

Buffering as Everyday Logistical Labour

Debbie Hopkins

Freight moves through water and air, by rail and road. Freight mobilities are central to global logistics. These mobilities are constitutive of the concept, ideology and practice of just-in-time logistics. Heralded for its efficiency and productivity, with everything arriving right when it is needed, thinking on just-in-time rarely engages with questions of labour – of the people who make just-in-time-ness possible through their everyday actions. One example is lorry drivers, workers at the forefront of everyday logistics. Lorries, drivers, fuels and its infrastructure, planners, roads and other forms of material infrastructure, business contracts and governmental regulations come together, in various configurations, to enable the mobilities of ‘stuff’, both ‘freight’ and ‘waste’. These are moved from factories or ports to depots, warehouses or shops, and back again in dynamic circulations. Through their mobilities, lorry drivers (outside of the UK ‘truck drivers’ or ‘truckers’) negotiate time; they work to be (just) ‘in time’ and to not run ‘out of time’.

Truck driving, then, offers an entry point to examine the il/logics of smooth and free-flowing logistics, and the effects and/or affects that these processes and logics have on workers’ everyday lives (Chua et al. 2018). In this essay, I develop a conceptualization

of buffering as a logic, idea and material practice that seeks to actualize the bogus notion of just-in-time logistics. These are enacted by individual freight drivers through their everyday activities, and re-enforced through digital governance by way of digital tachographs and algorithmic routing.¹ Meanwhile, everyday conditions such as expectations or experiences of traffic congestion, and operational policies such as fines for missed delivery slots re-enforce them, too. I suggest that buffering offers a useful intervention in thinking about the logistical from the standpoint of labour.



Tacho(graphic) time. Digital tachographs are built into modern trucks, guiding drivers' paid and unpaid time, with financial penalties for infringements.

Photo: Jennie, March 2021.

Here I consider buffering as one way to interrogate the logistical everyday, attending to logistics-as-embodied. Logistical processes are made possible by the extra/ordinary practices of workers which are normalized, rationalized and invisibilized. By thinking through buffering in relation to logistical mobilities and logistical labour, this essay contributes to theories of logistics at the micro-scale, uncovering the hidden pragmatics of circulation. As a complicated and complicating labour of its own, buffering spotlights the spatial, material and affective realities of dominant logistical ideologies. I argue that the mythology of just-in-time logistical systems is contingent on buffering as performed by drivers, whereby they absorb the spatio-temporal burden to keep the system moving, and maintain the illusion of smooth logistical flows at local and global scales. In this way, drivers might be complicit with or coerced into traditional logistical frameworks.

The video below represents both the obvious and some of the less visible dimensions of logistical work. It shows where and how people see freight circulations. It also depicts the noises of radio, sounds of the road, vibrations and vantage points; it reveals the life of the road and life on the road (Merriman 2011). But the logistical also takes place beyond this, in laybys, in depots and in lorry drivers' homes – where waiting, resting, sleeping, eating, socializing all take place. Everyday stories are presented, illustrating what Maggie O'Neill (2000: 4), following Walter Benjamin, calls the "micrology" of people's lives. Photographs are used in conjunction with drivers' voices to uncover the times and/or spaces of buffering and how this process is both facilitated and hindered by technologies like the tachograph and its embedded socio-political and economic regimes.



Truckin' along. Recorded during a mobile ethnography from the passenger seat of a lorry.
Video: Debbie Hopkins, June 2018.

Well, the office phones the customer up and says, "We've got a lorry coming down to you," say they're in Nottingham, and they say, "The driver will be there by 9am." You can probably get there by 9am but then the office gives you something else that has to go to Sheffield and that customer has given you a set time, 10am, but that's a bit too short. You carry on and try to get there on time... You miss your first appointment and then you go and do the second one but then you've got all the traffic and then you get behind on that one too.

– Jerry², March 2018

Some days it can be all right and other days if you get stuck in traffic if there has been an accident or roadworks or something and you're pushing on your time and you have the boss on the phone, you've got to be there by 4pm, mentally it can be quite daunting, especially if you're pushing to get somewhere and your time is running out and you're trying to think of somewhere to park up, somewhere to sleep.

– John, March 2018



Morning queues. A queue of lorries waiting to enter a depot early in the morning. Buffering offers a new way of analysing and interpreting the spaces of logistics.

Photo: Jennie, England, March 2021.

Both Jerry and John reflect on the complex nature of navigating time. Freight driving is all about time: how it is organized, packaged and governed. This is coordinated by back-office routers or planners who increasingly, although not wholly, depend on algorithms to coordinate complex flows of who-goes-where and when. Jerry talks about getting behind schedule. Some depots and warehouses have delivery windows that the freight drivers must meet, sometimes being threatened with penalties – financial or operational – if they are missed. The driving task then becomes “daunting,” John remarks, as they “push to get somewhere.” John also notes the ticking clock of drivers’ hours, the regulated patterns of rest that govern truck driving time. This sets the context for and of buffering, with additional labour taken on by workers – always planning, forecasting, imagining, enacting.

You get your four hours [of driving without a break] once a day, but if you do like a ten-hour day, you’ve got to have another 45 [minute break] before you go into your ten-hour drive by law. But then you’ve got your six-hour rule, so say if I start at 6am, by 2pm I’ve got to have at least half an hour [of rest] in that time. You can drive for three hours, then you’ve got a job for two hours, say, and that means you’re going to be over your six hours, so you’ve got to get your six hours in before your half an hour because then you break the law... I’m driving, say, three-to-four hours, do the job, get out, do it, up the road and then you think, “hang on, what time did I start? Oh, I’m half an hour over.”

– Jerry, March 2018



Waiting while working.
The mobile phone is an object of logistical buffering taking on meanings of work and leisure.

Photo: Debbie Hopkins, South-East England, May 2018.

Jerry's description of tacho(graphic) time above is confusing, but it is important. It weaves together various temporal rules of driving work, creating a complex mirage of different timeframes. Drivers must make sense of this and layer it onto the demands of management, routers and customers. To do so, they 'find' time and 'move' time, looking for ways to ensure they do not 'run out of time'. This time-play involves buffering – not formally built into the drivers' schedules, but designed and implemented by them: setting off early, finding quicker routes, 'knowing the roads', speaking with each other to share information about delays, developing networks and friendships with fellow drivers and depot workers. Drivers are constantly chasing time, in-time, out-of-time, playing with time. As the relationality between drivers' mobility and immobility, or activity and inactivity, becomes clear, the often-significant events-of-waiting (Bissell 2007) can be interpreted through buffering.

Forms of buffering are ongoing, layered into work/life. Work is allocated job-by-job, or daily. If it is daily, drivers will straight away start to think about where they might sleep if they 'tramp' (sleep in the cab of the truck), or what time they might leave home if they 'trunk' (do routes between depots on a regular route). I noticed this during my mobile ethnographies, when at 7pm in the final hour of a long day on the road the driver, Jo, kept looking across at his schedule for the next day, commenting "And I'll do it all again tomorrow." While his paid work might end at the depot, he was already planning for tomorrow. Buffering, then, is an embedded process that connects all forms of labour, that is labour.

Had a bit of a lay in this morning didn't
start till 3-30 2 hour drive to my delivery.
Now sitting in a layby waiting for moment
before I drive the last few miles. Then we
off to some nice tight lanes 🤔

Early starts. A text which reflects the buffering spaces as well as the embodied conditions of buffering, including exhaustion and fatigue.

Photo: Jess, February 2021.

The need to meet the times set by planners, routers or customers leads to inevitable early starts. Particularly noteworthy is a description of getting up at 3.30am as constituting a "lie-in." This is a pattern reflected across the 40-odd drivers I have worked with: setting off early to beat the traffic, getting to the first job, avoiding delays. This is not designed or enforced by employers or customers, but is rather a form of cognitive and embodied buffering work. Acts of buffering (for they are always multiple) implicate the spatio-temporalities of lorry driving work.

So, buffering is never a one-off event; it becomes imbued in the logistical everyday as a form of planning, of contingency and of agentic practice. Logistical mobilities depend upon these informal acts, rarely communicated or recognized, not officially

sanctioned, but reliant on the lives and bodies of those workers moving freight, doing the logistical labour on which capitalist systems are based. Thus, rather than being smooth-flowing, automatable systems, the functioning of logistics depends on workers' buffering as they absorb potential ripples. To understand logistics requires attention to the logistical everyday, to the informal practices that support the system and without which the myth of just-in-time would become even more evident.

Notes:

¹ A tachograph is a recording device installed in vehicles to monitor compliance with driving hour regulations.

² Pseudonyms are used for all participant names.

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