Understanding the Social Practices of Transport Management in the UK

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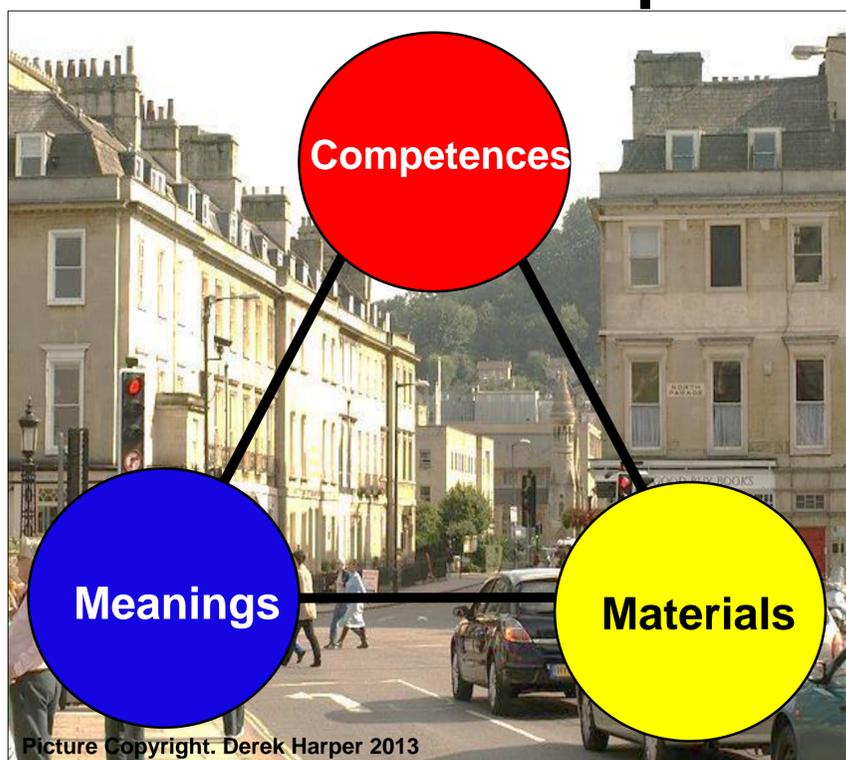
1. Introduction

In 2008 20% of Green House Gas (GHG) emissions were generated by road transport (DfT, 2008). GHG emissions have a significant impact on the global climate and human health and transport is the only sector in the UK where levels of emissions have not fallen since the 1990s (DEFRA. 2009). To meet the ambitious emissions targets set by the UK Government we need a step change in how we travel. A Social Practice Theory approach has been used to assess the management of the transport network to understand how the network is managed under normal and disrupted conditions. Using Shove *et al.*'s (2012) Three Elements Model it has been possible to identify the key *competences* of managing the network and the *meanings* placed on the network by politicians, the legal system and the public influence and how these influence how the *materials* that make up the highway network are used.
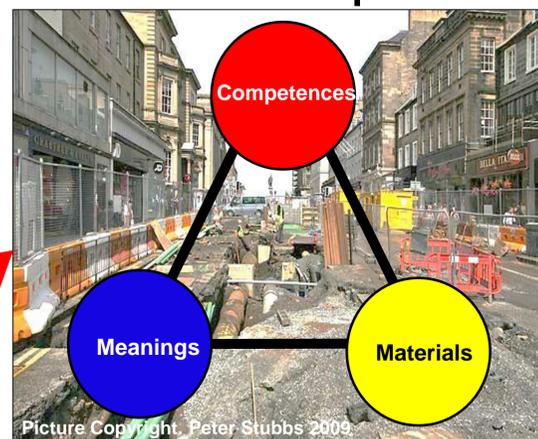
2. Method and Findings Part I

In 2010 Bath and North East Somerset Council completed their Network Management Plan. This document outlined how the Council managed their network and prepared for disruptive events. It was possible to identify three distinct types of disruption within this document: planned, unplanned/predicted and unplanned unpredicted, which all impact on how the Council manages the network. The materials are generally reduced in these incidents and the competences of managing the network and the meanings associated with the network also change during the period of disruption.
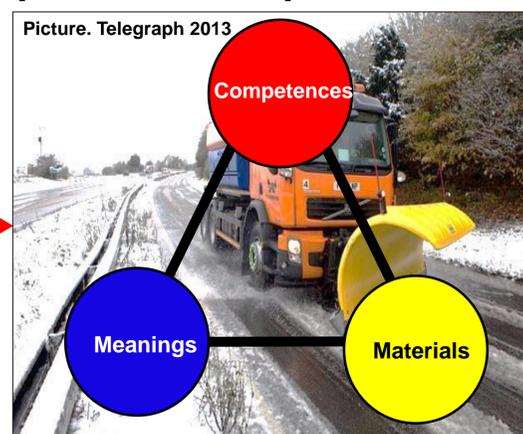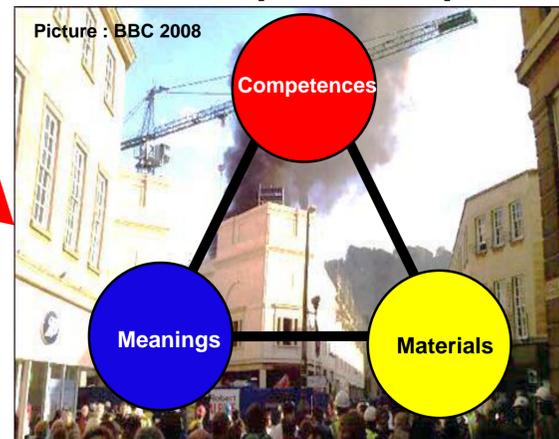
Normal Network Operation

Picture Copyright. Derek Harper 2013

Planned Disruption

Picture Copyright. Peter Stubbs 2009.

Unplanned Disruption - Predicted

Picture. Telegraph 2013

Unplanned Disruption - Unpredicted

Picture : BBC 2008

3. Findings Part II

Disruption is part of the normal operation of the network rather than a failure of the system. The research also identified that there is also a gap between Council policy for "normal" operations and the practices undertaken when managing disruption. Whilst the strategic policy prioritised pedestrians and cyclists, when the network is disrupted in practice motorists become the priority. Secondly it was found that disruptions provide the opportunity to implement permanent changes to travel practices, as the materials are temporarily altered along with associated meanings and competences. This also has a knock on effect on other practices undertaken in every day life often reducing the need to travel.

4. Conclusions

Policy makers need to be bold in taking the opportunities presented by disruption and use them to change unsustainable travel practices. Whilst doing this there needs to be caution, as there may be unintended consequences of making the changes. People may make fewer retail and social trips if there is reduced network capacity and this has an impact on other areas of society. The Three Elements Model provides a picture of the "now", but does not explain how we should move forward from this position. This is where an understanding of the differing types of disruption will help to provide opportunities to create the step change in travel practices that are required to reduce GHG emissions.

References:
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DfT (2008) *Factsheets: UK transport greenhouse gas emissions*, DfT, London.
Shove, E., Pantzar, M., Watson, M. (2012) *The Dynamics of Social Practice*, Sage, London.
BaNES (2010) Network Management Plan (unpublished)