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***South Park* and social research: what cartoons can tell us about sustainable mobility**

Abstract

This paper discusses a topic that has previously been the domain of business studies; sustainable mobility and, in particular, consumer attitudes to electric vehicles. In conducting a social research study into electric vehicle drivers, I was presented with a finding that was not properly accounted for in the extant literature. At a loss, my chief reference point became a television show, *South Park* (1997-). This incident is used to acknowledge that academic fields such as business studies would be improved by exhibiting greater openness to other disciplines, such as cultural studies. In the spirit of breaking down this barrier, the paper highlights something of the knowledge that can be gained from even the most cursory glance out at popular culture from within the closed world of business studies.

Key Words

Television Studies, Business Studies Sustainability, Social Research, *South Park*, Cars

Cars are ubiquitous in consumer capitalism and the culture of automobility defines the modern age. There are now over a billion cars on the world's road, and emerging markets will swell these numbers ever more rapidly over the coming years. However, the current internal combustion engines that dominate the marketplace exert a destructive effect on our planet and, by extension, pose a threat to the human race. They deplete finite reserves of oil and create toxic emissions, with the carbon dioxide produced playing a major role in climate change. Road transport is one of the greatest contributors to this process. As such, though this car system has become completely integrated into twenty-first century society, it is clearly not sustainable.

Accordingly, over the last decade, we have witnessed the emergence of the electric vehicle. Such cars attempt a more sustainable mobility, using electricity as either the sole source of power or alongside gasoline in some form of hybrid. Changing the fuel in this manner has the potential to overcome a large degree of the dependence on oil and dramatically cut down on the toxins produced. Over the last decade, there has been a steady stream of electrified vehicles brought to market but sales remain low in the extreme. As such, the electric vehicle market is not a natural one; it is only maintained by regulations and incentives. As the present time, electric vehicles are a minority technology that, according to the theory of strategic niche management, requires support to be sustained (see Geels 2002; Hoogma et al. 2002).¹

¹ Strategic niche management is a heuristic device used to support emerging technologies, as forwarded under the theory of socio-technical transitions (Geels 2005). This is a theoretical framework that enables entire systems of production and consumption to be conceptualized as a cohesive whole, allowing the development of a technology to be traced as it moves above and beyond obscure sectors of industry to permeate mainstream society. Socio-technical transitions theory works through the

The internal combustion engine is a dominant technology, which occupies a firmly held position within the mainstream of society. As a result, social institutions maintain the status quo – the values disseminated by existing cultural regimes act against disruptive change. Below this, all manner of innovative and novel niches such as electric vehicles are being worked on by relative outsiders. Circumstances have to perfect for them to be able to transition into the mainstream and usurp the incumbent. In the case of electric vehicles, perhaps oil prices need rise so high as to make gasoline untenable. In those circumstances, electric vehicles would become viable alternatives. We are not yet at that point so, for those with an interest in promoting sustainable mobility in this way, strategic niche management teaches the need to protect the technology from the marketplace for as long as possible.

construction of a multi-level perspective, wherein change is premised upon specific systemic conditions being met within a three-part model consisting of landscape, regime and niche levels. The landscape refers to the wider setting in which technologies operate; the socio-economic context. This realm provides for the scenery in which events play out, and includes culture, values and politics. Below this is the regime that orders existing technologies, providing a semi-coherent set of rules to coordinate the activities of social actors. These include beliefs, lifestyles and institutional practices acting so as to lock-in existing arrangements. At the lowest level, niches function as protected spaces in which innovations can be established; experiments, demonstration projects and start-ups. If they are to survive, these novelties must be sustained at this level until a time in which they are strong enough to challenge and, eventually, displace the prevailing regime – which is achieved using strategic niche management.

Until the time is right, the most valuable contribution such academics can make is to conduct social research on how best to look after the niche. Accordingly, the last few years have seen an extensive amount of electric vehicle research in the field of business studies, largely looking at consumer attitudes to the technology (see Newman 2013). Time and again participants present the twin obstacles of cost and range. Even with the generous purchase subsidies that exist, electric vehicles are notably more expensive than their internal combustion equivalents. This price discrepancy is heightened by the manner in which electric vehicles are considerably less practical than cars that run on gasoline; they tend to have battery ranges of less than 100 miles, with charge points few and far between and full charges often taking some time. In short, consumers resent having to pay more for less – they want value for money above all else (Dimitropoulos et al. 2011).

I have recently been involved in a study contributing to this literature. This paper will not be used to disseminate those findings; instead, it will explore an interesting diversion that occurred in the process of conducting the research. Of 234 respondents to a survey, one stood out. Initially, this was because I found his response amusing. Over time, though, his views came to intrigue me. At the end of the structured interview process, participants were invited to offer additional comments. Responses tended to reiterate the cost/range findings. However, one respondent, whose employer was piloting an electric vehicle as part of the works car pool, suggested the following:

After learning my employer spent £27k on a car (with a £2k government reduction), in a rural spaced out region such as ours, I was absolutely flabbergasted. Nearly four of our usual Vauxhall Corsa pool cars could have

been purchased for this price and I felt it was completely an exercise of self-gratification on someone's part and fundamentally pointless.

On a plus point, the performance and drivability of our current electric cars is good. Once the range and charging time becomes a liveable factor, I strongly believe that every single motorist on the road should drive electric vehicles. However, until that day, I believe they should remain for the extremely rich, stupid, smug and moronic people who can afford to waste £30k (including a charge point) to go to the supermarket and back.

The participant concluded that electric vehicles drivers had more money than sense; they were conceited fools. This respondent clearly drew attention to the status of electric vehicle drivers, what they represented – and what he perceived them to stand for what not something that he would like to be associated with.

In undertaking social research like this, it is, of course, customary to interrogate the existing academic literature to uncover past precedents to which you can relate your findings. Setting about this process, it quickly became apparent that such material thin on the ground. Amongst the dozens of recent studies conducted, only three approached this topic at all: Skippon and Garwood (2011) looked at the symbolic value of cars, Heffner, Kurani and Turrentine (2007) addressed the role of cars in constructing self-identity and Graham-Rowe et al. (2012) considered the way cars contribute towards the process of impression management. All of these studies, though, focus on the positive indicators of electric vehicle ownership – such as the manner in which running these cars conveyed a message of conscientiousness or the way that moving away from oil sent out an anti-war message. The approach was very

much to identify why a consumer would want to purchase an electric car, what they would like to tell the world about themselves. There was no proper attention given to negative connotations such as that brought to the fore in the response above. The question remained, what social stigma could put someone off being recognized as an electric vehicle driver? This absence seemed somewhat remiss considering that I am well aware from hearsay and conversations with friends and family from outside academia that many people take this view – electric vehicles owners are routinely considered self-satisfied, smug. It seems clear that there is something of a commonly accepted, do-gooder stereotype.

The few prominent evocations of electric vehicle owners in US/UK popular culture that emerged all seemed to reaffirm the above, received line. First and foremost, there are, of course car specific television shows, the most notable of which is the BBC's *Top Gear* (2002-). This show is important because, as Harrington (2010) has explored, it has become the world's popular television show and introduces supposedly expert insight on cars to an audience that would ordinarily have little specialist interest in the area. The hosts of this show have never been shy to hold an opinion, and have often mocked electric vehicles and their owners. The right-wing, tabloid style adopted by main presenter Jeremy Clarkson, in particular, ensures that he is always looking for ways to lampoon that which he considers the produce of political correctness. Electric vehicles have been no exception and, as a result, *Top Gear* has had to fend off accusations of misleading viewers in various test-drives primed with highlighting the inadequacy of the cars at the present moment (see Halliday 2013). However smug some of us may find Clarkson, he himself paints electric vehicle owners, in turn, as smug idiots.

In the hugely popular CBS television comedy, *Two and a Half Men* (2003-), as part of the process of introducing the new lead character of Walter Schmidt, the writers choose to depict his purchasing a Fisker Karma. This extremely high-end, luxury car seems to have been purposively selected to communicate the personality of Schmidt – a naive dot com billionaire, desperate to be seen to do the right thing, whatever that is, thereby craving positive attention. We are first shown the car in a scene that involves Schmidt making his housemate Alan Harper feel extremely inadequate that his conventional car does not match the same high standards. The popularity of the show, it has been consistently ranked in the top five syndicated shows in the US throughout its run, means that Bradley (2013) has suggested it as an example from which we can draw valuable cultural signifiers that engage with a wide cross-section of the population. In this manner, Schmidt's purchasing the electric car is significant in that it presents him, as owner, as a smug buffoon to a considerable audience.

Even in a pair of feature-length documentaries dedicated to championing the electric vehicle, *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (Paine, 2006) and *Revenge of the Electric Car* (Paine, 2011), did not escape creating a potentially negative impression. The latest in a steady stream of films critical of aspects of contemporary capitalist culture (see, for example, *Super Size Me* [Spurlock, 2004]; *Enron* [Gibney, 2005]; *An Inconvenient Truth* [Guggenheim, 2006]), they clearly paid a large debt to the work of Michael Moore and the type of movies that Keller (2010: 146) has discussed as 'partisan interventionist cinema'. In this case, the movies attacked the mainstream motor industry for keeping down the electric vehicle, presenting the technology as a plucky challenge to the establishment, large corporations and oil companies. For all that these films were pro-electric vehicle, director Chris Paine aped more than just

Moore's artistic style; he also co-opted his incessantly polemical nature, displaying a potentially grating sense of superiority, evangelizing to the audience while silencing those who disagreed with his position. In this case, the film may come across as a smug know-it-all and almost like a car salesman (see, for example, Cordova 2011; Smith 2011).

South Park and the smug

While the aforementioned were significant, perhaps the most pronounced exploration of the electric vehicle driver was to be found in Comedy Central's adult cartoon, *South Park*. The network's most successful show, *South Park* has a large youth demographic, and is especially highly watched online, allowing for a truly global audience. In television studies, it is particularly important to appreciate the changing landscape for media consumption, switching online in the manner that *South Park* has, with all its content provided free on the show's webpage (see Turner and Tay 2009). In addition to winning several Emmy awards, 2011 saw *South Park* come out at number one in an *Entertainment Weekly* (2011) poll to find the greatest animated TV series of all-time (thereby beating the highly respected, much revered *Simpsons* [1989-] – the cartoon that more typically gets brought up in serious debate). It is a biting satirical television show that prides itself on lambasting the pompous; those who tell others how to behave. The show can be conceptualized as 'an important popular text', which provides a 'microcosm' of contemporary society – equally informative and thought-provoking' (Halsal 2008: 23). When they select a self-righteous mark to bring down a peg or two, the depictions can carry some weight, as recognized by the show winning the prestigious Peabody Award for distinguished and

meritorious public service in 2006. The show received the award for its ‘stringent social commentary’ and ‘undeniably fearless lampooning of all that is self-important’ (Leonard 2006).

South Park, then, is highly satirical and satire, for Keighron (1998), is politics’ own entertainment genre – though, of course, the show does not forward one party line and casts itself as an equal opportunities offender. Such satire is considered of great importance to broadcasters for the manner in which it is said to appeal to the educated, liberal middle classes and, in particular, the young (Wagg 1992: 269). It is by appealing to those who actively seek to engage with their television that Zoonen (2005) sees satire in popular culture as providing an important means to achieve and activate citizenship. As such, when a subject is chosen as a prime target for mockery, it seems worth giving due consideration to the implications – critical consensus may be that the target may have gotten too big for its boots. By this line, for those interested in the promotion of electric vehicles as sustainable mobility, it is important to take note of the message they presented in the 2006 episode, ‘Smug Alert!’.²

This episode revolved around the, barely fictionalized, hybrid electric vehicle, the Toyonda Pious. It begins with Gerald, the father of one of the central child characters, who, having just purchased his new Toyonda Pious proceeds to drive around town showing off the car. He is clearly attention-seeking. As if the branding that adorns the car were not enough, Gerald insists on leaning out of the open window and informing everyone he meets that he now drives a hybrid. In the process, the local population is duly informed of how their (internal combustion engine) cars are destroying the environment – spreading a gospel with what Gerald refers to as ‘awareness citations’.

² Available at: <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s10e02-smug-alert>. Accessed 3 March 2014.



South Park mocks the electric car driver: Gerald in his Toyonda Pious.

In a short time, becoming completely carried away with his new eco-warrior persona, Gerald decides that his current levels of commitment are not sufficient to the cause so he initiates a campaign intended to convert other residents to take up more environmentally friendly vehicles. As part of this, he cruises around the town looking for internal combustion engines and issuing the owner a 'ticket for driving a gas-guzzler'. However, this mission is less than successful and Gerald proceeds to irritate and frustrate his former friends. Annoyed at the fug of self-satisfaction emitted by Gerald, he is dismissed with the retort that, 'ever since you got a hybrid car, you've gotten so smug that you love the smell of your own farts'. After deciding that he can no longer bear to live among such 'backward and unsophisticated' people, Gerald moves his family to that supposed hotbed of liberal progressiveness San Francisco (which the writers clearly selected as a city whose residents apparently have a far too high an opinion of themselves).

After the family leave, the sad and lonely best friend of Gerald's son decides to pen a song praising the virtues of electric vehicles. Kyle supposes that, if everyone in South Park abandons internal combustion engines, Gerald will return with his son in tow. The song is broadcast on a local radio station where its central message proves to be so powerful that it convinces everyone in town to drive hybrids. On his way home from the radio station, the boy meets Ranger McFriendly, local protector of the environment, who, with great concern, explains the disastrous consequences of his actions. While emission levels from internal combustion engine car exhausts have fallen, they have been replaced by a new pollutant – this time borne of the 'self-satisfied garbage' spewed by the drivers of hybrid cars.



The smug heads for South Park: panic as San Francisco's smug problem escalates.

The smog has given way to smug – and South Park now has the second-highest levels in the whole of the United States. The highest emissions are, of course, to be found in San Francisco, where Gerald is delighted to have found himself ensconced within a community of fellow hybrid-owners. They gather to discuss how superior they are, while pausing mid-conversation to break wind, bend over and enjoy the smell. A meteorological map of the United States shows that the two clouds of smug slowly begin to combine and a new danger is imminent. This threat is posed by the Academy Awards speech of, actor and self-publicizing electric vehicle driver, George Clooney (wherein, in real life, he extolled the transformative powers of the Hollywood elite, leading the way on issues from AIDS to civil rights – it was very much a self-congratulatory celebration of the right-on liberal actors mocked in the *South Park* writers' *Team America* [Parker and Stone, 2004]). The smug generated by this event exacerbates that already formed creating, what Ranger McFriendly describes as, 'the perfect storm of self-satisfaction' (an allusion to Al Gore's documentary film). The result of this storm is that South Park is heavily damaged, while San Francisco is completely destroyed – it disappears, 'completely up its own asshole'.

With their electric vehicles destroyed, the population of South Park vow never again to buy hybrids. They have learnt their lesson to beware of the danger posed by the technology. However, Gerald's son points out that the cars actually are a positive thing and that, 'hybrid cars don't cause smugness, people do'. He explains that hybrid owners just need to stop being so smug about themselves. The townspeople conclude that this is asking too much of them – they might be able to manage this feat one day but, for now, they're 'not ready'. They rush off to (re)purchase their beloved, gas

guzzling, Sports Utility Vehicles (the most polluting of all internal combustion engine cars).

Within the episode, the attitude of the *South Park* writers to those who promote electric cars was never clearer than in Kyle's song, 'Hey People, You Gotta Drive Hybrids Already', wherein the clearly well-meaning content is wafer-thin yet laid on so thickly as to become completely asinine. This is a parody song, played straight to dismissively expose the lack of informed content at the heart of the dialogue that these electric vehicles users are engaging in. It is clearly a comment on the smug middle classes that the writers see justifying their usage of the vehicles on scientific and environmental grounds that they do not themselves understand, as the reality is they are just promoting the cars to make themselves look and feel upright and virtuous. Advocates do not understand the issue and can only deal in vague platitudes. In order to understand just how vapid the song is, it is important to consider the complete lyrics, as follows:

Come on, people now, people now
People now, come on, people now
Got to drive hybrid, people now
People now, people now, people now
Hybrids are for people now, people now
Good for people driving people now
Get a hybrid, be good people now.

We have all got to be people now
People driving hybrid people now

People now, people now, hybrid now

Hybrid people driving people now

Come on people, let's be people now

Hybrid people driving people now

Come on, everybody, be people now.

This song is an essentially simple and rather empty plea that tries far too hard to be deep and meaningful. As such, it is positively cringe-worthy in its self-importance. It invokes people to *come on*, a frustrated whine that others cannot see the same progressive world that hybrid drivers do. This is insistent, as if scolding its audience to stop being so stupid and just accept the truth that they are being shown. Every line ends in the word *now*, because the hybrid owners' sense of righteousness is so urgent that they can barely handle others not agreeing with them for another instant. This is a most pretentious frustration at not having got their own way yet, when they are so obviously correct that they should not have to wait. The word *good* is overused, thrown into the mix as the drivers inherently assume the mode of transport must be good, for everyone – there can be no debate. There is no room for doubt, no space for counter-argument or debate. Most pertinently, the lyrics cloyingly stress the idea of *people*, that hippy-style invocation that so often symbolizes style over substance, those who profess to be alternative and pursue something different but actually have no answers and simply drop out; their rhetoric and image management makes great claims but, at root, is inane. That the song would act to link electric vehicles to hippies, then, perhaps the worst insult that the writers could make as, within *South Park*, the hippy is perhaps the most disdained all of the mocked social groups – repeatedly dismissed as pointless, encapsulated by drum circles, stoners and the

college know-it-all. As such, the idea is that this song is supposed to be profound but there is nothing to it beyond the flowery language and grand sentiment. That is the height of smugness – the idea that hybrid drivers are somehow better than everyone else and have a heightened, enlightened knowledge to preach unto others, more ignorant.

Though the meaning of the *South Park* writers throughout the episode is broad enough as to seem rather self-evident, when consulting such cultural artifacts, it seems good practice all the same to pay reference to the semiotics of Barthes (2009). In his work he sought to challenge the innocence and naturalness of culture by reconstituting its products (or, rather, the interaction between the product and the audience) as texts that can be read (though his nuanced use of text is debatable – see Nannicelli 2012). His work has a specific connection to automobiles for the way that he so deftly unpacked the advertising surrounding the launch of the new Citroen ds on its much-heralded launch in 1957. By decoding the manner in which the car was presented, he expounded supplementary connotations that moved far beyond the conventional view that such cars were but utilitarian items used to travel from A to B. Rather than functional tools, cars were more aptly to be understood as signs, and that particular vehicle was presented as the epitome of modernity – to drive the Citroen ds was to appropriate a status symbol of being thoroughly contemporary, hip and on trend. Electric vehicle drivers such as *South Park's* Gerald might think they have adopted similar status – with the added cache of doing so in a good cause. Indeed, this belief can be identified in the manner in which electric vehicles have become the cause célèbre of knowingly liberal and avowedly progressive Hollywood actors. By this line, electric cars of varying permutations are the latest celebrity must-have item as visible from their adoption by figures such as Brad Pitt (Tesla Roadster), Danny

DeVito (Toyota Prius – previously, GM’s recalled EV1) and Leonardo DiCaprio (Fisker Karma). Accounting for this fashion, Rowley (2011) explains that:

Status isn’t just about having the biggest, fastest or most expensive, it can be about generosity or social connections or, as here, eco-credentials [...] in other words, celebrities are making the ultimate statements: yes, they can afford the shiny sports car but choosing to drive an electric car displays their eco-awareness, their intelligence and empathy – things that just can’t be bought [sic].

Whatever their primary motivation, these electric vehicle users seem to believe that they will gain kudos from staking their environmental credentials in this way. They want to be seen as right-on. The writers of *South Park* obviously choose to react to such statements in a manner quite different from the positive appreciation such drivers may have hoped to receive. The implication that emanates from their electric vehicle episode is clear and unambiguous: electric vehicles appear to be the privilege of a select socio-economic elite, motivated as much by an overinflated ego and sense of self-worth as any wider environmental concerns. This discord highlights the inherent interpretation gap between the way a sign is communicated and understood. If such electric vehicle usage actually communicates smugness to significant numbers of consumers, this is an important finding as it could not only put those people off considering electric vehicles, it might also act to discourage the early adopters of this technology. Who wants to drive around in a car that makes you look smug? Self-consciousness of this negative connotation could prove disastrous for the emerging electric vehicle market, potentially holding it back from achieving the transition into

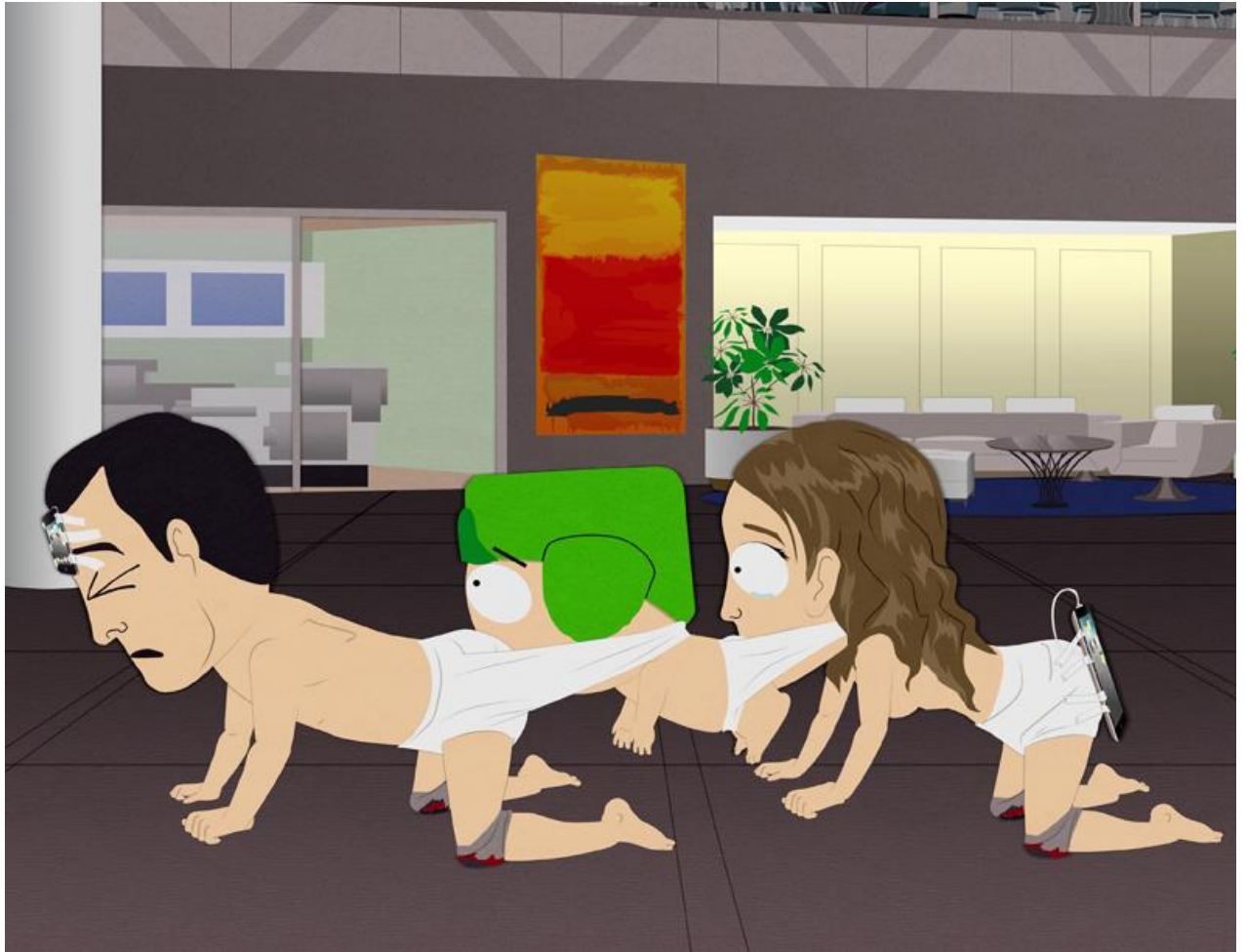
the mainstream.

Perhaps more damagingly, if electric vehicle owners are to be considered smug, then, there seems a realistic prospect that they will also be resented. With the nascent electric vehicle seeming likely to remain significantly more expensive to purchase relative to its internal combustion engine equivalents in the immediate future, the exclusivity of the product can reasonably be expected to persist. For Wells (2012: 758), the advantage of electric vehicle ownership has become an indicator of wealth inequality, and one that is only likely to grow, so ‘the social policy danger is that the financial and other privileges accorded to the electric vehicle-owning minority will accrue to the already-affluent’. Equally, if not more, important than the actual exclusivity of the electric vehicle, though, is the seeming exclusivity it is considered to possess. In these circumstances, the electric car may come to symbolize the privileged while the mass of the population, who do not feel in the position to allow themselves such supposed extravagances, might believe that they are increasingly marginalized and, subsequently, patronized.

At this point, the prospect of resentment is rife – and this development would act so as to significantly negate the chances of electric vehicles attaining wider acceptance. To these ends, it is sensible to consider Solomon (1993: 109) who has taken a great interest in understanding the impact of feelings on human behaviour and, in so doing, notes that resentment is a complex and powerful emotion. Rather than simply wanting that which another has got, resentment pervades deeper, unleashing greater consequences, as ‘where envy sees itself in an inferior position, not having what it really wants and unable to get it, resentment rationalizes this inferiority as oppression, and in so doing grants to itself a kind of moral superiority’. Resentment, then, does not require any authenticity or basis in fact, merely a

perception. If an electric vehicle owner can be construed as smug, this could be enough to set off the emotional reaction. Thereon, if the same electric car owners are prominently and roundly constructed as smug, the emotion is ever more likely. Once activated, resentment possesses highly destructive potential akin to contempt and anger – the chief difference between these emotions being their target audience, as resentment is directed to those who are considered socially superior. The danger for electric vehicles is that eliciting such commanding feelings at such a formative stage of their ascent to the marketplace could handicap their progress toward acceptance – or even derail it completely.

By way of comparison, an interesting parallel can be drawn here with another *South Park* victim, Apple; lampooned in 2011's 'HumancentiPad'. Apple users are also portrayed as smug. In the episode, the writers parody the way that Apple consumers give themselves over so totally to the company – mind, body and soul. Specifically, Kyle signs up to the terms and conditions of the iTunes user agreement in the latest update without bothering to read them. He does this because, like everyone else, he has total faith in Apple; the company is inherently good, he unquestioningly supports that company with passionate fervour. However, this was a mistake as it turns out he actually agreed to be part of a 'revolutionary new product' – namely, three individuals sown together, mouth-to-anus, with an iPad attached to the rear end powered by their defecation, meaning food is fed to the first individual and it becomes the power source.



South Park's HumacentiPad: a lesson in always checking the terms and conditions.

This, somewhat disturbing creation, plays on the central conceit of the horror film, *Human Centipede* (Six, 2010). In portraying this device, the episode pokes fun at these consumers who are, to all extents and purposes, duped into trusting Apple. Advocates' over-zealousness means that they will do anything for Apple, the company is considered so important to their lives. They have internalized its products as an integral component of everyday life, believing themselves to have become partners in a movement, and thus losing perspective on the harsh reality that they are actually being sold high-end gadgets by a capitalist behemoth that only cares about their money. Not only do they see themselves as thoroughly contemporary, hip and on trend but also progressive by supporting a company somehow different to the rest.

Apple users, then, can display a tremendous sense of self-worth premised solely upon their choice of computer, mp3 player or phone – becoming fanatical advocates prone to celebrate their apparent superiority over users of other brands. Despite this rampant smugness, Apple is tremendously successful as a company. While the attitude of Apple devotees has annoyed many, at the time of writing a Google search for the term ‘smugness’ brings up several results for Apple on the first page alone (see, for example, Brooker 2007; Thompson 2010), the company does not seem to have been hurt by such distaste for its products or customers. On the one hand, this may suggest that there is nothing to worry about with regards to electric vehicles. There is also the possibility, though, the two situations are different enough that they will not play out the same way: Apple is an established brand, offering particular products in areas with an accepted social cache. Somewhere along the line, and not entirely down to Apple’s marketing, consumers have accepted the need to talk on the move or downsize from their old CD collection (Srivastava 2005). The accusations of smugness have gained prominence after the value of Apple products was already accepted. We have not reached this point with electric vehicles. While there are established automobile brands operating in the sector, the need for electric vehicles has not been fully accepted. Further, that such a message of smugness go beyond a single brand and onto an entire technology, at such a crucial early stage carries the real threat that electric vehicles en mass could be dismissed.

Concluding thoughts

In truth, we cannot yet know if this will happen. At this stage, any such impact is pure speculation because there has been no academic research into this aspect. To these

ends, the aforementioned strategic niche management has been justly criticized for its excessive functionalism, with a distinct tendency to concentrate attention upon technological processes over and above their social roles despite all protestations to the contrary (see Genus and Coles 2008). As a result, agency is diminished in treatments of innovative technologies. The theory revels in its claims to provide a systemic overview, meaning that advocates have been prone to getting carried away by the structural features of analysis, rather than the minutiae it is supposed to enclose. In these circumstances, only a partial understanding of the process of technological transition is possible – a somewhat superficial depiction. As such, the theory tends toward accepting some degree of path dependency – ignoring conflict and contradiction to present the inexorable progress of a technology. To understand the transition of an emerging technology, it is not enough to understand the social in terms of simply who buys it and when – the richness of social life is only truly expressed in the cultural treatments it inspires. By this line, it would stand adherents of socio-technical transitions theory in good stead to consider the depictions of, say, electric vehicles in popular television programmes such as *South Park* – to some degree this both reflects and influences a notable element of public opinion. Why do the writers think it justifiable to treat the technology in that way, how do they have enough material to sustain it? Perhaps, the *South Park* slant reflects a prevalent undercurrent of opinion, which can be drawn on as there are so many examples to highlight it in the public consciousness. By now, the show clearly knows what targets to select to strike a chord with its audience. What do ordinary people think when they watch such presentations, how will it influence their attitudes? In this case, the television show engages with both the young and those of a critical mindset, perhaps the two key demographics to which electric vehicles would be marketed and it can

surely not have a positive effect. That the depiction would be so negative suggests that the time might not be upon us for electric vehicle to go mainstream, maybe that they are being pushed too hard or presented in the wrong way; it could be that wider debates around climate change that frame the need for sustainable transport options are floundering. Whatever, the smug problem in *South Park* should prompt questions for those with an interest in electric vehicles.

However, while the majority of electric vehicle research is conducted within the field of business studies, issues such as those raised in this paper might be considered trivial and lightweight, amounting to little more than a social survey anecdote and an obscure television show. While this particular paper has not provided any rigorous analysis, it has served a purpose – identifying a consideration that might otherwise be ignored. This serves to highlight the value of moving electric vehicle research out of the isolated environment of business studies and being open to insight from across a broader spectrum of academic schools. If a badly drawn, profanity-laden cartoon such as *South Park* could provide a good lead in to pursuing a potentially important line of research as suggested here, then the value that could be added to our understanding of this socio-technical transition by a whole disciplines such as television studies could be immense. In the medium- to long-term, studies could conduct content analyses, semiotic interpretation or ethnographies of viewing but, initially, attention needs to be drawn to the very real possibility that television studies could provide a genuine contribution to further our understanding of topics such as electric vehicles and the prospects of moving towards greater levels of sustainable mobility.

In turn, there may be some mutual benefit for the field of television studies by further engaging with other disciplines and helping to tackle their research problems –

essentially, promoting a wider spirit of collegiality. As Spigel (2005) notes, television studies has always represented a fundamentally hybrid discipline, encompassing a range of disparate strands, competing theoretical perspectives and oppositional research methods. It is part of what Fiske (1996: 212) has characterized as the effectively open-ended project of cultural studies. To these ends, branching out into other areas would seem most natural and is not an entirely new phenomenon.

However, there is still room to develop this further and, perhaps, an incentive to do so. More importantly, then, combining with researchers on other topics could be most fruitful for many scholars in television studies, leading to new applications of television studies building on some of the sterling contributions that have already been made by television research that informs a discipline such as gender studies (see, for example, Lewis 1991) or in the field of political representation (see, for example, Jones 2005). At a time when academics, in the UK higher education climate at least, are facing increasing pressures to produce cross-disciplinary research and highlight the impact of their findings, such developments could be of much use to those in television studies. For example, using the techniques and theories of television studies to aid understanding of popular attitudes to sustainable mobility and, in turn, perhaps develop policy recommendations seems to promise much. It would provide a readily recordable means of measuring the effect of research in the real world, thus justifying analysis beyond academia. The type of topics presented in this paper present but one example of how television studies could help to meet those demands for functional, collaborative work that many scholars have to deal with today and, hopefully, can act to stimulate other areas of research that might not have been considered. However, Grossman (2010) has suggested that, in order to survive, there is a need for the field to expand its remit and consider new areas so, in stimulating one such consideration,

perhaps this paper can have made some small contribution to prompting new thinking on the topics that television studies might explore and inform.

In sum, research that comes from fields such as business studies could benefit a great deal from searching for inspiration further afield. What better place to start than with studies of television; truly mass media which may well have a lot more to say about the reality of society than even the best constructed but inherently limited academic social survey. While the paper has not engaged in anything like a sophisticated deconstruction of a cultural text, it has drawn attention to the usefulness of doing so, and that seems a significant finding of itself. Paying attention to cultural forms such as *South Park* could well represent a valuable research tool in our quest to understand social attitudes, perhaps to be placed alongside participant observation and formal interviewing.

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