**Floods thoughts**

**Obsolete practices, materials and competences**

Writings in the national Guardian have unintentionally revealed a lot about transitions in social practice. In particular it seems that there is a clear generational difference in responses to reduced (electricity etc) supply. This is rooted in knowledge of and rooting in older forms of practice that have been superseded by more technology-dependent forms. An example is a hotelier whose restaurant was plunged into darkness mid-meal, who reportedly complained that:

“*none of his diners could pay their bills because the card machine stopped working. “There’s an £800 bill for a table of 18 I doubt will ever be paid now,” he said.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

However several commenters suggested alternative payment practices with other materials and competences:

*“a really boring point about credit cards. All retailers get sent a metal plate as part of the agreement with their merchant provider so that they can take manual payments in the event of electronic failure. You buy a manual swipe machine and vouchers and you can trade whatever happens.” (Merson)*

*“I think a majority of businesses no longer keep manual card machines - since about the turn of the century, sooo.....yeah.” (name293840)*

As Gordon and others have noted, familiarity with such older practices (relying on radio rather than internet, using phone-boxes [interestingly called ‘payphones’ by the younger generation – an American influence?]), and having requisite materials and competences (camping stoves and candles) are the essence of resilience in the face of disruption to supply. Their normalisation could also play a part in lower demand energy futures.

The point, from the perspective of Demand’s social practice focus, is that the process of practices becoming fossilised and outdated moves more quickly than we might expect, and from the perspective of energy demand, the embedding or insertion of electrical *and* data infrastructures, appliances and devices into ever more micro-practices (e.g. payment as a practice shared (‘dispersed’) across multiple practice fields) is problematic as a ratcheting of dependence on fragile systems – more lock-in. In terms of potential energy futures, it seems that the materials and competences of earlier practice and an understanding that they are still valid and important need to be actively fostered.

**Phones and communication**

This turns out to have been a critical area of social practice. With the majority of mainstream communication taking place by (no signal or battery) mobile phones or damaged landlines[[2]](#footnote-2), and information and support being sought through the internet and twitter, ‘disaster response’ was limited by the simultaneous and related removal of ICT data networks *and* electricity to power them. Again, the linkage between communication, electricity and data in practices, via the embeddedness of infrastructures, intermediaries and devices/appliances, was made clear and problematic.

**Re-charging**

Energy storage might have become vital, and there were active and angry debates on social media about the misuse of collective or emergency supplies for selfish demand: e.g. people flocking to the hospital as one of the first places to get re-powered, in order to charges mobile phones and laptops. This was seen as a serious breach of social norms – consider that hospitals display numerous requests for people to switch off mobiles [why is this??]. And interestingly, it was facilitated through a Tweet to the local Bay Radio – one of the few sources of information due to the relative lack of embeddedness/interlinking of radio and mains electricity.

*“7 December at 07:15 · Lancaster's way of helping out with the flooding seems to be just go around looking at ruined shit, looting stores and going to the hospital to leech off the wifi and have a 'warm cup of tea' which Rachel had tweeted to the bay......*

*We went through 1 weeks food in 1 day at the RLI yesterday! People were just plugging in their phoned and laptops to any socket they could find! Don't they realise we are on a generator? All they are doing is draining the hospital power supply!?! 7 December at 07:21*

*Security soon came and put a stop to it. I was livid …*

*6 December at 17:19 · Please don't come to the hospital unless your ill because it's a hospital not a refugee camp!!!!”*

The implications for energy futures are that communication in (increasingly predictable/prevalent) electricity-free periods should be rethought, and that ICT appliances and devices with multiple forms of powering are more resilient.

**Politics, ownership, duty, the state and private sector etc**

The responses to the disruptions of normality also raised debates on the roles of state and private actors. Most clearly and obviously, different people expressed thanks and support for the emergency services (and criticisms too of course!), but also there was an overflowing of thanks for the ‘generator men’ who had ‘heroically’ driven ‘400 miles from Devon’ in some cases to provide ‘us’ with power. Photos were posted of the generator wagons collecting on a parking site (that looks like Caton Road- one of the worst hit streets and site of the damaged substation), to then fan out and replace main electricity via the local substations[[3]](#footnote-3), plugging in visibly and audibly generating electricity from diesel. Facebook messages urged people to give the drivers of the wagons and the people standing by them tea or coffee and mince pies – refuelling the refuellers. Others then complained that they were being paid overtime, did this sort of thing as their job, and shouldn’t be rewarded. A week later social media is still being used to get tea and cake to soldiers drafted in to make emergency repairs to Cumbria’s road infrastructure. -

The local energy company ENW (ex-Norweb, not a monopoly [but presumably ‘providers’ in the same sense as BT are the providers of the phone and data cable/fibre network?]) had provided free food from a burger van in Dalton Square, provoking comments of climate change irony from a vegan, and backlashes about ‘treehuggers’ trying to make political capital. Cognitive dissonance in action. Again this raised debates about desert, need, and priorities:

“*have put a butty van on the Quay free of charge. Pretty decent of them I think. X*

*I know!!! but i havent been because i have food and money and clothes... shame about the utter reprobates that are getting 3 square meals from it....”*

Other examples abound. A landlord friend has been hailed as a community hero for keeping open (and selling beer) until the early hours. This is something that often happens at his establishments which have exploited the late-night licensing laws. The Bay Radio station staff were similarly hailed as heroes for providing news and information. This raises the questions of who should provide what? What is duty, normal service provision, charity, emergency response, community cohesion? We seem to be witnessing the revalidation of essential services.

**Supply and demand**

Shops and businesses re-opened, spotlights and Christmas decorations were lit, and retail premises (easily the most energy-consuming sector of the non-domestic built environment, along with food establishments) were open and consuming busily, to make sure that Christmas consumption was not too badly hit. Who makes these decisions about discretionary and non-discretionary consumption?

By contrast, even as the major employer the University had no power for most of its site, and householders were being asked to ration their consumption, it was noted that

*“You're all wasting your time being careful as greedy businesses are still allowed to open up. Just think how much power currys / pc world is using. 8 December at 15:10”*

In terms of demand and practice, in extraordinary circumstances the importance and value of some ‘normal’ practice (that providing a service) was revealed and validated. By contrast, other practices became understood as self-seeking (e.g. the profit-making of shops) or as profligate (‘the Council’ and their decorative lights) and were denigrated as such. In terms of advice, it seems that social media, word of mouth and some pretty vicious social sanctioning were the main modes of policing consumption (“if I knocked on anyone’s door around here I would get a punch in the mouth”).

There have been raging debates and blaming and recriminations arising from the state of liminal/fragile supply – with the majority of the town still (as far as people could tell, and inform each other) powered via diesel generators, and appeals from ENW for help with demand management:

*“Please could we ask that those restored by generator in*

People reasonably asked whether or not they were on a generator supply, and therefore needed to reduce consumption:

“*How do we know if we are the ones restored by generator??· 8 December at 12:18*

*Electricity North West We are using both generation and mains supply currently to try and stabalise the grid until full repairs are made.8 December at 15:31*

*Are we likely to be getting any more power cuts this evening? Thx· 8 December at 15:35*

*Electricity North West There is a possibility that managed power cuts may be needed to reduce strain on the network while repairs continue. We will work to keep as many as possible on supply 8 December at 18:41”*

*“Electricity North West 1300 10/12/2015 #‎Lancaster‬ Whilst on generator, if you experience any outages, we'll dispatch engineers ASAP so that you won't be off for long!*

However this standard language, of keeping usage to a minimum and only using appliances where necessary, revealed that there was no obvious hierarchy of ‘usage’ or ‘appliances’, or what constituted ‘a[n acceptable] minimum’ or necessity. These debates led people to become temporary experts on energy demand, for example posting advice about the relative power demands of different appliances and devices[[4]](#footnote-5). The very visibility of (Xmas) lights made them a focus of ire, obscuring other arguably more inessential and energy demanding practices that continued in the shade:

*“Christmas lights, fridges, microwaves are all ok its all these electric showers at 10kw a piece that keep triping generators out, folk also putting tubledryers on there 3kw soon over load a 200kw genn 8 December at 12:11*

*Yeh but Christmas lights on in the day?? Really... But Yeh deciding that now is the best time to do all your washing and ironing isn't a great idea either 8 December at 12:12*

*Our Xmas lights are battery leds / solar power, thought that was pretty standard nowadays. 8 December at 17:15”[[5]](#footnote-6)*

This prompted interesting debates between ‘lay experts’ and ‘naïve sociologists’ about energy demand and practice, need and normality:

*“People haven't got a clue. They're the ones who complain about a neighbours set of 25 LED Christmas lights at 16 watt but they've got there 50" plasma telly on with a 3kw heater to keep warm haha ”*

*“Surely if everyone puts all their xmas lights on it will make a difference! They aren't asking for people not to use electricity but to use it sparingly for now. Ok a tv might not be important for some but for most of the country it forms a big part of their day (rightly or wrongly) unlike fairy lights.”*

*“People aren't going to turn their lights off when the trees in town are lit up!*

*I've just driven through town and they're all on on St Johns Street! I'm not moaning in just pointing out while town is all lit up people won't take notice. Shop windows have Christmas lights too!*

*“Hahaha. Gotta say tho...i do object to "unnecessary use" during these times. Johnnys arcade was open throughout the power episodes. Wonder how many kwh that used up on their 350 gamblers etc. I think its quite shoddy that non essential stuff is being switched on by both businesses and council buildings. It would save 1000s of kilowatts to just limit use of rooms at town hall etc. Ive seen countless businesses in the area with huge lit signs switched on whilst traffic lights outside are switched off. Doesnt quite seem like we are 'all in it together' when im not showering or washing my clothes as as part of the effort when i walk past empty shops and banks etc with 20 lights on etc...”*

The lights were seen as symbolising or representing every-day and normalised profligacy, important in its aggregate effect:

*The Christmas lights show a likely (and highly visible) disregard for being sensible with power usage elsewhere. Even if they are battery operated, people passing don't know that, and it appears as if they don't care about saving power. They are utterly unnecessary, and highly visible.*

*If you multiply small things by many 1,000s, they become big things!”*

Whilst these discussions might be thought of in terms of highlighting the different roles for the public in their relationships with energy (as e.g. consumers, producers, pro-sumers, citizens etc: ) he following response highlights perhaps the energy consumer view *par excellence*:

*“Trying to dictate what I do with my electricity . I pay for it I will use it how I like t[hank]y[ou]”*

**Zombies: practice, agency and structure**

**T**he city centre was a strange place on the Sunday, as recorded in the national Guardian, with groups of ‘indie-students’ (?) wandering ‘like zombies’ into town from a powerless campus, to find all shops shut (except Booths, who had a generator delivered at 2am). The imagery used reflects (consciously?) George Romero’s use of a shopping mall in the seminal zombie-flick *Dawn of the Dead* to make a heavy-handed point about consumerism. Compare the following:

*“Nothing in the town centre was open but still people were there, propelled by some primeval urge to forage for flat whites and Wi-Fi. People stared at their phones in silent horror, processing grief, as those with wheeled luggage stared at the railway station’s locked gates. Residential streets, normally quiet as a mortuary on Sunday mornings, were rammed. … Streams of bewildered indie-zombie students heading into town from a dead university.”[[6]](#footnote-7)*

*“Most of the gates are down, I don’t think they can get into the stores … I guess the power’s not off in this area… could be nuclear …*

*What are they doing? Why do they come here?*

*Could be some kind of instinct. Memory? Of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives.”[[7]](#footnote-8)*

Of course the important point is that the disruption of infrastructures that prosaically underlie and support practice does indeed reveal the routine and compelling nature of social practice, in other words the power of structure in relation to agency. On closer inspection it became clearer that in fact, many were engaged in a search for mobile phone coverage (as of 15th, this is still limited) or else were re-locating in search of new geographies of supply and practice. However the geographical nature of practice time-space was laid bare and reconfigured: students sat incongruously on garden walls in impromptu gatherings, or queued at telephone boxes.

**Mobility/Transport**

A third aspect of the DEMAND focus is mobility, and I reflect on this as an auto-ethnographic field note:

“I was someone who fled town on Saturday afternoon from the soon-to-be flooded bus station, reading the paper notices about changes of departure locations of the service at Preston and waiting for the bus delayed by the weather. We had already found out that trains in both directions from Lancaster were cancelled or delayed because of the weather and other ‘normal’ disruptions. We set off on what turned out to be the last bus out of town in that direction for the day, having paid for gig tickets and a very cheap hotel and not wanting to miss out. The bus went down the A6 allowing views of the first signs of flooding at Galgate, and then the Police were stopping traffic south of the M6 roundabout. Our driver negotiated and got let through – the vehicle was deemed big enough. We drove on through 2 feet of water, after watching in disbelief as a convertible sports-car drove through with water up to their windows, luckily not at the same time as the car transporter which crossed through in our direction, whose wash would have swamped it. The story was the same further south with lower levels of water across the road, but some flooding of houses obvious as we got to Garstang and the Fylde villages, with people pumping out from gardens and cellars already at 1600. The bus driver engaged in long discussions with everyone getting on-board warning them that they would not be returning if they got on, and warning everyone of high tide time. The next day we discovered that not only were there no trains but now no buses either. We had to call an information line seen on the back of a bus, and they had no information because the bus station was flooded. We had to get a very expensive taxi back to town, on approaching Lancaster we saw gridlock leaving town – the University had advised students to leave and the exodus from town and campus was total. We jumped off at Bus station floods, traffic diversions, but also the continuing lack of traffic lights – potentially lethal to bikes and pedestrians, but the traffic seems to be flowing better than usual?”

The most persistent result has been the powering down of the traffic lights for more than a week, revealing an alternative way of ‘doing’ traffic inftrastucture known in the Netherlands as the Monderman junction after its chief promoter. The local cycle pressure group is asking for people to report on their experiences, in case this is a way of promoting safer and freer flowing traffic in town; it figured as a methodologically interesting accidental experiment in mobility.

*“Morecambe Area Police … there are still issues with traffic lights not working- please drive with caution and treat all these junctions as "Give Way”*

*…Good to see really sensible considerate driving on way to RLI from Hest Bank today. Everyone letting alternate vehicles in and driving sensibly. Only traffic jam I saw was on Greyhound Bridge.*

*Keep it up and maybe the council will switch off the lights permanantly! (Let me dream)”*

**Methodological note and ‘conclusions’**

Facebook has had remarkably interesting debates ongoing about the relative selfishness and necessity of different energy-demanding activities (Xmas lights versus ‘doing a wash’). The only problem is that properly heated debates might get deleted!

Social media is all I managed to access for the vital days, and the Facebook Past & Present Group on Facebook is a great research resource – a totally random sample of Professors through to unemployed, and the debates have been focussed on Xmas lights as a highly visible symbol of ‘selfish’ consumption.

Then there have been backlashes about the really energy-demanding items, and debates about guilt about doing washing or hoovering. Xmas itself of course is of high, cohesive, symbolic, collective meaning. The debates aired many different views existing on need, desert, waste, social value, with an underlying but not fully formulated hierarchy of energy demand based on social value, one which clearly conflicted with the dominant values of a decentralised and ‘liberalised’ capitalist economy having taken over provision of social goods and services. Energy futures in which demand and supply are highlighted and negotiated in similar ways more regularly prove to undermine the neo-liberal project itself - for now it seems that the sticking-plaster of the ‘Big Society’ is holding.

1. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/06/storm-desmond-lancasters-small-businesses-face-zombie-apocalypse?CMP=share\_btn\_tw [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Is this the case? I have not had a landline phone for a couple of years and so cannot comment! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Indeed, there has been confusion and then swift learning about the distribution system itself – reports that ‘the substation’ (singular) was damaged were confusing given that the smaller transformer sheds providing power to smaller areas of numerous streets are also called substations. Also, reports that ‘the power station’ had been damaged raised worries about local Heysham (nuclear) power plants. As pointed out by Elizabeth and Stan, the circuits of electricity provision have been weirdly underlined as different generator-substation mini-circuits went down and repowered, revealing strange connections and dark spots of provision. People now know where their local substations are. Moments of switching to (still being tested) mains power, or refuelling, provided momentary black-outs. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Amongst the sources reposted in Facebook groups were <http://www.greatbowden.org/documents/TypicalEnergyUsageforHouseholdAppliances.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. https://www.facebook.com/ElectricityNorthWest/posts/1074564525911194?fref=nf&pnref=story [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ian Martin. “‘Hammering, grim, brainless’ – how Storm Desmond hit Lancaster”, Guardian Wednesday 9 December 2015 17.11 GMT. http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/dec/09/storm-desmond-lancaster-floods-chaos-power-neighbourliness-ian-martin?CMP=share\_btn\_tw [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “Dawn of the Dead (1978) Mall Scene” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zK\_44APmbY [↑](#footnote-ref-8)