rather than the future. So, as I am probably not best qualified to comment on the future of parking, I thought I'd borrow my opening statement from postmodern author Douglas Coupland, who recently wrote in a newspaper article: 'The elevator only goes down. The bright note is that [it] will, at some point, stop.' How encouraging. He envisions a future where we are vexed by the presence of our digital selves, so my first thought was: 'Does this apply to parking?' With digital technology in mind, I sought to find out what some of the members of the parking fraternity thought about the future of our industry.

Martin Hughes, at Scheidt and Bachmann, enthused about the new equipment designed to provide ease of use, as well as green credentials, such as the utilisation of reusable tokens to replace paper tickets. From the developments in place already, one can see parking becoming more user-friendly and ecologically responsible.

One person I wanted to speak to was Neil Herron, director of Parking Appeals, who told me about his vision for virtual parking solutions. These would become reality, he said, through advanced GPS technology. ACTIV8 VPS is designed to address issues of vehicles loading and unloading where there are kerbside restrictions. VPS would allow a 'virtual' parking space to be pre-booked for a vehicle at a given time, for a cost based on vehicle type, time of day, and length of stay. There are plans for trials to begin with Transport for London (TfL) focusing on the benefits it could provide in 2012 for the Olympic Route Network. Herron sees this as a whole new



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way to look at managing restricted kerbspace, responding to different kerbside user needs, rather than simply enforcing with no traffic management benefit.

Ensuring needs are met

The second phase of this technology would provide a huge benefit for disabled drivers. Disabled Access4All is being developed in the form of a mobile phone 'App', which offers directions to accessible facilities, as well as tracking local authority boundaries in real time. This will result in the appropriate blue badge protocols always being followed, and will work in harmony with the features of ACTIV8 VPS, such as booking parking slots and sending notifications to the service provider, not only preventing a penalty charge notice (PCN) being issued, but also to ensure access needs are met.

I spoke to Helen Dolphin, of Mobilise, who outlined her general concerns about the future: 'The problems of getting tickets out of parking payment machines and then paying is really tricky for disabled drivers with upper limb disabilities, and any technology which removes the need to do this would be very welcome.'

'Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) has been a real breakthrough for me in entering car parks, but I've only ever found it in use when parking is free for blue badge holders. One of the biggest complaints from our members is about the abuse of blue badge spaces, and any technology which could stop this would be of an enormous benefit. I'd also like to see more controls on parking at hospitals to make sure patients and their visitors are not prevented from parking by people just using the spaces to do their shopping.'

Harry Clarke, of RingGo, was eager to share his views on the future, which he saw as a simple move from an analogue world to a digital one. According to Clarke, the use of coins and tickets

could soon become outdated, and in their place would come phone and web applications registering to a central database. This might, firstly, lead to better tracking down of offenders: if you have an outstanding ticket at one end of the country, you won't escape a penalty at the other. Although my first thought was of a family holiday turning sour as Daddy gets towed away 150 miles from home, this actually does potentially have huge benefits to the user-friendly aspects of parking.

Clarke suggested that in the digital world it would be possible to charge depending on the need for a space, as well as the vehicle using it; for example a large gas-guzzler could be penalised where an electric car would not be.

Parking takes a back seat

Power and green issues are two themes to keep in mind, but first I'd like to examine what form cashless parking could potentially take. I invariably purchase my £2.40 lunch sandwich on my debit card and I carry an Oyster Card in my wallet even though I don't live in London, so I feel I've got a pretty good idea where this is going. I spoke to Mendy Sudak at Ranger Services, who said: 'I envisage a time, in the not-too-distant future, where civil enforcement officers (CEOs), parking fines or pay-and-display are



a thing of the past, and where motorists pay a fair price for each parking experience!

Paying for parking electronically, and being charged for the time you spend there, seems like a reasonable, fair and professional way to do things. We already have pay-by-phone systems and if there's an iPhone app for your airport boarding pass, why shouldn't there be one for your trip to the shops? Even if we're not there yet, we're getting to the stage where everybody has some form of technology in their pocket, so I can see this being embraced gradually.

The reason I began this article by quoting Douglas Coupland's fear of the future is because I agree with his view that when our sense of self enters a digital domain and processes become unseen we start to become cynical. If this is combined with the fact that hating the parking industry is ingrained in our nation's consciousness as much as queuing for fish and chips, then we have the perfect environment for trust issues to arise.

We have seen this already with responses to ANPR. How long do they keep my data for? And why should they have it in the first place? If the vision of digital data being at the heart of all parking practice is the future, then it will demand

consummate professionalism and utmost quality of data protection if the public is to trust it.

This is implicit in the idea of power shifts. Firstly, people have to actually have faith in the technology itself, but also, who do the public trust more: those supposedly evil, money-hungry parking companies, or the government? Probably neither. It is worth noting that with the rise of these technological developments, the public sector will increasingly outsource to private companies, and then there will be levels of accountability and budget costs to consider. Harry Clarke suggested that 'the power will go to the companies that have expertise and scale to aggregate the provision of advanced digital services to local authorities'.

A major change will be that, alongside cashless parking, the need for enforcement will decrease, so that the core business of parking will no longer be about how many workers you are deploying and how many penalty charge notices (PCNs) are issued. The result would be a decline in the power of enforcement companies and, as Mendy suggested, the presence of civil enforcement officers. I asked Alan Wood, of Marston Group, for his perspective: 'The future for the enforcement sector has to be about greater transparency of what we do and

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how we do it. The introduction of video and audio recording on our staff while executing warrants will happen. I also know that we will work closer with the advice sector; everybody automatically thinks about the Citizens Advice Bureau, but what about the other charities? Consumer Credit Counselling Service, National Debtline, MIND, Age Concern to name a few, which we are working closer with today than ever before. But the surprising thing is, it actually can work to benefit all of us.

In a digital world, transparency is critical to build trust. Professional practice is therefore vital. Thus far it seems apparent that parking is heading towards becoming integrated, connected, and ultimately, invisible, and those who will control it are the companies who can provide the most user-friendly service and technology, while being seen as trustworthy by the public.

However, green issues are still a major factor. Although electric cars do not change the fundamental structure of a car parking space, there are other elements to consider, such as the deployment of electric charging points or incentive schemes. For example, at what point would London's congestion charge cease to become free for the environmentally friendly? London won't be any less congested just because the miles of traffic are running on hydrogen and tofu. If all these minute details need to be taken into account, they certainly do not seem to be congruent with the need to simplify things for optimum user-friendliness.

An evolution of ideas

Plus, if local authorities in metropolitan areas will be charging for electricity, it is worth noting that people may switch to cheaper alternatives, like electronic bicycles (e-bikes). China has 25 million cars on the road, but it has four times as many e-bikes.

I believe that we are moving away from the evolution of technology, towards the evolution of ideas and information, so the notion of parking becoming 'invisible' makes sense to me. However, on an industry level, we are presented with a debate that is seemingly being pulled in different directions by digital technology, green issues, corporate and government power struggles, as well as our own cultural biases.

For clarity I sat down with BPA chief executive Patrick Troy, for the official BPA view. He said: 'The parking profession will look very different in 10 years' time, as technology and innovation drive forward a vibrant parking sector determined to deliver better and easier-to-use facilities on behalf of the motorist. As the sector becomes more professional, the motorists' trust and confidence in parking providers will increase. In turn, this will enable the sector to deliver more user-friendly services to the motorist for the benefit of all.'

The key point of this article is that achieving and maintaining professionalism in the present will certainly yield rewards for the future, whatever shape that happens to come in. So, I guess right now that's where the elevator stops. How very Zen. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Simon Fogg is BPA
communications
assistant