

## Chapter 4

### Help or hindrance? Media uses and discourses on media in outdoor sport tourism

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#### Abstract

Dichotomies opposing the “virtual world” and “real life” persist in common discourses; they are frequent in outdoor sport tourism, where discursive, informational and digitally mediated practices might be viewed as hindering the experience and the contact with the environment. This chapter aims to understand such discursive oppositions among the participants, and to overcome them by documenting the integration of *media practices* in general within outdoor sport practices. Drawing on empirical work with travelling kayakers, paragliders and rock climbers, the chapter details wary and hostile views on media practices, then contrasts these views by showing how media practices aid or enable the coordination and communication of outdoor sport tourism activities.

#### 1. Introduction

Although digital technologies have become essential to organising social life and mediate a substantial part of our interactions, dichotomies opposing the “virtual world” and “real life” persist in common discourses. An example of a practice commonly viewed as virtual would be an online video game: It involves distant individuals, actions performed through control devices, screens that display virtual territories and virtual bodies made of information flows. One example of a practice commonly perceived to be firmly anchored in reality is going downriver in a kayak. At first sight, information or media representations have little involvement in this specific practice. In most cases, however, the kayaker will have carefully studied a detailed and codified description of the river section in a guidebook or, more and more often, an online *topoguide*. Moreover, there is a non-negligible chance that such a run nowadays would be recorded with a video camera, most likely an “action camera”, either by the kayaker her/himself using a device fixed somewhere on her/his gear or by a fellow paddler standing on the river bank. In the latter case, the leisure practice involves not only a human body performing complex and energy-demanding moves in a rapidly changing material environment but also the representational mediation of the camera; screens to watch the images afterwards; and, quite likely, digital transmission channels to store the video or share it on the Internet, through more or less public means of diffusion such as e-mail, a Facebook page or an Instagram account, thereby involving distant places and people. Rather than trying to identify in this second example a physical, real dimension and distinguish it from a virtual, informational one, we should try to analyse this complex networking of bodies, places, images and devices as a significant part of the outdoor sports practice. One major concept that will be used in this chapter to support this perspective is *media practices*, which Couldry (2004, p. 117) defines as “practices relating to, or oriented around media”.

How to understand the pervasive integration of media practices into outdoor sport tourism, as well as the perceived incompatibilities between the two sets of practices? The aim of this chapter is to (1) acknowledge and understand, in the specific context of outdoor sport tourism, the common rejection and criticism of media practices as passive and/or detached from reality; (2) show the

weaknesses of such views, given that media practices can be an integral part of the outdoor sport experience and, in most cases, are seen as enhancing or facilitating the practice; and (3) detail the crucial roles that media practices play in coordinating and communicating these practices, thereby constituting a significant part of their social dimension. These analyses are empirically grounded in the study of three different outdoor sports—paragliding, rock climbing and whitewater kayaking—through interviews with participants and examples of media contents and media uses from the same participants.

## **2. Theoretical framework: Media and space as practices**

This chapter is an account of how media are used—and sometimes refused—in specific leisure practices. On a theoretical level, it is rooted in theories of practice and their applications to two fields of research: media, and the geography of outdoor sport tourism. Practice theories, and more specifically the notion of *media practices*—that is to say all practices where media play a significant role without necessarily being central—allow to study the integration of media and representation in the course of action, and thus to overcome the virtual/real dichotomy. A geographical analysis of outdoor sport tourism, when informed by theories of practice, is suitable to explore the values attached to the practice of space, as well as its mundane and material aspects. Here, this geographical approach will help to explain the contrasted views on using media when experiencing nature, travel and sport altogether, while also grasping the deep practical implications of such media for actions performed through and with space.

### 2.1. *Media as practices*

Theories of practice hold embodied, contextualised and interpretive action as the basis of the constitution of social life (Schatzki 2001); they consider that people act in certain ways because they are in certain contexts and have certain interpretations of how the rest of the world will respond to their actions. They are interpretive or cultural theories because they are attentive to “the symbolic structures of knowledge which enable and constrain the agents to interpret the world according to certain forms, and to behave in corresponding ways” (Reckwitz 2002, pp. 245–246). But they are also materialist theories in that they analyse the constant “relation between human agency and material environment”, that is, a “coordination” (Thévenot 2001, p. 74) between ideas and materialities, between representation and action. “Understandings”<sup>1</sup> can lead actions in that they “organise” practices (Schatzki 2002), and media can take part in building understandings. However, understandings have no power outside the material world; they have no effect without being enacted through and with bodies. Consequently, theories of practice can in no way concur with a view of media contents as being detached from actual life and reality, nor with a view of media as content imposed on passive consumers.

As Couldry (2004) explains, adopting the theories of practice has been a way to renew the field of media studies. Couldry’s criticism is directed at the excessive focus on the representational dimension of media and the blindness to what people actually do with media texts and devices. His main proposition is to “decentre media research from the study of media texts or production structures”; the notion of “media practices”, as “the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around media” (Couldry 2004, p. 117), is the way to operate such a decentering. This suggests a diversity of practices, rather than assuming uniform experiences of reception or consumption determined only by media content and broadcasting technologies. It is also an effort to deconstruct the assumed specificities of mass media and to situate them in the long history of communication

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1 A term that includes representations, ideas, discourses... in sum, ways of mentally grasping the world.

techniques and practices. This echoes Debray's theory (who names it "mediology") of studying the medium:

Our mass media are fundamentally the contemporary, overinflated, deafening, over-visible variation of a basic invariant that is more shadowy and less showy but nevertheless present in every mode of communication, every chronological stage of the circulation of signs: the vehicle device. The organ of transmission. Let's call it medium.<sup>2</sup>  
(Debray 1998, p. 12)

In contrast to the common understanding of "media" as an activity by corporations and professionals and as a process of mass diffusion, the study of the medium covers the full spectrum of mediated communication, all the way to basic inter-individual interaction. This does not mean undermining the structuring or "anchoring" role (Swidler 2001; Couldry 2004) of representations, nor the unequal power of the diverse actors who produce them; but with practice theories, the influence or strategic role of objects is understood by looking at how they are actually handled in the course of action, in the daily context of social life. Here, for instance, the notion of media practices will encompass reading or watching content from professional outdoor sport media; producing images or text about one's own sport travel practices, showing it *in situ* to peers, sharing it on social media; taking a paper guidebook out of a bag to look at it, adding comments on an itinerary described on an online collaborative *topoguide*; and so on.

This means that media must be studied without assuming *a priori* that the media content and objects are at the centre of all the practices that involve them. With this in mind, Morley (2009) advocates for a "non-media-centric media studies", its main characteristic being a much clearer take on materiality than in previous media studies. This materiality is not only about the technological networks and infrastructures that Morley focuses on: If informed by a theory of practice, the study of media should address every material involvement of media in practices, from undersea cables and satellites

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<sup>2</sup> Personal translation. Original quote: "nos mass-media sont au fond la variation contemporaine, hypertrophiée, assourdissante, surapparente d'un invariant de base plus ombreux, moins tapageur, et néanmoins coprésent à tous les modes de communication, tous les stades chronologiques de la circulation des signes : le dispositif véhiculaire. L'organe de transmission. Appelons-le médium."

to the gesture of taking a smartphone out of one's pocket – as we will see with the example of outdoor sport, the latter is not always the unproblematic or meaningless gesture it appears to be.

After the era of mass media came another major technological and social change that made the practice approach even more necessary: the digital revolution. In short, the digital revolution is a spectacular acceleration of the “mediatization process”, as defined by Krotz:

Mediatization describes the process whereby communication refers to media and uses media so that media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole. (Krotz 2009, p. 24)

This increased relevance was particularly due to the digital format of data transmission, the Internet, and, subsequently, mobile devices and the rise of “Web 2.0”, which is mainly characterised by the major role of user-generated content. In combination, these innovations have made the ability to produce and to share media content widespread. To address this new state of affairs, some authors have proposed “to see audiences as active cultural producers” (Bird 2011, p. 502).

## *2.2. Outdoor sport tourism as geographical play*

The geographical perspective is crucial to understand the complex meanings and implications of leisure practices such as tourism and sport, where relations to place and environment are central to the enjoyment. Among the themes relevant to outdoor sport tourism, geographical research has explored the meanings of nature as a cultural and mystical construction of space, as opposed to urban space in particular (Bourdeau 2003), making nature a central category for the touristic enjoyment of places (Bourdeau et al. 2011; Laslaz et al. 2012). The geographical perspective has also yielded insights, through non-representational theory (Thrift 2007) in particular, in outdoor sport practices as bodily practices of immersion, of enjoyment of movement and contact (Thorpe and Rinehart 2010; Thrift 2000; Wylie 2005). Such work is in part inspired by theories of

practice. A geography of practice, indeed, does not view space as a purely material context; it is also a resource (or constraint) and a material for action, as well as a subject of interpretations and of symbolic constructions (Lussault 2007; Stock 2007, 2015). To summarise the many ways in which space is involved in human action, Lussault & Stock (2010) propose the expression “doing with space”. I proposed the alternative expression of “playing with space” (Geffroy 2017) to address the hedonist and aesthetic spatialities of leisure practices such as outdoor sport tourism.

In this geography of practice, leisure and tourism are treated as a set of physical movements and material actions, but also as “ways of making knowledge”, part of a “process [of] ‘lay geography’” where “the individual works and reworks, figures and re-figures an account of a place” (Crouch 2000, p. 65) and where such knowledge, beyond practical uses, may also be a source of enjoyment. In this regard, media practices hold an important role: tourism research has shown how they were a central means of the symbolic construction of places, especially tourists’ practices of photography (Crang, 1997). And a geography of practice should truly consider lay practices of photography as a *construction* of places, and not as mere representation or mirroring or in terms of accuracy or truthfulness. Crang calls for the following view to be adopted:

Such a focus refuses to look on the mediated world as some fall from grace, some tragic loss of authenticity. Images are not something that appear over and against reality, but parts of practices through which people work to establish realities. Rather than look to mirroring as a root metaphor, technologies of seeing form ways of grasping the world. (Crang 1997, p. 362)

For the author, it is best to avoid considering photographs only in their visual dimension, as they are not only seen but also taken, exchanged and discussed. They are not only objects but also practices. Furthermore, it is important to credit these practices with relevance in their relation to place: They are meaningful ways of experiencing places, of building attachments to and memories of them.

Some research works have already addressed in depth the relationship between outdoor sport and media practices, in terms of constructing places or identities, or as an aid to moving and acting in outdoor environments (Evers 2016; Laurier 2015; Mao and Obin

2018; Thorpe 2017; Woermann 2012). But none of these works have yet addressed the conflictual dimension of this relationship, the clash between the embodied experience of sport in nature viewed as an authentic experience of “reality” and media practices viewed as distanced or virtual engagements. This chapter will give empirical evidence of this conflict, in the discourse and practices of outdoor sport tourism participants, but also show the limits of this conflict’s relevance to these leisure practices.

### **3. Empirical insights: methods and outline**

The ideas and examples I develop in this chapter are based primarily on a series of semi-structured interviews that took place between 2016 and 2018 and on images collected from the interviewees. I chose three sports based on their potential to induce travel: kayaking, paragliding and rock climbing. I conducted investigations at some of these sports’ major sites, namely, places<sup>3</sup> that are world-renowned and attractive enough to the sport communities to attract people on a global scale<sup>4</sup>. I conducted 76 interviews, with more than 110 participants. The questions related to their travel and sport histories, their ways of conceiving the relation between sport and travel, their enjoyment of the places of practice and finally, their media practices during their mobilities for outdoor sports and in their daily lives.

Collecting pictures from these individuals was a way of building up research material that is more specific to media practices and was a direct illustration of the way participants spoke about their media practices. I asked participants to send me a few of the pictures

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3 All but one are located in the south-eastern part of France: for rock climbing, the Greek island of Kalymnos, and the Verdon gorges; for kayaking, the area of Hautes-Alpes; for paragliding, Annecy Lake and Saint-André-les-Alpes.

4 The encountered population, though, was mostly European, or from other rich Western countries. This is due to the sites’ locations and to the geographies of power and privilege that those sport and travel practices largely reflect.



they liked the most from their sports travels, mainly via e-mail after the interviews had taken place. It is a form of entirely “respondent-led photo-elicitation” (Scarles 2012), based on “participant-generated images” (Balomenou and Garrod 2019), where participants themselves are involved in the analysis, since I asked them to comment on their pictures. The aim was to grasp the visual ways of enjoying practices and places of outdoor sport tourism with the images providing information not only about what is valued and admired (landscapes, people, activities...) but also about how the practice of taking pictures is integrated into practices of sport and tourism. This means paying attention to what the pictures show but also to the circumstances of their capture. The interviews and the comments on the pictures help in this contextual work. For instance, the interviews give detailed information on the ways in which these pictures are shared, with whom, on what platforms and for what purpose. The interviews also help to understand the social interactions and the spread of information online: Thus, I explored a wide variety of online material based on the websites interviewees told me they visited and the tools they reported using. These included social media (mainly Facebook, Instagram and YouTube), specialised news websites, blogs, collaborative platforms for information about sport sites, weather apps, etc.

What follows will consist of three parts. The first is an account of general criticisms addressed to media practices, in common as well as scientific discourse, opposing them to the real or authentic experience. The second is an empirical study of the views expressed by outdoor sport tourists and grounded in, or related to, such criticisms. The third part, based on empirical material and providing elements of theoretical discussion, is an attempt to show how, on the contrary, media practices may be viewed as an essential means of constructing the reality of the outdoor sport experience—in particular through the diffusion of specific understandings of space.

#### 4. Fake, virtual, passive: the roots of anti-media discourses

Media contents and media practices are often viewed as a poor, untrustworthy way of accessing ‘reality’. This wariness applies in particular to images, since in postmodern cultures, while the visual remains central, the “relation between seeing and true knowing has been broken” (Rose 2016, p. 4). The view of images as potentially deceptive rose to prominence in both scientific and common discourse (Boorstin 1961) in the era of mass media, which are perceived as a new central institution of influence – that is to say, of the manipulation of *messages* (Baetens 2014, p. 41) – and a major site for the creation of simulacra (Baudrillard 1981; Boorstin 1961). These ideas also blossomed in the field of tourism: Boorstin saw it as a particularly fertile ground for “pseudo-events” and fake images. Critics of Boorstin, like MacCannell (1976), rejected the accusations levelled at tourists that they are indulging in shallowness but recognised “staging” or “performing” as a fundamental characteristic of the tourist experience (Edensor 2000; Larsen and Urry 2011). Some authors imply that most tourists are condemned to an inauthentic and distanced relationship with people and places: “The connection with the unfamiliar is likely to be purely visual, and filtered through sunglasses and a camera viewfinder.” (Graburn 1977, p. 31). Tourist photography, in particular, has repeatedly been analysed as essentially a reproduction of pre-defined dominant images; the idea of the “hermeneutic circle”, in which tourists are “trapped”, is one of the recurrent *topoi* of tourism studies (Albers and James 1988; Urry 1990) that are still frequently used today, although most of the time it is challenged by highlighting the ways in which tourists negotiate these representations (Stylianou-Lambert 2012).

The development of digital technologies and the Internet has added another layer of argumentation regarding views of media practices as disconnected from reality. This is because of the new and more efficient ways of handling and transforming information, and in particular because of the common conceptions of virtuality. Graham shows how the metaphor of “cyberspace” has helped to sustain the idea of the Internet as both “an ethereal alternate dimension” and an alternate system (because it is non-physical) of places and

spaces (Graham 2013, p. 179). Such metaphors lead to a belief in the existence of a world of possibilities detached from “physical” reality or “real life”. Kinsley details the specific issues this “life online” presents, in particular regarding “authenticity and identity”: “The ability to bend and alter representations and performances of identity through mediated communication is [...] often treated as problematic” when accurate knowledge is sought, particularly in research (Kinsley 2013, p. 546). But this criticism is also ubiquitous in the public discourse, especially with regard to online social media as new stages for the narratives of the self.

Moreover, media practices are frequently accused of being passive and unhealthy behaviour; there have been multiple calls to restrict “screen time”<sup>5</sup> and to engage in other, more “active” activities, in particular those involving physical exercise and contact with *nature* (see, among others, Larson et al. 2018). Indeed, if media may be rejected from a common understanding of reality, nature is considered to be – at least, in contemporary Western cultures – one of the primary sites for experiencing reality. It is mostly a matter of feelings and stimulations of the body, as Crouch (2003, p. 1953) illustrates with the case of a gardener describing her experience:

Working outdoors feels much better for you somehow... more vigorous than day to day housework, much more variety and stimulus. The air is always different and alerts the skin... unexpected scents are brought by breezes. Only when on your hands and knees do you notice insects and other small wonders.

The perception of the world seems enhanced here, the body and the mind more attuned to the diversity and versatility of life. Of course, this heightening of the bodily experience through contact with nature combines particularly well with other practices of physical activity. That is why outdoor sports are experienced as an intense commitment of body and mind (Geffroy 2017; Niel and Sirost 2008). Multi-sensoriality is a key part of enjoying physical activity in nature, unlike a modern body described as mostly “ocular” (Lewis 2000), that

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5 While media are, of course, not restricted to television, computers and smartphones, these have assumed an increasingly dominant position in media practices, and the screen has become the symbol of the passive consumption of media content.

is, trained for a visual relation to the world – the media currently being a significant part of this relation.

These ideas and oppositions structured around the categories of reality *versus* abstraction and activity *versus* passivity are appropriated in various ways, as will become clear below, but they are common enough to constitute a strong discursive background. They are variations on the common dichotomy of image *versus* reality and representation *versus* action. The next part will study the occurrences and influences of such dichotomies in outdoor sport tourists' views.

### **Distrust or distaste: negative views on media practices in outdoor sport tourism**

This section presents the main arguments put forward to oppose or limit media practices, as they emerged from my empirical study. Broadly, the participants may express indifference to representations of or discourses on the sport, as opposed to their view of the sport's actual practice; they may point to media practices that they view as excessive, particularly when they tend towards narcissism or hindering the physical or lived practice; and they may indicate a preference for more direct means of communication. Many of these views may thus be interpreted as a desire for a close relationship with space and the material environment through focused bodily activity; and many of these views reject communication-centered practices, as a form of disembodiment or of staging the outdoor sport experience.

### ***Media practices: poor connection?***

Some interviewees express indifference to representations of the sport or tourism practice, which leads to little or no consumption of such media contents. In rock climbing, in particular, the participants associate the specialised media mainly with accounts of extreme performances, which they consider uninteresting because of the wide gap between such activities and their own practices. Martine, for example, explains why she and her husband ended their subscription to a popular rock climbing magazine:

It was increasingly clear that it was a quite elitist magazine, for the stars, and climbing starts at 7c [grade], but our climbing, which is 6a, for them it's hiking, not climbing!<sup>6</sup>

Maïke expresses her distaste for watching “climbing material”, because of the unpleasant feeling of inferiority it elicits from her:

I feel bad when I watch something about climbers, because then I always feel like, I'm the shittiest climber! Because most of the stuff they record and you can watch is about the, THE crags you know, the people that climb, 10 [grade] or whatever, and you're like, you're not even able to climb 5 [grade] at the moment!

To these people, it seems the media content is exceedingly oriented towards spectacular rather than regular practices of the sport; it is far from being representative of the sport as they experience it. Other climbers similarly report being unable to relate to media accounts of the practice, not even because it does not correspond to their experience but because, at a more fundamental level, their enjoyment of the sport is personal, and they do not find any form of satisfaction in watching or hearing about other people doing similar activities, as Henrik explains:

I have zero interest in knowing how other people perform. [...] If I read magazines and watch TV, I watch the competitive aspect of climbing, and this is not interesting to me. I'm only interested in how well I perform.

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<sup>6</sup> Some interview quotations are translated from French. Others are direct transcripts from English – often by non-native speakers.

Like Henrik, several of the interviewees state that, to media “consumption”, they prefer their own physical, lived experience of the sport.

On a related note, many interviewees claim a preference for the more “embodied” means of communication. They strongly value the sport community as a space of exchange and social relations but dislike the distance and the lack of physical co-presence that characterise online interaction and/or the specialised media. Even to learn about rock climbing sites, Maike states she relies on word-of-mouth rather than professional media; when asked whether she reads magazines or any other types of specialised media, she replies:

I don't. I like the, talking about things better. We say Mundpropaganda.<sup>7</sup> [...] Oh cool, so there's a different spot here, and now we look at the map together... It's better for me, works more than a magazine where they probably had paid a lot of money to put this article down.

She prefers to speak to fellow climbers with similar experiences; media representation, by contrast, appears to her to be prone to bending reality for commercial purposes. And not only does she hope for more accurate information, but she also seems to find direct human contact more enjoyable and more lively, much like Jérôme, a kayaker who answers as follows when asked about his means of communicating with other kayakers:

Telephone, mate! Telephone, and when you see boats, you run after them [...] wherever you go, you take phone numbers. In that way, you have a contact. [...] And I'm thinking, telling people, come on, bring me to your place, and I'll bring you to mine, see, we have things to exchange... I like that. Facebook and all that, first you need Internet, and then it's less fun, and you don't know who you're going to navigate with, on the phone you quickly see who you are...

Again here, direct conversation rather than mediated exchanges, or speaking (on the telephone) rather than writing (that is, more embodied ways of communication), are preferred because they are viewed as deeper, more honest and more open.

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7 “Mund” (German) = “mouth”

### *Hindrance to lived or physical practice*

But this reluctance also often applies to “productive” media practices, in particular when capturing images is seen as hindering other, more important dimensions of the practice. In such cases, people seem to value the material over the discursive; the mental memory over the documentary memories; and *living the moment* over recording it or showing it. Micaela puts it as follows: “when we travel, we live the moment intensely, we are here for what we came to do, and not for, afterwards showing ‘Oh, I was there’, or for remembering”; and her husband, Théo, adds “I don’t have Facebook, she doesn’t post anything on Facebook... we’re not the type to show, today a multi-pitch route...” For them, the time and effort needed to capture pictures threatens the full enjoyment of the practice as they conceive it; it is almost incompatible with “what [they] came to do”, and they have little interest in sharing and displaying what they did. Though it is rather rare among the interviewees to express incompatibility on such a general level, many of them explain how the production of images may sometimes conflict with the sport activity, in particular because of the complex or even perilous material and bodily circumstances. Paragliders, in particular, if handling photo or video gear, face the risk of dropping it, like Francis who “lost two smartphones, each time [he] tried!”, and face the risks related to a lack of focus on the control of the wing, as Vivien explains:

When it’s crowded in the air or when the air conditions are turbulent, it is better to be focused on what happens around you because it might be dangerous, to take a selfie and not see someone coming just in front of you.

Besides, while the material conditions can make it difficult to take pictures in general, it is particularly hard to take good pictures. Several interviewees explain that the result is not worth the trouble if the proper gear and techniques are not used, and that it can be a major effort. In rock climbing, in particular, they often note that high-quality pictures need to be shot from above, requiring a third member outside of the belayer–climber party and some rope handling; otherwise, as Michel puts it, the images produced by the belayer are “always the same” and restricted to “butt pictures”!

### ***Criticising narcissism***

Criticism directed at media practices may also take on an ethical, if not moralistic, dimension. Social media are the main target: as a platform of public or semi-public display of the self, they attract accusations of narcissism and concerns about privacy. Many of the interviewees consequently claim that they use these tools with caution or even dislike the general tone of the contents and exchanges on these platforms, while still using them, as is the case for Marius:

I've registered on Facebook, but I find it's too much navel-gazing.  
[...] It annoys me. It's too much about showing off.

Indeed, although most of the interviewed people have a social media account (mostly on Facebook), there seems to be a general desire not to engage in excessive habits of posting – of course, what is “excessive” may depend on the point of view – and to restrict most of their communication to their closest social circles. Some people quite clearly reject any form of display of their “life” to broader circles. The idea is that social media are not a legitimate space for personal matters. That leads several people, like Javier, to stay off social media:

I have no Facebook; I don't like to share my life with people I don't know [...]. I want to share my pictures with friends, or my family, and no more people.

Micaela and Théo develop their own view on the media-related behaviours they see as excessive, in a way that echoes what I call here the narcissistic tendency:

T: It's also consumption society, kind of [...]. I did this, and this, and this, and this, people show that, they do lots of things...

M: I want to taste this, I want to have access to that. Where it becomes annoying is that, they don't want to taste for the sake of tasting, they want to taste for the sake of showing.

They analyse media practices as part of a broader process of accumulation of symbolic capital, that works through displaying and reporting numerous visited places and lived experiences. Such analyses are well-documented in literature: Sport and tourism, in particular sports perceived as risky (Kane and Zink 2004) and tourist behaviours viewed as adventurous and autonomous (van Nuenen



2016), are an important source of symbolic capital and, as such, are heavily mobilised in media practices, especially when it comes to “self-branding” (van Nuenen 2016). But in Micaela and Théo’s opinion, this is a shallow relationship to the world, and it is encouraged, or at least supported, by media practices.

Attitudes of distrust or distaste towards media practices are undeniably present – and even common on certain particular topics – in outdoor sport communities. However, most of the time, such a reluctance is presented as a matter of personal preference rather than a general, socially relevant criticism. And they co-exist with many neutral or positive opinions on the matter, and first of all, with multiple uses that make media an essential part of the outdoor sport practice – as the following section will show.

## **5. Media practices: sharing spatialities, sustaining communities**

It is insufficient to address media practices in terms of taste or to ask whether they are hindering or enabling aspects of outdoor sports tourism, given that they now are a major component of much of human action rather than a set of tools. I will show here how media contents and technologies are enmeshed in practices of outdoor sport tourism, and in particular how they contribute to the construction of places and spatialities in this leisure field. I have made a similar argument before (Geffroy 2017), which is developed here in greater detail. In particular, I will interpret media practices, in line with practice theory, as a means of *coordinating* and *communicating* practices on both the individual and the collective level.

### 5.1. *Mythologies of places, mythologies of the self*

In outdoor sport tourism, a large share of media practices consists of circulating sport sites' images. These images' influence relates to the general landscape aesthetics and to the specific aesthetics of each sport practice, including criteria relating to the terrain's suitability for the sport. It is also related to the people circulating these images and to the events and stories situated in these places and narrated through pictures and text. It is in such a circulation that *myths* are formed, and it is of such material that the dreams of sport tourists are made. Media practices are a central node for the cultural construction and ordering of space, especially because they create places of reference. The Verdon canyon is a good example of such a famous place. It owes its symbolic power within the rock-climbing community to its spectacular cliffs, to its history, which rests on exceptional sport performances and key cultural developments, and to prominent images of the area. In the Verdon, when I asked rock climbers what had brought them there for the first time, the answers frequently contained adjectives such as "mythical", "famous" and "historical". In several cases, the reputation was given as an explanation in itself, as with Tim: "Because it's super famous! I don't know, yeah, it's like, it's one of those places, you have to be there once in a lifetime pretty much, at least." Two different pairs of climbers elaborated a little more and cited among the "big names" that of Patrick Edlinger, a key influence in popularising both rock climbing and the Verdon in the early 1980s, through films (Janssen 1982, 1983) depicting the climber's lifestyle along with spectacular climbing sequences. The importance of strong visual impressions is evident in the vocabulary used by the interviewees to describe the power of this place's appeal: Martin and Gabriel mention "the grey" (in reference to the dominant colour of the cliffs), the "beauty of the rock" and the "grandiose atmosphere".

Of course, the sport sites' cultural construction has a material reality: The Verdon's reputation has attracted many rock climbers from around the world and has strongly structured the (modest) development of the area around the activity of rock climbing (Mao et al. 2003). Media practices, by carrying positive values through images, discourses and stories, have played a significant role in the

material appropriation by the climbing community. While the spread of media content accounts for part of the places' symbolic value, the physical practice also contributes to actualise these meanings. By travelling there, staying there and climbing in the cliffs, the climbers experience and rethink their own conceptions; in the eyes of others, their bodily presence and their specific sport actions confirm the identity of the place. This is particularly visible in the Verdon, where viewpoints along a scenic road offer non-climbing tourists the chance to watch climbers emerge from the deep ravine; and by producing the images themselves and circulating them, climbers reproduce, perpetuate or transform the representations. Lamont (2014), using the case of cycling tourists on the Tour de France's roads in the French Alps, shows how a place's mythical status is validated through physical experience and expressed through discursive categories of authenticity or even sacredness. He also shows that these global representations draw their power from the intense joy they provide when put into action and, eventually, from the images shot during these meaningful moments and shared afterwards. Martin and Gabriel shared with me pictures and comments that demonstrate the same kind of relations with the Verdon and also with Yosemite. During the interview, they explicitly stated their personal appropriation of the myth of Yosemite prior to visiting it. They went there and captured spectacular pictures of themselves climbing cliffs. They found intense pleasure in the environment's exceptionality (Gabriel: "Arriving on one of the most aesthetic and most exposed summits I've ever known") and in its mythical value (Martin's comment on Figure 1: "The myth finally within reach of our hands"). They shared these pictures, that they count among their dearest memories, with a pride they do not try to conceal.



*Figure 1: Martin and Gabriel at the foot of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park, US. Source: M. Berthelot*

Ness (2011), in her study of meaning-making processes in Yosemite, offered to go beyond the “representationalist-constructivist bias”, which is the belief that landscape meanings are the result of public, conventional symbolisms. While acknowledging that place symbolisms are internalised (“inward” meaning-making), she also shows that the bodily act of climbing itself produces spontaneous, “unmediated”, “outward” meanings. The value of such an analysis lies in its emphasis on freedom, spontaneity and pre-conscious processes in

the constitution of places' significations. In particular, it may challenge a view of professional media representations as hegemonic. However, as soon as the meanings processed at an individual level are expressed through a medium and shared, these meanings enter the global sphere of the collective constitution of understandings and symbolisms. For instance, Martin and Gabriel have no authority regarding the representations of Yosemite, a US national symbol and rock-climbing mecca, since they are French, non-elite climbers and do not engage in any media coverage. However, they did partake in the collective constitution of Yosemite's meanings through sharing their personal pictures. Social media and other technologies that facilitated the handling of pictures probably helped bridge the gap between the authoritative and lay practices of meaning-making.

These media practices not only contribute to collective understandings of places or landscapes but also negotiate the collective understanding of the sport participant's identity and the sense of community (McCormack 2018). Social media, in particular, are one of the main spaces of self-presentation. Within outdoor sport communities, "profile pictures" often display the individual's body in action in a natural environment. Such representations forge close ties between socially valued personality features and terrains of practice. Indeed, they embody the skilful negotiation of risk, the aesthetics of the functional body and an intimate connection with the natural environment. Martin and Gabriel offer an explicit illustration of this with Martin's picture of Gabriel (Figure 2) and comments made during the interview that seem directly related to such pictures: "We also stage ourselves a little bit, so that means we give in to the





*Figure 2: On the “Snake Dike” route on Half Dome’s south face, Yosemite. Source: G. Moncaubeig*

common temptation of heroism. So yeah, like, “Oh fuck, it’s exposed, take a picture of me...!”

Based on this material, media practices may be interpreted as ways of creating and sustaining shared aesthetics, symbols and stories among the participants in outdoor sports, especially regarding places and ways to act in these places – in other words, the spatialities of the practice. In line with Schatzki, such frames of thought and action may be called “teleoaffectivities”, that is, an association of ends and emotions (Schatzki 2002, p. 80). Teleoaffectivities are the

“desired horizons” of a practice; the concept is one way of explaining the normativity of practice: how shared understandings lead to similar actions. In tourism and in sport subcultures, teleoaffectivities are heavily loaded with place symbolisms and hedonic values, which media practices contribute to establishing and transmitting in the form of appealing images and promises of pleasure. But in a theory of practice, teleoaffectivities must be viewed as engaged in the course of action and always in specific contexts; relatedly, media representation must be understood as the focus of constant work by the actors rather than distant images and discourses determining motives and desires. Media practices build a sphere of immaterial, discursive relations concurrently with tourist mobilities and sport movements. And one of the elements of criticism of media practices is that they substitute an alternative world of such relations to the physical experience. My observations show that, rather than being a substitute, media practices support and complement the sport and travelling experience (Thorpe 2017), make it possible to share experience and conceptions of the activity and, in some cases, may be a *continuation* of outdoor sport tourism outside the timespaces of the physical sport practice, e.g. at home or off-season. Some interviewees underscore how important it is for them to “daydream” about their sport and travels when they cannot be away or outside. Apart from holidays, Vivien, who lives in Belgium, has almost no opportunity to fly, and he explains his habits of reading and watching paragliding media as follows: “since I don’t fly much during the year, I need to feed myself with paragliding.” Michel, who is also Belgian, jokes with his wife, Martine, about his imaginary climbing during winter months:

Martine: All winter long, he reads the guidebooks, he dreams about doing this and that, that’s true...

Michel: I climb much more in winter than in summer, you know!



## 5.2. Encoding terrains into playgrounds

Outdoor sport tourism is a highly specialised geographical practice as it is grounded in a specific knowledge and reading of the terrain corresponding to the modalities of a sport practice. To be shared and accessed in efficient ways, such information needs to be “encoded” in an adequate vocabulary and/or adequate media repre-

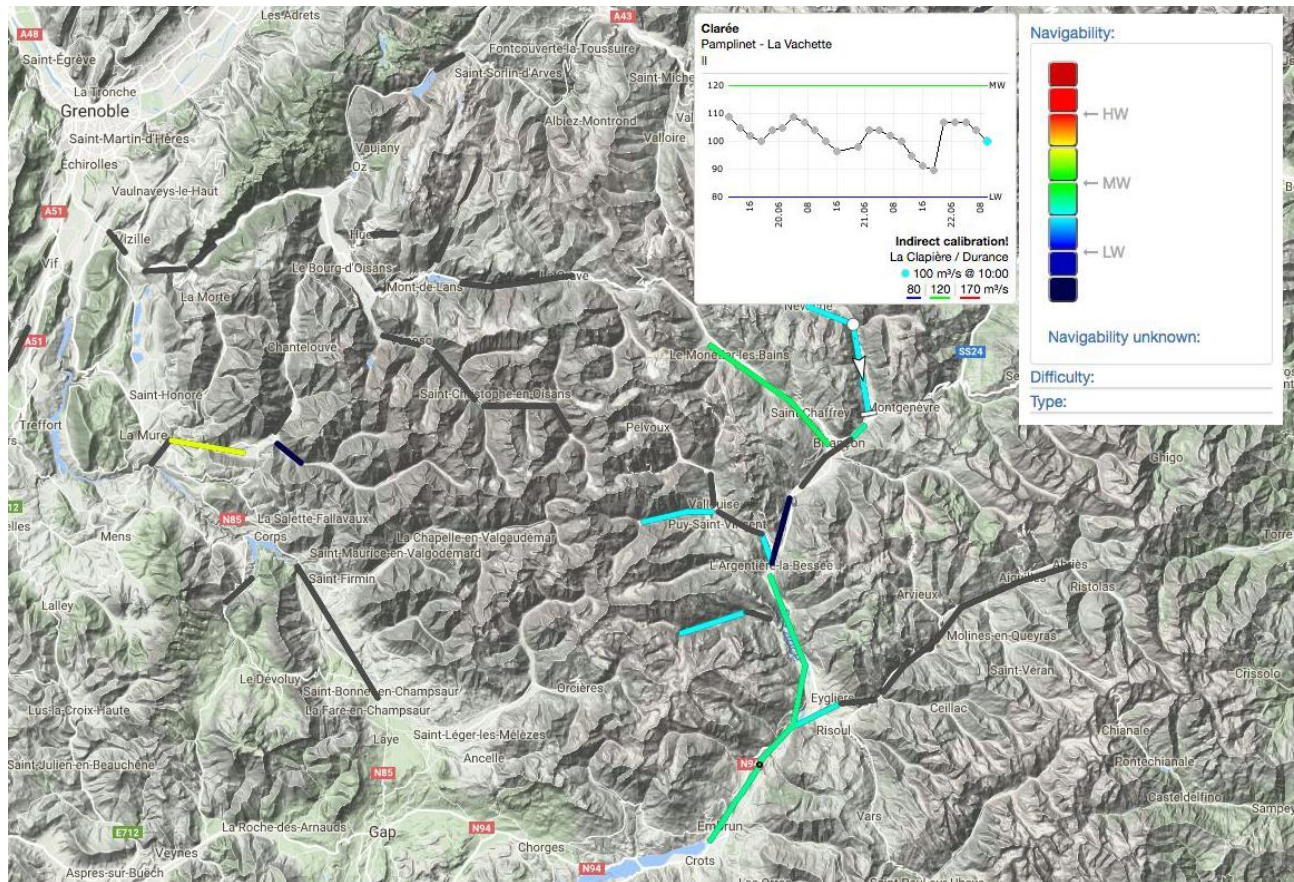


Figure 3: The state of some rivers in the Hautes-Alpes on 22 June 2017, as seen on rivermap.ch. Example of reading: The River Clarée currently flows at 100 m<sup>3</sup>/s. This river’s navigability is between medium and low, and has been the same for the few past days. Licence CC-BY-SA. Thus, a part of media practices in outdoor sport tourism may be analysed as an encoding/decoding of the terrain.



On a global scale, such information may be shared through online platforms. Among the main media tools used by the people I interviewed are online “topoguides” and reports on weather and other conditions. Rivermap (see Figure 3) is one example of such a tool. It is not a comprehensive guide for kayaking routes but focuses on displaying a precise set of data, namely *water levels*. It aggregates a large set of public data from different countries and regions – in particular, measures from hydro-electrical companies. The main aim is to display rapidly changing geographical information (river levels) on a base map by using an efficient visualisation: colour lines on the river sections and easy-to-read charts of water level variation. Part of the contextual information is provided on a collaborative basis: the geographical coordinates of the routes (start and end of river sections), the name of the river, the grade of difficulty etc. Other complementary information or sources of information may be added to each river section, such as links to a description of the route, temporary obstacles or hazards, video footage of a kayak run. Indeed, although it is useful to have a quick, multiple-scale glance at this essential indicator (water levels), it is only one part of the information needed to find kayaking routes and practice them. Such a website is generally supplemented by other sources, mainly guidebooks or “topoguides” in paper or digital format,<sup>8</sup> which provide a more thorough description of the river: additional information about put-in/take-out (embarkation/disembarkation) points, features of the river, infrastructure etc. These platforms may be described as “spatial media”; these technological developments, built on the digital processing and displaying of geographical information, are “increasingly intrinsic to how it is that places/spaces are accorded variable importance” (Leszczynski 2015, pp. 745–746). For outdoor sport practices among others, they greatly contribute to make our spatialities increasingly mediated. The concept of “spatial media” is a way to undermine the description of such technologies as “‘virtual’-‘real’ spatial hybrids”, and to acknowledge “spatiality [...] as always-already mediated” (Leszczynski 2015, p. 729).

The micro-geographies of the body in the biophysical environment are also a significant focus of media practices. There are

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8 For instance, [eauxvives.org](http://eauxvives.org) and [kajaktour.de](http://kajaktour.de).

means of expressing skilled, embodied relationship to the terrain – visual means, in particular. A whole field of media practices is built around certain technologies, principally the combination of light mobile devices and online sharing platforms – the iconic brands being GoPro and YouTube. Video footage may be used, for example, when preparing a climb, flight or river run. Fabrice, a climber and mountaineer, says he frequently searches the Internet for videos of ascents he plans to do: “it’s reassuring, but sometimes I’ve told myself it’s not good because you don’t discover, sometimes I’ve watched the climb and I could almost bluff someone and tell him I’ve done this ascent.” Once again, despite the usefulness of this pre-visualisation technique, it is criticised for potentially reducing the first-hand physical experience. Several interviewees explained how they use their own first-person video footage to reflect on their practice and learn from their own mistakes. For instance, Jérôme, Valentin and Gabriel discuss using GoPros while kayaking:

V: It’s mainly to watch in the evening. Like later, we’re going to watch what we did today, look at the passages...

J: [...] The things today, the mistakes, I’m sure it’s this damn left hand that threw me in the hole...

G: Yeah you clearly see all the mistakes you make.

Didier has a similar habit: He records all his paragliding flights on video, not only to improve his technique but also to “re-enjoy the flight”. It seems, then, that such videos are viewed as particularly realistic and immersive representations of the outdoor sports experience. It allows access to precise details of the body’s movements, some of which might even be unconscious or uncontrolled during the action. It may also provide a part of the pleasure of the lived experience through the visual impressions and some other sensorial or emotional evocations of the bodily relation to the environment. In that perspective, wearable or “action” cameras have been a crucial innovation (Evers 2016; Thorpe 2016).

### 5.3. *Communicating and coordinating spatialities*

As can be seen, media practices are involved in multiple instances of conceptual, as well as pragmatic, understanding of environments of outdoor sport tourism; in other words, they are a key element in defining the spatialities of this leisure practice. Media practices do not only have a representational role to play as a distant, informational reproduction of reality; this is a misconception at the root of many negative views of media practices. In the framework of a theory of practice, they should rather be conceived as central means of *communication* and *coordination* of practice, as defined by Thévenot (2006, p. 6):

[Communication] designates the variety of ways of putting things in common: through the movement of a body communicated to the other it embraces, through the opening of a room communicating with another. The notion of communication then becomes more concrete, more material and plural, than its narrow informational meaning implies.<sup>9</sup>

In that sense, communication is the basis of social action and phenomena: Communication happens whenever we take something out of the strictly individual realm. *Coordination* designates all the ways of establishing schemes of interaction—orders, but orders always viewed as doubtful and problematic, relying on the whole set of communications and not only on rules, formal hierarchies and agreements (Thévenot 2006, p. 12). Coordination concerns interactions not only between actors but also between the actor and his or her environment (*idem*).

As illustrated above, outdoor sports are coordinated activities in that they rely on conventions on how to move in a specific environment. Since they take place in non-standardised and sometimes rapidly changing environments, they have always relied on geographical conventions of representation. Recent technological

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9 Personal translation. “Le terme [communication] désigne des façons diverses de rendre commun : par le mouvement d’un corps communiqué à l’autre qu’il étreint, par la liaison d’une pièce qui communique avec une autre dans laquelle elle donne. La notion de communication se fait alors plus concrète, matérielle, et plurielle dans ses canaux, que ne l’implique son acception informationnelle étriquée.”

innovations have enhanced and developed the means of *communicating* spatialities of practice: As seen with the example of Rivermap, digital, online, interactive formats make it possible to efficiently aggregate large sets of data, to regularly update them, and to build them in a collaborative way. The same technological developments opened up a field for an efficient communication of grounded, bodily schemes of understanding the environments and movements of practice; in that sense, media practices are closer than ever to physical practice. The contemporary flourishing of self-shot pictures and videos may, therefore, be interpreted as the expression of a renewed interest in a bodily aware communication of practices. In it, participants often find precious material to develop their own practice or simply the pleasure of sharing or recognising enjoyable modes of body–environment coordination. Such media practices are collective (Laurier 2015) in that they refer to and actualise common ways of enjoying places, landscapes and movements.

## 6. Conclusion

As a practice of the body, of nature and of immersion, outdoor sports tourism is particularly likely to attract criticism about media practices being disembodied, artificial and isolating. My research showed that such critical views are undoubtedly common among participants in this leisure practice. These views are, however, far from being universal, and the participants' discourses show, in general, a more nuanced consideration of the multiple ways in which media practices are integrated to outdoor sport projects and actions: media practices help building aesthetics of the sport environment; they may become tools supporting and improving the skilled bodily practice; they are instrumental in connecting people around shared practical understandings of space. I do not want to suggest that there is a natural and frictionless integration of technological innovations in practices of leisure, nor that the evolution of outdoor sport tourism is now and forever linked to the evolution of media practices. Rather, I suggested here that leisure practices have

their own specific ways of appropriating media and technologies; tools and uses are defined in relation to particular needs and aspects of the practice. This is precisely what the conceptualisation of media as practices allows to grasp: how media content and uses are embedded in contexts, in practices where media are not necessarily an end in itself. Here, the specific context of outdoor sport tourism, its specific values, needs and constraints account for a large part of the reluctance to or acceptance of media practices. On the individual level, viewing certain media practices as hindrance to or enhancement of outdoor sport practices equates to attributing different sets of values to those media practices within a more general project of action. And on the collective level, media practices are essential for defining the frames of such projects of action—expectations, values and understandings related to codified physical movement in the biophysical environment, in the case of outdoor sport tourism. The approach of the geography of practice also helps to discern the importance of media practices within this specific leisure practice: this approach moves the discussion away from the dichotomy of virtual against physical relationship to the environment and acknowledges the full diversity of spatialities that are at stake in outdoor sport tourism practices. These spatialities indeed involve aesthetics and representations, affects and perceptions and physical contacts and material resources.

Hence, this chapter contributes to the science of digitally and informationally mediated social life, a social science that fully tackles the contextualisation of technologies and representations in human action. To that end, geography has an important role in spatially grounding technologies that may seem detached from materiality; and studies of bodily-focused practices, such as sport practices, can be instrumental in recognising the interlocking of the conceptual-informational sphere and the bodily-material one.

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