



Immense changes in traffic – Considerable stability in discourses. Road speed in Danish parliamentary documents 1900–2010



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 March 2014

Received in revised form

15 January 2015

Accepted 16 February 2015

Available online 24 February 2015

Keywords:

Road speed

Policy

History

Parliamentary

Qualitative methods

ABSTRACT

Research on road safety acknowledges speed as having a major impact on both the number and severity of road crashes, and this seems to have been translated into policies. However, a closer look reveals that the societal debate and political context also seem to play a major role in the way road safety policies are shaped. Yet, the knowledge on the political discourse regarding speeding and speed management is scarce. In this paper, we analyze the ways speed has been managed and legislated in transport policy-making by studying Danish parliamentary documents from 1903 through 2010. Analyzing the material qualitatively in two phases, first, we looked for notable policy shifts in the material, and consequently identified five historical periods. Second, we analyzed these periods in more detail, and identified and analyzed four repetitive discourses about speed across them, which were as follows: speed, individual rights and responsibilities; speed and safety; speed, policy measures, and law enforcement; and speed and other societal goals. While the transport system has undergone a massive change during the last 100 years, we found a considerable stability in the discourses regarding speed policies. The themes and patterns we distinguished in the documents occurred repeatedly. Certain discourses are strongly connected to the way speed is discussed and governed, and these are likely to emerge when speed policies are taken up in the parliamentary context. We conclude that in addition to the current prominent discourses, past discourses may have a strong influence on the way safety measures and policies are being understood and accepted.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Scholarship on road safety research acknowledges speed as having a major impact on both the number and the severity of road crashes (Elvik, 2005). A look at the policymaking in the area of transportation shows that this knowledge seems to have been translated into policies. European transport policies, for example, show a wide consensus on treating speeding as one of the biggest problems in road safety (European Commission, 2003, 2010). In addition, many national road safety policies have been prioritized to fight speeding, and massive investments in speed enforcement have taken place during the last decade.

However, while the association between speed and road safety problems appears to have a broad political consensus, a closer look reveals a fuzzier picture. Different speed management policies

have been subjected to a political and societal debate (e.g., European Transport Safety Council, 2008; Heydecker, 2011), and the implemented policies and regulations have not always reflected the seemingly established consensus. In Denmark, for example, speed limits on motorways have been raised during the last 10 years, despite research-based evidence advising against this (Sørensen and Larsen, 2013). Similarly, a serious debate over speed limits on autobahns occurs every so often in German politics (e.g. The Guardian, 2013). In the UK, the Department for Transport announced a consultation on increasing motorway speed limits in 2011 (Department for Transport, 2011). Hence, the actual transport policies and measures that have been introduced and proposed have been shaped through debates and various interests in the society, as demonstrated in previous literature (Bax et al., 2009; Elvik and Veisten, 2005; Fridstrøm and Elvik, 1997; Low et al., 2003).

The societal debate and the political context thus seem to play a major role in the way road safety policies are shaped. However, this context has rarely been addressed within road safety research, which traditionally has focused either on directly measureable

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road safety indicators, such as on the number of crashes and violations and on the causes for these or on the characteristics of road users, vehicles and infrastructures relevant for safe/unsafe performance on the roads. In the context of road speed, only a few studies have addressed the policymaking processes (Frey, 2010; Svensson et al., 2014). Yet, the way that speeding and speed management are understood and conceptualized in the political context of transport creates an important frame for implementing policies and measures.

In this paper, we investigate how policies on road speed have been historically formed and constructed by analyzing the ways speed has been managed and legislated in transport policymaking in Denmark. More specifically, we identify different political discourses on speed (and its political management) beginning with their first appearance in parliamentary documents from 1903 through documents from 2010. We also analyze and identify common themes and patterns across the different discourses and historical periods.

1.2. Speed and its societal implications

The transport safety literature has identified speed to be one of the major contributors to road crashes and established an association between road speed and both the number of crashes and their severity. Changes in speed have been shown to have a direct influence on safety, i.e., crashes and injury severity (Elvik, 2005). Consequently, speed is globally among the top priorities in most of the road safety programs and policies. While means to regulate road speed are various, including road design and in-vehicle technology, the most common means is through speed limits. Not only are drivers demonstrably unable to rationally choose proper speeds themselves (Elvik, 2010a), but also the speed limits have been found to effectively influence the speed choices and to bring the general road speed closer to what is considered an optimal level (Elvik et al., 2004; Lamm and Klöckner, 1984; Summala et al., 1980).

Nonetheless, road speed has many societal implications besides that of safety, and defining the optimal speed may depend on the chosen perspective (Johnston et al., 2013). While from the engineering perspective, the optimal speed is the one that reflects the road design, from a public health perspective, any speed exceeding human tolerance for biomechanical impact of the crash, i.e., resulting to an injury or death, is too high (Elvik, 2010a). From the socio-economic perspective, which is likely to largely dominate in modern road policies, the optimal speed is the one that minimizes the total cost of travel, incorporating different elements such as safety, travel time, and fuel consumption (Elvik, 2002). However, even applying this perspective, determining and legislating the optimal speed limit is challenging. These reasons for this are as follows: firstly because the determination is not exact science and consequently the costs are difficult to reliably estimate (Elvik, 2010a), secondly because individuals' and society's perspective on optimal speed often conflict (Elvik, 2010b), and finally because the process of translating a policy priority into concrete speed limit legislation is affected by values and interests other than rational socio-economic ones (Bax et al., 2009).

1.3. Policy as a discourse

Previously, scholars focusing on the policy making processes have investigated such topics as how research evidence is utilized in policies and how policymaking processes are structured and determined (Jewell and Bero, 2008; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Teisman, 2000). Policymaking is a complex process and has, in general, been proposed to incorporate both the targeted problems, proposed solutions, and the political environment in which the

actors involved in the process navigate (Teisman, 2000).

For a better understanding of how policies are formed and how they are influenced by societal debates, political cultures, values, and evidence-based knowledge, different approaches have been applied. While some studies have applied organizational perspectives and identified general structures in the processes (e.g., Teisman, 2000), others have focused on the discursive meaning-making in the policy making processes (e.g., Bacchi, 2000; Barry and Elmes, 1997). We situate our paper in the discursive approach and based on Foucault (1994), we understand discourses as time-typical conceptions of the reality that can be observed through the use of language. We view the contemporary discourses as bearing traces of, and being partly based on, past discourses. Hence, in the present paper, our focus is on the political discourse on speed from a historical perspective.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Materials

The materials we analyzed for this paper are comprised of various Danish parliamentary documents, such as parliamentary debates and other legislative acts, bills, and passed laws, dating from 1903 through 2010. The year 1903 was the first year speed was mentioned in this type of document. To illustrate the societal and historical context of the investigated materials, Table 1 shows the number of vehicles on Danish roads at different points in time, and Fig. 1 shows the number of road fatalities between 1930 and 2010.

In our data collection, for documents dating from 1900 to 1985, we used the yearbooks of the Danish parliament, and for documents dating after 1985, we used the electronic archive of the Danish parliament. We used the search terms “automobiles,” “speed limits,” “traffic law act,” and “speed” (all originally in Danish, here translated into English). The search included both the headings and body text. All documents matching the search criteria were screened for relevance, and we summarized and categorized the relevant documents ($n=87$) before including them in the analysis described hereafter.

2.2. Analysis

The analysis of the collected material was qualitative. First, we chronologically went through all of the collected material, constructing a timeline and looking for notable shifts. We consequently identified five historical periods marked by the shifts. In our analysis, we defined a “shift” as a noticeable change from a

Table 1

Number of registered cars in Denmark 1911–2010. (Sources: for years 1911–1990 Trafikministeriet (2000); and for years 2000–2010 Statistics Denmark (2014)).

Year	Number of cars
1911	2482
1920	11,594
1929	61,078
1939	108,756
1949	104,863
1960	391,851
1970	1,060,732
1980	1,375,998
1990	1,575,019
2000	1,843,254
2010	2,120,322

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