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## ‘Hop, Skip, Go’ Review: Going Mobile

A “mobility revolution” may well affect where we go and how fast we get there. Will it happen suddenly or unfold slowly, in incremental stages?



The Bell Nexus concept vehicle at the Uber Elevate Summit in June. PHOTO: EVA HAMBACH/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Marc Levinson

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My condo building has an underground garage with some 250 parking spaces, each attached to a particular unit. Our board would like unit owners, should they wish, to have the option of installing chargers for electric cars; each owner would pay individually for the power consumed. But after many visits from engineers and electrical contractors, we’ve come up empty. It seems that a system of separately owned charging stations in a single building is more than current technology can deliver.

Perhaps the frustrations of trying to equip our garage for electric cars, even though the technology already exists, explain my skepticism about “Hop, Skip, Go: How the Mobility Revolution Is Transforming Our Lives.” The book, by John Rossant and Stephen Baker—the head of a nonprofit devoted to improving life in cities and a veteran tech journalist, respectively—offers a global tour of new mobility technologies that are “poised to change our cities, our economies, and the fabric of our lives.” Such innovation, the authors tell us, promises to make previously inaccessible places easy to reach and offer a “mobility dividend” in the form of faster commutes. These are bold claims, coming at a time when a train commute from White Plains, N.Y., to Midtown Manhattan takes about as long as it did in 1890—and my neighbors, should they choose to shell out for a Tesla Model S, would have no place to plug it in.

“Hop, Skip, Go” seems to be the result of an extended reporting trip, during which the authors chat with would-be game-changers from Los Angeles to Helsinki to Dubai to Guangzhou, offering futuristic punditry along the way. Their breezy style makes the book a fun read. That said, much of what they describe could be gleaned from the pages of this newspaper or any number of business publications. Many of their insights are not particularly original. Unless you’ve spent the past few years in a cave, you’re probably aware that “in the coming age of mobility, practically every rolling and flying conveyance will be a networked device.” And a great deal of the content here consists of quotations from people who, as they say on Wall Street, are talking their own book.

As Messrs. Rossant and Baker observe, after a century in which the traditional automobile reigned supreme, “the entire car economy, from giants like Toyota and Ford to Daimler, [now] has to find its place in a world of connected vehicles.” There’s no disputing that the technological disruption of the automotive world is well under way. Every major auto maker is trying to build electric vehicles, develop autonomous vehicles, and invest in ride-sharing, car-sharing and other ventures to hedge against a future that may not involve a car in every

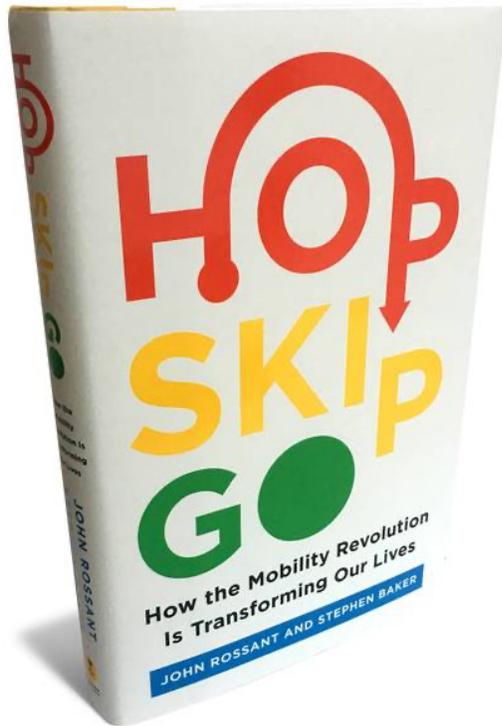


PHOTO: WSJ

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HOP, SKIP, GO

By John Rossant and Stephen Baker  
*Harper Business*, 239 pages, \$29.99

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driveway. The United Auto Workers' recent six-week strike against General Motors lasted so long mainly because workers are panicked that dramatic changes in car-making will eliminate jobs—even as the industry worries that its internal-combustion past will hinder it from thriving in a world in which software will matter more than hardware.

The authors have tracked down entrepreneurs who are following their dreams of shaking up passenger transportation. In Shanghai, we meet Joseph Xie, whose Shanghai Quality Sensor Technology Corp. specializes in tiny semiconductors that sense light, sound and motion and have a wide application for autonomous vehicles, among other uses. In the Detroit area, R.J. Scaringe's company, Rivian, aims to build electric cars and recently captured a \$500 million investment from Ford. In

Helsinki, an engineering student named Sonja Heikkilä wrote a thesis proposing a mobility app that would allow subscribers access to every sort of conveyance, from dockless scooters to rental cars. Mark Moore, a former NASA researcher now with an Uber venture called Uber Air, envisions small aircraft allowing users to fly over traffic jams within a decade.

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Some of these people have fascinating ideas. But the authors' enthusiasm often gets the best of them. When they visit Divergent 3D, a company near Los Angeles that prints body panels and other car parts intended to be assembled by robots, they fall victim to the fantasy of cars that can be melted down, redesigned overnight and then printed anew tomorrow, without regard to, say, insurance requirements, liability laws and federal safety standards. Divergent's technology certainly holds promise for improving the automotive manufacturing process: Making assembly lines more efficient and more flexible would be no small achievement. But any scenario in which 3-D printers make cars is a stretch. As Messrs. Rossant and Baker themselves acknowledge, "3-D printing cannot compete with the astounding production of a traditional assembly plant."

Perhaps the most interesting discussion in "Hop, Skip, Go" concerns what the authors term "urban mobility networks." Already many sources, from ride-share vehicles to transit buses to pedestrians with cellphones in their pockets, emit streams of data that reveal travel speeds, service interruptions and impending demand at specific locations. This sort of information is being used today to retime traffic lights and adjust tolls; it could be made freely available to help travelers using any mode of transportation to choose the most efficient route to their destination in real time. The technology to do this is available now. The big question, Messrs.

Rossant and Baker suggest, is whether local governments will ensure access for all residents.

By the end of their book, the authors admit that “the new order is likely to creep into our lives bit by bit. The skeptics among us—like the fabled frog as the water in the pot suddenly grows warmer—will insist that nothing is changing.” In other words, “the mobility revolution” promised in the subtitle is more likely to be an extended series of incremental improvements, most of which will not merit headlines. Cars with many autonomous features, for example, are already available in dealers’ showrooms. But if you’re looking for a vehicle that can transport you on any road under any conditions without the involvement of a driver, you may have a long wait.

*Mr. Levinson’s books include “The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger.”*

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