



# Traffic News On Radio

*News on the latest traffic jams may not be a DJ's idea of glamorous radio, but traffic news is vitally important for many listeners, especially in urban and built up areas. So much so that a range of services have sprung up to cater for stations' traffic news. Jonathan Heasman and Marc Maes take a look at the situation in the UK and Belgium.*

**M**ark Flanagan, MD at Fox FM/Oxford, believes that after music, traffic news is one of the most important reasons for listeners to tune in to a particular station.

"We do travel bulletins every 10 minutes on our breakfast show, using information from the AA Roadwatch and from our own helicopter 'The Flying Fox.' Oxford has particular traffic problems with a very badly congested ring road, so traffic news is a very important part of our service."

*"Traffic and weather services are perceived by advertisers as being important to listeners. Whether that is actually true or not, doesn't really matter,"*

Mark Flanagan,  
MD Fox FM/Oxford

At Birmingham-based BBC Radio West Midlands, managing editor Peter Davies thinks the importance of traffic news is often exaggerated in the radio industry, "After all, research shows that most people listen in their homes rather than their cars."

However, he admits that in big metropolitan areas like the West Midlands, with its extensive motorway network, traffic is an important part of the radio station's public service provision.

Before taking up his current position at Fox FM, Mark Flanagan was MD of a small station in Aylesbury, Mix 96. He argues that even in more rural areas traffic news can still be a major selling point for a station, "Providing really local travel news is one way a small station can develop a niche and stand out from larger regional stations which are playing a similar type of music."

Flanagan also thinks that weather news can sometimes be undervalued by stations. "It's further down the list of listener's priorities compared to travel, but it's still very important. A lot of stations take a broadly based regional forecast and don't pay enough attention to getting more accurate local forecasts."

In the commercial sector, Flanagan recognises that both travel and weather reports have an added importance by

acting as a magnet for sponsorship. "Traffic and weather services are perceived by advertisers as being important to listeners. Whether that is actually true or not, it doesn't really matter—we are working in a business where the perception is the reality."

Meanwhile, at Belgian pubcaster the BRTN, head of the traffic news desk René Gijsenberg sees traffic as a "very important service to our audience."

"We were the first in Flanders to include traffic information 17 years ago." And although the station has no obligation to cover traffic problems, it works closely with the local and national police and traffic assistance organisations to provide as good a service as possible. "We are continuously looking for ways of improving the service," he adds. "As we have no separate traffic channel, we have to do our best to include the

information between our normal programmes."

In May this year the BRTN signed a deal with traffic assistance organization Wegenhulp, whose Touring Mobilis project collects, collates and edits reports from Belgian drivers and passes them on to BRTN and private network Bel RTL.

"Initially we received a small number of calls, some of them incorrect," says Gijsenbergs. "But now we have some 3,000 regular or occasional callers, each with their individual computer codes. The system is checked regularly and has become a reliable network."

In heavily-congested Antwerp BRTN's Radio 2 has made an extra effort to add more traffic staff to its central police road centre.

"Antwerp is situated at a crossroads of motorways, so traffic information is particularly important," says head of Radio 2 Paul de Meulder. "We air traffic news for the greater Antwerp region between 06:00-08:00 and 17:00-18:00."

Former Radio Contact net VRM has also recognised the need for traffic news, and has hired a former state police agent and sent him out into the city with a car and transmission equipment to keep an eye on traffic developments.

## Tips For Traffic And Weather

UK radio consultant and head of UK Radio Development Mike Powell believes weather forecasts and traffic bulletins can be made more digestible and can help keep listeners tuned in if they are broken up.

"Rather than reading the details out in one long bulletin at the top of the hour, it's better to keep listeners hooked by, say, giving the current conditions and then teasing the fact that you will give the three-day outlook in 10 minutes time."

This hook can help the station achieve its "quarter hour maintenance" which (in the UK) is necessary for (Rajar) audience research.

Concise four or five-word weather summaries can also be effective, he says. "The Americans do it effortlessly," he notes. "Particularly at breakfast and drivetime, the DJ will give a one-line weather summary and the current temperature every time he ID's the station name and frequency."

As far as traffic news is concerned, Powell is a big fan of the airborne approach. "The criticism of these services is that they only relay information which is fed up from the ground. Of course that is true to a certain extent, but these service can also home in on specific trouble spots."

"The main advantage, though, is the glitz they can add to a programme. Radio is primarily theatre, and helicopter spots sound great."

He cautions, though, against the temptations of lengthy hand-overs between the ground-based DJs and the airborne traffic reporter.

"I have a loathing for this kind of broadcasting incest. It slows everything down. We have an obsession in the UK with thanking presenters for everything they do, when they're just doing their job. I think that DJs should get straight in and out of the traffic news, whether it be airborne or from a studio."

Traffic news presentation should also avoid gimmicks and be disseminated in a straightforward manner, he says. "People take traffic news very seriously; they need to be able to understand clearly what is being reported."

Other ways of making traffic news more interesting include involving listeners by creating a jambusters club, through which they can phone in traffic news using their mobile phones.

"Listeners really appreciate it when a station makes that extra little bit of effort."

"A few years ago, when I was MD at County Sound [Guildford] we had a really major set of roadworks on the A31 at the Hogs Back", recalls Powell. "Every morning at 06:30 we would put an ID-ed radio car up there to report on the tailbacks, which was highly visible to the motorists stuck in the queues. The response was fantastic."

## Traffic Services In The UK

*There are five professional traffic news services operating in the UK, using a variety of systems. Here is an overview:*

### ■ AA Roadwatch

Europe's biggest road traffic information service (established in 1973) is offered free by the UK's largest motoring organization, the Automobile Association. Stations can receive voiced reports live from one of Roadwatch's 10 regional broadcast centres, or scripted bulletins for their own presenters to read. Information is gathered from the police, car-callers (a Jambusters Club operates) and AA breakdown patrols. The service is free (excluding the costs of faxes or ISDN lines) provided the AA is given on-air credit. Alternatively an advertising 'contra-deal' can be arranged. Clients include: Virgin Radio, Classic FM, Talk Radio UK, Capital Radio, London News Radio, most BBC local radio stations and many local commercial stations.

### ■ ITN Travel News

Launching early October, this is a new joint venture between ITN (the well-known television and radio news provider) and Traffic Master, which produces in-car traffic information devices. The service will be studio-based and will compile reports using Traffic Master's electronic traffic monitoring technology. This includes sensors which can measure the speed of traffic on 'A' roads and motorways, and electronic devices which can calculate up-to-the-minute journey times for popular routes.

### ■ Metro Networks

Re-launched in April, Metro Networks specialises in providing an airborne service to its client stations. The service is free, financed by 10-second advertisements which run during Metro's traffic reports (although alternative methods of finance are also available). On air, Metro's service can be named however client stations wish Metro also provides an "on the ground" studio-based reporter for each station in addition to their airborne presenters. Clients include: the GWR Group, the EMAP Radio Group, East Anglian Radio, Heart 106.2/London, County Sound Radio/Guildford.

### ■ North East Travel Network (NETN)

A local service launched in March this year. NETN, founded by local broadcaster Les Gunn, provides client stations with a 24-hour service of "ready to read" faxes. Information is obtained from the police and exclusive local contacts. NETN's philosophy is to provide stations with reports of major accidents and incidents as soon as they happen. Clients include: Metro FM/Newcastle, Great North Radio, TFM/Teesside, Sun City 103.4/Sunderland, plus various local newspapers and text services.