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# Chapter 4

## Press Discourse on Cycling Before, During, and After the First Covid-19 Lockdown in France. The Rise of the User-Group Voice



Thomas Buhler , Matthieu Adam , Hakim Ramdani, and Pauline Jobard

**Abstract** In this chapter we explore what a “crisis” event (here the first lockdown related to Covid-19 in France) means in terms of (i) the balance of power among actors expressing themselves in the daily press and of (ii) the main messages that the more prominent of these actors disseminate. In order to analyze changes in press discourse on city cycling in France, we examine a corpus that spans the period from September 2019 to September 2020, i.e., six months before the first lockdown (March 17, 2020) and five months after the end of the month-long lockdown (May 11, 2020). The discourse analysis has been conducted on 578 press articles from five regional newspapers (Rennes, Montpellier, Besançon, Paris, and Lyon) and one national press title (*Libération*). This entire corpus was analyzed using textometry, a computer-assisted method for analyzing quantitative textual data. This enables us to identify a discursive change. Two elements characterize that change: (i) the balance between actors who “talk” or who “are talked about” in the articles shifts gradually. During this period, cycling organizations appear to be the actors whose position is strengthened in the media discourse; (ii) these actors are strengthened in their traditional mission of lobbying for cycling, but with a focus on new issues (e.g., wearing a face-covering or not for cyclists, calling for the reopening of green public spaces to allow the transit of bicycles, etc.). The first Covid-19 wave appears to have been the accelerator of a wider process that has led cycling organizations to professionalize since the 2000s, to move away from ecologist, anarchist, and anticapitalist discourses and to promote instead the idea of everyday cycling as a

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tool for improving public health. The Covid-19 crisis has further established cycling organizations as reference actors for bicycle mobility in French cities.

**Keywords** Discourse · Covid-19 · Cycling · Textometry · Press · Association

“My ambition is for France to become a cycling nation” said Elisabeth Borne, who was then the French Minister of Transport, in *Elle*, one of the country’s best-selling women’s magazines on May 11, 2020, the day marking the end of the first lockdown in France. The Minister was announcing a cycling plan already started through the deployment of temporary cycling infrastructure and the implementation of the “coup de pouce vélo”, a post-crisis plan including an individual subsidy of €50 for bicycle repair, an individual hour for training in the city cycling and a subsidy to local authorities to install bicycle parking facilities. This plan was conceived, designed, and subsequently implemented by FUB (*Fédération nationale des usagers de la bicyclette*), a federation of numerous bicycle promotion associations. On May 14, Elisabeth Borne took the stage with Olivier Schneider, the president of FUB. In front of a large panel of journalists, they announced the creation of a “bicycle academy” to quickly train 250 bicycle mechanics. On May 29, 2020, they were again together in front of journalists, this time to make a first public assessment of the previously announced bicycle plan.

The period around the first Covid-19 related lockdown in France (March 17–May 11, 2020) placed the issue of cycling at the center of the urban agenda both in terms of a rapid increase in use (Buehler and Pucher 2022) and in terms of implementing temporary cycle paths. These three media moments allow us to introduce what happened politically in France in the spring of 2020 with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. First, cycling has become a political issue: cycling, as a mode of transport, has started to be perceived as a solution to develop a health-friendly mobility (social distancing) while responding to the possible desertion of public transport for fear of catching the virus, but without causing the deleterious impacts of a massive recourse to the car. Second, to meet this challenge, governments—in this case the State, but also local authorities—implement cycling policies based on the development of infrastructure, but also on the individual determinants of cycling, namely the ownership of a bicycle in good condition and its control (Adam and Ortar 2022). Third, some of these policies (see Chap. 3) have been implemented in conjunction with cycling associations, particularly the largest of them (FUB). Fourth, and as a consequence, the issue of cycling has been particularly covered by the French press in connection with the pandemic and the measures taken (or not taken) to curb it.

It is precisely from this fourth aspect that we decided to document and analyze the previous ones, based on an analysis of the discourses published in the press. The present chapter does not attempt to measure the effects of the pandemic on cycling infrastructure or practice, but questions who are the actors and what their respective power is when it comes to urban cycling issues in French cities. In other words, has

this pandemic accompanied or enabled the emergence and the strengthening of new actors in the urban cycling sphere?

In the framework of this research, we have adopted the following working hypothesis: the more an actor is mentioned in the corpus studied, the more that type of actor will be considered as powerful and important in the decision-making process regarding city cycling policies. This involves reading all the newspaper articles and making sure that the results do not contain any wording that presents the actors in a negative light. Having checked this point, we started therefore start from the widely accepted hypothesis in the discourse analysis community that a strong presence induces a stronger positioning in the interplay among actors (Buhler and Lethier 2020; Fairclough 2013).<sup>1</sup>

One way of grasping the respective strength of actor's positions is to use data from the local and national daily press.

In the first part of this chapter, we explain the method used to analyze the relative importance of different types of actors in the daily press; in the second part we analyze cycling organizations<sup>2</sup> discourse during the crisis; the third part propose an interpretation of these results, focusing on the rise of user-group actors.

## 4.1 Studying the Daily Press to Reveal the Power-Balance Among Cycling Actors

In order to measure possible changes in the respective powers of urban cycling actors during this period, we identified the daily press (both national and regional/local) as a source of investigation. These data have many advantages for conducting diachronic analyses: (i) *signal continuity* is ensured since articles are published almost every day at a national scale on many different subjects; (ii) access to these data has become straightforward especially with the use of integrated portals such as *Europresse* which is used for the present research; and (iii) the textual data thus identified and organized in the form of a corpus can then be analyzed with systematic discourse analysis tools. These tools, and in particular textometry, can be used to analyze the progression of occurrences of certain terms over time.

Before turning to the technical aspects, it is necessary to consider some features of the “journalistic” discourse genre.

### *The discourses of the daily press: openness and heterogeneity*

The discourses contained in the daily press have two main features (Moirand 2007). These discourses are (i) “open”, i.e., they target a wide readership (unlike technical or peer-to-peer discourses). Daily press discourses are also (ii) *heterogeneous* both

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<sup>1</sup> This is one of the working hypotheses of all the currents that rely on the analysis of corpora that are fully or partially quantified (NLP, textometry).

<sup>2</sup> The term “association” (in French) hardly finds a perfect equivalent in English. We will use here alternatively the terms “cycling organizations” [following Cox (2007)] and “cycling associations”.

on the semiotic level (by the distribution of various signs across a page, the use of font sizes, colors, etc.), but also in terms of texts (lengths, formats, types of texts), and utterances (diversity of writers, diversity of interviewees).

The marked heterogeneity of such documentary sources initially destabilized the discourse analysis movement in the 1970s (Moirand 2007). Traditionally, these linguists have been keen on establishing genres and typologies on the basis of qualitative analyses of homogeneous sources. Between the 1970s and the 1990s other linguists came to work on larger and potentially more heterogeneous corpora and developed tools for deciphering them (Lebart and Salem 1994). Following on from these pioneering works, critical analysis of a broader corpus of textual data was developed in the 1990s and the 2000s (Fairclough 2009, 2013; Peticlec 2009; van Leeuwen 1993). This logic of analysis that we share imposes in our case a certain reduction in the data analyzed: we focus here on textual and lexical elements only. We thus leave aside the visuals, print sizes, page layout, etc. This methodological reductionism allows us to work on large corpora and enables the internal comparability of texts.

***Textometry: a tool to measure the media presence of various actors and to identify the causes they support***

To respond to these two strong features, we used textometry, a computer-assisted textual data analysis technique. Textometry is based on the heritage of lexicometry, which dates back to the 1970s (Lebart and Salem 1994). Although textometry is based on quantitative data analysis (and produces complex statistical analyses such as factorial analysis) it allows a systematic return to the actual extracts of the texts studied. It thus puts in place a number of precautions regarding the interpretation of statistical models and tables.

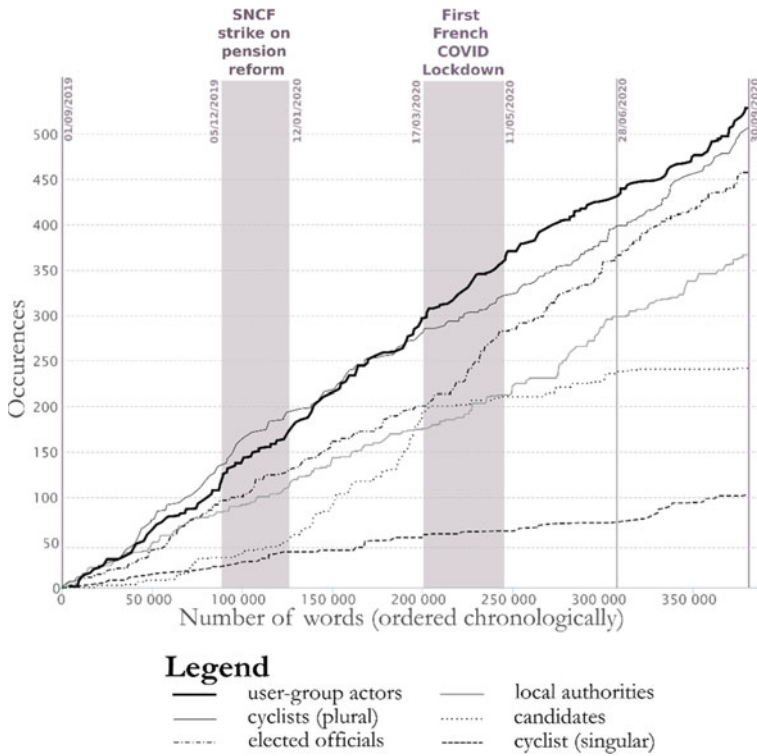
Textometry is particularly effective at identifying similarities or oppositions between groups of texts, and variations over time within a corpus. In this respect, it has been characterized as a “contrastive” method (Buhler et al. 2018; Buhler and Lethier 2020; Comby 2016).

***Time period considered***

An extensive period of time around the first Covid-19 lockdown has been considered in order to be able to detect any changes in the media presence of the actors studied. We have therefore focused on a period of a little more than a year which runs from the beginning of September 2019 to the end of September 2020.

In order to better specify the context surrounding this corpus, a few points need to be clarified. The period preceding the Covid-19 pandemic in France cannot be considered as a “normal” period in terms of the media exposure of cycling. In late 2019–early 2020, a national train strike took place (see Fig. 4.1). This event had a major impact on many users of public transport in the Paris region, many of whom had to take up or resume cycling (Compagnon et al. 2020; Razemon 2019).

It is necessary to specify a second factor in order to analyze the results. The beginning of the year 2020 also saw the campaigning period for the municipal elections in France. After much procrastination, the first round took place on March 15, just



**Fig. 4.1** Running total of mentions of different types of actors

before the lockdown, with the second round taking place more than two months later, on June 28.

**Press titles considered**

We sampled six different French newspapers (five regional/local titles and one national title, see Table 4.2) focusing on different urban circumstances in terms of population and bicycle use (see Table 4.1): (i) the Ile-de-France (Paris), a metropolitan region of 7 million inhabitants which has few equivalents in terms of size in Europe, through its regional newspaper *Le Parisien*; (ii) Lyon metropolitan area (daily newspaper *Le Progrès*) which has been particularly dynamic demographically and economically for the last twenty years and has a history of cycling policy dating back to the 1990s (Buhler 2011, 2012); (iii) two dynamic but smaller metropolises: Rennes and Montpellier (with *Ouest France* and *Midi Libre* respectively). These two cities have rather different histories regarding the place of cycling and alternative modes of transport in general: Rennes is considered exemplary in many surveys by cyclists whereas Montpellier seems to be lagging behind (FUB 2021).

For its part Besançon (newspaper: *L'Est Républicain*) is a medium-sized city in terms of population and is representative of medium-sized French cities that had a

**Table 4.1** Five cities are considered in this press discourse analysis

| City<br>(metropolitan or urban regions are considered) | Population<br>(INSEE, <sup>3</sup> in 2019) | Modal share of cycling           |
|--|---|----------------------------------|
| Paris  | 7,094,649                                   | 1.9% (ENTD <sup>4</sup> in 2019) |
| Lyon   | 1,411,571                                   | 7.8% (ENTD in 2019)              |
| Rennes   | 457,416                                     | 4% (ENTD in 2019)                |
| Montpellier  | 491,417                                     | 3% (ENTD in 2019)                |
| Besançon   | 195,745                                     | 2% (EMD <sup>5</sup> in 2018)    |

**Table 4.2** Corpus considered includes 6 newspapers, 578 articles, and 380,421 words

| Title                    | Type     | Edition concerned<br>for the analysis | Title average daily<br>circulation (paper +<br>web) in 2020<br>(ACPM <sup>6</sup> ) | Number of articles<br>in corpus |
|--------------------------|----------|---------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| <i>Libération</i>        | National | /                                     | 77,780  | 17                              |
| <i>Le Parisien</i>       | Regional | Parisian region                       | 178,600   | 197                             |
| <i>Midi Libre</i>        | Regional | Montpellier                           | 82,716  | 57                              |
| <i>Ouest France</i>      | Regional | Rennes                                | 625,896   | 86                              |
| <i>Le Progrès</i>        | Regional | Lyon                                  | 156,113   | 178                             |
| <i>L'Est Républicain</i> | Regional | Besançon                              | 110,697   | 43                              |

reduced dedicated infrastructure and modal share of cycling before the pandemic (Buhler et al. 2021).

For the national title, we selected *Libération*, which offers the most articles on cycling of the three major dailies (*Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*) over the period under consideration. In terms of volume, these articles are on average 20% longer than articles in local newspapers.

For all of these daily newspapers, we considered all the articles dealing with cycling whether for utility cycling or leisure cycling. We searched for articles via the *Europresse* platform, a multilingual search engine that provides access to 17,000 press titles (newspapers, magazines, general, and specialized press). After collecting the articles, all of them were read, making it possible to discard 43 off-topic articles dealing with the holding of events (such as a bike flea-market). The corpus considered in this chapter consists of 578 articles for 380,421 words.

<sup>3</sup> French national institute for demographical statistics.

<sup>4</sup> French national transport and mobility survey.

<sup>5</sup> Local transport and mobility survey.

<sup>6</sup> The “Alliance pour les Chiffres de la Presse et des Médias” (ACPM) is an independent structure that certifies the audience and readership of various French media.

### *Design and test queries to measure the presence of actors in discourse*

In order to measure the importance of the different types of actors in the daily press, we defined queries enabling us to cover each category of actor while limiting the number of double counts. This procedure was not performed automatically and meant making cross-comparisons several times over between the statistical queries and the actual excerpts from the articles under consideration. For example, we considered adding to our “user-group actors” category the different names of local bicycle advocacy groups.<sup>7</sup> After reading the excerpts where these names appear, we observed that these terms were systematically accompanied by the term “*association*” (club or society), as in the example below. We therefore confined ourselves to generic terms that allowed us to cover the designations of the different types of actors in a satisfactory manner.

The Vélocité Grand Montpellier association was invited, as a mediator, to put into writing an eleven-point document that the four lists undertake to abide by if they are elected.

*Midi Libre* (Montpellier edition – March 13, 2020)

In the same way, we tried to separate, on the one hand, the references to a local elected official (of “communal” level, the *commune* being the lowest tier of local government in France) and, on the other hand, the institutions or elected officials of supra-communal institutions. In France, the regulatory powers relating to urban transport and roads have been “transferred” to supra-communal structures (as part of a process that began in the late 1990s). That said, the figure of the local (communal) mayor is still very important in public opinion and in the local press, especially in the event of conflict (Moirand 2007).

After tracking back-and-forth between queries and the analysis of excerpts corresponding to their results, we arrived at the categorization set out in Table 4.3. It should be noted that we separate the plural from the singular of *cyclist* since the associated references are to two quite different types of statements: respectively a general statement, and the discourse of one particular individual providing feedback on his/her cycling experience.

It should be noted that few references are made in this corpus to private actors, whether they are bicycle vendors ( $n = 9$ ), specialized consultancy agencies ( $n = 1$ ), or even generalist retailers ( $n = 9$ ). Therefore, we decided to exclude them from the progression chart (see Fig. 4.1). The same goes for central government highways and engineering departments ( $n = 6$ ).

It should be noted, too, that some queries were limited to the written form (WF) considered (see Table 4.3). For example, the term “Métropole” was only counted when spelled with a capital letter, which implies a reference to the institution and not to the area of influence. Other queries were conducted at the lemma level (L). The lemma is an upper level form that contains several written forms. In other words, for a lemma-adjective (e.g., “associatif”) all the forms of this adjective were included in

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<sup>7</sup> These names frequently involve wordplay that is highly creative but that would unfortunately be lost in translation (“*La Petite Rennes*”, “*L’Heureux Cyclage*”, “*Pignon-sur-Rue*”, “*Rayons d’action*”...).



**Table 4.3** Queries developed to measure the occurrences related to the different actors

| Type of actors        | Queries on the lemma (L) or on the written form only (WF)   | English translation   |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| User-group actors     | “association” (L)<br>“coopérative” (L)<br>“coopératif” (L)<br>“associatif” (L)<br>“FUB” (WF)<br>“collectif” (L—only the noun) | Club or society<br>Cooperative (noun and adjective)<br>User-group<br>National federation of cycling organizations<br>Collective (noun only) |
| Cyclists (as a group) | “cyclistes” (WF)  | Cyclists  |
| Elected officials     | “élu” (L)<br>“maire” (L)  | Elected official<br>Mayor   |
| Local authorities     | “Métropole” (WF)<br>“communauté urbaine” (L)<br>“communauté d’agglomération” (L)<br>“communauté de communes” (L)              | Different types of unitary local authorities  |
| Candidates            | “candidat” (L)  | Candidate   |
| Individual cyclist    | “cycliste” (WF)   | Cyclist   |

the count (i.e., the masculine adjective “associatif”, the feminine “associative”, and the plurals “associatifs” and “associatives”, as in French unlike in English, adjectives are declined in gender and number).

## 4.2 Cycling Organizations During the Crisis: More Prominent Actors Advocating New Issues

### A change of focus in terms of actors given media exposure

The set of data treatments previously described leads to Fig. 4.1, which shows the progression over time of the use of each category of terms (i.e., categories of actors).

Two points need to be clarified in order to read the graph. First, the newspaper articles are arranged by publication date, from left to right. In order to facilitate the temporal reference, time markers have been added for the first lockdown and other important dates in the period under consideration. Second, each curve is incremented by + 1 each time a term belonging to its category is mentioned in an article. Thus, the curves can never decrease, and one must look more at the slope of the different curves than at their height.

Several points emerge from Fig. 4.1. First, we note that the category most mentioned during the period is that of user-group actors. The rate of their progression increases from the period of the rail strike onward, not slowing at the beginning of 2020, and accelerating at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. We note a slow-down at the end of the period corresponding to the summer break when these

voluntary actors are less available to respond to the media. Their media exposure thus resumes at the beginning of September 2020.

A second category of actors mentioned is that of cyclists (plural). A surge can be observed at the end of 2019, then during the rail strike and the unveiling of the results of the annual “barometer of cycling cities<sup>8</sup>” survey (in January each year). The trend then slows quite markedly until the end of the period under consideration.

As far as political and institutional actors are concerned, during the first months of the period and until March 2020, we note a switch from occurrences relating to elected officials to occurrences relating to candidates, which is perfectly understandable in times of local election campaigning when “outgoing elected officials” are banned from making public comments. After the first round of local elections (March 17, 2020) the occurrences relating to local elected officials picked up strongly and accelerated very markedly at the end of the lockdown period.

The occurrences of actors from supra-communal institutions, which also appeared relatively sparse until the first round of the local elections, increased subsequently, at the time of the second round of voting in June 2020. Reading the excerpts from this period, this can be explained by the fairly close connection between the second round of the local elections and the composition of these institutions (there are no direct supra-communal elections in France). For their part, references to the individual cyclist and his or her subjectivity remained fairly stable over the period, with a low level of occurrences: their opinion was seldom asked for and with little variation in the daily press.

Taking these results into account, cycling societies are the actors that gained the most prominence during the first Covid-19 lockdown period, becoming dominant in the daily press articles on the subject.

### **New issues and new media messaging for user-group actors**

When looking for excerpts associated with user-group actors, four major positions and themes emerge. In order to illustrate and be explicit about the textual material considered, we have opted to accompany each type of media messaging with a rather long excerpt.

#### **Bicycle lobbying: demanding exceptions for cyclists in times of pandemic**

Cycling organizations have played a primary role in defending the interests of cyclists. During the beginning of the first lockdown, several decisions taken by the government to avoid the spread of the pandemic concerned the liberty of movement, access to public spaces, and whether or not there should be an obligation to wear a face mask while cycling. Regarding access to public spaces, organizations defended a right to ride through parks that were closed due to the risk of prolonged proximity among people.

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<sup>8</sup> The “Baromètre des villes cyclables” is a national online survey organized every two years by the “Fédération française des usagers de la bicyclette” (FUB) to assess the degree of satisfaction of cyclists in France (FUB 2021).

[excerpt 1] The ‘Paris en selle’ association and the ‘Vélo Ile-de-France’ collective, which represent utilitarian bicycle users, wrote Monday to the Prefect of Seine-Saint-Denis<sup>9</sup> “département” asking him to review his position. The Saint-Denis and Ourcq canals are considered strategic routes for commuting by bicycle. The closure “strongly penalizes the caregivers and other professionals mobilized who now travel by bike to avoid public transport, where the risk of contamination is particularly high,” warn the societies. Like Julie, the activists regret that the ban forces cyclists to fall back on “roads shared with cars whose speed has increased with the fall in traffic.

*Le Parisien* (April 23, 2020) (translated by the authors)

These arguments are based on the specificity of cycling: cyclists are in motion which pose less risk to others in terms of prolonged proximity and therefore of spreading the virus. The cycling lobby argues here that cyclists are a special case, warranting special treatment and exemptions. This alleged “specificity” of cyclists and their needs was also used as an argument by FUB to plead against the wearing of face-coverings when cycling, which was then compulsory for all in the public space. In addition, there is a conflict in the way parks are perceived. They are seen differently (1) by the authorities, who define them as a recreational space, and (2) by the cyclists’ associations, for whom they are a means of transport.

#### Participation in planning temporary cycle tracks (and contesting the outcome)

In all the cities concerned in our analysis, it is mentioned that the expertise of the cycling organizations played an important role when the local authorities set about creating temporary cycle paths. Of course, not all the societies’ proposals were taken up, and they expressed their disappointment.

[excerpt 2] The City and the Metropolitan Council explain that all of these improvements to be made were identified in conjunction with the *Rayons d’action* bicycle users’ society. We had an exchange. But not really the opportunity to discuss matters, relativizes Charles Levillain, president of the society. We made our proposals and gave a map with all the roads identified as dangerous, opines Florian Le Villain, vice president. But we note a big gap between what we proposed and what they proposed.

*Ouest France* – Rennes edition (May 2, 2020)

Nevertheless, the period of first lockdown shows a greater openness of the circle of discussions on the subject of temporary cycle paths compared to the past, when the organizations often could only contribute at the end of the implementation process during the public inquiries (Dusong 2021).

#### Managing emergencies and helping move “essential staff” by bicycle

Among the new roles of the organizations, the participation in emergency management must be highlighted. In all the cities studied, the local organizations set up a scheme for long-term bicycle loans for healthcare staff and other “essential” workers.<sup>10</sup> This had already been experienced by some Ile-de-France cycling organizations a few months earlier during the train strike in late 2019.

<sup>9</sup> The prefects are the representatives of the central government in the 100 French departments. Seine-Saint-Denis is a department in the Paris region.

<sup>10</sup> According to the terminology developed by the French government at the time to designate jobs that could not be done by working from home.

[excerpt 3] “My bike for solidarity”. This is the name of the platform launched on March 26 by the association of cyclists located in rue Garibaldi (Lyon, 3rd). The concept is simple: if you don’t need your bike anymore, because you have to work from home or you have been laid-off, then you can lend it to workers who have to continue travelling to work. The beneficiaries may have a car, bike, or scooter that has broken down but do not want to or cannot use public transport.

*Le Progrès* – Lyon edition (April 11, 2020)

Calling on elected officials to address the urgency of the situation

Finally, the period has allowed cycling organizations to feel legitimate in putting pressure on elected officials and local authorities to set up temporary cycle lanes, as well as to help the modal shift to cycling, especially for former users of public transport who have turned away from it for health reasons. There are two recurring themes in the two excerpts below, that of the exemplary nature of other cities (in this case Berlin) and the idea of a unique opportunity—and one that may soon disappear—for improving the place of the bicycle in French cities.

[excerpt 4a] The Besançon Cycling Association (AVB) has just sent a letter to Besançon City Hall “to suggest to our elected officials that our city become the flagship of tactical urban planning in times of crisis;” it explains in a press release. The society proposes, on the same model as some of the world’s major cities like Berlin, “to shake up the use of the roads and streets.” Basically, it suggests developments that could be made immediately to expand pedestrian areas. “Walking on a narrow sidewalk while complying with the recommended social distancing is a challenge, when just a stride away, wide, almost empty spaces would offer a comfortable alternative for a journey that would be good for social distancing and ... for the planet.

*L’Est Républicain* – Besançon edition (April 17, 2020)

[excerpt 4b] “I hope that they won’t restrict themselves to making announcements, because if the cycle scheme put in place is not complete, the risk is that people will try it out, be disappointed and not continue, which would be a shame when we have never been so close to gaining ten years on cycling policies,” points out Olivier Schneider.

*Libération* (May 4, 2020)

In all of these four types of media messaging, a common element emerges. During this period cycling organizations managed to upgrade their image as organizations with a professional and sound discourse in order to appear as serious-minded interlocutors. This change of image is linked to a transition made in many French societies since the beginning of the 2000s from militant organizations composed of ecologists, anarchists, and proponents of the anticapitalistic left to professional and constructive interlocutors (Dusong 2021).

### 4.3 Reinforcement of an Existing Trend Rather than Rapid Change

Our analyses show that cycling organizations have reinforced their place in the local media. Their members and leaders are therefore increasingly listened to and sought out by journalists, which strengthens the impact of their discourse. In the newspaper

articles, we find four different roles that they assume: (i) political advocacy in favor of cycling, (ii) expertise on mobility, (iii) education and training or support for cyclists, and (iv) support for the implementation of public policies. We also observe that this growing media presence was not brought about by the health crisis; it was already apparent from the time of the transport strikes of the previous winter, but it was further amplified by the health crisis.

### **Three cumulative factors that explain user-groups reinforcement in the media**

This growing momentum is due to three cumulative factors that cannot readily be ranked by order of importance. First, the subject of urban cycling quickly emerged as a major media issue at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Journalists therefore turned to those who were considered to be legitimate and had a well-constructed discourse on this issue, including the cycling organizations.

Second, like other political actors (elected officials, environmentalists), the pro-bike organizations saw the health crisis as a window of opportunity to promote their views and interests. The unanimous political support for cycling that took hold at the time of the first lockdown in France (see Chap. 3) has provided an opportunity to promote the benefits of cycling in terms of traffic congestion, ecology, and physical exercise. At the national scale, the FUB, a country-wide organization bringing together a large number of local organizations, was particularly active. First, from March 2020 until its announcement in May 2020 and its implementation in the following months, FUB advocated the need for an ambitious cycling plan. Second, in the summer of 2020, when prefects and mayors began to impose, through local decrees, the obligation to wear a mask outdoors, FUB opposed the mandatory wearing of face masks while cycling, and obtained satisfaction.<sup>11</sup> At the local scale, cycling organizations also made themselves heard by defending the need to integrate the bicycle in health crisis policies (see excerpt 4b above). This opportunistic approach is not unprecedented: cycling organizations had already seen the public transport strikes as an opportunity to make their voices heard. They had taken advantage of the disruption to give prominence to their discourse on the need for pro-bike policies as an alternative to public transport in the media. Some had also made arrangements for their members to accompany potential new cyclists on their commuter journey, which is politically significant since it can be likened to strike-breaking actions (an issue that had been debated within the cycling organizations themselves<sup>12</sup>). During the rail strikes as well as during the lockdown, the press releases produced by the societies, as well as the numerous contributions from user-group actors on Twitter, found a sounding board in the local and national press. This effect could be bolstered by

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<sup>11</sup> See the press release of August 21, 2020, “Port du masque obligatoire à vélo: la FUB demande aux préfets et aux maires de revoir leurs arrêtés”. <https://www.fub.fr/presse/port-masque-obligatoire-velo-fub-demande-aux-prefets-aux-maires-revoir-leurs-arretes>.

<sup>12</sup> See the article by Joseph d’Halluin (at the time a member of the FUB’s executive board) titled “Le vélo, casseur de grève?” on Actu vélo, a site managed by the FUB. <https://actuvelo.fr/2020/03/25/le-velo-casseur-de-greve/>

the marked presence of a community of cyclists, whether or not they were members of organizations, particularly defending commuting by bike (“vélotaf”) on social networks and especially on Twitter, a media very much frequented by journalists who often recruit their interviewees there (and which they did increasingly during the periods of lockdown).

Third, cycling organizations have been directly or indirectly involved in the design and implementation of crisis cycling policies. At the local scale, in some cities, associations have been involved in the design of temporary cycling facilities. They were then largely invited to comment on these facilities in the press. At the national scale, the FUB has been closely involved in proposing solutions to the government and then contributing to their implementation. In particular, it obtained a €120 million budget (financed by energy saving certificates (CEE), a method by which energy supply companies finance actions to reduce energy consumption) for a bicycle plan (the “coup de pouce vélo”—a crisis plan that lasted from May 11, 2020 (end of the first lockdown in France) to March 31, 2021.<sup>13</sup>). The FUB both designed and implemented this policy. Its flagship measure, the funding of a €50 grant to individuals to help them have their bicycles serviced, was both thought up and put in place by the FUB (via Alvéole, a dedicated program carried out with a consulting firm). Some local organizations affiliated to the FUB were also mobilized to implement another (minor) part of this plan: periods of education and training to become proficient at urban cycling (called “getting back in the saddle”). As a result, user-group actors were interviewed by the press not only for their traditional advocacy role but also because they were central actors in the implementation of public policies in a time of crisis.

We identify one track of interpretation of these results, which will have to be confirmed by further analyses: this growing presence in the media could be explained above all by the “professionalization” trajectory followed by many local French local cycling organizations.

### **Cycling organizations on their way to professionalization**

The presence of cycling organizations, and particularly those linked to the FUB, in the press is part of a broader perspective: that of the professionalization of cycling advocacy (Caimotto 2020; Cox 2020; Dusong 2021; Stehlin 2019). In France, but not only there (e.g., the Provo episode in the Netherlands<sup>14</sup>), pro-bike activism historically comes from ecologists, anarchists, and the anticapitalistic left, who are particularly critical of the predominance of the automobile, but with various arguments and objectives. In France, it is in the 1970s that the bicycle becomes an object of militancy. It is set up as a symbol by the first ecologist parties, and in particular the supporters of the first ecologist candidate to the presidential election, René Dumont,

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<sup>13</sup> See on the official website: <https://www.coupdepoucevelo.fr/auth/home>.

<sup>14</sup> The Dutch anarchists of the Provo group (1965–70) were among the first activists to take up the issue of urban cycling, in particular to fight against automobile domination and road violence. They were notably the inventors of the famous white bicycles, today considered to be the origin of bike sharing (Furness 2005).

of which a part of the program (1974), written by a pro-bike association of the Ile-de-France (MDB<sup>15</sup>) which still exists, was entitled “I Vélove You”. In a context of urban and energy crisis, the bicycle was then a catalyst of the ecological discourse (Huré 2017). As the proximity between MDB and Dumont illustrates, but also what was happening in various French cities at the time (ibid.), the institutionalization of bicycle activism was an issue from its origins. This activism was initially driven by a marked ideological view of the world, strongly conflicting, criticizing at the time the industrial society. It relied on social codes that were those of social movements, and protest actions—demonstrations of the critical mass type, road blocks—intended to make them highly visible to politicians and the media. As Dusong (2021) shows, contemporary urban cycling activism is characterized by a diversification of modes of action extending beyond political advocacy (advocacy, education and training, expertise), by depoliticization<sup>16</sup> and by professionalization. As cycling has shifted from being a marginal activity to become a mode of transport that is considered legitimate by a growing proportion of public opinion, and particularly by politicians (even if some remain particularly reluctant, see Chap. 3), cycling activism has been partly transformed (more radical groups remain, but they have been little seen in the press during the pandemic). While the bicycle has become part of the norm of the development of public spaces (Spinney 2020) and is ever less a marker of a political leaning even if it remains a strong symbolic vector, the idea that urban cycling reflects a general and conflicting worldview is fading away. The agonistic perspective has largely given way to the expert perspective.<sup>17</sup> The most institutionalized organizations are pleased to have the increasingly attentive ear of the authorities and of companies. For their part, the statutory authorities are happy to benefit, free of charge, from technical expertise that helps them in their decision-making, and from partners who are familiar with their operating codes and who do not disrupt political-administrative interplay through their radical stances and actions.

### **When professionalization means presence in the local media**

This professionalization results, first of all, in a shift away from the traditional discourses and modes of action of social movements, which are judged to be too explicitly activist or politicized, and instead toward the codes of technical and political expertise. This mutation is made in the name of efficiency and pragmatism. It

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<sup>15</sup> *Mouvement de Défense de la Bicyclette* (“Bicycle Defense Movement”) founded in 1974, became *Mieux se déplacer à bicyclette* (“Getting around better by bike”) in 2004. Over the years, the name of the association has lost its confrontational character.

<sup>16</sup> We understand politicization as a rise in generality and conflictuality (Duchesne and Haegel 2001) and therefore depoliticization as the opposite process.

<sup>17</sup> Experts can be individually engaged, but the position of the expertise is not that of opposition, but that of advice (to government) or of counter-proposal, in both cases by relying on a form of legitimacy (technical, scientific) recognized by the power. Because they do not play on the same regimes of legitimacy, nor with the same modes of action, the agonistic perspective and the expertise perspective correspond to an opposite relationship to power and contribute to different political cultures. As Cox (2020) has shown, in bicycle activism, expertise and agonistics can complement each other, and associations can sometimes switch from one to the other.

breaks with the anti-productivism of the earliest pro-bike militants (Popan 2018) and reflects an acceptance of the social world as it is rather than a desire for radical transformation. This professionalization is then translated in a rather literal way: some club and society members who were particularly audible in the press during the pandemic are also elected officials or make cycling expertise their profession, within local authorities, consulting firms, or as independent consultants. This professionalization also has an influence on the social composition of the members of the societies, in particular those who play the role of leaders or spokespersons, who are very often male and from the managerial categories in France as elsewhere (Hoffmann 2016; Stehlin 2019), a phenomenon that is far from being specific to cycling activism and can be found in many fields.<sup>18</sup> This can be seen in the profile of activists who express themselves on social networks and in the press, who are also often technocrats (engineers, urban planners, administrative executives in private companies or in the public sector, etc.). The social homogeneity between pro-bike advocates and politicians or administrators also favors their ability to make themselves heard due to their sharing of common codes, notably the mastery of language levels, a degree of moderation in their comments, and the recognition of the need for technical expertise. This social homogeneity also works in favor of the user-group actors in their capacity to be “good” (i.e., competent, formatted, moderate) sources for journalists. Because they have become well adapted to the standard codes of public expression, cycling advocates easily meet the expectations of journalists who are tasked with quickly producing news items on subjects of which they often have little knowledge.

In France, the FUB, and to a lesser extent its local affiliates (with a great deal of diversity among them), embodies this professionalization. Today, it presents itself publicly as “the bicycle lobby”, reflecting its corporate conception of political influence. The FUB, working in conjunction with a consulting firm (Rozo), has set up *Alvéole*, a program designed to raise funds (essentially through CEEs) in order to implement public policies to promote cycling. It was *Alvéole* that was responsible for setting up the “*coup de pouce vélo*” at the beginning of the pandemic. Then, in the middle of the pandemic, it launched the Academy of Active Mobility (ADMA), a group of employees tasked with “increasing expertise and training in the field of active mobility” by offering education and training to the general public, but above all to public and private sector actors involved with urban planning and mobility policies. At the local scale, although it is not stated explicitly, organizations (and particularly those affiliated to the FUB) are contributing to this process of professionalization of activism: they often portray themselves as “sources of new ideas”, suggesting changes or even fresh doctrines in terms of traffic flows, taking part in consultations between the statutory authorities and “representatives of civil society”, and to a large extent they embody this transition from politics to expertise.

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<sup>18</sup> The social diversity of the cycling organizations themselves is greater than that of their leaders and spokespersons and undoubtedly depends on the type of actions they carry out, but also on the local social and political circumstances of the cities where they are based.



This professionalization, which first began some twenty or so years ago, is still underway, and indeed it is even accelerating. It is clearly contributing to both the normalization and the legitimization of bicycle advocacy in the political and media arenas alike. As a result, it is opening the doors of the traditional media to cycling advocates as our statistical analysis has shown.

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