Glyn Moody, [REDACTED]

Submission to Office of Rail Regulation regarding real-time train information

1. My name is Glyn Moody, and I am a journalist who has been writing about technology for over 30 years.   More recently, I have been exploring the advantages of openness – notably open source (such as GNU/Linux), open content (Wikipedia, for example), and open data. I am a non-paid member of the Open Knowledge Foundation's Advisory Council, but otherwise have no interests to declare.   I am happy for this submission to be made public and distributed freely without restriction.

2. In general, open data brings a number of benefits.   It automatically increases transparency, it allows data to be used in new ways, and can also generate new economic activity.   I believe that all of these are possible if real-time train information were made available as open data.

3. As your consultation document points out, the UK rail sector receives around £4 billion in public subsidy each year.   Part of the quid pro quo for those monies is transparency – for the public to be able to see exactly what its funds are doing.   Although real-time train information may not seem to fall into this category, it is nonetheless a product of the work that the public funds, and also a measure of what is being achieved, and should therefore be made available.

4. Moreover, it should be made available under minimal licensing conditions – essentially, put into the public domain.   As its name suggests, this is where information owned by the public should indeed go, so that anyone can use it as they wish.   There are sound economic reasons for doing so.

5. As the Guardian pointed out in 2006 (http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/mar/09/education.epublic): "The US and EU are comparable in size and population; but while the EU spent € 9.5bn (£6.51bn) on gathering public sector data, and collected € 68bn selling and licensing it, the US spent € 19bn - twice as much - and realised € 750bn - over 10 times more. Weiss pointed out: "Governments realise two kinds of financial gain when they drop charges: higher indirect tax revenue from higher sales of the products that incorporate the ... information; and higher income tax revenue and lower social welfare payments from net gains in employment."

6. This ability for completely open data to generated huge knock-on economic benefits is why the UK government is releasing many public datasets itself, and funding the new Open Data Institute.   The consensus is that any costs incurred will be more than offset by the additional economic activity this generates.

7. I believe the same will be true for the real-time train information.   For not only will this allow a wide range of software to be developed that will provide taxpayers with access to information they have helped pay for, it will enable entirely new classes of programs to be created that take real-time train information and add in other kinds of data – geodata, meteorological, traffic etc.   It's not possible to say what exactly those will be, since the key point about releasing data freely is that it makes possible all kinds of unsuspected uses.

8. With regard to the current provider of that information, the way it has dealt with some programmers and their requests for access (for example here: https://mocko.org.uk/b/2010/10/29/national-rail-have-killed-my-train-times-app/) does not inspire confidence that it will be able to open up fully to allow maximum economic benefit to be derived from the data.

9. I would therefore urge that responsibility for providing the full data feed, under a minimal licence, should be placed with a completely new organisation that is charged with providing it to developers with as little friction as possible.   This will be fully funded by the railway operators as one of the conditions for them being granted networks.   This will allow the

data to be made freely available, and thus exploited by all categories of users, including commercial ones, without being constrained by licensing.

10. In conclusion, making real-time train information freely available under a public domain licence represents an exciting opportunity simultaneously to extract largely unsuspected value from it by providing innovative companies with a key raw material - data - while allowing the taxpaying public to benefit from it both directly and indirectly in a wide variety of ways.   I urge you to take this course.

Glyn Moody

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