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Anthropology of the Crowd, Blog 10

Magen Stempin

Virginia Commonwealth University



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Homo sapiens on Bikes

Analyzing the crowd at the 2015 UCI Road World Championship, one timed trial at a time.

<https://rampages.us/msbikerace15/>

Magen Stempin

One

September 27, 2015

It's the eve of the last day of the 2015 UCI Road World Championship, so I should probably get started on this.



Above: the reason I've been walking a mile to work every day this week.

The UCI Road World Championship is kind of a big deal. It's the top road bicycling race in the world and along with the Tour de France and Giro d'Italia makes up the Triple Crown of Cycling. If the Tour de France is the Kentucky Derby of cycling, the Road World Championship is the Preakness Stakes — not the most widely attended of the three races and nobody really cares unless they're a dedicated fan of the sport. It's also a rich man's sport.

Going into the week, I knew somewhere in the back of my mind that cycling wasn't a cheap sport. The bicycles run anywhere from \$5k – \$15k. I didn't fully remember this until we were on the ground and didn't see a single person of color for the first hour or two. Before the race, I just sort of generally assumed “people” would show up and didn't think about how “people” would be defined, though whether or not that's a product of my white privilege remains to be figured out in later self-reflection.



That bike alone is worth a semester of tuition.

Because cycling is a rich man's sport, it only takes about five minutes of standing at the start/finish line to notice that everyone's American or European — in other words, white. There were maybe a handful of people from Asia. With the exception of the entire country of Eritrea turning out in support the Friday of the nine day race, every black / African-American person my group spoke to was from Richmond.

One of my group members asked why the crowd skewed so white during our first day of interviews. I said it was because of money.

Countries with higher GDPs have more extraneous cash and greater flexibility to throw money at things like sports. Sports like ice hockey and gymnastics and dance, where costs are high for the competitors, tend to attract fans who could, in theory, afford to have their own children participate. My younger brother has been playing ice hockey for years — his player fee alone is nearly \$2,000, never mind replacing various equipment and the bundles of cash my parents inevitably end up shelling out every season on gas, food, and hotel rooms for games and tournaments. The average family living in Carver or Jackson Ward is more than likely not going to be able to afford that, even if the player got a scholarship to waive the player fee.



This is the face of someone who great benefits from New Zealand having a GDP value of \$41,500.

The crowd also skewed older (with a few exceptions) and that took me a little bit longer to realize why, though it should've been obvious. It's a money thing. This is the second year that the Road Worlds have been held in the States since the inception of the race in 1921. (The first time was in Colorado Springs, Colorado in 1986.) Every other year,

the event has been held somewhere else in the world. Usually Europe, though it started branching out to the Americas roughly 40 years ago. It makes sense, then, that the crowd would skew older — people in their 50s, 60s, 70s would be the ones with the money (and time!) to fly to America for a week and a half to watch a bunch of people ride bicycles in loops around a city. The only real exception to this was the day VCU encouraged what few students stuck around to come out for a “The Worlds at VCU” day.

Let’s fact it. Richmond should’ve ditched their marketing campaign of “The World Comes to Richmond” in favor of “A Bunch of Rich Anglophones & Europeans Come to Richmond”.

Two

October 5, 2015

As I mentioned in the previous post, a certain demographic stuck out at me as my group and I went about collecting data. Older middle age, well-off to wealthy, white (and mostly European) men seemed to be the norm for locals and tourists alike. I went into some detail about that in my last post, positing guesstimates about why that might be, but looking overall at the big picture, in terms of “welcoming the world” well, the world didn’t really show up.



I mean, unless you think the world is majority white, like what my group's skin tone photos might have you believe.

If we go by the statistics of where people currently live as a generalized marker of the world, the world population is actually majority Asian — 61% (4.4 billion) of the world's population lives in Asia* with the Han Chinese population clocking in at 18% (1.3 billion) as the largest represented group**. The next three largest represented populations broken down by specific ethnic groups are the Hindustani (12% or 890 million)**, Arabs (5.8% or 420 million)***, and Bengalis (4.4% or 320 million)**.



Yumi Kujihara, Japan's fourth place biker. Credit: UCI [China]

For comparison, my group talked to two people from Asia — a study abroad student from China spending the semester at VCU and a full-time VCU student who'd moved from the Philippines to the United States when she was younger. We didn't find anyone not related to the university in the crowd who'd come from Asia or identified with an Asian ethnic group. This alone should be indication that the spectators present at the UCI Worlds is not indicative of the population.

Eight Asian countries competed — Singapore, Qatar, Lebanon, Japan, Mongolia, South Korea, Israel, and Thailand — and none of them medalled; Japan came the closest, with a biker placing fourth in the Junior Women's Road Race, but she was the only racer to come in at the Top Ten in any event of the six countries.****

Africa comes in with the world's second largest population at 15% (1.1 billion).* And yet, similarly, of the handful of black spectators my group interviewed, two came from Africa (but now currently live in DC) and the rest came from the Richmond area. Had it not been for the very passionate Eritrea fans (due to cycling being a national sport***** and that it's the first time any kind of national Eritrean team has been in the States*****), representation of African or African-descendant fans would've been far and few with only the locals of Richmond lending their numbers to any kind of representation (the city is 50.6% Black or

African American, non-Hispanic*****). Africa herself lent five countries — Rwanda, Eritrea, Morocco, South Africa, and Zimbabwe — and, like Asia, none of them medalled, with South Africa placing the highest and only biker in the Top Ten of any race (fourth in men's junior timed trials).****

Keagan Girdlestone, the racer from South Africa who placed fourth. Credit: KG's personal website.

And yet the majority of people we spoke to were (white) North Americans, (white) Europeans, and (white) Oceania (Australia and New Zealand). Respectively, those groups account for 4.9% (353.4 million), 10% (740.7 million), and 0.5% (38.6 million) [roughly 15% or 1.13 billion] of the world's population* and they were represented by 44 of the 76 registered national teams and solo cyclists****. Together, the three regions are equivalent to the world's African population, but that requires combining the numbers of three separate regions — on their own, none of them really hold a candle to Africa's numbers.

Underrepresented in Asia and Africa and heavily skewed towards white Anglophone and Francophone countries across the globe, it's safe to say that, with numbers to back it up, the crowd at the UCI Worlds isn't truly representative of the World. If you want to read into my theorizing why, [you can find that here](#).

* — Population Reference Bureau, 2014

** — CIA Factbook, 2014

*** — Conglomerate of latest national censuses

**** — 2015 UCI Road World Championships Wikipedia

***** — TesfaNews

***** — Cycling Weekly

***** — US Census, 2010

Three

October 5, 2015

Part of my group's tasks was to interview sixty unrelated individuals and collect various data on them — where they were from, their native language, what they thought of the race on a broad, general scale, etc. As a whole, when my group met in larger numbers, we tended to gather more interviews. On our own or just with another person, it was fewer. Our first day looked something like this:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
Subject Number	What is your location?	Did you introduce yourself and ask permission to use their data?	Sex (M/F)	Age	First language	Country of origin	Cheer type (recordings are fine)	Did you submit their THREE WORDS using the WORD FORM?	Sociocultural/linguistic data (group choice)	Skin color RGB value (save picture, use ColorZilla)	Biometric data (group choice)
1	Marshall & 5th	Yes	M	57	English	USA	Quiet observation	Yes	3000 miles		Gray
2	Broad & 2nd	Yes	M	74	Italian	USA	"Hup hup hup!"	Yes	1600 miles		White
3	Broad & 9th	Yes	F	51	English	New Zealand	"Go go gol!"	Yes	8700 miles		Brown
4	Broad & 12th	Yes	M	45	English	USA	Clapping	Yes	10 miles		Black
5	Broad & 6th	Yes	M	43	English	USA	Clapping	Yes	1/8 mile		Light brown
6	Broad & 8th	Yes	F	34	English	USA	"Whoo!"	Yes	8 miles		Brown
7	Broad & 7th	Yes	F	26	English	USA	"Whoo!" & clapping	Yes	25 miles		Blonde
8	Broad & 7th	Yes	F	29	English	USA	"Whoo!" & clapping	Yes	20 miles		Brown
9	Broad & 7th	Yes	M	64	Dutch	Netherlands	Yelling	Yes	300 miles		Gray
10	Broad & 7th	Yes	M	69	Italian	Italy	Duct tape art	Yes	350 miles	#FFC995	Gray
11	Laurel & Franklin	Yes	M	23	English	USA	Clapping	Yes	3/5 mile	#F3B8F8	Brown
12	Laurel & Franklin	Yes	F	20	English	USA	"Whoo!"	Yes	1/2 mile	#EDB8D8	Brown

My group walked four miles for five hours for these twelve interviews. So, y'know, it was physically more than I what I thought I was signing up for.

As with anything involving voluntarily talking to strangers, things were a bit awkward at first, but once we started warming up, it got easier. It's important to be relaxed and sure of yourself — people caught on right away if we were nervous or uncomfortable, which came across in our first couple of interviews. After that, we fell into a routine where one person got the subject's attention and asked permission while another person or two conducted the interview and a fourth took a photo of the upper arm for the skin tone portion of our data.

I will say the whole thing felt awkward. It never felt natural, much as we were able to fake it, and that's something we're currently discussing in my methods class, how official interviews have a tone of formality to them that usual conversation doesn't. We found out more interesting things about the subjects through the side conversations we had in the course of the interview than anything they gave us as answers to our questions. But being more informal in a situation like that requires training that can't be given in one or two class meetings before being let out on the ground, so in this case, formal interviews was the best way to go to include any and everyone taking the class.

Four

October 7, 2015

Talking to strangers is not my forte — I'm more comfortable if I'm approached or if conversation just springs up naturally. For me, the hardest part of collecting data was not only initiating conversations with strangers, it was appearing calm and comfortable while I was doing it. To me, that felt like it was important because people would be more willing to answer questions and be thoughtful and honest if the interviewer was open and relaxed since the interviewer sets the tone of the whole thing. For me, being comfortable the hardest part, but I think I was relatively successful, so it was all good in the end anyway.

Five

October 7, 2015

In terms of asking different kinds of questions to gather more data, there's a couple things I wish I could've been able to go into more detail about:

- **Languages spoken** — Because the UCI Worlds draws so many different kinds of people, not only do you get a variety of languages spoken, you find people who speak multiple languages. People who come from anywhere outside America tend to speak at least two languages — their native tongue and English — and finding out how many languages (and which) a person spoke would've been fascinating because I'm just generally interested in knowing how people can communicate.
- **Thoughts on Richmond** — A couple of people touched base on this, but I'm curious to know what the tourists thought of it. You develop your own opinion of a place when you live in it for any length of time and you often forget your true initial assumptions if it's a place you moved to. Hearing outsiders' opinions would've been interesting.
- **Home & travel** — I'm always fascinated by people's stories of travel — where they've gone and what they've seen and how it

compares to home for them (which often times is far different from what I know or assume). Getting to that level of a conversation would've taken time, though, so it would've meant more time on the ground (after already spending a lot of time there) or fewer people to interview (which was not something I could control).

Six

October 7, 2015

Did VCU have to be so intent on sending students home?

It seemed, in the month between the start of the semester and the UCI Worlds, that VCU was actively pushing for students to go home over the break. There's nothing super specific about this I can point to; it's just a gut feeling.

Rumors spread far and wide about how many people were coming, conflicting numbers being thrown out by people who thought the one they'd heard was the most accurate. 40.000. 90.000. 400.000. 450.000.

I work (technically) for VCU Police as a Residential Hall Security Guard. There was a lot of talk about traffic and road closures — my building's staff was told to start heading to work upwards of two hours early during the Race since we're on MCV and most of us live on or near MPC. Residents staying on campus during the week had to preregister guests; the email came through looking like a TelegRAM so the few people who do check their emails on a regular basis didn't bother to look. (I spent all week turning away the disgruntled friends and significant others of my residents. Sorry guys. Read your email.)

And then the race came. And we wondered where everyone was.

A lot of campus cleared out. I mean, it felt empty, like the day before Thanksgiving empty. We were told to prepare for hundreds of

thousands of people coming, tourists who would clog up our streets and slow down our takeout/delivery and block all our roads. But life didn't come to a full stop — it was an awkward skidding into an annoying standstill by the last few days. I wasn't completely blocked from getting to work, but RamSafe drivers were sure to (loudly) voice their complaints over having to drop me off even anywhere near downtown when I got off work.

Classes being cancelled was a good call. I think, perhaps, it would've been too crowded if *everyone* had stayed and tried to go to class like normal. Parking for sure would've been a nightmare. But scaring people into making like a tree and leaf-ing was probably too extreme of a reaction. It was nearly always empty up by campus (most of the action was from 5th to Governor's along Broad) and the day VCU tried to hold an event to get students to come out and crowd along Franklin Street it, well, looked like this:



Look at all those people not there.

Seven

October 7, 2015

I think the one aspect of the crowd I found most interesting was how unifying it was. Sure, the majority of people tended to be locals or people relatively close by (within 250 miles or so), but all kinds of nationalities were represented. I noticed that while people were eager to root for their home country's cyclist(s), they were just as quick to cheer on every other cyclist, too. There was a sense that everyone was there because they loved cycling (at least, the diehard fans; some locals were there just because they were curious what all the hype was about) and it translated into an overall love of the sport and rooting for all the bikers — though if your country won, that was pretty sweet, too.