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Article by Steven Bochenek

Ah, Toronto traffic management: from a macro-perspective, it's a fascinating *mélange* of animal behavioural theory and MacLuhanesque cybernetic collaboration. From a micro, it's a toxic mix of political ill will and swearing.

Thoroughly familiar with the latter, let's review the former. That is, how does the information flow from the collection technology and between our traffic nerve centre and you, the commuting driver? What infrastructure exists to keep you up to date, how does information flow, and what's around the proverbial bend?

Given how complicated the system is, it actually works rather well. No, really. Stop laughing. Consider. Each municipality has responsibility over its own roads and infrastructure. However the 400 series of highways, which move through the GTA is a provincial responsibility. Hence a whole other set of infrastructure.

First, let's review the City of Toronto's system. The Traffic Management Centre, aka the nerve centre, is at Don Mills and Overlea. That's where Rajnath Bissessar, P. Eng., and Manager of Urban Traffic Control Systems, witnesses and co-conducts a messy symphony of traffic every day with all of us players.

The city's system of traffic-monitoring infrastructure is called RESCU. It includes 869 detector loops embedded in the roadways. Bissessar explained, these "collect speed, volume and occupancy data that is used for incident detection and detecting congestion."

Controller computers securely housed in the field transmit this data continually to his office in Don Mills. When there's important news to pass onto commuters, the RESCU system has 24



Toronto Traffic Management – 703 Don Mills Road.
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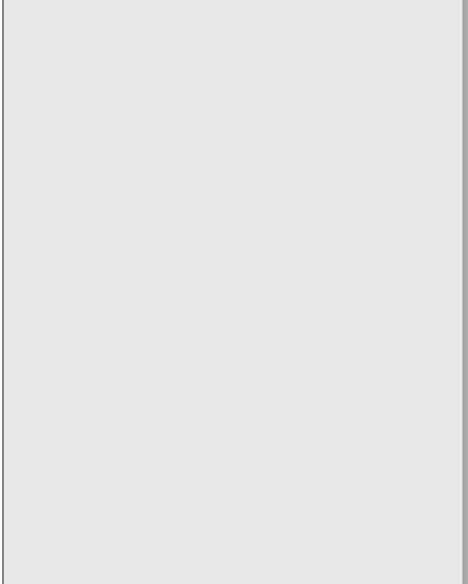
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variable message signs (VMS) at its disposal, 18 of which are usefully portable.

Most helpfully, RESCU has 27 live traffic cameras on the city's most vital arteries – that is, the Don Valley Parkway, Gardiner Expressway, Allen Road, Lake Shore Boulevard – and a couple of signalized intersections. Have a look. Still images are uploaded every three minutes.

<http://www.toronto.ca/rescu/list.htm>



Traffic in Toronto. Click image to enlarge

Bissessar went on to explain how the system works after the loops collect the data. “A computer program processes the data and then provides the location of potential incidents and recommends possible strategies for signing on the VMS.” So, before any human interactivity with the technology, the system is searching out problems and already suggesting how best to tell you.

RESCU's cameras have full pan-tilt-zoom functionality. A camera operator watching on remote monitors “confirms the nature and extent of the incident, reviews the suggested signing strategy and then implements the messages on the VMS.” They also alert emergency services, including police, fire and ambulance crews “to assist in incident response activities.”

If you drove past the VMS, fear not. The operators also “distribute the information to the media for widespread dissemination to the public.” What does that entail?

The Urban Traffic Control Systems office has a subscriber list of media outlets that want to be regularly updated. When something important happens on the city's expressways or Lake Shore, “we issue a Major Incident Report via email to the media.” For a monthly fee, some media outlets have direct access to the RESCU cameras' live feed. Or, like us, other media can simply view the camera feeds on the website.

Which is all fine for the city, but what if the incident happens on the 401? You're in Toronto but here it's a provincial issue. Who updates the media and, ultimately you, now?

Enter the Ontario's Ministry of Transport (MTO) Freeway Traffic Management System, COMPASS. It's managed from MTO's office at Keele and 401. They monitor, alert and direct traffic issues similarly on the 400 series of highways using scores of cameras, which refresh pictures every three to five minutes (http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/traveller/trip/traffic_cameras_list.shtml). The Ministry's site also contains useful traveller information, from winter road conditions to interactive maps.

You'd think there'd be rivalry between or redundancy between the two groups but they seem refreshingly cooperative and complementary.

“There's a recognized greater good,” says GTA traffic legend Cam Woolley, currently a reporter with Toronto news source CP24. Recognize the name? A retired OPP sergeant, Cam (now honestly, is there a better handle for a traffic expert?) is renowned for his colourful reportage on GTA traffic. His knowledge of driver behaviour and Ontario highways is encyclopedic.

Picture Yoda with an emergency band radio.

Woolley's noticed a spirit of community surrounding traffic among all the important players: the teams at COMPASS, RESCU, emergency responders, the media and even commuters. “There may be some political disagreements way up the chain but there's cooperation at the street level.”

So the COMPASS team liaises regularly with their colleagues at RESCU in Toronto, “as the need arises,” says Bissessar. That can include “planning expressway closures, signing strategy (RESCU signs for events on the Ministry expressways that may have an impact on the city's expressways and vice versa) and technical issues. We provide a video feed to the MTO and vice versa.”

Meanwhile on local news TV and radio stations, there's a recognition that people care deeply about traffic and the weather – why else are you still reading this? – because these impact our lives significantly every day. (Example: When I was a student at Ryerson's School of Radio and Television Arts they had us monitor a news station for a day, then break down how much time proportionately was spent on global events versus local traffic. Conclusion? The Middle East is less important than the Santa Claus parade.)

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That cooperation Woolley cites is reflected in the reverse dissemination of information: the media don't hoard traffic facts like an important news scoop. Instead, they have ways of collecting their own extra traffic information and often feed that back to MTO and the City. Bissessar: "Often, media reps will call us about an incident and we provide or exchange information over the phone." In fact, there's a dedicated phone line at the office in Don Mills expressly for these updates from the media.

Woolley's and other media companies integrate easily with COMPASS and RESCU. "We have agreements with MTO and the municipalities." But his organization is constantly collecting information from other sources too. They monitor emergency services radio, transit radio, other frequencies. "We also have some cameras of our own and our helicopter." Plus their sister media outlets are constantly collecting and sharing information. "Many media outlets have a similar system."



Traffic in Toronto. Click image to enlarge

Speaking of monitoring police radio, it's also common these days for police to contact media directly from their cars when there's a major issue. It makes sense for them to exploit the system. Tips to avoid an area don't just make their lives' easier, they can literally save yours. Consider how the police need to keep traffic flowing so other emergency services have accessible routes.

When Woolley started decades ago, the information was fed top-down. Now, he notes how social media are accelerating a convergence between all the players in the traffic information equation, "breaking down the silos. We're getting people tweeting into us where there are no cameras."

Imagine. The city and province have dozens cameras on the major highways but we all have them in our pockets. That means millions, massively increasing the system's reporting power. Until now the social media movement has been grass roots, a loose confederacy of Twitzens, media outlets and civil servants, but you'll see more concrete changes to RESCU within the year.

"Currently, we rely on a traveller information system called TripInfo to provide traffic information for the City's expressways and Lake Shore," says Bissessar. "Given the prevalence of smartphones, the City will be reviewing the usefulness of TripInfo. We will also be looking at providing traffic information via social media within the next four months (Twitter, Facebook, etc.)."

More changes that should improve traffic flow in the city are coming to RESCU. In December 2014, Toronto's 30-year old traffic signaling system will be replaced by the intelligent signaling system, TransSuite.

The same system is currently being implemented in New York to control their 12,000 signals, so our meagre 2,200 should be simple for it to accommodate. Given the billions of dollars in wasted commuters hours that go up in GTA smog every year, its \$25 million price tag sounds like a bargain.

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By **Steven Bochenek**

About Steven Bochenek

Despite being a member of the Automobile Journalists Association of Canada and a member of its house band, the Troubadours, Steven is a veteran marketing writer who came to writing about cars almost by, umm, accident.

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