CIHT Dubai Evening Seminar (Online) – Bulletin

Jonathan Spear

Micromobility – Perspectives on the Mess and Success of a New Mode of Urban Transport

About the Speaker

Jonathan Spear is a Transport Policy & Strategy Advisor with 25 years' experience in consulting, advocacy and thought leadership. He has worked extensively in the UK and Europe, Middle East, Africa and Asia Pacific, and been based at various times in London, Beijing, Dubai, Hong Kong and Singapore. Jonathan is a Fellow of CIHT, a Chartered Transport Planning Professional (CTPP) and current Chair of the CIHT Dubai Group. He is also active in leading technical research on policy, organisational and regulatory issues, and supporting COVID-19 response, for the World Road Association, PIARC.

Presentation

Jonathan began his presentation with a review of the context for micromobility, current thinking, how it has evolved, and the key players. Micromobility is a new concept for the transport industry and is very different from traditional modes, including active travel in the form of cycling and walking. The term refers to a variety of small, powered, lightweight personal mobility devices including e-bikes, e-scooters and mini-segways with new products constantly emerging.

Jonathan's presentation made clear that the phenomenon of start-up firms offering shared e-scooters for hire has come from nowhere to severely disrupt the urban transport sector. Since 2017, when Bird introduced the first e-scooters on the streets of Southern California, they have spread rapidly to hundreds of cities across the world, securing billions of dollars of private investment, offering citizens and visitors more transport choice and utility, whilst outflanking and putting pressure on the existing agencies which plan, regulate and operate roads, urban spaces, public and shared mobility.

Three years on, arguments continue to be made, often passionately, by those who advocate and oppose the e-scooter industry. To its supporters, micromobility offers an entrepreneurial, convenient and sustainable means to connect to public transport and make short-distance trips in place of the private car. To the sceptics, e-scooters are unsafe, disruptive, undermine active travel and represent the unacceptable face of venture capitalism. There is evidence to support both viewpoints and the situation continues to change. A third viewpoint balances some of the opportunities with a need for better regulation and standards, micromobility complementing other options.

Cities are facing demographic and economic pressures, changes to traffic volumes and travel patterns, congestion, pollution and the multiple challenges of climate change. Over 600 cities across over 50 countries have adopted e-scooter hire schemes and are wrestling with issues of safety, regulation and access. Paris has replaced an e-scooter free-for-all with a tender for time limited concessions where common standards, collaboration between operators and authorities takes place and where employee rights are protected. Stronger regulation and consolidation to a handful of players is driving up standards and growth.

In the UK e-scooters are technically illegal as they are classed as motor vehicles. However, this is changing; the Department for Transport is reviewing future regulations and has accelerated trials of e-scooters across UK to gather data and shape the way forward.

Jonathan was clear in his exposition of the benefits of e-scooters: time savings, first and last mile connections, low cost, low environmental footprint and being fun! He was also clear in some of the lesser known benefits such as e-scooters supporting Mobility as a Service (MaaS) and being a precursor to other future mobility technologies and innovative payment platforms. Ultimately, the debate is not about e-scooters in isolation, but about the wider shared economy and associated business models.

There are also challenges such as user safety, potential modal shift from active modes which lessens any environmental benefits, parking and street litter, rights to use infrastructure and issues around equity and data access. There have been instances around the world of acrimonious relations between operators and authorities in the past which has damaged trust.

Jonathan asked the question of whether to regulate or not? Do we need order and rules of engagement rather than outright bans or laissez-faire operations? Appropriate, proportionate regulation can potentially facilitate positive change and benefit more people.

The impact of COVID-19 on e-scooter demand has been stark with reductions of 60-70% and services in some cities suspended altogether. Milan and Paris, among other cities, have responded to the pandemic by making more space for active modes of travel and e-scooters are being tried by people as a new mode. It is forecast that demand for e-scooters will return to pre-pandemic levels in early 2021, but with better regulation and more space in cities in prospect.

In the UAE Abu Dhabi is the most advanced Emirate on e-scooter use and regulation, having allowed hire schemes from mid-2019. In Dubai it is legal to buy an e-scooter, but not to rent one, although this looks set to change imminently. Other Emirates, or Federal agencies, have yet to make clear policy.

Jonathan presented the results of CIHT Dubai survey from the registration of this event. Two thirds of participants responding were UAE residents. 48% support and 26% strongly support the development of e-scooters, with only 2% in opposition.

Jonathan concluded his presentation by stating that when managed well, in the context of an integrated transport network, e-scooters can help cities make progress against a range of policy criteria. He set out ten recommendations for the way forward:

- Create national policies and standards, but devolve details to cities
- Limit and regulate competition
- Foster collaboration and integration
- Provide access to properly regulated parking
- Invest in dedicated infrastructure and facilities
- Recognise the importance of data sharing
- Involve, educate and train e-scooter and other road users
- Consider micromobility as part of a wider multi-modal agenda
- Bring public-private collaboration to the fore
- Use the experience of COVID-19 to develop a more resilient micromobility sector

In summing up Jonathan stated that e-scooters are the current big thing. How should we prepare for the next big thing? It might be with us sooner than we think!

Post-Seminar Note: Dubai RTA launched e-scooter trials in five areas of Dubai on 26th October.

Questions	
How does asset condition affect safe use of e-scooters?	The robustness of e-scooters has increased significantly recently, and they are now better designed for intensive public use. One of the safety issues is the condition of the highway, however, and more care and attention needs to be given to maintenance of such issues as potholes and surface defects.
More companies providing e-scooters what guidance on their use and facilities is required?	Technologically there is an ability to regulate much better. For example, there is a small number of start-ups that are using physical docking stations which are easier to regulate and licence, whilst geofencing can control how and where scooters are used.
What are the recommendations for tenders or open markets?	The starting point would be having a clear and strategic policy on how e-scooters are part of an integrated transport system. How many operators are needed and what are the fleet sizes and other considerations. There may be a need to regulate the quality of service as well and overall objectives such as sustainability. Should operators supply data for broader transport planning as well? These could be part of the considerations for any tender.
How will consumers adapt to micromobility in Asia?	Most applications have been in North America, Europe and Australia. Applications in Asia may be compromised by condition of the road asset and intensive use of the street environment. Singapore has invested in a strong regulatory framework for e-scooters, but ultimately has ended up being quite restrictive.
Do any e-scooters have provision for wireless charging?	Not as yet! A more promising development is swappable batteries which reduce the logistics and carbon footprint to returning e-scooters to base for charging.

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