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New Motion-Picture Advertising May Enhance London Subway Rides

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LONDON – The commute to work could soon be like a trip to the movies.

Several companies are developing technology to allow motion-picture advertisements to be projected on the walls of subway tunnels. The gizmos are based on the same theory as a movie projector, but with a twist. “When you see a film, you sit still and the film moves past the shutter very quickly,” says Josh Spodek, co-founder of Submedia LLC (broadway.sub-media.com), a New York-based start-up that is exploring technology to project these kinds of ads. “Here, the film is sitting still and you are moving.”

As advertising space on television, in newspapers and on radio becomes cramped, companies have begun to look for other places to display their messages. Outdoor advertising has developed in the past several years from rundown billboards to rotating displays on bus shelters and branded chairs in airport lounges. Projected images in dark subway tunnels is just an extension, albeit a complex one, of the already crowded advertising landscape.

There are several different competing technologies that seek to exploit one of the last spaces open to advertisers. Details are being kept under wraps by the developers. But put very simply, the idea is to use the walls of subway tunnels like the flip-books children play with: They show a picture of one image on a page and then the same image, altered slightly on the next page. By flipping the pages rapidly, the image appears

to move. “It’s a cross between movies and billboards, in terms of the kinds of ads you can show, but it isn’t really like either one,” says Mr. Spodek.

The idea appeals to transit authorities, who, if the technology works, are sitting on a whole new source of advertising revenue. “This is an idea we’ve been looking at for years,” says Jan O’Neill, spokeswoman for the London Underground, which operates the city’s subway system, “and it is something we are very interested in.” The London Underground, known as the Tube, has spoken to London-based Metrocom, which has developed a technology to project ads in subway tunnels. While no decision has been reached to push ahead with the technology in the London transit system, “we’re always looking at good ideas, and these advertising ideas are very revenue-generative for us,” says Ms. O’Neill from the London Underground.

The problem, she says, is public safety. “Our first priority, of course, is safety, and we wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize that.” Past proposals to project images in subway tunnels used flashing images, and if a subway car stopped in the middle of a tunnel—a common occurrence for London’s decrepit system—passengers watched the flashing image nonstop until the train moved again. This caused problems for children and epileptics. “Efforts have been made since then to improve the technologies,” says Ms. O’Neill, “and I believe that most of those wrinkles have been ironed out.”

While the idea may be straightforward, it’s the execution that could be difficult. In order to implement the technology, companies like Submedia or Metrocom would handle the installation and maintenance of the

advertising sites. This is a concern because safety authorities are “looking at how adding a new element to an old system would affect that system,” says Mr. Spodek. Subway networks “are sometimes very old,” he says, “and you have to be sure that whatever you’re adding doesn’t complicate them.”

Each transit system is different, adds Ms. O’Neill. “In New York, they have several tracks in one tunnel but here, we have smaller tunnels,” she says. “That means that you could only work on them during the four hours or so at night when the tubes are closed.” The risk advertisers would take is that if the technology falters in the morning, it would be difficult to fix until that night, and the advertiser would lose an entire day of face time with travelers.

The price of putting on such a campaign hasn’t yet been determined. The average price of a two-week traditional poster ad campaign on the London Underground is roughly 70,000 pounds (110,300 euros or \$104,211). But prices vary widely depending on the length of the campaign and how many posters a company rents. The new technology would have to develop a new pricing system that would take into account the new medium and its effect on the public’s attention.

Various ad agencies, including Bartle Bogle Hegarty in London, have spoken to Metrocom to explore ideas about promoting clients like Levi Strauss & Co. jeans in London’s tube. But no decisions are imminent. “It could be an interesting opportunity,” says Steve Parker, head of outdoor advertising for Starcom Motive, a media-buying firm part of Bcom3. “But it is a daunting project to consider.”