

Commuter Rail Twitter Reveals History of Delays

A delay by any other name still makes you late

By Kaila Webb

Introduction

To its credit, the MBTA attempts to alert commuter rail passengers when trains are delayed. What's less clear is just how the T defines a "delay". Information presented on the authority's data website shows that the number of delays has been falling in recent years. But a closer look reveals that while delays are down, there has been an increase in the number of trains classified as "running behind". When the number that are delayed and running behind are added together, the number of late trains has remained relatively unchanged, despite this change in terminology.

Transparency Better, but More Improvement Needed

An easy way to bond with fellow Bostonians is to complain about commuter rail. While it's often regarded as unreliable, unexplainable, and unresponsive, a weakness in the transparency of MBTA performance data makes these claims no more than conjecture. True, the agency has done a vastly better job making its operation public in recent years, but there is more work to be done.

While [State of Service Reports](#) list miles between failure, ridership statistics, and causes for delays, the MBTA had not released a count of postponements; at least not until [corporate social media accountability](#) became the trend, and MBTA Commuter Rail got a Twitter profile.

A short computer script [downloaded all of the @MBTA_CR profile's tweets](#). Their first one, on June 18th, 2014 at 1:46 pm, reads:

"This account will begin tweeting live on July 1st! Follow for the latest information on updates & alerts regarding @MBTA commuter rail lines"

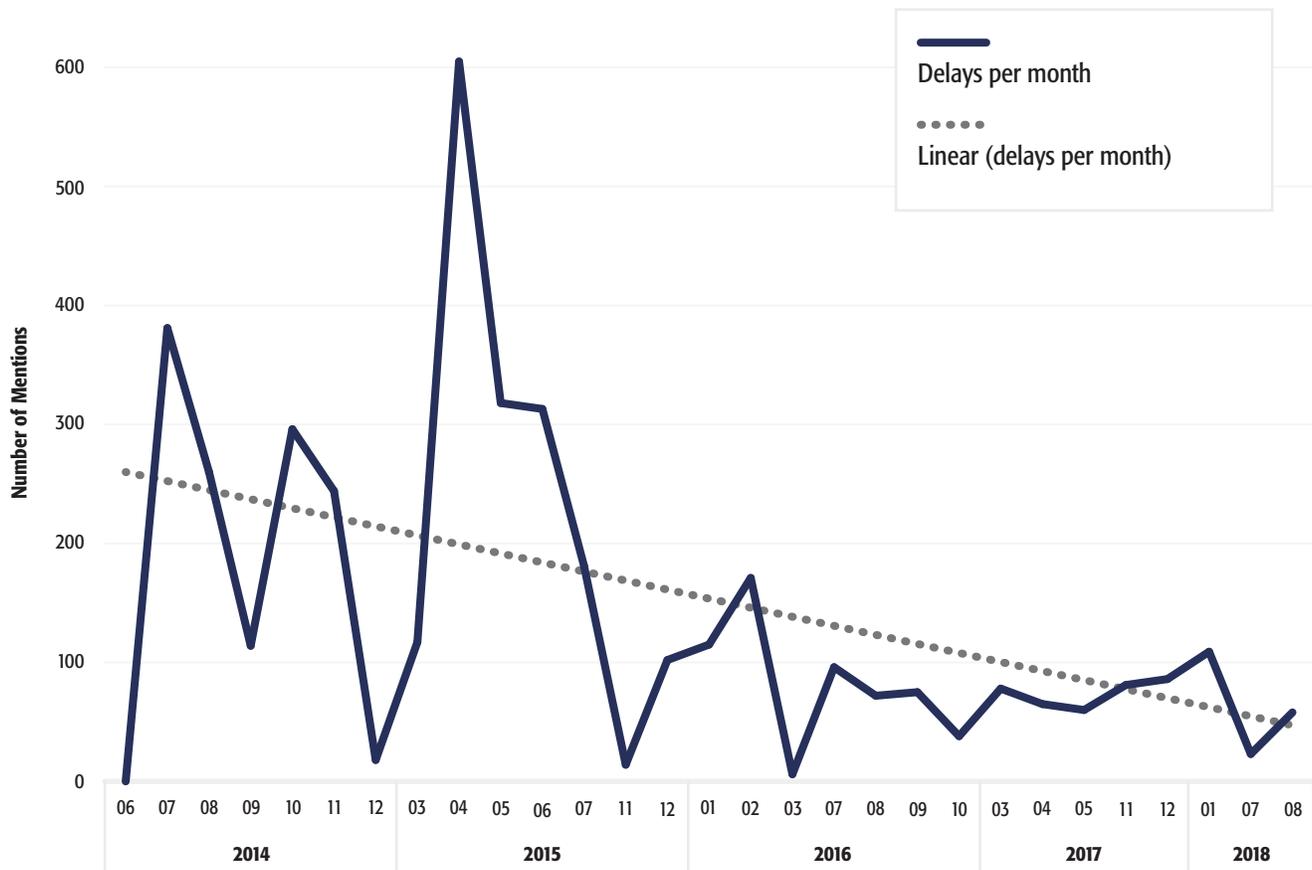
"Delayed" vs. "Running Behind"

Over the last four years, @MBTA_CR has attempted to alert passengers of every commuter rail delay and notice. Pioneer counted 503 apologies, 4,149 mentions of delays, and 7,701 alerts that a train was running behind. The numbers translate to about three delay reports a day:



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@MBTA_CR Delays Per Month



Commuters might be surprised to learn that the number of delays seems to be decreasing. [MBTA Back on Track](#), the MBTA’s data website, reports that the commuter rail’s “percent on time” averaged [90 percent at the beginning and end of 2017](#). Is this more of a PR move than an actual improvement in service?

While the MBTA twitter mentioned fewer delays, they began to refer more frequently to trains being behind schedule — at a rate that at first replaced and then exceeded their original delay announcements.

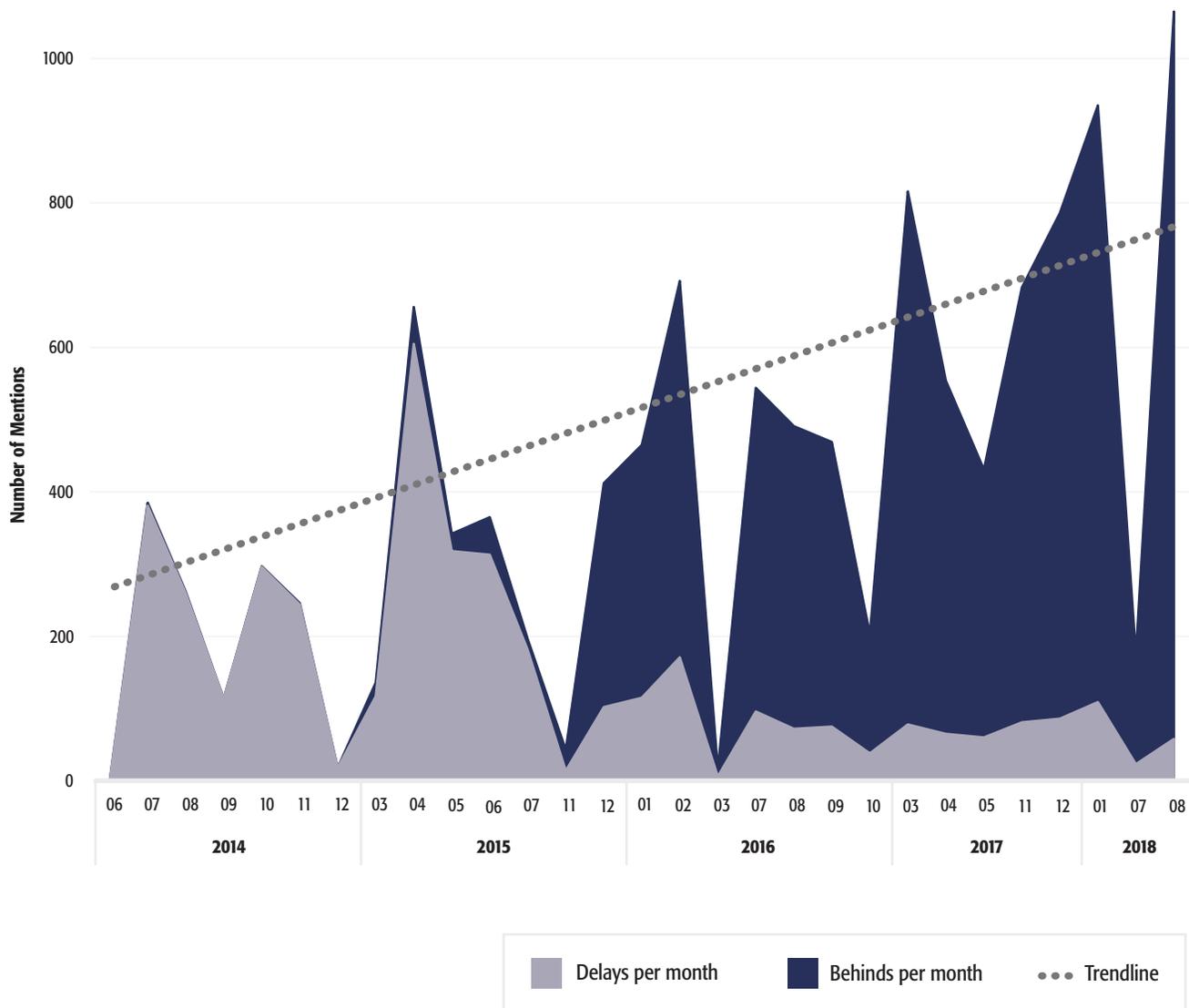
While the terminology may have changed, the performance hasn’t. To a commuter on his or her way to Boston, it doesn’t really matter what the MBTA calls its tardiness. A late train still translates to missed meetings.

The MBTA reached out to Pioneer to explain that the change in language was conscious, and attributed the increase in late trains to the addition of 11,000 trains during the examined period. While the increase in trains explains the rise in those reported late, it does not account for the lack of communication regarding the difference in terms. No public, written announcements have been made differentiating trains that are running behind from those that are delayed.

The MBTA differentiated the terms to Pioneer. Trains that are running behind may be able to catch up to schedule, whereas delayed trains are unlikely to do so. They emphasized that marking trains as either delayed or not delayed confused passengers on when the train would actually arrive. However, at most this change was relayed to conductors or announced in stations. The MBTA’s Twitter has nothing announcing this change in terminology, so anyone now looking at service announcements on the website or Twitter is unaware of the meaning of service alerts in use.

The MBTA should be given credit for numerous improvements in [infrastructure and transparency over the past several years](#). Their [data dashboard](#) proudly announces their daily ridership of 1.17 million, and admits which services are less reliable (like buses, with a with an average [46 percent reliability in August 2018](#)). While these are steps in the right direction, the majority of riders won’t check a data dashboard to find out if their train is running late; they’ll be waiting for a notification from @MBTA_CR to pop up on their phone. The average commuter doesn’t read reports on reliability, but they remember delays and come up with their own individual risk assessments when planning their next ride.

@MBTA_CR mentions of "Delay" and "Behind"



Conclusion

For non-riders scrolling through Twitter, announcing that a train is “running behind” sounds lovely. It implies that no one should worry, because commuter rail is still chugging along towards its destination. But for someone actually trying to get from A to B, it obfuscates the reliability of our transit system. To a layperson, a train that is delayed and one that’s running behind are the same thing. If there’s one thing Boston doesn’t mind, its bluntness, and the MBTA twitter accounts should either stick to calling a delay a delay, or plainly explain why they won’t.

Saying a train is running behind instead of delayed may be a

sweeter way to convey failure, but it doesn’t fix anything. It certainly doesn’t improve the public’s perception of the MBTA’s lack of reliability. The commuter rail must stop hiding behind the wall of social media and provide the public with fully transparent data and straightforward definitions of the terms it uses.

Without developer permissions and a knowledge of coding, Pioneer would not have been able to access this data. [Passengers](#) who have [inquired in the past](#) have been referred to the MBTA’s service announcement page, which, while useful, provides no further clarification on the matter. They should remember that with taxpayer money comes taxpayer oversight.

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