

Presenting and representing roadsides: the practise of mounting and removing private signs along road.

Daniel Normark^{a,b} and Oskar Juhlin^a

^{a)} The Interactive Institute / Mobility Studio, Stockholm, Sweden

^{b)} Section for Science and Technology Studies, Göteborg University, Gothenburg, Sweden
daniel.normark@tii.se , oskar.juhlin@tii.se

Highways and roads are repeatedly treated as non-places; insignificant spaces that people cross in order to reach their private and public spheres. But a closer look reveal a much more vivid place. This paper presents an ethnographic study of the abundant practice where private persons make and post signs along the roads. People who live along roads have various reasons, and investigate in various ways, to communicate with passing drivers. Even though these road signs are mostly used for interaction outside of the neighbourhood community, they fill an important role to sustain those communities.

Simultaneously, roads are monitored and regulated. Formal rules forbids private posting along the road. However, the road administrators' guidelines state that removal of signs should be handled with respect towards owners of signs in order to maintain "goodwill". It is then up to the road-inspector to interpret if their actions will affect the "goodwill" of the road authority. The ambiguity between formal rules and road inspectors' interpretative work is a prerequisite for the practice of mounting signs.

We studied this practise by gathering more than 2000 pictures, as a survey of the roadside in Sweden. Additionally we conducted seventeen interviews with people posting signs, during our journey trough Sweden. We also approached road inspectors that remove signs. Six interviews with road inspectors where conducted, four in Sweden and two in Canada. These interviews provided additional footage from Sweden and Toronto. Thus we have obtained detailed knowledge about the signs, the practices of the posters of signs as well as the removers of signs.

First, the fieldwork reveals the ways in which signs are used as a form of intermediate interaction. Second, the fieldwork unveils detailed ways of how signs are made and posted. When people use road signs to communicate they account for: the meaning they want to convey to passing drivers; the situation in which the driver will read the message; and they have to ensure that the sign will stay in place as long as the message is valid. The people posting signs adopt a repertoire of themes, in order to balance these sometimes opposing issues with their available means.

Third, the study provides detailed understanding of the relationship between posting and removing signs. Road-inspectors and people mounting signs attend to the intensions and practices of each other. Road-inspectors can remove signs and their presence discipline people mounting signs in their turn to adopt several tactics to keep the sign up as long as possible. Whether a sign should stay or go depends on: formal rules about signing; organizational procedures; its material form and location as well as content and meaning. Thus, road-inspectors act, not only as maintenance workers, but also as editors. However, interpreting which signs that should be removed is problematic as signs are often ambiguous and ambivalent. Mailboxes, for example, are both used to receive mail but they are also indexes (signs) of the inhabitants place.

Furthermore we argue that an understanding of current road-signs practices can generate design-requirements for location-based message systems that are able to meet the needs and challenges of communication media between drivers' and the roadside communities.