

TYPE IN TRANSIT

LED DISPLAYS IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

KEYWORDS

Multi-script
Digital
Transport Signage
Legibility
Devanagari
Kannada
Latin

The Delhi Metro began its operations eleven years ago in New Delhi and its suburbs; becoming only the second underground public transit system in India. It covers a little less than two hundred kilometers, and carries over a million passengers¹ every single day. In all its trains, and at a majority of its station platforms, the Delhi Metro uses LED signage to communicate information about train-timings, routes, and other safety messages, in English (Latin) and Hindi (Devanagari). *Type in Transit* began as a humble research initiative in early 2011, to study the type design and typography devised for the LED displays in the Delhi Metro.



Illustration I

A typical example of an LED display in the trains of the Delhi Metro, set in both Latin and Devanagari.



Illustration II

Numbers used in the LED display signage in buses in London.

Over the last two years, *Type in Transit* has evolved into a travelling project that documents LED signage from public transport systems across the country, and around the world. It is a growing collection of Latin LED signs, as well as Kannada and Devanagari letterforms from India. The project has been featured on Cannot Be Found <http://www.cannotbefound.co.uk/?p=926> and on Humped Mag <http://content.humpedmag.com/2012/05/24/814/>.

Type in Transit documents the different approaches to typography and letter design used in various LED systems, and critically appraises them for legibility. To do so, the project pays attention to three key factors:

LETTERSHPES

LED displays, because of their grid-based systems, place very strict restrictions on the design of lettershapes. Some designs on these displays embrace the constraints of the grid, have robust and square shapes; while others try to work around the system to design more organic shapes, and still succeed. Devanagari and Kannada are especially demanding because of the complexity and nature of their letter shapes; and the examples collected portray the ingenuity with which Indian scripts can be tackled.



Illustration III

Kannada signage from a bus in Bangalore and Devanagari signage from the Delhi Metro; both attempting to tackle the problem of representing letters in a form that is true to the tradition of each script.

Also note the use of two weights of Latin in the first sign, to make the bus number clearer.



Illustration IV

Compromises, such as this monospace “y”, seen in the Delhi Metro, are needed in these signs to fit even the Latin letterforms.

MULTI-SCRIPT TYPOGRAPHY

These displays throw up a difficult challenge for multi-script typography. Not only do two scripts have to be pared down to function in a coarse grid, but they both have to appear in equal prominence. The Delhi Metro uses Devanagari and Latin in its signage, which are very different scripts. Visually, it is common for composites and conjuncts to occur below the average activity zone in Devanagari; while in Latin there are more ascending letters than descending, and additions like stacked diacritical marks occur above the zone. Since no extra space can be made either above or below in these display signs, the designs are an outstanding example of how multi-script typography in current digital devices strives to function within rigid limitations.

ARRANGEMENT OF INFORMATION

Additionally, the project focusses on how different styles and weights have been created in this limited atmosphere, to highlight important information. It compares styles such as serif, sans serif, and monospace to recognize what works best, and how these styles can be used together to create an effective design.

In this presentation, one will share the collection of images, and analysis of LED displays gathered so far. Alternate designs that have been conceptualized based on this analysis will also be discussed.

1. DELHI METRO RAIL CORPORATION http://www.delhimetrorail.com/press_reldetails.aspx?id=FzMnclfd2010Mlld
 2. SINGH, Vaibhav (2011) *Devanagari in multi-script typography: A critical enquiry into the development of notions of multi-script typography, for the combination of Devanagari and Latin scripts*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Reading.