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*MANAGING BRITISH PUBLIC OPINION
OF THE CHANNEL TUNNEL*

RICHARD ROGERS

During the run-up to the multiple openings of the Channel Tunnel, there was much talk in the British media and undoubtedly in British pubs about the safety and security of the three 50-km-long conduits between Folkestone and Coquelles. A couple of months before Queen Elizabeth II and President François Mitterand cut the ribbon on the tunnel in May 1994, the British government announced a much-publicized measure calling for life imprisonment for hijacking, seizing control of the tunnel, destroying or damaging trains or the tunnel itself, or endangering tunnel safety by making threats. This was in direct response to a widely perceived threat of terrorist attack on the tunnel, perhaps by the Irish Republican Army. Later that month, after Le Shuttle service for lorries commenced, newspapers reported several glitches in the system. In one of the initial runs, warning lights flashed in the engineer's cockpit, indicating a fault in the system, and lorry drivers had to be evacuated into the service tunnel and transported into daylight by a maintenance vehicle. A second, similar technical failure two days later led to the temporary suspension of freight service. During a trial run of a Eurostar passenger train that same week, a power failure suddenly brought the train to a halt, leaving people to wonder what would have happened had the regular freight service still been in operation. And in the fall, just days before Le Shuttle "overture automobile service" for shareholders and journalists was due to begin, newspaper headlines reported that the Channel Tunnel leaks! Silt had clogged the drainage system, resulting, according to one engineer, in a "steady and disquieting amount of saline water concentrated in a few areas."¹ Worst of all, at least from a public relations point of view, was the technical failure of an inaugural Eurostar train filled with 400 reporters in mid-

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¹"Chunnel Takes a Bath," London *Sunday Times*, September 25, 1994, business sec. p. 1.

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FIG. 1.—The Science Museum's "Channel Tunnel: The Whole Story" exhibit covers various aspects of the tunnel's history, technology, and effects—on both the British landscape and psyche.

October; it undoubtedly received the most press attention of all the incidents.

Eurotunnel spokespersons have downplayed these teething problems of the newborn tunnel, and since the Intergovernmental Committee issued the licenses to operate the Eurostar passenger and Le Shuttle car trains beginning late last year, all systems are go. Nevertheless, public opinion in Britain has been lukewarm to the tunnel. In a number of recent polls, a majority of Britons surveyed indicated that fears of terrorist attack or claustrophobia will keep them from ever using the tunnel. These are only the latest in an array of concerns in Great Britain about the Channel Tunnel, voiced continually since the 1880s, when the first of two aborted projects (the other was in 1975) was halted ostensibly out of fear of military invasion through the tunnel.

Against this backdrop, the Science Museum in London opened a timely temporary exhibition (see fig. 1) on the Channel Tunnel containing attractive spaces devoted to, among other issues, the history of tunnel projects, channel geology, environmental impacts, and tunneling techniques. Shown in London for several months in 1994 and then at the National Railway Museum in York until the end of 1995, it goes a step farther than most exhibits on controversial

technologies. Much to its credit, and in stark contrast to the larger Eurotunnel Exhibition Centre in Folkestone, "Channel Tunnel: The Whole Story" unabashedly takes on the contemporary fears of the tunnel in a number of interactive, hypertext displays. Contributing in its own way to the debate on public perceptions of the safety of the technological system, the computer polling station in the center of the exhibit queries in French and English, "Who's afraid of the channel tunnel?" After relating to visitors that three out of four Britons surveyed recently said they were unwilling to take the tunnel, the display invites participants to indicate what worries them about the tunnel. The long list of potential disasters on screen, which the visitor can touch to record concern and receive further text of the safety measures taken by Eurotunnel, is of biblical proportions. All of the worries—flood, railway accidents, train breakdown, fire, suffocation, rabies, tunnel collapse, explosions, power failure—are rendered in eye-catching graphics, inviting the visitor to touch them all. So while the real-time survey is not statistically valid, it gives a sense of the participants' curiosity about Eurotunnel's particular safety measures. At my last viewing, which was before the announcement of leakage in the tunnel, flooding intrigued the ten thousand or so participants the most.

The other computer survey, not as prominently displayed or flashy, is entitled "Where are we now?" and deals with public opinion concerning the very existence of the tunnel. Next to a wall of graffiti with quotations on the tunnel largely taken from newspaper articles, the interactive asks the visitor, among other questions, whether he or she agrees with the construction of the tunnel and the high-speed link between Folkestone and London. Unlike the other poll, visitors seem to take this battery of questions more seriously, and the majority said they like the tunnel but dislike the link. Other questions such as "Do you think travelling through the tunnel will be safe?" and "Are you going to use the channel tunnel?" are followed by screens reporting the results of still more public opinion polls and interpretations of the results. One indicates that "opinion is influenced by how close to the tunnel, rail link and terminals people live," and another states that "most concerns are based on the fear of the unknown."

This brings me to a critique of the exhibit and the influence of Eurotunnel's full sponsorship and collaboration with the exhibitors. The £120,000 sponsorship, which according to Science Museum policy is accepted on the condition that the patron cannot bias the design and content of an exhibit, nevertheless had its price—albeit in ways different from the overt government and corporate boosterism peri-

odically described in *Technology and Culture* exhibit reviews.² While the London exhibitors, who proposed the idea, strove to maintain a critical distance from Eurotunnel's positions, dutifully verifying almost every fact from independent sources, in many cases Eurotunnel's points of departure and frames of reference remained dominant. The interactive displays are cases in point in that the "fear of the unknown," which brings to mind the troublesome notion of an irrational public, is countered by Eurotunnel's safety measures and not balanced by the views of independent fire and security experts. To put it in different terms, the intention of the exhibit is to point up, then summarily assuage, all fears of the Channel Tunnel.

There is plenty of material available concerning the dangers of the tunnel in the minutes of the Channel Tunnel hearings in the House of Commons and House of Lords and in specialized journals and reports. The exhibitors spent months collecting much of this material, all of which is now duly filed in the Science Museum and on hand for interested researchers. The most controversial issues, such as the "nonsegregation" of passengers and vehicles and the extent of the security measures taken to detect explosive devices carried into the tunnel, are not to be found in the displays. Perhaps these two issues are indeed too specialized for the exhibit, but I could imagine questions in the surveys along these lines: "Would you prefer traveling through the tunnel in your car or in separate (lounge) cars?" or "When traveling on Le Shuttle, would you feel safer in separate compartments, as is required by the ferries?" Furthermore, except in one line of graffiti, the word "terrorism" is conspicuously absent. While the polling station on fears contains "explosion," it could just as easily read "terrorist attack"—arguably the greatest cause for concern these days.

Other Eurotunnel frames of reference inspire the two separate exhibits on travel times from Britain to the Continent—one is aimed at Le Shuttle customers, the other at Eurostar. In the first, the visitor can assemble different-sized foam blocks representing the time it takes to travel by car from London to Paris via hovercraft, ferry, or through the tunnel. The ferry takes two-and-a-half hours, the

²For government boosterism, see Michal McMahon, "The Romance of Technological Progress: A Critical Review of the National Air and Space Museum," *Technology and Culture* 22 (1981): 281–96. Corporate boosterism is touched on in Bernard S. Finn, "Exhibit Reviews—Twenty Years After," *Technology and Culture* 30 (1989): 993–1003; and Howard P. Segal, "'Made in Maine': A Professor's Perspective," *Technology and Culture* 31 (1990): 463–68.

hovercraft and tunnel one hour each. (It is also noted that the record for swimming the English Channel is seven hours and forty minutes.) The exhibitors wisely counted on delays and extended the time it takes to travel through the tunnel from approximately thirty-five minutes, which is Eurotunnel's calculation, to one hour, but the question the display poses is telling. Apparently "the *best* way to cross the channel" is the fastest, as the tunnel and the hovercraft come out on top. The slower ferry, which unlike the tunnel offers fresh air, on-board duty-free shopping, video and game rooms, and an occasionally sun-drenched deck, does not fare well. Those prone to claustrophobia, another missing (loaded?) term, presumably would prefer the ferry. The other section on travel times is in the opposite corner, next to the wall of graffiti. It reads that a trip from London to Paris on the Eurostar passenger train will take three hours, and two-and-a-half hours after the high-speed link is laid. Here, as in the other display, there is no comparison between the tunnel and the airplane, which, considering the relatively steep prices announced by Eurostar, is likely to be a main competitor.

Eurotunnel's sponsorship is recorded in the acknowledgments. A more *reflexive* exhibit, if such an exhibitry philosophy were deemed feasible, would reveal the sources of the content and the frames of reference. At least the visitor should be made aware that the exhibit is a subtle sell.