Cycling and the City: Reflections of Commuting Practices

Phil Jones and Dan Burwood

Commuter cycling tends to have certain labels attached to it. It is a performance of environmental responsibility. It enacts a healthy lifestyle agenda aimed at holding back the rising tide of the west's obesity epidemic. It is a resistance against high gas prices. Outside more bicycle-friendly countries, urban commuter cycling is also seen as a high risk activity, engaged in by the stubborn few.

Cycling is, however, an intensely personal experience, the practice of which is poorly represented by these simplistic labels. In order to better understand the experience of being in motion through the city, 28 commuter cyclists who work at the University of Birmingham, UK, were asked to record an audio commentary while riding home. Using GPS tracks recorded in parallel to the commentaries, Phil produced a variety of maps exploring themes which emerged from the rides. A group of participants volunteered to be the subject of Dan's documentary portraits, choosing locations and poses that reflected elements of their cycling life. Participant quotes accompanied these photographs which, alongside the maps, were exhibited as large giclée prints flyposted around the university campus.

The intention of the project was to capture a more nuanced perspective on commuter cycling as an everyday performance. The materials presented here are not a definitive portrait of commuter cycling, but intended instead to open a conversation about the nature of this practice and what it brings to its participants.

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Editor note: There are links embedded in this document that take you to maps produced during the analysis of the data produced by the cycle participants. These combine GPS information and participant transcript segments. These can be viewed online or downloaded to Google Earth if you want to take a closer look.
When I see the Clock I’m happy as I know I’ve arrived safely at work
Here the locations of participant homes in Birmingham are shown against the UK’s official Index of Multiple Deprivation (2007). It would be possible to use the IMD as a proxy for income and class and thus start to make assumptions about individual participants. Not only is this methodologically dubious, it also raises ethical concerns as participants were never asked if their GPS data could be used this way. The map here is at a coarse scale and purely illustrative of the ethical issues raised by the use of GPS. Data about homes and neighbourhoods have not been used in the study.
Wearing a Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver turns the body into a giant marker pen, drawing invisible lines across the city. The maps displayed here capture traces of the fleeting and contingent practice of cycling. On the one hand the playful nature of the maps that result seems a subversion of GPS as a military technology.¹ But GPS retains its sinister edge as the researcher collects information about the body of the participant.

“I know where you live...”

Even when it’s raining
I’d still rather be on my bike than stuck in a car
Animals mentioned by participants

Canal towpath

Rea Valley Route

[explore the animals map]
Participants’ audio commentaries can be read as a performance of landscape as they respond to and reflect upon the passing scene.\(^2\) Looking at where participants talked about animals, a very clear pattern emerges. The city’s waterside cycle routes become an interface between the cyclist and the natural world. Here, practical concerns about traffic fade away creating spaces of positive engagement with the surrounding environment.

When the cars move slowly, it’s fine, kind of like a slow ballet
I must confess I generally use my iPod when I’m cycling to and from work. It’s not the safest thing I guess, but it’s nice and it sets me in the right mood.
There's always a boat parked down here and sometimes two. Obviously a stopping place or indeed a living place for some people. Sometimes you can smell their breakfasts, which is fairly tantalising...

Well the water's up because we've had a huge rain. I used to live here when I was younger. I'd walk up here at night on my jack jones and just come and stand by the water and listen.

I can smell the Bournville chocolate factory. Pretty sure they just manufacture and pump that smell out. But it's nice anyway. Doesn't make me want any though.

Oh those brakes. Glad I haven't got a hangover this morning.

Ah, just passing the chip shop, and when you're hungry it's not good! It's always a nice smell. That's one thing you notice on a bike, the smells. Particularly in the countryside. You get to smell the flowers and nettles and that.

[smellscape map]
Cycling offers a rich sensory engagement with the world around us, unlike the cocooned ‘blandscape’ of the private car. We transform spaces into places through inscribing meaning onto them. Even the most apparently mundane space can be brought to life by a scent, a memory, a sound. These fragments provide glimpses of the ways place is performed through everyday interactions.

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I should probably be a lot more careful and when I’m not on the bike I do tend to think that I will calm down the next day. But invariably the next day comes and I’m just as crazy as ever.
Accidents & injuries

I've crashed three times this year so safety first, isn't it.

Just coming down to the fire station now. About five years ago I was knocked off here but I spent a week in Stelly Oak and my friends gave me some help. So I'm much better than I was in the beginning of the month.

I was hit by a car here ten years ago.

Just coming up to a mini-roundabout where I was hit by a car and fell over. I was looking for the trees but didn't look for the pole. It's not out of the way but really does come out.

This is the place where I had the accident on the way back from the hotel. I was doing about 50 mph and then I hit a car. It's not a very busy road but it's not safe either.

[explore accidents map]
In the UK, the number of people cycling has plummeted since the mid twentieth century. Many non-cyclists cite safety as a major reason why they are unwilling to cycle. Accidents, though rare, do happen, creating a strong emotional resonance to different sites around the city for the individuals who have been injured. This map could be read as representing a landscape of fear. Alternatively we can read a landscape of resistance against the dominance of automobility.

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4 The 2006 Labour Force Survey revealed that just 2.7% of UK workers used a bicycle for travelling to work.
Perhaps drivers are so bad-tempered because secretly they want to be cyclists too.
...my wife thinks I’m a bit nutty. She doesn’t quite understand why I never go the direct route to work.
The journey of 6.3km could be reduced to 4.2km by taking a more direct route. The chosen path, however, avoids a 14m ascent and descent across Selly Oak and also maximises the amount of time spent on quiet routes. This cyclist feels the journey is both safer and more pleasant as a result, particularly in making use of the Rea Valley cycle path alongside the river.
Cyclists are no single tribe.⁶ Leisure cyclists, vehicular cyclists, off roaders, razor wheeled racers, couriers, casuals and a host of others are not just identifiable by dress and equipment but how they ride. The GPS records show gentle ambles next to the canal, agonising crawls up steep hills, brave dashes across busy junctions, routes chosen to maximise speed, to maximise comfort, to maximise the view. These traces show identity being enacted and inscribed across the city.

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Plenty of long, slight inclines to get home. More work getting home than getting in. Would be nice if it was the other way around.
...still haven’t got my brakes fixed
Mounting the pavement

Just nipping onto the pavement to get over to the traffic lights.

Oh god they're resurfacing the road! Oh shit. I'll have to go on the pavement.

Now I get back onto a shaley bit, pavement.

Okay, one little bit of pavement cycling...

It's very safe, there's no cars around because I'm on the pavement.

I'm going to mount the pavement, which is always a bit tricky.

If it's really backed up past the school I'll cycle on the pavement because I don't want to be cycling down the side.

I try and be very considerate with pedestrians because I know I shouldn't be on the pavement.

I'm just going on the pavement here because I'm just going past some one-way traffic.

I know it's against the law to go on the pavement...

I'm going to go up on this pavement here... Try not to freak out the lollipop man.

I hate cycling on pavements though, it's very bad for pedestrians.

I'm cycling on the pavement, I'll try not to run over any kids from the catholic school.

[ pavements map ]
The UK is notorious for producing terrible cycle lanes.\textsuperscript{7} British cyclists are often left with a choice between road cycling, or enacting various illegal ‘tactics’\textsuperscript{8} to ride safely. It is common to make use of sidewalks (‘pavements’ in British English) as impromptu cycle lanes at difficult points in the journey. Employing this defensive tactic enacts an implicit critique of the poor cycling infrastructure in UK cities which is frequently blamed for low rates of cycling participation.

\textsuperscript{7} Warrington Cycle Campaign (2007) \textit{Crap cycle lanes: 50 worst cycle lanes in Britain}. London: Eye Books

I loath oil. God how I hate the stuff. Well, not the oil, it’s the use we make of it. I like the forest it was made of.
The transcripts contain a record of locations where participants rang their bicycle bell or interacted with a passerby. These encounters mostly took place on the waterside cycle routes of the canal and the Rea Valley where pedestrians and bikes share the same path.

"Use my bell just to gently encourage somebody to move over and let me by..."

"Just coming past to your left..."
Cycling occupies a privileged position between walking and the automobile, allowing distances to be covered quickly, but without isolating the rider from passers-by.\(^9\) This is particularly true on cycle routes shared with pedestrians. Not all cyclists are comfortable using a bell to warn pedestrians of their approach, preferring to engage verbally. Where the anonymity of driving tends to bring out aggressive behaviours, cyclists are immersed in the world around them which (sometimes) produces higher standards of civility.\(^{10}\)

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I don’t like going uphill in traffic. Especially when a double wide Land Rover tries to push you off...
Reflections

Different kinds of urban spaces are brought into being by the act of riding. The research and exhibition that this paper documents was intended to open a dialogue about the nature of urban cycle commuting, its practices and practitioners. Like the exhibition itself, exposed to wind and rain, the everyday performances of cycling are ephemeral, fleeting, contingent. The GPS records layer ghostly traces of these performances across cartographic space. In turn, the portraits remind us that these records are not mere ‘data’ within a research project, but were created by people whose lives are not reducible to lines on a map. There is no single category of ‘cyclist’. The individual cycling body is re-enacted and re-inscribed on a daily basis. Similarly, there is no city, but multiple cities, brought into being each day by individuals and their engagements with urban space. Any serious attempt to encourage greater levels of cycling participation needs to move away from discourses of safety, environmentalism and healthy lifestyles, to engage with how cycling is performed every day, by a diverse group of people with a diverse range of cycling styles.

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