Public road signs as intermediate interaction

ABSTRACT:

This paper reports a study of the abundant practice among people who live along roads to communicate with passing drivers by making and mounting public road signs. These signs can be seen as a complement, parallel or second to official signs posted by road authorities. The paper focus specifically on how public road signs support different forms of *communities*, the *practical work* of enhancing readability for passing drivers and the *adoption* to road-inspectors work of removing public road signs. We argue that public road signs are important enabling *intermediate interaction* between communities. Furthermore, people posting signs adopt different *tactics* so that their messages are detected by passing drivers while not deleted by road authorities. However road inspector's work of removing signs is also vital for the success of public road signs, seeing their maintenance work as *editing* the road.

KEYWORDS: public road-signs, communities, intermediate interaction, ethnographic fieldwork, uses of space

8.1 Introduction

We present an ethnographic fieldwork on the social practice of designing and posting signs, along public roads in Sweden and Canada. It is a large and global, yet vernacular practice, where people present various messages in a multitude ways. In general, the signs are made to tell bypassing drivers something about the current location. They can be mounted along the road to inform drivers of local characteristics e.g. small kids living beside the road; to promote locally available products; events or establishments. Signs can also be used to express opinions or just state existence of local activities. The styles and materials of signs vary considerably, from the most cheap paper posters to costly installations in concrete. We refer to such signs, which are made and posted by private persons in comparison to official road signs that are handled and granted permission by a road authority, as *public road signs*.

In our study we will particularly focus on how these signs support different forms of *communities*, the *practical work* of making and placing them at appropriate places to get the message through to swiftly passing drivers, and finally the activities that occur to *avoid deletion* by authorities. First, we see that this practise has relevance for the work of keeping, showing and maintaining a community. In communities there is always a need to be able to express the identity and belonging of that community (i.e. a locality or sense of place). These expressions and signs aid the ongoing work of configuring (defining) within the people what their interaction is about. But the signs also *present*, as a label, the community towards those that pass by the location.

Second, we have also studied the posters´ practical achievements when designing and mounting the signs. Hence, we need to study not only the signs or systems themselves but also the people engaged in them and the practicalities on which the signs depend, to understand how this practice works.[273]

Third, road spaces and highways are heavily supervised and regulated. Driving on them requires a driver's licence and several regulations restrict and limit the use of them. The roadside and the messages that are posted along the road is no exception. The official signs are part of a strict sociosemiotic sign system[274]. The signs are made and designed by a national authority, with strong dependency to international boards. The changes of this system can be explained as an interaction between on the one hand internal linguistic possibilities and on the other hand social and technical factors which affects decision in international standardisation bodies. But here we are concerned with signs that exist in parallel or second to these official signs. There are also rules for personal or local signs, which postulate where to place them as well as procedures to follow and permissions needed, before placing them along the road. However, the posters of the signs we are interested in lack such permissions. Still, their signs seem to nurture in an ambiguous state where there is uncertainties as to if they are illegal or not, as well as if there are other reasons that legitimate their existence.

Michel de Certeau highlighted *uses of space* as an active manipulation or performance. Significant, for the active uses of space in his analysis was the view from the walkers, as 'the elementary form of this experience of the city'[275]. This influential approach has, since then, become the 'means whereby it becomes possible to open up more spaces within which the operational logic of culture can be addressed'[276]. Yet, Nigel Thrift points out that automobility is remarkably absent in de Certeau's studies. This, according to Thrift, should not be taken as evidence that roads evade manipulation, on the contrary, the geography, created in the practise of walking, are equally manipulated, performed and created among drivers and road-users. The second geography is still there, but on a different frequency, and made in another pace while *driving the city*.

Roads are a natural, but heterogeneous, part of our everyday life. And even though roads are immensely regulated, spatially and institutionally, with policemen, speed bump, speeding cameras, fences, sectioned streets etc, drivers regularly adopt different 'tactics' to temporarily take advantage of the situation, as opposed to continuously follow regulations[277]. Hence, the city and the countryside is authored by hybrid bodies, embodying and embodied by the car[278].

The paper is outlined as follows. First, we discus the relation between mobility and community life, and preceding studies on public road signs. Second, we present a brief section on the methods we have applied. Then follows the analysis of the empirical material. The third section concerns how the signs relates to community life. The fourth section discuss the various ways in which posters design and mount signs to make them

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[273] As argued by e.g. de Certeau (1984), Garfinkel (1967) Suchman (1987).
[274] Cf. Krampen (1983)
[275] de Certeau (1984:93)
[276] Thrift (2004:42)
[277] Cf. Juhlin (2001); Katz (1999); Laurier (2004)
[278] Cf. Dant (2004); Michael (2000; 2001); Laurier (2004)

readable from the road. The next section discuss how this practice is handled by the authorities. Finally, the paper ends with a discussion.

8.2 Mobile Communities

Communities, as a term, predominantly refer to groups of individuals whose sense of belonging, social identity, support, locality, culture and shared knowledge tie individuals together. As technologies are enmeshed into everyday life, they consequently are entwined with community. However, the relation between traffic and community is highly ambiguous. Most notably transportation and communication technologies have an impact on community life. This in turn has yielded a debate on whether transport and communication technologies destroy or increase the liveliness of community[279].

We will in the following focus on the interactions that is necessary to create and maintain a community. These interactions are situated, mediated and interrelated to the context – consisting of buildings, pathways, villages, stairs, streets, parks, squares, malls, railroads, cars, tubes, telephones, highways, email, bus stops, petrol stations, discussion-boards, mobile phones, schools, playgrounds, weather etc. From each situation to the next, the context varies and so does the modes of interaction that is facilitated or inhibited by it. Sociologist Barry Wellman argues that different *modes of interaction* facilitate or inhibit different *forms of communities*. He identifies three forms of communities i.e. neighbourhood networks (or door-to-door); network of nodes (or place-to-place) and network of persons (person-to-person). These communities are distributed in a spectrum from geographically limited groups to the people whose communities are totally independent of place.[280]

In a neighbourhood intrapersonal interaction depends on sustained or re-occurring physical proximity and shared sense of belonging to a place. It is a traditional form of community, which is locally bounded, spatially compact with regular interaction and limited movements within walking distance. Network of nodes are generally far-flung, sparsely-knit, and fragmentary where the individual connects to loosely bound networks of shared interest, work, practice, and locality. Thus, network of nodes rely to a greater extent on technologies that bridge between these places such as phones, highways and mail. These technologies make it possible to meet and stay in touch despite physical distances. A network of nodes depends on interaction between places rather than within a place, such as a network consisting of households and places for work, living and leisure time activities. Network of persons are further detached from place and based on interaction mediated by technologies like mobile phones. The community becomes totally detached from any sense of belonging to a place. Maintaining such a network is only a personal responsibility.

Seen in this perspective, roads both facilitate and inhibit communities. On the one hand transport technologies have compressed distances and enabled network of nodes and persons to develop - automobility is the paradigm for everyday mobility[281]. We use roads daily, dwell in them and meet each other. In Sweden, over 60% of our travel consists of car travel, which is consistent with statistics from other western countries[282]. On the

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[279] Cf. Wellman Boase & Chen, (2002)
[280] Cf. Wellman (2001a; 2001b)
[281] Beckmann (2001); Pooley et al (2005); Urry (2000)
[282] Cf. SIKA (2003); Urry (2004)

other hand automobility and roads have in many cases inhibited neighbourhoods and the interaction between residents[283]. As a consequence roads are often described as *in between* communities – i.e. placeless, history-less strips of asphalt and concrete, a supermodern non-place[284]. This perspective of the road as a non-place is further accentuated by urban and traffic politics focus on accessibility, where the road is presented as a mono-functional space exclusively for transportation[285].

Contrary to the view of the road as a non-place, this chapter contributes to a growing body of studies on transitory places that 'take seriously what it is we do while travelling and the places that travellers use while still between A and B'[286]. The relational perspective of these studies empathise the movements and mobility as 'integral to the construction and performance of landscapes and places'[287], rather than seeing the flows of drivers as situated *in between* communities.

8.2.1 Related road-sign studies

The practice of posting public road signs does not sit well with the perspective of road use as a mono-functional transport activity. People present, express and form description of their location as complement, or in opposition to, official road signs. Road signs, and their relation to communities, were initially studied by architects in the 1960s and the 1970s such as Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, Michael Southworth, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. They noted that signs, buildings, flags and other symbols along the road were used to 'compensate for the direct contact with people'[288]. Similarly Venturi and his colleagues saw the extensive use of signs in Las Vegas as a way to reach out '… in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of big spaces, high speeds and complex programs. Styles and signs make connections among many elements far apart and seen fast.'[289] What arguably can have been a result of higher speed and greater density of cars at that time, these studies revealed how public signs were changing. Commercial road signs, that presented individual shop owners and products, both grew in size and decreased in textual content. The road signs on the strip created both clutter and detachment since the messages had low connection to the context. 'The pivot of motion on the highway today is all too likely a temporary shanty, and its goal a whiskey advertisement. On the other hand, a historic building, or the central stock exchange cannot be seen'[290]. Although Lynch and Venturi shared an interest for road signs, their perspective on them differed widely.

Kevin Lynch and colleagues was among the proponents of regulatory measures of public signs. He urged for an organisation of the presentation of road signs, to favour messages that connected to the local context: 'Signs might be used for something more than giving directions or pressing a sale. And those advertisements that are most connected to the location should be favoured.'[291] They wanted a design of road signs that favoured a strong connection between the sign and its neighbourhood. The signs should in various ways explicitly reflect the local communities. According to Kevin Lynch, the…

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[283] Cf. K. Lynch (1972)
[284] Augé (1995)
[285] Cf. Fotel & Thomsen (2004); Juhlin & Sjöberg (1999)
[286] Laurier (2004b:3), see also Katz (1999); Laurier (2001); Merriman (2004); Morris (1988); Normark (2006); Thrift (2004).
[287] Merriman (2004:146)
[288] K. Lynch & Southworth (1974) in K. Lynch (1990:584)
[289] Venturi (1977:8-9)
[290] Appelyard et al 1(964:17)
[291] ibid:17

> … liveliness of a place is influenced by… the transparency of the setting (that is, by how it makes visible the activity it contains); the way people can leave perceptible traces of their presence; the manner in which things express their action and purpose; the pattern of ownership, which always have sensory consequences; and the mix and density of movement and activity.[292]

Robert Venturi and his colleagues instead saw the possibilities in withholding the weak connection between the driver and the roadside. The loose connection between driver and road context provides an opportunity to play around with new roles and heightened symbolism. They saw that the de-contextualisation along the roadside not necessarily implied a decline of communities. The use of signs enabled the creation of the imagery of the pleasure-zone, that present '…lightness, the quality of being an oasis in a perhaps hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role.'[293] For Venturi the signs could express nodes of interests in a network of nodes. Thus, the signs along the roads enable more powerful ways of communicating between roadside inhabitants and passing drivers, e.g. expressing communities of interests.

Roadside memorials, which can be seen as a type of public road signs, have recently received attention in folklore studies and social studies of death.[294] Most scholars report that this practise has become increasingly common in the US, Australia and Sweden.[295] The memorials are secular commemorations of the absence of lost family members, relatives and friends. They provide a personalised place at a publicly available location. Thus the roadside memorials complement cemeteries, which are the authorities appropriate (or proper) place for grief and remembrance, since the structure of cemeteries inhibit personalisation[296].

Similar to other public signs, roadside memorials do not fit well with current policies by the road authorities. Still, researchers on roadside memorials report a tolerance from authorities towards the signs. According to Hartig and Dunn…

> …there are two reasons why some of these institutions have accepted the proliferation of roadside memorials. The first revolves around the way in which these artefacts of death posses a reverence, and second is related to the hope of policy makers that these memorials may serve as warnings to careless or carefree drivers.[297]

For example in Texas, the authorities have created guidelines regarding where roadside memorials can be mounted and how big they can be. But these shrines are only allowed if the fatalities are caused by drunk or drugged drivers, i.e. in order for the signs to function as a warning. Few comply with these guidelines. Paradoxically, objects such as empty or full beer-cans are even placed at the site. And these remains could be interpreted as contradictory to the objective of roadside memorials as a safety reminder[298].

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[292] K. Lynch (1976:35); see also Francis (1991)
[293] Venturi et al (1977:53)
[294] For example, there was a special track dedicated to "roadside memorials to the dead" at the 7 international conference on: the social context on Death, Dying and Disposal, in Bath, UK, September 2005, for abstracts see Walter & Howarth (2005).
[295] Cf. Everett (2002); Reid & Reid (2001); Hartig & Dunn (1998); Petersson (2005)
[296] Petersson (2005)
[297] Hartig & Dunn (1998:10)
[298] Reid & Reid (2001)

8.3 Method and setting

The study presented in the article is generated out of ethnographic field work including observation of public signs, interviews with posters of signs, as well observations and interviews with civil servants who are responsible for maintenance of the road side.

First, the observation of road signs was informed by empirical studies, developed by architects such as Kevin Lynch and Donald Appleyard, to investigate the 'highway experience'[299]. Kevin Lynch argued that studies on the highway experience should include, among else, an analysis of the perceivable i.e. the environment. It could be studied through e.g. photographic surveys where the researcher, architect or designer gathered an overview of the area as a set of journeys that could describe the visual corridors of the roadside. Similarly, we have gathered pictures on public road signs. More than 2000 pictures of signs were taken along the road when travelling around 4000 kilometres between Gothenburg and Vilhelmina in Sweden. Second, according to Kevin Lynch, researchers have to identify dwellers of the place and ask them how they interpret their environment. In our case, we are interested in road signs from the perspective of those that post them. Therefore, we did seventeen interviews with people posting signs, hereafter called posters, during the journey trough Sweden. Interviews are a good tool to go beyond that, which is observable, however as Kusenbach points out, an interview is limited by the narrative it enable and the situation where it is conducted.[300] Thus, in line with Kusenbach's *go-along* technique, most interviews were conducted outside, in proximity to the signs, which provided detailed descriptions on the way signs were put up, constructed, and how the signs related to the road. Third, we also approached road inspectors that maintain the roadside. Six interviews with road inspectors where conducted (four in Sweden and two in Canada). We also did observational studies in Stockholm by following the civil servants in their job of identifying public road signs and deciding which should be deleted. These interviews provided additional footage from Sweden and Toronto. In all, the data provide us with detailed knowledge about the practices of posting and removing signs.

The analysis of the ethnographic data reveals first, how signs express identity and belonging among communities both as a form of interaction within communities, and as a mode of intermediate interaction. Second, the fieldwork unveils the detailed ways of how signs are made and posted. Third, the data reveal tactics and strategies by which the practices of posters and civil servants, adapt to each other, which in the end establish a second geography of public signs.

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[299] Cf. Appelyard et al (1964); K. Lynch (1990)
[300] Kusenbach (2003)

8.4 Communities and the public road signs

Figure 8.1: Bulletin board in a neighbourhood	*Figure 8.2: Esoteric sign that was used once to guide a truck driver*	*Figure 8.3: Sign informing of the presence of children*
Figure 8.4: The neighbourhood sign in 'Slut'	*Figure 8.5: The setting of the neighbourhood 'Slut'*	*Figure 8.6: A bold, simple food sign*
Figure 8.7: The sign easily seen from a distance	*Figure 8.8: Sign beside the restaurant*	*Figure 8.9: Sign providing direction using an arrow in Toronto*

Communities are made, shaped and sustained through interaction. We suggest that interaction through public signs have a role in doing communities. There are signs that are used to interact within a network of neighbourhoods as well as within networks of people Furthermore we discuss the more abundant practice by which signs are used for interaction outside of such communities.

8.4.1 Interaction within communities

Public signs are used to communicate with other members of a community. A bulletin board, adjacent to mailboxes, is a common feature in small neighbourhoods (cf. figure 8.1). It fits for interaction within a neighbourhood community, where people spend time on a particular place and also revisit the same location, for example when they pick up mail. This type of signs seems to conform with doing what Wellman refers to as doing 'neighbourhood networks' or 'door-to-door' communities. However, in general the bulletin boards we passed were often empty or scarcely used.

We also found road signs that supported network of nodes as well as networks of people. Here people used signs to interact with fellow members of a specific network by addressing a group in the message on the sign. For example signs were presented in ways that was understandable, among members of the group even though the object or symbol was cryptic, or simply odd for a larger audience. One informant had a large collection of old 78 records that he wanted to sell. Therefore he mounted an old 78 record on his flea-market sign. He argued that it attracted:

> …interested collectors. They recognise the old 78 record hanging outside by the road and that is why they stop and enter… it's a specific *community of interest* that I want to attract and it works…Of course I get good contact with other collectors, many from Norway… and many of them return a couple of times every year.

He was a collector himself and by putting out a record other collectors could find his place and his second hand store. The disc was well known sign among collectors. By mounting the record on the sign, the store became a node for collectors that now and then passed that place.

Similarly, persons can establish temporary relationships (or networks) assisted by the interaction of road signs. The occurrences of such signs are empirically available as esoteric messages, which are hard to understand for to non-network members. But also, in the way the meaning are strongly linked to specific activities that are bounded in time (figure 8.2). For example the sign in figure 8.2 consist of a piece of tree, arrow like, posted on a stick. It is painted yellow and there is a text which says 'CAT'. By interviewing the posters we learnt that it was mounted to give directional advice for a person at a particular occasion. A house-builder had contracted manual worker to dig on his yard. The worker in turn mounted a sign along the road to inform a truck driver of the direction to the place where he should dismount a Caterpillar. Thus the text 'CAT' refer to the object he was supposed to bring, and the arrow to where it should go. The purpose and use of the sign was limited to one situation and the communication within a 'network of persons' consisting of a house-builder, a worker and a truck driver. But the sign was then left at the crossing and it was still there at least half a year later.

8.4.2 Interaction with non community members

Road signs are mostly used to interact with people outside of a neighbourhood or personal network. We will refer to such messaging as intermediate interaction. Such interaction occurs for various reasons. They can be posted to inform drivers of local characteristics e.g. small kids living beside the road (figure 8.3) or to promote locally available products, events or establishments. In general, they are used to reach out to other people to make them relate to the neighbourhood networks e.g. slowing down to avoid accidents or buy goods. We will in the following argue that these signs also go beyond support for such navigation support or coordination of road use, and also have an impact on people's sense of communities.

During our observation of signs, we encountered several small gatherings of houses, which mounted their own road signs to name that location, e.g. the sign with the text 'Slut' (figure 8.4 and 8.5). They made their signs a couple of years prior to the study, after disputing for eight years with the road authorities. The authorities found it unwarranted to label the setting, since the road was too small and there were too few houses. For the people living in the houses, the sign was important for two reasons. First, it was of importance to support navigation into commercial activities in the village and thus sustain the community economically. The informant argued:

> We have an entrepreneur in the village who rents out forest-machines and farm-equipment and its very important for him that his customers can find the way to Slut.

Second, the sign was important for the people to sustain a sense of neighbourhood community. An inhabitant argued that:

> …there are many people that do not know that this village is called 'Slut'… and now at least those that pass by know of us and there are many people that pass by.

The posting of the sign is not discussed solely as a way to support navigation. Rather it is about establishing an entity of 'us' through interaction with anonymous people passing by. The name of the village, as the informant pointed out, is known to all the residents, but unknown to others. The sign can be seen as strengthening the neighbourhood community in itself by expressing this 'we' to non-members.

Thus, *intermediate interaction*, which occurs in between members of different forms of communities both support activities between unacquainted people as well as support existing social networks. Mark Granovetter has argued for the importance of such interaction when studying what he describes as weak ties. He claims that '…*bridging* weak ties are of special value to individuals… It should follow, then, that … groups making the greatest use of weak ties are those whose weak ties do connect to social circles different from one's own.'[301] Wellman's apparatus makes visible the way in which signs are used to mediate interaction within forms of communities. But we also need concepts that refer to the abundant forms of intermediate interaction, between different forms of communities. Public road signs are often used in this way to bridge between communities, which makes them valuable as mode of interaction.

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[301] Granovetter (1983:208) see also Granovetter (1973)

8.5 Posting signs as practical achievement

Our observations and interviews reveal that when people use road signs to communicate they account not only for what they want to convey and to whom. Public road signs can not be understood unless also accounting for the detailed ways of how signs are made and posted to get the message through, given the awkward situation for the potential reader. This includes accounting for the location where the drivers read the signs as they pass by, and the time available for reading, which depends on the speed of the car. The posters adopt a repertoire of themes to send the message in a favourable way. We will in the following discuss some of these themes referred to as boldness, location as index, repetition, personalisation, and dynamic messaging.

8.5.1 Boldness

Posters tend to make their signs bold to get the message through to those passing the place in their in vehicles. These drivers and passengers will have to read the sign from quite afar during a brief moment. Boldness is achieved by elaborating with size, shape, colour, iconic features and material of the sign. In the following example a restaurant owner utilises both the text and the colour to make a strong impression (figure 8.6 and 8.7). He said that:

> Considering that they [*the drivers, authors' comment*] drive ninety kilometers per hour, they have to read it from a distance to be able to slow down and turn. You have to use letters they could see from 100 to 150 meters ahead.

In this case, he used a bright red colour to make the sign stick out. Further, the restaurant owner minimized the length of words to the blunt concept of 'food' ('mat' in Swedish) since the drivers have to be provided with big letters. He said 'All you need to see is that there is food.' More detailed information was provided in proximity to the restaurant (figure 8.8). However, the restaurant owner argued that the 'food' sign was the sign that really attracted customers, and not the more elaborated sign.

8.5.2 Location as index

Public road signs get some of their meaning from the location in which they are posted e.g. a village or a work site. There are also other ways by which the signs become indexical. A vast number of posters extend the index of a sign by making it into an arrow, either through its form or by paint (see figure 8.2, 8.6, 8.7 and 8.9). Other posters carefully select the location to provide direction and navigation to readers (figure 8.10). For example, a family managed greenhouse had several signs beside a road close to their business. They had one official sign, posted by the road authority on the main road but the crossing was peculiar, the off-way at the crossing turned right after the crossing, while the green-house was located along a gravel road towards the left on the off-way. While we, the informant and one of the authors, stood by this crossing, the interviewee argued that:

> …we placed it here so that it shows that this is the entrance, so that its not that one here [*pointing at a formal sign and the asphalt-road turning right, authors' comment*] and then drivers come and start wonder around to the neighbours and so on.

The informant placed a large metal sign beside a gravel road connected to an off-way. The location was chosen to direct (potential) customers that left the main road towards the gravel road, instead of following the off-

way that diverged to the right, and continued in parallel to the main road. Thus, the position of the sign was an index for the message of the sign.

8.5.3 Repetition

At most locations, the posters use a single sign. But another strategy to get the message through is to multiply it. Occasionally, posters multiply signs so the driver gradually understand the meaning of them, even though the drivers' speed, direction or perspective limits the perception of the signs. Such signs can even play on being small, to draw attention. For example, a poster placed several almost identical small signs (figure 8.11) along a stretch of around a kilometre leading up to a bigger sign (figure 8.12).

Multiple signs, can also be a way of notifying the driver, for example with directional information. The text on some signs describe how far ahead an activity, an off-way and subsequently a sign is (figure 8.13 and 8.14). This is particularly useful when e.g. the official sign is obstructed by a curve or a hill. A person posting such signs (seen in figure 8.13) argued that:

> … the first signs are there so that they [*the drivers, authors comment*] will react on the other sign.

The antiquities store owner tried to alert passers-by, by posting a public sign in the beginning of curve, that the off-way to her store was located less than hundred meters ahead (here the curve ended).

8.5.4 Personalisation

Public road signs attract drivers' attention because they are unique and distinguished from official signs. An interviewee commented that: 'you need something more tempting.' Thus, in addition to official signs that the interviewee purchased from the road administrators, the interviewee also posted four, handwritten signs, made of plywood (figure 8.14), that according to him, attracted more customers:

> I don't know if it is that they look more amateur-like but the signs work.

Thus, a personal and unofficial style was more successful, for the interviewee's business, than signs that copied the style of official road signs.

8.5.5 Dynamic messaging

Sometimes a message concerns a topic where a static road sign is less appropriate e.g. shops where the open hours for some reason has to be conveyed. One informant commented that customers arrived at 'odd' times, unless he provided open hours along the road. A strategy is then to add a specific 'open' sign on the other sign every morning (figure 8.15). Another approach is to hide the sign altogether when it is not applicable e.g. by putting a carpet over it (figure 8.16).

Figure 8.10: *Sign, on the left is placed as an index for the off-way to the green hous, while the road turns to the right*

Figure 8.11: *Small sign repeated through a long stretch*

Figure 8.12: *Bigger sign by off-way*

Figure 8.13: *Sign in front of curve, notifying the driver of a flea market 100 meters ahead*

Figure 8.14: *Example of personalisation, a sign with amateur style*

Figure 8.15: *Attachable open sign underneath official sign*

Figure 8.16: *Public road-sign hidden underneath carpet*

Figure 8.17: *Example of the ambiguity of objects beside the road, is this a mailbox or a comic strip?*

Figure 8.18: *A tractor, parked beside the road, or a sign, attracting attention for the antiquities store?*

8.6 Adapting to Road Authorities

The life of public road sign is also in the hands of a road authority and its inspectors. Whether a sign should stay or go depends on formal rules about signing; organizational procedures; its material form and location as well as its content. We will in the following discuss first how the administrators actively work with 'strategies' to manage the road as a 'proper' place[302] and second how the posters adapt to the inspectors.

Road inspectors are given authority to dismount public signs, through a set of *formal rules*. But the specific interpretation of them has to be made with reference to a specific situation[303]. The signs are first and foremost handled as *material objects*. The inspectors interpret the need to remove signs in terms of where the signs are placed; how big they are; the material they are made of etc. The legislation for national roads in Sweden states that messages should be taken away if they are posted inside the road area. Thus, road inspectors have to decide where the boundaries go. On the highways into Stockholm this is defined as the area up to the game fence. Road inspectors also interpret whether a sign is a direct or indirect threat to traffic safety. A direct threat should be taken away immediately, whereas it is less urgent when the sign is understood as an indirect hazard. The interpretation is made with reference to the location and physical form of the sign. Streamers are usually posted above the road on overpasses, and considered especially dangerous since they can fall down in one end. Then they will hang all the way down to the road surface, becoming even a physical obtrusion for drivers.

Their work is complicated by rules which state that removal of signs should be handled with respect towards the owners of the signs in order to maintain the State's 'goodwill' and further ensure that they act in a way which is 'service oriented'[304]. For example, they have to be more careful with removal of expensive signs. If the signs are considered to be litter they are removed because they pollute the road scenery. For example, graffiti can be perceived as un-aesthetical and the writing is a criminal offence, rather than a safety hazard.

But it is not always clear if an object beside the road is a sign or not. Citizens are allowed to mount a mailbox along the road. But mailboxes also have the function of telling the road users where the box owners live (figure 8.17).

Decisions are also affected by content and meaning. Directional signs and signs that warn for hazards seem to get a milder treatment. No civil servant seems to have anything to say about e.g. community signs warning for the presence of kids. Signs that inform on various events is also occasionally accepted since the event is limited in time. The organizers are then trusted to remove signs afterwards. Commercial signs are occasionally accepted, when the removal of them might ruin a small business e.g. a café. Ideological and political expressions are also allowed in conjunction to elections. And memorial signs, which mark and honour a person killed in a traffic accident, is seldom removed.

The identification of non-allowed road signs and their removal is also affected by the *organisational procedures* of the road inspectors such as a

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[302] Cf. de Certeau (1984:36)
[303] Suchman (1987)
[304] Cf. SNRA (1999)

regular nine-to-five–work; routines as to where and when they travel to look for signs[305] or available funding for the task.

Summing up, road-inspectors act, not only as maintenance workers, but also as a form of editors of public signs.

8.6.1 Testing limits of inspectors' interpretations

Posters attend to the road authorities' practices when they put up and make signs. Road-inspectors, who have the authority to remove signs, discipline posters and make them adopt several tactics to keep the sign up as long as possible. The most common tactic is to test limits of the roadside regulations given the ambiguous practice of the administration. The posters elaborate on the placing of the sign, its appearance, as well as the times when they are up. For example one poster placed a sign just beside the road, but it was regularly removed. Then he started to post signs close to a nearby tree on the outskirts of the roadside (figure 8.14). He argued:

> In the end I mounted the sign so far out on the roadside that I guess it's no longer the responsibility of the road administration, and the sign has been left alone there.

Posters also elaborate on time, such as placing signs along the road during weekends when the road inspectors are not working. Some posters enhance the formal signs e.g. by attaching flags or additional signs to it (figure 8.15). The combination provides legitimacy to the sign, whereas the decorations enhance and complement the official message. Another strategy is to use ambiguous objects that can be understood as a sign but also as a vehicle, which could legitimately be parked along the road (figure 8.18).

Thus, posters can be seen to display the kind of tactics similar to those discussed by de Certeau…

> … a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus … It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches on them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is at least expected.[306]

This is met by the inspectors who are sensitised to the specifics of the posted signs, which in the end enables this second road signs system, or rather sign practice.

8.7 Discussion

With reference to sociologists Barry Wellman we argue that most public road signs should be understood as an important mode of interaction in between members of communities. Such road sign is often placed in proximity to settlements or work sites. But the messages are rarely directed to other members of these local communities. Instead they are made for passing drivers, who are themselves more engaged in interaction with people in several other loosely related localities. Here, we needed to go beyond Wellman's categories which account for communities and mobilities. We use the term *intermediate interaction* to account for this social practice, which are used to strengthen the identity of the neighbourhood or the network, and to make it economically sustainable by *bridging* between different communities, and even different forms of communities.

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[305] Esbjörnsson & Juhlin (2002)
[306] de Certeau (1984:37)

The posters have developed strategies to enable communication with people who pass on the road. They do not have much time available to get their messages through. Therefore, the messages have to be brief, bold and easily understood. The reading driver might have to be notified in advance, that there is something ahead that they can read, by for example using a series of signs. It must also be clear what the sign refer to. Posters of public signs prosper on the locality, indexicality and context in which it is posted to account for the ways in which signs are watched by drivers who pass by during a brief moment.

Road authorities struggle with this practice. On the one hand these signs are incompatible with the road administrations' view of the road and its proper use, and most of them are dislocated. On the other hand, they have an informal way of preserving messages which are considered to have a special value. For the posters, it is essential to develop a repertoire of 'tactics' that account for these practices.

However, road administrators removal of public signs is not only a problem for this sociosemiotic system, in fact it is rather a vital recourse for the success (or potential success) of public signs. The roads we visited were remarkably uncluttered by community road signs, with some exceptional roads in Toronto. This is probably due to the work of the road inspectors' maintenance work, but also on the posters restricting themselves as an adaptation to the authorities. A roadside without any restrictions would soon be overcrowded with signs. Hence the role of the road inspector is important in how the public signs are seen. Specifically, we think about the ways in which the road inspectors interpreted the content of the signs in a sophisticated way. Their practice is best understood as a form of editing, rather than a mechanical routine process that could be automated without loss of important signs. Thus, the second geography on the road side is a vital element, which makes local life transparent for passing drivers as a form of intermediate interaction. But that geography can not be seen as in conflict with road authorities and the official state. Rather, it is an intermediate geography also in the sense of something occurring in between communities and the official state.

Kevin Lynch suggested that the 'transparency of the setting' made it interesting and meaningful. We have shown how public signs can, and do, provide liveliness to the road-space. The signs are used to provide clues in relation to what happens on them, who the abutter to a particular segment of the road is (who 'owns' it), what road-users can do beside the road, where children play, where someone is mourned etc. The second geography, authored by people living on and beside the road is available, even from the view of the road – as we are *driving the city*.

Further, Venturi pointed towards the opportunity to use the weak tie between the driver and the poster to create a fictitious interpretation of a locale. However, in our studies such use of signs seems much less present than indexical signs with strong linking between the sign and local activities. Additionally, Lynch's warrant for regulation of such an order was met by road authorities. Thus, a more post-modern or narrative view on signs has to find other ways into this social practice. Perhaps emerging technology use e.g. mobile location based message practices, have something to offer. In general, these systems make digital information and messages available when the user is at a specific location through the user interfaces of mobile devices such as mobile phones, hand held computers or laptops. These applications have been designed with the purpose of providing reminders for personal use; location sensitive electronic guides

or for communication between individuals in communities where the specific location is of importance for the meaning of the messages[307]. Although these systems have not yet been considered for public road signs per se it could very well be the case in a number of years. And then, it could possibly be Lynch and his urge for a more playful use of signs that will increase in use[308].

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[307] Burell & Gay (2002); Cheverest et al (2000); Dey & Abowd (2000)
[308] Brunnberg & Juhlin (2003)

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