Insights on disruptions as opportunities for transport policy change

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ABSTRACT

Policy change is characterised as being slow and incremental over long time periods. In discussing a radical shift to a low carbon economy, many researchers identify a need for a more significant and rapid change to transport policy and travel patterns. However, it is not clear what is meant by rapid policy change and what conditions might be needed to support its delivery.

Our contention in this paper is that notions of habit and stability dominate thinking about transport trends and the policy responses to them. We limit variability in our data collection and seek to design policies and transport systems that broadly support the continuation of existing practices. This framing of the policy context limits the scale of change deemed plausible and the scope of activities and actions that could be used to effect it.

This paper identifies evidence from two sources to support the contention that more radical policy change is possible. First, there is a substantial and on-going churn in household travel behaviour which, harnessed properly over the medium term, could provide the raw material for steering behaviour change. Secondly, there is a growing evidence base analysing significant events at local, regional and national level which highlight how travellers can adapt to major change to network conditions, service availability and social norms. Taken together, we contend that the population is far more adaptable to major change than the policy process currently assumes.

Disruptions and the responses to them provide a window on the range of adaptations that are possible (and, given that we can actually observe people carrying them out, could be more widely acceptable) given the current configuration of the transport system. In other words, if we conceptualise the system as one in which disruptions are commonplace, then different policy choices become tractable. Policy change itself can also be seen as a positive disruption, which could open up a raft of new opportunities to align policy implementation with the capacity for change. However, when set against the current framing of stability and habit, disruption can also be a major political embarrassment. We conclude that rather than being inherently problematic, disruption are in fact an opportunity through which to construct a different approach to transport policy that might enable rather than frustrate significant, low carbon change.

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1. Introduction

Policy change is generally characterised as being slow and incremental over long time periods (Hall, 1993; Howlett and Cashmore, 2009). This is said to be especially true for transport, given a variety of factors from the scale and stability of major transport flows, the fixed nature of transport infrastructure in space and the long planning horizons of major investments, to the often entrenched public and political attitudes to the very notion of behaviour change and the extent to which it is legitimate for the state to intervene in individual decision making (Dudley and Richardson, 2000; Banister et al., 2007; Rye et al., 2008; Docherty and Shaw, 2011).

What is meant by the term 'policy' itself needs clear definition at the outset if discussions on key outcomes such as the rate of change and overcoming barriers to change are to be successfully identified and addressed, yet such definitions remain loose in the field of transport research. Howlett and Cashmore (2009) build on Hall's (1993) paper on conceptualising policy change to identify three component parts that define the 'ends' or 'aims' of policy:

1. Overarching policy goals (e.g. economic growth, environmental protection).
2. Formal policy objectives (e.g. cutting congestion or reducing energy use).
3. Specific settings (e.g. 10% reduction in delay in city X or on mode Y).

These elements are complemented by a further three system components that represent the means or the tools to achieve these policy aims:

1. Instrument logic and implementation norms (e.g. welfare maximising).
2. Mechanisms and Instruments (e.g. congestion charging, vehicle taxation).
3. Calibrations of instruments (e.g. time of day structures for charging).

Furthermore, 'radical' policy change of the scale and scope that delivers substantive and genuine realignment of policy with respect to critical issues such as, for example, travel behaviour, network operations and/or the financial support for mobility systems, can be conceptualised as encompassing change across all of the above dimensions. Given the complexity of these interdependencies, it is unsurprising that repositioning transport policy towards challenging objectives that cut across these domains – such as decarbonisation – is regarded as something of a 'wicked problem' (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

Marsden et al. (2012) apply this framework to explore the extent to which the deepening understanding of climate change and the implications of overarching targets of up to 80% reductions in CO_2 emissions by 2050 has affected policy change in the transport sector. They conclude that whilst the overarching policy goals have been amended and carbon reduction added as a clear macro-objective, there has been little progress in any of the other dimensions. This contrasts with the research base, which clearly identifies the need for transport policy to set out and follow unambiguous pathways to deliver real change in our transport and mobility systems if the required radical shift to a low carbon economy is to be achieved (Hickman et al., 2012; Anable and Shaw, 2007; Hickman and Bannister, 2007; Tight et al., 2007 and Chapman, 2007). Although the measures that will need to be taken – shifting the share of mobility provision to more energy efficient transport modes, improving the efficiency of vehicles and changing socio-economic behaviours so that there is a real reduction in the need to travel in the first place – are well theorised (see, for example, Dalkmann et al., 2010), the actual policy steps that will be required to implement these changes are not defined at all well.

The difficulty in agreeing clear policy pathways outside of a modelling exercise is because, as Eddington commented, the engineering of real change in transport requires an enormously "sophisticated policy mix" (Eddington, 2006) in terms of changed regulation, pricing, land use zoning, new business practices and so on. There are many hands involved in the policy implementation process and many agendas at work. Worse, in the context of carbon reduction policy, the nature and pace of technological change is also highly uncertain, with, for example, the widespread adoption of 'ecocars' (Banister, 2000) still some way off despite their longstanding promise (see also Geels et al., 2011). The flip side to this is that the degree of behavioural adaptation required is also uncertain and, therefore, unconvincing as a likely solution to problem in itself. This conclusion also conveniently matches current policy logics, which suggest that behaviour change should largely be tackled by addressing information gaps and psychological cues at the margins through incentives and targeted marketing (see Shove, 2010 for a critique).

Our contention in this paper is that the lack of progress towards actually implementing meaningful policy change is, in part, because notions of habit and stability dominate thinking about transport trends and the policy responses to them. We explain away or limit variability in the data we collect, and seek to design policies and transport systems that broadly support the continuation of existing practices. This framing of the policy context limits the scale of change deemed plausible (the policy setting) and the scope of activities (logics and instrumental norms) and actions that could be used to effect it (the instruments and calibrations). There is however, a long-standing and growing body of evidence on the churn of household travel patterns, which offers at least the potential to build a more dynamic view of the potential for behaviour change around.

Notwithstanding the slow pace of formal policy development, examples of substantive and significant change in collective transport behaviours can already be found if we look for them. Planned policy interventions such as congestion charging