

issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-164 'Don't be Rude on the Road': Cycle Blogging, Trolling and Lifestyle

Steve Jones  
Nottingham Trent University

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines hostile noise on the UK Guardian's Bike Blog. Like the Internet, the bicycle has been framed as a redemptive technology at the heart of new forms of urbanity and citizenship. The article examines these struggles, concentrating on how accusations of trolling police the boundaries between cycling as a sphere of autonomous play and a more 'ethical' disposition that links cycling to environmental and social responsibility. It argues that a sense of community is established through the embattled relationship with a 'petrolhead' mode of online writing which asserts the pleasures of unrestrained lifestyle-as-fun and contests the claims to good citizenship made by pro-cycle bloggers. The article asks whether cycle blogging is constituted by its games of taste and its defensive response to trolling, or if conjoined strategies of netiquette and on-road etiquette framed in terms of 'responsibility', offer a route to legitimacy.

## Introduction

In her introduction to *Cyclebabble: bloggers on biking* (2011: ix), the British journalist Zoe Williams argues that, whatever cyclists' differences, 'We revel in our differences: Lycra mankini or tweed trousers tucked into your sock? Traffic lights - a suggestion or an order? Racer or hybrid, helmet or commando, freewheel or fixie. Nothing sours the bond'. And yet the *Guardian's* 'Bike Blog', the on-line discussion board from which the selection of posts in *Cyclebabble* is drawn, is partly constituted by precisely such a souring of the bond. Accusations of trolling abound, from both within and outside cycling's various practices and subcultures. In particular, discussion is regularly prefaced or framed—as in the quote above—by a set of negative conventions (such as riding through red lights, the exemption of cycling from 'road tax', or the wearing of 'inappropriate' clothing), which are variously used to condemn all cyclists, to condemn particular sorts of cyclists or to provide a point of departure from which the individual contributor can establish their own virtuous distance. Even if a writer takes issue with such conventions, therefore, the negative consensus around the meanings of cycling serves to generate and police the practice of cycle blogging.

Like the Internet, the bicycle has been figured as a redemptive and global (or at least 'North European') technology, capable of being at the heart of new urbanities and new forms of mobile citizenship. Like the Internet too, the bike is a technology whose meanings are struggled over by different social groupings. Having been largely abandoned as a means of mass transportation in Britain and elsewhere, cycling has instead become associated with a shifting mixture of 'subversive play and utopian futures' (Aldred, 2012: 97), which express the dispositions of particular middle-class fractions. In this article, I deal with these struggles for meaning and the connections that on-line writers make with their off-line identities and embodied cycling activities. By analysing Bike Blog in the light of debates over taste and citizenship, I concentrate on the boundaries drawn, and policed through accusations of trolling, between cycling as a bio-political sphere of 'healthy', autonomous and frequently expensive play and a more 'ethical' disposition that links cycling to environmental and social responsibility. At the same time, a fragile sense of on- and off-line community is established through the embattled relationship with a sometimes imagined and sometimes insistently present 'petrolhead' mode of on-line writing which asserts the pleasures of unrestrained lifestyle-as-fun and contests the tastes and claims to good citizenship made by pro-cycle bloggers. The essay asks whether the field of cycle blogging is constituted by its games of taste and its defensive response to real or assumed trolling, or if 'civilizing processes' of netiquette and on-road etiquette offer a route to a form of 'professionalization' and thereby to legitimacy.

To examine these issues, the article analyses the archive of contributions to the *Guardian's* Bike Blog from its appearance in 15 June 2009 to the end of December 2012. '*Guardian*' is used throughout the article as shorthand for a range of on-line and print media owned by the UK's Guardian Media group: the Monday-to-Saturday *Guardian* newspaper and the Sunday *Observer*; the website *guardian.co.uk*, which reproduces almost all of the newspaper's news, editorial and comment pieces, together with some original content; and a network of discussion boards which are routinely referred to as 'blogs'. While in the blogosphere more generally, bloggers write blogs, to which other contributors append comments, in the *Guardian's* case any such distinction is blurred, so the discussion constitutes the 'blog' every bit as much as the (generally) journalist-written article that occasions the discussion. Similarly, comment posters on the boards are regularly described as 'bloggers', even if they are only occasional visitors to the pages.

Bike Blog was chosen since *guardian.co.uk* is amongst the world's most-visited English-language newspaper websites (its own research claims it to be the world's third most popular newspaper website in any language (Media Briefing, 2012)). *Guardian.co.uk's* relative success stands in stark contrast to the long-term decline in sales of the print versions of the *Guardian* and *Observer*. Indeed, in 2011 editor Alan Rusbridger announced a 'digital first' strategy, foregrounding the problems faced by print in an online age. Crucially in terms of the discussion here, 'digital first' does not currently involve the website operating behind a paywall, thereby encouraging the contribution of posts from readers who may balk at having to pay for content. While the blog is primarily British (indeed, southern English) in its topics and comments, it regularly attracts comments from around the world, and covers global cycling issues. So, for example, during two weeks on October and November 2012, Bike Blog dealt with cycling matters from Oregon, Yemen, New York and Sydney as well as its UK 'home'.

Bike Blog's breadth of readership is crucial when considering trolling and other forms of on-line hostility. Although the *Guardian* umbrella covers a spectrum of political and cultural positions, it is generally characterised as occupying a space on the 'progressive' liberal-left of the British press, at some ideological remove from the majority of British national newspapers. A prominent trope in hostile comments is therefore that the paper's readers are 'guardianistas' – modish, metropolitan liberals. Although other UK regional and national newspapers cover cycle-related stories and invite reader responses on the topic (most notably the *Times* with its campaigning 'Cities Fit for Cycling' site) no other paper has a regular discussion board dedicated to cycling (though the London *Evening Standard* carried a short-lived bike blog).

Although the *Guardian* had previously run a regular 'Two Wheels' column, Bike Blog was an offshoot of the paper's 'Ethical and Green Living' section, first appearing in its own right with a column entitled 'What Moves You to Get on Your Bike?' on 15 June 2009. Bike Blog was envisaged as a weekly discussion piece accompanied by a podcast, but open-to-comment postings have been much more frequent than this: between June 2009 and December 2012, guardian.co.uk posted over 700 bike-related features on Bike Blog. Numbers of comments varied from less than ten on several topics to approaching 900 on the topic of 'cycle haters'. Although around 400 of these articles were studied, the sample here is limited to discussions which either contained direct accusations of trolling, or broached a variety of legal or etiquette issues. This poses some problems in terms of how the article attempts to capture the character of trolling on the Bike Blog. As Patrick O'Sullivan and Andres Flanagin note in their discussion of 'flaming', while there might be a consensus that trolling 'consists of aggressive or hostile communication occurring via computer-mediated channels' (2003: 71) there are considerable differences in the perceptions of senders, receivers and third party observers about whether such communication represents a 'real' violation of community norms or a misinterpretation on the part of one or other interactant (see also Lange, 2006; Neurauter-Kessels, 2011). Nonetheless, explicit accusations of trolling enable us to see the positions taken by those prepared to name the troll and the reactions of those named as trolls. [1]

Equally, however, the article examines on-line comments in which trolling is not explicitly marked. O'Sullivan and Flanagin note that a further problem with writing on flaming is the assumption that it is overwhelmingly negative and destructive, and research is therefore 'framed in terms of finding solutions to the 'problem' of uninhibited or inappropriate messages' (2003: 74). By contrast, I show that the 'troll function' of valorising negative conventions is generative : although it establishes limits to what is writable on Bike Blog (and doable offline) it is also 'click bait' that provides opportunities for writing, traffic for the website and the legitimation of positions taken by some writers. Writing about an earlier period of internet discussion systems, in which the troll had the more specific role of provoking an indignant response from someone new to the forum, and a more legitimated disposition [2], Michele Tepper (1997: 40) argues that trolling serves to generate profits in distinction within the on-line field. Trolling, she notes, is accepted within on-line subcultures, because it enforces 'community standards and [increases] community coherence by providing a game that all those who know the rules can play against those who do not.' Although the troll may well be an individual from the shifting 'community' of Bike Blog contributors, the troll function is nearer to this sense of a set of rules and (negative) conventions which can form a capital on which a poster can trade. Moreover despite the often high level of hostility shown between pseudonymous posters on Bike Blog, trolling can also consist of relatively playful games within which humour and deep knowledge of community conventions are highly valued.

In what follows, I provide a context for thinking about these rules through a discussion of the dominant regime of mobility in late modern societies, and the relationship between this regime and practices of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

## From automobility to moral mobility

In this section I review key writing about transport in late modernity. I note potent correspondences between cycling and the internet around their common promotion of a model of renewed participatory democracy and citizenship. However, there is no necessary relationship between the two technologies and their associated practices, and I go on to suggest some problems in linking cycling and the internet as redemptive technologies which automatically generate virtuous behaviour.

The most encompassing theoretical engagement with these issues has been the description of a hegemonic regime of 'automobility'. For Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2000: 738), this is a near-global phenomenon, exerting 'an awesome spatial and temporal dominance'. Automobility links embodied mobile practices and their representation on the internet for it is both 'the predominant form of 'quasi-private' mobility that subordinates other 'public' *mobilities* of walking, cycling' and so on and 'the dominant *culture* that sustains discourses of what constitutes the good life [and] what is necessary for an appropriate citizenship of mobility' (739, original emphasis). As a consequence, they argue, 'society should be reconceptualised as a 'society of automobility''. While some individuals and groups may practice other forms of mobility, these exist in a subaltern relationship to automobility since the institutions of civil society, including the internet, cannot 'be conceived of as autonomous from these all-conquering machinic complexes' (Sheller and Urry, 2000: 739).

In her discussion of cycling and citizenship, Rachel Aldred (2010) argues that automobility's privatization of public space, its reinforcement of inequality and its cultivation of consuming individualism are problematic for democratic citizenship. By contrast, her research amongst cyclists in Cambridge indicates that, for her primarily middle-class respondents, cycling can produce a number of potential forms of citizenship that point outside and beyond the 'carcoon' (Wickham, 2006: 4). She notes four dimensions of cycling citizenship: 'being responsive to environmental issues, taking care of oneself, being rooted in one's locality, and responding to the social environment' (2010: 39). Cycling therefore appears to be a form of 'resistant mobility' (Green, 2012: 274), or 'virtuous mobility'.

This virtuousness has undoubtedly become central to health and transport policy discourses. Tim Jones and his co-authors (2012: 1407) write that cycling has entered the policy domain as a response to a number of problems associated with car dependency and more broadly with late modernity: congestion and environmental degradation; the disembedding of face-to-face social relations; obesity and cardiac illness, such that Aldred describes it as a “win-win solution” to public health, environmental and economic problems’ (2012: 95). This policy discourse has, in turn, entered popular conceptions of the meanings of cycling. Through their interview work with different groups of Londoners, Judith Green and her co-authors argue that a new ‘moral transport hierarchy’ has been established in which ‘car travel clearly occupied the bottom rung’ (2012: 280). By contrast, cycling was at the apex, with ‘the moral worth of cycling [resting] on its construction as the ultimate mode for meeting a range of citizenship obligations’ (2012: 280). For Green *et al*’s respondents, therefore, cycling offers a route towards the flexibility, freedom and independence of ‘true’ automobility, for, ‘If car driving once provided the ... promise of autonomous and efficient travel, in accounts from our participants, cycling now unequivocally offered this possibility’ (276).

This reconstruction of citizenship and reclamation of public space bears comparison with the countercultural values regularly claimed for the internet and the blogosphere, technologies which activists have claimed as privileged tools for the construction of virtual communities, subcultural playgrounds and ‘netizen’ democracy (Curran, 2012: 38; Hauben and Hauben, 1997). As Bart Cammaerts notes, a Habermasian notion of the public sphere is regularly invoked in discussions of the blogosphere, depicting it as an independent arena ‘where public opinion is formed through communicative action, through the free and open exchange of rational arguments between status-free citizens’ (2008: 358). Zizi Papacharissi (2002), however, argues that there is frequently a slippage or imprecision when depicting the internet as a public sphere. While it may have the potential for promoting the democratic exchange of ideas and opinions, it is exclusionary to some and what she describes as a ‘public space’ to others, open to a multiplicity of voices who may have little interest in rational public debate. ‘A virtual space enhances discussion’, she claims, while ‘a virtual sphere enhances democracy’ (2002: 11). As we shall see, there is no necessary direction to this travel: blogs (including Bike Blog) constantly shift between operating, in Papacharissi’s terms as ‘spheres’ and ‘spaces’.

For some authors and activists, the bike and the internet can form powerful associations. Green *et al* note that the cycling citizen is a hybrid of ‘active’ and ‘activist’ conceptions of citizenship. While the active citizen has rights and obligations in relation to the nation state, the activist cycling citizen is ‘engaged in struggles over rights in sites as local as the city streets, or internet message boards, as well as globally, across international borders’ (2012: 273). Similarly, in his discussion of Critical Mass protests, Zack Furness (2007: 301)

argues that the online circulation of self-produced bike advocacy mirrors the leaderless organization of the ride, and celebrates 'xerocracy [self-produced media] over corporate media' as much as 'bicycling over car culture'. Horton, meanwhile, in his study of cycling in the environmental community, argues that, while the car and television set are absent or marginalised in the lives of environmentalists 'the computer screen ... facilitates for British environmentalists a rooted but networked sense of local belonging to a globalised green community' (2004: 750). And Aldred (2012: 107) describes how activist cycle blogging, represented by the London 'Cycling Embassy of Great Britain' ([www.cycling-embassy.org.uk](http://www.cycling-embassy.org.uk)) has been a key part of local and national environmental campaigns.

Against the regime of automobility, therefore, 'vélomobility' (Horton, Rosen and Cox, 2006: 2) has routinely been constructed as a virtuous practice and CMC as an element of this. But there is no necessary connection between these two technologies. As hypermodern convenience devices, computers share many characteristics with cars, not least their participation in processes of disembedding or 'unbundling' face-to-face relationships and territorialities of home, community and work. Indeed, Sheller and Urry themselves imagine that the future involves both a more diverse ecology of mobility and an (albeit significantly less privatised) intensification of 'carcooning' through the hybridisation of the car with a range of convergent ICTs. 'Thus, any public vehicle could instantly become a home away from home: a link to the reflexive narratives of the private self in motion though public time-space scapes' (2004: 171). We – and contributors to Bike Blog show an awareness of this – should therefore be cautious when envisaging a carless future or hybridising netizen democracy and cycling citizenship.

This section has shown that there is widespread agreement over the negative impact of a regime of automobility in late modernity. Cycling has come to the centre of policy discourse and been widely accepted as an exemplar of moral mobility, while its advocates have described urban futures based on the conjoined technologies of the bicycle and the internet. But, as the next section shows, acceptance of cycling is not the same as acceptance of cyclists.

## The cultural construction of cyclists

We saw in the previous section that cycling has been constructed as a model of virtuous citizenship, analogous to - and sometimes linked with - notions of the active netizen. Yet despite this acceptance of cycling as potentially rich in social and ecological moral worth, Green et al note that its *'practice* incurs disapproval of inappropriate road use, echoing

a normative assumption of car driving' (2012: 279, original emphasis). The sociological literature indicates a strongly marked difference between cycling as an ideal (albeit one freighted with risk, see Horton, 2006; Aldred 2012) and the cyclist as the embodiment of social distastes. The section therefore discusses the ways that cycling has been described as a stigmatised activity, before considering how cyclists themselves engage in practices of judgment and repudiation. Finally, I discuss the early contributions to Bike Blog as an example of a 'safe space' where condemnation could be temporarily suspended.

Aldred (forthcoming) notes a strong disjuncture between the virtuous policy representation of cycling and the 'stigmatised' construction of cyclists within the popular imagination. Although cycling in most of its developed-world forms is a largely white, male and middle-class activity, this status is threatened since 'a stigmatised identity ... might have the power to 'spoil' the higher status identity' (8). Similarly, Horton (2006: 145), argues that 'Cycling, and most especially urban utility cycling, has become a polluted and polluting practice and 'the cyclist' a polluted and polluting identity.' Cycling is spatially marginalised and the cyclist symbolically marginal, so that cyclists 'are experienced as threatening and unsettling, and are demonised ... within the mass media', through being described as strange, criminal or deviant. Chris Rissel and his co-authors' (2010) study of the representation of cycling in Sydney and Melbourne newspapers shows a similarly low level of positive framing of cyclists, and the expression of 'powerfully negative' sentiments on opinion pages and blogs.

However, all the authors above note that a critical perspective on cyclists is also common to cyclists themselves. Indeed, Aldred (forthcoming) is overwhelmingly concerned with how cyclists other, blame and shame one another, and she argues that 'there are two conflicting stigmatised images of 'the cyclist'; one cast as incompetent and one as too competent'. Jones et al similarly argue that one of the more pressing policy issues is to appeal to a 'fundamentalist tendency within the world of cycling advocacy' (2012: 1422). In the clearest expression of this approach, David Skinner and Paul Rosen (2006: 92), argue that 'the identity of people who commute by bicycle tends to involve them setting themselves apart from other cyclists'. They note that an 'insistence on discussing the 'hell' of 'other' cyclists' is common to all their interviewees, even those amongst them who are cycle-commuting advocates (2006: 95).

Though the depth of hostility expressed towards fellow cyclists may come as a surprise, the fact that cycling is a diverse practice involving a wide range of opinions and value-hierarchies should not. The very notion of a 'cyclist' identity is problematic since adult cyclists tend to be travel omnivores: most will hold a driving licence and use public transport and all will be pedestrians. Perhaps precisely because of this complexity, at the moment of its appearance on 15 June 2009, Bike Blog appeared to offer a 'purified' space

within which a community could be imagined, a 'temporary autonomous zone' where, for a while at least an enhanced sense of cycling solidarity could be expressed and enjoyed. Although a key feature of many forms of cycling advocacy has been the insistence on the desirability of cyclists being present within car-dominated space, Bike Blog's initial appeal was more to the notion that a separate space for online discussion would increase understanding of cycling, overcome difference and pave the way for a more rational cycling future. In part, too, there was a sense that Bike Blog represented a withdrawal from the face-to-face conflicts of 'real' cycling (Horton, 2006: 125). In calling for potential contributors to write about what 'thrills and enrages' them about cycling, the article positioned the blog as follows:

*Cycling coverage tends to veer towards earnest discussions of gear ratios and carbon fibre gizmos, something we want to avoid. We also hope to steer clear of endless debates about red lights and/or belligerent car drivers. Cycling, in the main, is enjoyable, not a source of conflict*

*We want this blog to be for everyone who cycles, however frequently they use a bike and wherever they go on it (Walker, 2009).*

Had Bike Blog actually avoided these issues (not least sport cycling, which tends to attract large numbers of posts), then it would have been short lived. But the editorial points towards the direction that the site would subsequently take: it frames cycling in terms of pleasure, everydayness and as an expressive lifestyle activity. In response, the 105 comments were entirely supportive. Although a variety of problems were raised, they were either environmental or external to the cycling community ('white van man' or, as we shall see in the next section, 'Clarkson'). Gledhowian (16 June) was typical:

*This is fabulous - well done Guardian! I'd like to see a critical mass pressure group developing from this which pushes the government into making changes to transport policy whereby cycling becomes a recognised and funded alternative to the horrible motor car. Not much to ask? For the sense of freedom it engenders, for the fitness it develops and for the positive mental outlook it breeds what can beat cycling?*

*Let's do it*

As we saw earlier, however, claims that the internet acts as a virtual public *sphere* and exemplar of polite, rational discourse, typically overstate the extent to which this is the case. Instead Bike Blog very quickly came to offer a public *space* for anti-cyclist sentiment

and the articulation of divergent cycling dispositions from cyclists themselves. This should come as little surprise since, as Manuela Neurauter-Kessels (2011: 191) notes, disrespectful and aggressive behaviour is a persistent feature of much CMC and prevalent among the anonymous users of online newspaper comments. Moreover, because of the heterogeneity of cycling itself, there is no single privileged position from which cycling advocates can pronounce, nor a singular view of cycling that they espouse. Indeed, only eight days after its launch, one contributor, *scavenger*, could write: (23 June 2009) 'Here's a challenge to the Bike Blog folks: Find a topic for discussion that doesn't result in the usual offtopic flamewar between different types of road user. I suspect it is impossible'. We turn to this impossibility now.

## Trolls, Haters and Flamers

In the previous section, we saw how Bike Blog was initially treated as a public sphere within which an online community could debate, in rational manner, the pleasures and practices of cycling and the problems of automobility. However, in the following sections I argue that the meanings and values of the blog have been shaped both through the actions of dissenting voices ('trolls', 'flamers' and 'haters', but also those challenging the claims to virtue made by cyclists) and through the games of taste and practices of 'responsibilization' played out by cyclist bloggers themselves.

To do this, I have adopted Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a cultural 'field' to think about the Bike Blog. For Bourdieu, a field is a relatively durable and consistent set of cultural practices governed by its own internal laws, a 'particular social universe endowed with particular institutions and obeying specific laws' (1993: 162–3). Fields possess their own autonomous codes of conduct and modes of behaviour and their own forms of reward (in this case not monetary reward, but symbolic recognition in the form of the acknowledgement of one's peers) so that they become 'self-regulating, self-validating and self-perpetuating' (Ferguson, 2001: 5). Although this article does not have the scope to cover the international range of blogs which would constitute the field [\[3\]](#), the idea draws our attention to how a field involves both the internal dispositions of a cultural activity, and its external relations with related cultural fields. In the case of Bike Blog, for example, it explores how the deployment of what O'Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) call 'problematic messages' constitute and maintain the practice.

A central form of such problematic communication is what Bike Bloggers characterise as overt trolling: the contribution of clearly pro-car and/or anti-cyclist posts to the virtuous

space of the Bike Blog. In an intertextual and convergent medium such as a newspaper have-your-say column, 'trolls' also exist outside the Bike Blog and construct the cycle trolling discourse in other media. Any 'conversation' typically takes place across media, and the troll or hater may not always be a contributor to Bike Blog. The *Guardian* articles to which the comments respond, for example, are frequently versions of such flamebait, highlighting broader cultural hostility to cyclists and encouraging righteous indignation from the majority online pro-cycling community and gestures of approval from mischievous or anti-cyclist posters.

Indeed, a prominent way in which the cycle blogging field is constructed is through its relationship with 'cycle haters' in the media. In the UK, a shorthand for this hostility is given by reference to the BBCs' *Top Gear*, and its chief presenter, Jeremy Clarkson. *Top Gear* is a 'slippery candidate for investigation' (Bonner, 2011: 44): its use of comedy, fantasy and pleasurable failure mean that it is far from straightforward propaganda for a car-centred lifestyle (as many contributors to Bike Blog admit). Nonetheless, Clarkson's more strident work for the tabloid press, and the very success of the programme in adopting an approach to environmentalism which shifts between the 'irreverent' and the actively antagonistic, means that it operates as a touchstone for Bike Blog. As Frances Bonner notes, 'The days of taking pleasure in cars may be numbered, but there is an element of defiance and denial surrounding public discourse on the topic. *Top Gear* is a significant site for this defiance' (Bonner, 2011: 42)

'Clarkson' and 'Top Gear' are therefore ways of performing trolling (for example, *Gfewster* 15 September 2009 quoted Clarkson in posting, 'You are guests on the road. Get used to it') and of labelling trolls on Bike Blog. In response to a poster's call for bicycles to have number plates, *StOckwell* (24 August 2011) responds, 'I'll remember you next time some moron in a car tries to kill me and then tells me it's my fault because you ride like a dick. Or are you a Clarkson fan trolling?' Or for *cuddyduck* (10 June, 2011), 'The button you seek is most likely on *The Times* motoring blog page, found by hovering your mouse over a jpg of a gurning Jeremy Clarkson ... Where's the 'idiot lying trolls' button?' For other commenters, it was important to establish a blogging position distinct from the Clarkson persona. Thus *WattaPalaver* (19 November 2009) argues that 'despite some rude remarks made about me, recommending I go off and watch Clarkson videos, I am not anti-cycling. I am anti stupid road users'. And others drew a distinction between haters and trolls. Thus *contractor000* (9 November 2012) argued against the accusation that 'this *Shufflecarrot* is a troll. Just an interestingly transparent example of conservative instincts in every possible example... In fact, *Shufflecarrot* may be Jeremy Clarkson's cousin.'

Bloggers saw that, within the media field, imitating the comic reactionary Clarkson persona was a means of trying to establish legitimacy by taking sceptical or denying positions about the environment and cycling. Thus, when the British TV chef James Martin claimed to have chased some weekend cyclists off the road in his car, he was represented as a failed Clarkson:

**LordLucan (15 September 2009)**

*'Personally I don't think that Clarkson crosses the line in the same way that this fool does'. Similarly, Ikearse (16 September 2009) observed that 'Using the 'Clarkson' get out clause doesn't work because Jeremy Clarkson is a) funny and b) hasn't actually openly admitted to an act of violence against the person'.*

While *Top Gear* is therefore held to be a relatively successful example of a cultural politics of defiance and denial, and its imitators on the blog and in other media as failed examples of this, the two are linked by a common position on taste and consumption that is distinct from the bike bloggers and serves to constitute the field through being its other. As Bourdieu argues, whereas the 'old' middle classes based their consumption practices on a morality of modesty and restraint, the new middle classes urge a morality of pleasure as duty. 'This doctrine makes it a failure, a threat to self-esteem, not to 'have fun'' (1984: 367). Here, 'having fun' is represented as a knowledgeable but wilfully unreflexive practice, at odds with the virtuous restraint of cyclists. Thus a one-time contributor, *Euan888* (1 June 2010) was quickly named as a troll (and confessed to trolling) when he imitated the hedonistic language of consuming, spending and enjoying in response to a feature on how the new Transport Minister was going to end what the tabloid press called the 'war on motorists':

*SUPERB! At last a minister who talks sense. Personally I would go one further and ban cyclists from all city centres ... Then, we need the new Govt. to ban the use of average speed cameras as they actually increase the chances of a crash as everyone drives with one eye on their speedo and the other on the hot female in the car beside them... Let's put the 'Great' back into Britain!*

A challenge to the claims to moral mobility made by Bike Blog therefore came from posters who either adopted, or who were censured for adopting, an unreflexive position on lifestyle-as-fun. This position could be dismissed as unethical and as a source of disgust (for example, Cree (5 January 2013): 'Lot of trolling on this page, for me cars and their drivers are a bunch of filthy immoral fat scum. The Jeremy Clarkson body coming to a driver near you ha ha fat boys'). Trading on the idea that unrestrained automobility exists at

the lowest level of a mobility hierarchy, the dismissal of such posts and posters represents precisely the profit in distinction identified by Bourdieu 'which consists in the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be' (1984: 224).

But if such trolls and haters maintain the boundaries of the community through creating a sense of virtuous entitlement amongst the in-group, a much more insistent (and common) form of attack presents cyclists themselves as unreflexive hedonistic consumers and 'matter out of place'. In this form of online disrespect, far from being at the apex of a moral hierarchy, cyclists are those travellers least concerned with the diverse ecology of the road. Three examples give a flavour of this aggression:

**BallaBoy (23 June 2009)**

*Is that before or after you run a red light, head the wrong way up a one way street, steam through a zebra crossing, mount the pavement and shout at pedestrians for exercising their priority in crossing the street?*

*As a frequent London pedestrian, I can assure you that the lycra clad half wits marauding around the capital on two wheels are a far greater hazard to my health and safety than anyone in a car.*

**Bourbons3 (19 November 2009)**

*I agree with the principle of cycling ... but I can't stand cyclists. It just seems to attract people who, as soon as they got on a bike, get some power complex. If they're not shouting at pedestrians to get out of their way, they're running through red lights, which also puts people crossing at risk.*

*So that leaves me with the conclusion that cycling is good, but cyclists are bad.*

**Carlill (09 November 2012)**

*Cycling's problem is that there is a pervading sense of self-righteousness that clings to the 'movement' ... And I say this as someone who doesn't own a car and despises the Clarkson 'I should be allowed to go as fast as I want whenever I want' brigade.*

The terms used not only resonate with the observation that the cyclist is a strange and marginal figure, but also ironically recast vélomobility as sharing automobility's worst characteristics, while privileging pedestrianism as the apex of the moral mobilities

hierarchy. This echoes Jones *et al*'s (2012: 1420) analysis of urban mobilities, in which respondents who value walking in the city most highly are described as 'pedestrian prioritisers'. Pedestrian prioritisers are almost all drivers, but desire changes, both to motoring, though the imposition of further restrictions, and to cycling through the creation of segregated cycle tracks.

As the tone of the posts above indicates, many contributors do not participate in Bike Blog in a Habermasian spirit of rational exchange, but with the intention of assigning to cyclists an identity that is 'immoral, repellent, abject, worthless, disgusting, even disposable' (Skeggs, 2005: 977). The virtuous pedestrian persona might well be adopted as a mask for the expression of broader anti-cyclist feeling (and bloggers are well aware of the potential for impersonation on the Bike Blog, so for example, *Hithlum*, (09 November 2012) responded to *marcolo*'s claim that he was regularly threatened by cyclists: 'Make believe stories where everyone of a group is evil and vile and the teller is an angelic martyr tend to be pure ..... well I am smelling and you are shovelling great mounds of it' [4]) but the ascription of hedonism, excessive or inappropriate consumption and unrestrained speed to cyclists is a wounding invasion of a space which seeks to celebrate cycling's progressive potentials. As Bourdieu notes, within the dominant class, opposing forms of habitus correspond to particular material conditions and configurations of cultural capital: an 'aristocratic asceticism' or disposition for austerity and purity stands in opposition to a hedonistic taste for luxury and ostentation. While for the most part, bike bloggers claim this aristocratic asceticism for themselves and their practice, 'pedestrian prioritiser' posters, whether they are trolling or flaming, attempt to reverse this symbolic distinction. As we shall see in the next section, the effect of this is to generate new games of distinction as posters attempt to reclaim the profits accruing from austerity.

## Defensive and reflexive responses

While the adoption of a blanket anti-cycling position may therefore make the troll easy to name and counter, other critical positions are more ambivalent. By problematizing Bike Bloggers' claims to good citizenship and netizenship, trolls and flammers contribute to the fragmentation of any imagined Bike Blog community. This section discusses reflexive responses to these attacks. First, I show that hostility from anti-cyclists is both constricting and generative. It constricts because the 'memes' of bike trolling established in the previous section—red light jumping, pavement riding, cyclists as metropolitan hipsters and objects of disgust—take up space and drown out 'good sense'. But, equally, such tropes provide opportunities to write, points of departure and the chance to clarify and codify counter-arguments. Second, I suggest that, for some Bike Bloggers at least, responding

to the negative consensus involves a form of 'responsibilization' where, rather than Bike Blog being a utopian and inviolable space, it becomes one in which posters play out their moral authority through the enactment of increasingly intellectualized and professionalized positions on cycling. These positions can be sharply divergent, however, and a particular fault line is the difference between social or community responsibility, and a more individualized notion of private responsibility.

Setting up anti-cyclist 'noise' is a key way in which posters begin a conversation and position themselves at the centre of the imagined community. As Honeycutt (2005) points out, an important feature of netiquette is a poster's ability to digest and synthesize a great deal of information economically. To do so is both a form of politeness and a demonstration of mastery over the conversation. So, for example *Bablkubrox* (23 December 2009) writes:

*I think that what this blog requires is a regular monthly article 'Is Red-Light Jumping Mostly the Fault of Helmetless Fixed-Gear Brompton [5] Riders?' so that everyone can vent their spleen, and the resulting 500-odd posts then be sealed, autoclaved at a high temperature and collected for disposal.*

In other cases, however, this shorthand dismissal of flame tropes could itself be misrecognised, and named, as trolling. The extended exchange below (28 November 2012) is typical of such attempts to name the meme and to thereby quarantine it.

**Jimson Weed**

*Can I be the first to say that cyclists don't pay any road tax? Thanks, carry on.*

**Tresorf**

*You can be the first person to say that cyclists don't pay any 'road tax'. Can I have the pleasure of being the first person to mention that 'road tax' doesn't exist (you pay VED, a motor vehicle tax based on the vehicles potential emissions) and that cyclists pay for their proportion of road use (their road use impact having orders of magnitude less impact than a car incidentally) through the same general taxation as everyone else (income tax, VAT etc)? ... Sorted? Right, carry on.*

**PhineasPPhagbrake**

*@tresorf - I think Jimson is just trying to beat the trolls to it, but really it only encourages them.*

**Tresorf**

@JimsonWeed - oh right. sorry about that :) A premature rant on my part :-)

**Tresorf**

@PhineasPPhagbrake - poe's law

**JimsonWeed**

@tresorf - no problem - quite understandable that you thought my post was genuine given the level of anti-cycling crap one usually sees on here :)

**Mmmmf**

@tresorf - Thanks anyway. I'll keep your post as a handy cut'n'paste for the next time.

**Luke Ts**

Shall I mention helmets or red lights, too, to get that out of the way?

The response from *tresorf*, above, gives some sense of how trolling is reflexively managed on Bike Blog. Cycling is widely depicted as a high-risk activity and, as we have seen, the cyclist is a polluted and polluting identity. On-line at least, posters are required to respond to persistent anti-cyclist accusations by 'responsibilising' themselves through the sort of expert knowledge that *tresorf* (mistakenly) deploys. Like other subjects occupying risk-defined identities, pro-cyclist bloggers 'are instructed to become prudent subjects who must 'practice individual responsibility' by asking questions, making complaints and legally exercising safety rights' (Gray, 2009: 327, see also Littler, 2011). Such online responsibilisation corresponds closely to the discourse of moral mobility noted by Green *et al*, who point out that not only does cycling's claims to moral worth rest on its environmental credentials, but also on a model of health and physical independence involving, 'the enactment of a particular *style*: that of prudential and knowing agency'(2012: 280, original emphasis). While flammers may charge cyclists with being inattentive citizens (both on the road and to the needs of others), to be responsible is to insist on the mindfulness of cycling (Parkin, 2004: 372). Moreover, demonstrating expert online knowledge of issues such as safety and taxation, complements the assertiveness that is particularly prized when cycling in the city.

In his work on tourism, Ian Munt (1994) notes how different middle-class fractions wage intense classificatory struggles with one another over lifestyle, and three of these struggles have particular relevance to Bike Bloggers' attempts to reclaim their practice as one of

'aristocratic asceticism'. Firstly, responsible cycling involves practices of *intellectualisation*. One means towards this is the ability to access and organise academic work on a topic, marshalling the resources of others to verify arguments. So, for example, when the issue of the desirability of wearing a helmet appears, *sboy* (10 November 2012) gives a link to the pdf of a medical report, 'Trends in Serious Head Injuries Among English Cyclists and Pedestrians'. Similarly, cycling provides opportunities to study and learn. When *Darkstar2* (21 August 2012) asked 'What's a bidon, and do I need one?', an immediate response from *yesnomaybe* was 'Ridiculous name for a water bottle. Origin, French. Pretentious, but then this is the *Guardian*. Right, I'm off for a ride on my vélo.' To which *StOckwell* responds:

*Hardly pretentious - many things to do with cycle sport, not to mention the automotive industry which developed from the bicycle industry, are regularly referred to in French. Or perhaps you don't hold with derailleurs on your bike or a carburettor in your Limousine and a chauffeur to drive it, if you need one after getting it out of the garage.*

Second are issues of *professionalisation*. In common with Munt's observations that travel offers new forms of work, a number of Bike Blog topics and posts deal with the opportunities for employment within a renewed, but niche, cycling industry. However, for the most part cycling continues to be an expressive leisure activity, and professionalisation therefore takes the form of committing cyclists to ethical codes of conduct. Discussions regularly take place on the carbon footprint of cycling and, as here, on the ethics of cycling consumption (to which a number of posters reflexively responded, suggesting that such ethical consumption was out of the price range of 'ordinary' cyclists)

**Mroli (20 October 2009)**

*@mojoangel - agree that you are pushed to find stuff that is not manufactured in asia (apart from truly high end cycle wear). Someone mentioned clean clothes earlier - have a quick look here: <http://www.cleanclothes.org/campaigns/lidl> and aldi are singled out as being pretty bad. At the Cycle Show, we talked to the guys at Endura (mid-range cycling brand) and they were pretty clear on their working practices and that they were 'ethical'.*

Finally, Munt notes that new middle class tourists play out hegemonic spatial struggles. In the case of Bike Blog this takes the form of expert knowledge about or experience of, those predominantly North European cities (Berlin, Amsterdam and Copenhagen, as well as Portland in the USA) in which cycling is constructed as a normative activity. While trolls are regularly denigrated as an amalgam of 'American' and 'Little Englander' characteristics, knowledge or experience of 'copenhagenization' indicates membership of a denationalised

imagined cycling community.

### **Lostindenmark**

*(quotes) 'In Copenhagen, 37 percent of commuters now use bikes to get to school or work'.*

*you speak of this as if it's a growing phenomenon: it isn't. cycling is just what you do in Copenhagen: i lived there for 20 years ... If we had cycle paths - and car drivers! - like the Danes, we'd all be on bikes.*

Although the examples above are clearly moves within a classificatory struggle, they tend to be successful, in so far as other posters typically recommend them, or respond positively to them, and this is because they effectively carry out 'cultural intermediary' work in re-establishing a sense of the cycling community as one that is global, rich in cultural capital, continually-self-improving and mindful of others. The economic capital needed for what is an often expensive lifestyle is often disavowed, but in the example below, what is initially expressed as the class problem of cycling ('yuppie bourgeois niche crap') is reclaimed (if within a metropolitan milieu) as an example of responsabilized cycling's ability to include class others:

### **Line L51 (16 November 2012)**

*- I thought this article was about cobbling together bits and pieces from skips, junkyards etc. to construct a viable bicycle not this yuppie bourgeois niche crap.*

### **Monchberter**

*-The upswing in interest in bikes is almost wholly a yuppie bourgeois thing. Less well-off people were already riding bikes or refuse to as cars still remain a strong success / wealth indicator for certain groups and bikes indicate low status.*

### **Misterbaxter**

*- @Monchberter - that's not really true. I live in an inner city area and I am involved with a youth project there; I see loads of kids on single speeds who are not at all from 'yuppie bourgeois' backgrounds.*

**Monchberter**

*@misterbaxter - Good! I was making a sweeping generalisation however but all the press surrounding the upswing in interest seems to mostly focus on 'respectable' people cycling. Would like to see more coverage and publicity of examples such as you mention.*

Other forms of responsabilisation discourse, however, are less warmly received. We saw earlier the problems associated with a 'cycling survivalist' identity (Green, 2012: 287) which *overstates* the need for a cyclist to take responsibility for their own safety, just as Aldred's respondents contend that one can be *too much* of a cyclist. 'Being a cyclist', she notes, 'Involves not just managing a stigmatised identity, but managing other *people's identities*' (forthcoming: original emphasis), the identities of those who are felt to 'give cyclists a bad name'. The post below plays on this idea of an excessive practice of self-responsibilisation, while also, through its use of high-end cycling brand Rapha, invoking the damning notion of 'all-the-gear-but-no-idea':

**2hard2guess.**

*(Quotes another poster) 'Then someone flung open their car door into my path.'*

*- Which shows that your accidents are due to your not even knowing the basics of safe cycling. No-one has ever opened a car door into MY path because I make sure my 'path' is at least a car door away from the car. Before lecturing people about your supposed expertise on cycling you should first read a book or two.*

**Averyonnaise**

*@2hard2guess - Loving your empathy for a fellow cyclist, I can picture you now dressed head to toe in Rapha (plus cap) sneering at inferior group sets whilst studying your cadence from this morning's 5k commute.*

This section has shown how trolling and flaming construct the dominant values of Bike Blog through providing a set of negative conventions which must be addressed. Nonetheless, even such conventions might be traded upon to establish a poster's virtue, and their prestigious position within a micro-hierarchy [6]. I have suggested that while some forms of responsabilisation strategy in the face of trolling can be relatively unsuccessful, for other posters there is a premium placed on a reflexive attitude towards cycling as an outward-facing activity in which one must adopt *both* 'a learning approach to life' (Featherstone, 1991: 91) *and* a mindful disposition towards others.

## Conclusion

One of Pierre Bourdieu's most potent metaphors is the 'dream of social flying' (1984: 370). For Bourdieu the fraction of the new petite bourgeoisie which he calls 'new cultural intermediaries' is engaged in 'a desperate effort to defy the gravity of the social field' through their display of cultural goods, qualifications and embodied practices. It is no accident that cycling has experienced a renaissance amongst 'new' middle class citizens, for whom it offers just such a dream of flying, whether it be in the embodied form of self-propelled and prudent agency or in the more symbolic form of belonging to overlapping communities of 'active' sports people and 'activist' citizens expressing their concern for a speeded-up and vulnerable planet.

Despite this move towards the mainstream, and evidence that cycling is becoming increasingly prominent within a 'new moral economy of transport', the article has shown that cycling continues to be a peripheral activity, and the cyclist an often reviled figure. Though the web has permitted an increase in the advocacy of cycling as a lifestyle choice and ecological responsibility, this has been accompanied by an increase in more negative estimations of cycling and cyclists. In a relatively short-lived medium such as the online comments page of a newspaper, trolls, flammers and haters need to be both vigilant and persistent to set the agenda on cycling. But I have shown that cycling's claims to virtue make it particularly vulnerable to counter-claims from posters who either are, or who pose as, more vulnerable and disenfranchised mobile citizens. This heightened traffic corresponds to Horton's observation that greater seriousness about cycling futures is likely to be accompanied by ever greater depictions of cycling as risky, and cyclists as matter out of place (2006: 146).

The article has shown that contributors to Bike Blog respond to these online threats in various ways. Hostility to cycling certainly leads to a defensive response as pro-cycling posters are forced into addressing what are represented as the central truths of cycling—its reckless hedonism, consumerist modal enthusiasm and inattentiveness to others—precisely the aggressive, boorish machismo that pro-cycling posters ascribe to the 'Clarkson' persona of unreconstructed 'petrolheads'. But beyond this defensiveness lie responsabilising strategies of knowing, subscribing to codes of online and offline behaviour and connecting with local and global others. Responsibilisation is, rightly, often seen as a neoliberal strategy, by which people take charge of their own subjection, and there are clearly aspects of this in the way that cycling is often referred to on Bike Blog in health terms. Moreover, showing oneself to be a knowledgeable, responsible cyclist undoubtedly involves making gains within the micro-hierarchy of Bike Blog, and therefore corresponds to Bourdieu's notion of a field as a site of position-taking and profit-making. But I have

shown, also, that responsabilisation can take the form of responsibility to the imagined community of cyclists, to the diverse ecology of road users and to an understanding of those who are left out, or left cold, by vélomobility. While 'trolls' represent the impossibility of idealised discourse about transport futures on the internet, some posters continue to imagine a form of social flying that is not only about individual profits in distinction, but also about making connections across social divisions and reversing the social atomisation and privatised city living of the regime of automobility.

## Biographical note:

**Steve Jones** lectures at Nottingham Trent University. He is the author of *Antonio Gramsci* (Routledge, 2006) and co-author (with Bob Ashley, Joanne Hollows and Ben Taylor) of *Food and Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 2004). His research interests include national identity, food culture and everyday life.

## Notes

[1]. The Guardian's post moderation rules meant that some of the more norm-contravening posts had been removed. Unlike some other UK news sites, Guardian Online indicates where a post has been deleted.

[2]. Tepper looked at the Usenet group, alt.folklore.urban (AFU), focusing on the way that veterans would entice new users into the group by posting deliberate misconceptions. Unlike common understandings of the term today, these trolls were both gently humorous and rich in legitimate forms of social and cultural. As Tepper approvingly notes: 'the two most notorious trolls in AFU ... are also two of the most consistent posters of serious research.' (1997: 43)

[3]. Interested readers might look at the most followed – largely US – blogs: bikeportland.org, bikesnobnyc, fatcyclist.com and copenhagenize.com. For a sense of the hostility engendered by cycling see twitter.com/cyclehatred.

[4]. Alongside the quotidian symbolic violence of online conflict, claims of physical violence between road users are surprisingly common on Bike Blog. See Honeycutt (2005) for a discussion of violence in the online realm.

[5]. Brompton is a manufacturer of high-end folding bikes, and the UK's biggest bike producer.

[6]. This article doesn't have space to consider the rhetorical forms in which posters generate recommendations, and thereby in-blog prestige, but it should be noted that both humour and the detailed demolition of other posts ('fisking') are typically highly rated on Bike Blog.

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