



Communications Breakdown

Usually when an 'old timer' tells a story about "how things used to be", they're talking about a time period say 30 or 50 years ago or more. That's what makes them old timer's. I'm not exactly an old timer, but I'm going to tell you about how things "used to be" when you were a bike racer traveling abroad. The period that I will take you back to is only 15-20 years ago. Back then, 'Globalization' was a buzz word that had just started being tossed around. The Berlin Wall had just been hammered down. Communism was receding, and the US stood poised to take advantage of this 'New World'. It was a truly exciting time to be traveling Internationally. Some things were lacking, however. Communications in particular.

The changes in communication networks over the last 20 years have been staggering. The idea of laying fiber optic cable across the Atlantic Ocean was a pipe dream. Sending video over that cable via code division multiplexing technology seemed as far away as anything depicted in a Star Trek movie. When I landed at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris in February 1991 to begin my professional racing career, I carried in my hand the most important piece of equipment I owned: a fax machine. As I walked out of the airport, I was stopped by Security. "What is that in your hand?", the man asked me in French. "It's a fax machine." I answered. "It looks brand new." he said. "You must come with me. You have to pay tax." He led me back inside the airport where I was written up for entering the country with a brand new fax machine. I was required to pay the equivalent of about \$300 US Dollars to be allowed to leave with the machine. "If you leave France, you can reclaim your tax at the border if you can show them the machine." Two weeks later I collected my \$300 back at the France/Belgium border.

The fax proved indispensable. From my apartment in Belgium I was able to send hand written letters to family and friends instantly. To send three hand-written pages took about five minutes of connection time which cost about \$8.00. I was able to say more in those pages than I could in a five minute phone call. Still, my phone bill was never less than \$800 a month. That was mostly from sending faxes. Talk time was not an option at those prices.

Looking back, those years in the early 90's were the end of the 'romantic' era of communication. When you left for Europe to race your bike, you said goodbye and you meant it. Being homesick was just different, then. It was real and constant. If you wanted to get a dose of Americana you had to go to the movie theater. This lack of options for communicating had a profound effect on an athletes ability to even exist in Europe for more than 10 days at a time. The number of Americans that were spending 6 or 8 months at a stretch in Europe could be counted on two hands. There were extremely talented riders in the United States at that time that simply would not go to Europe to race. The disconnect for them was unbearable. Some of those riders had the physical ability to ride with the top racers in the World. If the communication network and tools that we have at our fingertips today were in place, their racing careers would have been dramatically different.

Today, if you travel to Europe you have a plethora of options to be in touch with whoever

you want to be. Real time. More amazingly, it's practically free. One \$800 bill that I used to burn every month sending hand written letters can buy you a laptop, an iPhone, and a years worth of high-speed wireless internet access. Those items will be transported out of an airport in Europe without raising an eyebrow from security. As soon as you land your wireless carrier has identified you and made it possible to make or receive International calls, send IM's to people, and get your email. Before you make it through Customs you're completely connected to the World you left behind. It's as if all of your friends and family are traveling with you hip side.

The latest technology to converge and go viral is Twitter. Curious about the daily doings of any professional rider? Just follow them on Twitter. Even if you don't know someone you can effectively be made aware of what they are doing via an instant SMS message sent to your cell phone. Something as mundane as "Just finished todays ride. Having a coffee in Milan." is Tweeted out to all of a racers followers, wherever they may be. Some athletes have hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter. That means that a short message like that, sent from their mobile device, one time, costs Twitter about \$3,000 in carrier fees (given approx. 200,000 followers). If that athlete 'Tweets' eight times in a day, Twitter racks up about \$24, 000 in fees, that day. I mention this not to poke holes in Twitter's business model, but it is dumbfounding that there is a company out there that is willing to burn \$35,000,000 every six months in order to provide such a service. Use it while you can. It may not be around in another six months. There will always be another one, though. The progress that has been made over these last 15 years has forever altered the 'International' experience.

If a person is immersed in YouTube, FaceBook, MySpace, Skype or Oovoo, it doesn't matter where on Earth they are. Their evening is spent watching what they want and hanging out with their friends the same as if they were living right down the street. That makes spending an evening recovering from a cold, rainy 200km race in Belgium a lot more bearable than if all you have to get back to is your wood stove, dim light, Jack Kerouac book, pen, paper and fax machine. Romantic? Heck yeah. For a day or two.

It's easy to take all of these new luxuries for granted. If I hadn't struggled at every step to make use of every new technology to come along to be able to stay in touch with people, I would probably take it for granted, too. I am overjoyed that I can travel to far off places and the people that I communicate with daily wouldn't know that I left the country if I didn't tell them. Spending time in Europe is a breeze, today. Had I been able to enjoy the inexpensive, high-bandwidth World that has become 'normal' for us, I'm sure that my racing career would have been different, too. I don't think it would have necessarily been better. Parts of it would have been considerably easier. Less expensive, too. I'm glad that I was living abroad during those last years of the romantic era of communication. If for nothing else than that I can now be an old timer before my time.

Because of the advances in communications technology, Paul Willerton can write from his home in Oregon or anywhere else, for that matter. You can read more from him at defect.com/blog.