

Media, Society and Cycling Cultures: Editorial

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Cycling is living in a new season.

The policies of restriction for public transport during the Coronavirus epidemic, the Anthropocene debate, and the need to rethink the urban and extra-urban mobilities for carrying out a model of sustainable economic and societal development are translating into renewed attention towards cycling. Consequently, it can be registered an increase in the production and selling of bikes and an impulse to the diffusion of the cycling practice in different countries.

Nevertheless, the experience of cycling and the cycling cultures are transforming in a significant way. Cycling is increasingly mediated through social media, apps, and platforms. Even when it is a solitary activity, it is more and more exposed to the connected audience on the Internet and constantly measured, counted, and made visible through complex algorithmic systems. While the history of media runs in parallel with the history of cycling, and in general, of sports, through the papers of this special issue, we will illustrate how mediatization is increasingly granular and fine-grained. It is hard, therefore, to conceive of cycling nowadays, like many activities, without any connection to the different waves of digital media. The new mediatization implies the capture into the complex apparatus of digital capitalism and the related logic of competition, marketing, and commercialization. It shapes the making of the cyclist identities and the cycling cultures.

Nevertheless, this entanglement with digital worlds is not one-sided and deterministically oriented. It is an encounter in several dimensions: it is a sign of involvement of cycling with digital capitalism and the neo-liberal ethos, but it opens new possibilities for the emergence of cycling cultures in the current dominant car-centric society. As reminded in some articles, this process found a moment of acceleration during the pandemic. The times of lockdown and the restrictions of mobility make social media, apps, and digital infrastructures even more important to develop, stabilize and maintain sociality at a distance with a multiplier effect on the spread of cycling. More and more people found cycling attractive by joining online communities and networks of cyclists. This process, as the articles recall, presents chances but also dilemmas,

paradoxes, and issues that need additional investigations and reflections. Of course, the special issue is not intended to furnish a complete overview of the theme. It, nevertheless, presents some empirical works, mostly ethnographic from diverse countries (Canada, Spain, Italy, Germany, Australia etc.), media and platforms (Koomot, Zwift) to provoke reflections on some of the dynamics of cycling cultures.

The special issue opens with the introduction by Mario Tirino, who describes the main concepts. He discusses the concept of cycling cultures in a car-centric society and displays how it can vary not only to the countries but have many local plural instantiations. By drawing on the concept of waves of mediatization, he describes the archaeology of media cycling. In dialogue with the contributions of the special issue, he also addresses the platformization and the datafication of cycling.

The articles of Sarah Torne and Luca Benvenga (in Italian) analyze two popular platforms: Zwift and Koomot.

Sarah Thorne describes Zwift as a massive multiplayer game that leads indoor cyclists into a digital world, Watopia. Zwift became very popular during the Covid19 emergency. Zwift provides competitive races articulated in several levels of ability. The platform asks cyclists to provide information on height, weight, and power to determine the speed. This way, it gives a 'realistic' simulation of analogue cycling. Height and weight are crucial for the speed of climbing and descending. The platform draws on techniques of gamification (experience points, levels, in-game currency, achievements, and badges) to keep cyclists engaged. Sarah Thorne focuses on cheating in the platform related to the algorithm. 'Weight' is the variable at the centre stage. Notably, the platform has been accused of creating the conditions for pushing toward the eating disorder.

Luca Benvenga pays attention to Koomot, a platform designed to register races, make new maps, share photos, and exchange experiences on cycling. By drawing on a digital ethnography of Koomot, Benvenga displays how the platform permits self-tracking and the fabrication of data doubles. Data doubles are avatars that shape identities by showing the performances of cyclists. They make quantified selves. The platform keeps engaged cyclists by introducing experience scores and levels of achievement. Datafication of cycling becomes a mechanism of governmentality, as it contributes to the government of the individual conducts and the spread of a neo-liberal ethos. Moreover, the platform gathers data in collaboration with other companies, like Garmin, Lufthansa, etc. and works with local agencies of tourism for the marketing of some territories (Switzerland, Sud Tirol). The wide database permits a fine-tuning of marketing campaigns. The platform gives rise to many communities of cyclists. It is then a means for the making of new groups. At the same time, it draws, like other platforms, such as Strava, on data extraction and reinforces the logic of quantification of the selves. It shifts cycling in the dynamics of the performance society, where the search for an identity is given a response by numbers.

The granularity of mediatization in the cycling world illustrates, as Thorne and Benvenga, the pervasiveness of digital capitalism and the neoliberal ethos. The other articles of the special issue help us to understand, on the other hand, that the same process is double-faced and can enable the emergence of cycling cultures in a landscape dominated by car-centrism.

Matthew Tiessen describes how “Torontonians cyclists, armed with mobile GPS-equipped apps and a desire for exploration, sought respite from lockdowns by descending into Toronto’s enormous network of ravines – its ‘upside-down mountains’ – and their 100-plus kilometers of urban single-track and mountain bike trails”. Notably, he contrasted the dark imagery of the Covid19 cosmology nurturing fear, death, constant monitoring, preventive measures, masks, and inescapable binaries between positive/negative, vaccinated/unvaccinated, masked/unmasked, closure/opening, etc. with the liveness and the positive feelings of the mountain bike community of Toronto during the same time. Apps, smartphones, and GPS devices became the ways for Torontonians to find relief from Toronto’s Don Valley, a network of ravines into the urban infrastructure. The digital instruments, here, acted as a portal for the experience of cycling where many in a hard time could experiment with the sense of freedom; the possibility of enhancing and expanding the ability of cycling in a dynamic of expansion, optimization, intensification; the experience of the state of flow, the return to biological rhythm, and the thrilling of taking risks.

Julia Bee and Suzanne Ryder, Fiona Mclachlan and Brent McDonald’s articles display how digital media open new fields of visibility.

Julia Bee focuses on She36 Berlin bicycle-based collective and a social influencer, Juliet Elliott. In a male-dominated culture, She36 is a feminist collective attentive also to LGBT+ communities of cyclists. The collective shares vlogs and photos on cycling and repair activities on Tumblr and Instagram. She36 is characterized by fixed gear and without brakes bicycles. The style of the group is punk and skate movement. Vlogs inspire mobility practice and contribute to the stabilization of identities. The analysis of Julie Elliott’s influencer style reveals the intersection of multiple media and platforms, vlogs, photos, etc. These contents highlight the need to move to a methodology addressing the sensory approach to the cyclist’s aesthetics.

Suzanne Ryder, Fiona Mclachlan and Brent McDonald draw on an auto-ethnography of one of the authors. It reflects on how digital media has helped to make women in cycling more visible and presents the growing literature on this aspect. They describe how social media and women’s clubs of cyclists in Australia (She Race Group) offered support and shared experiences to overcome the feeling of being intimidated in their attempt to access what is perceived as a dominant male practice. These groups on the Internet helped also build up new relationships by establishing a safety net of care and solidarity. These groups are helpful as well in raising political issues and combatting the discriminatory rules that penalize women’s participation in cyclist races.

The special issue concludes with the articles of Rocío Blanco-Gregory and María Porro Nieto (in Spanish) and Francesco Bonifacio. Both articles confirm the usefulness of the concept of cycling culture.

Rocío Blanco-Gregory and María Porro Nieto focus on Vuelta de España, the popular and well-known professional race. They analyse the impact of La Vuelta, in terms of the increase in tourism. They found a positive effect of the race on the spread of cycling, and in particular, the strategy of the official and the digital media, and economic benefit for the region of Extremadura that was interested in the time of the investigations by several stages.

Bonifacio's article, finally, draws on the participant's seven-month Milan-based observant participation, during which he worked as a Glovo part-time rider. Based on a solid empirical base, and practice-based studies on knowledge and learning, the article provokes reflection on the work of riders, a key worker in the actual regime of digital capitalism. He maintains that this work implies a specific way of urban cycling, a practice normativity that arises in a context where any training regulation is absent. He convincingly argues that "food-delivery work is accountable to a specific practice of urban cycling, that has to do with the difficult negotiation of speed, safety and accuracy". This way, he suggests that the work of the rider, heavily captured in digital capitalism, enacts a specific cycling culture.

This issue of the journal is dedicated to our friend and colleague Vincenzo Del Gaudio. Vincenzo passed away suddenly on Sunday, November 6. We will greatly miss his volcanic intelligence and his ability to study esports and other forms of sports mediatization in an original way.