

Traffic tweeting: Will Twitter change the way we drive?

By Tom Vanderbilt | Updated Monday, April 4, 2011, at 7:07 AM ET

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Will Twitter—and tweets about traffic—change the way we drive?

On an early Friday morning rush hour last month, a Seattle-area web designer named Michael Micheletti was driving his BMW, "check engine" light blazing, to his dealer to be serviced. In some kind of disharmonic convergence, the car gave out a few miles from the dealership—dead in the middle of I-5, one of the nation's busiest corridors. At 7:51 a.m., the following tweet appeared, under the handle "": "That black BMW stalled in the center lane of I-5? Yeah, that's me. Sorry, I don't like it either."

The ensuing traffic jam, as local news outlets noted, attracted some attention in the Twittersphere. The Washington state department of transportation used its feed to counsel drivers—at least those who were on I-5 approaching the BMW and looking at (or listening to) their Twitter feeds, and who happened to be followers of either or , around 15,000 in all—to "give Mike some room." At 8:09 a.m., the denouement was revealed: "Tony from AAA here to help me. I bet my BMW looks really stylish on this tow truck." The epilogue was there on Twitter, too, for those wanting to follow it to the end: Mikeym took a VW Golf and a Subaru Impreza out for test drives, before finally settling on a Hyundai Genesis. (On March 27, he noted: "There are two different people at this Hyundai dealership who drove up in BMWs to do some car-shopping.") He gave the BMW to ("family tradition," he tweeted on March 29).

Given Twitter's particular genius for broadcasting micro-narratives of no particular consequence (Will that friend of yours get on that next flight to Spokane? Oh, will that grocery line ever budge?), it's little surprise that conversation about traffic—the liturgy of complaints, the minor revelations, the rare piece of useful information, the grinding banality of it all, or even the joy of not being in it—is such a staple of the site.

There are the local DOTs or Road Authorities bleating out a stream of salting advisories and local closures, often revealing some small kernel about the nature of a place. Consider , with English officiousness, alerting its followers: "Western Avenue / A40 (Hillingdon): Eastbound direction. Lane one restriction to facilitate cyclic cleaning." Dispatches from self-appointed traffic authorities can be telling too; note this one from : "Qualis and BEST bus in a fight on Southbound Peddar road near the Dominos ... blows being exchanged." Some, like , are simply bots that channel official incident feeds to Twitter.

There are frustrated drivers seeking advice on alternate routes (one driver, in famously congested Caracas, Venezuela, wanted to know when a street was going to clear: "Vía @ : Es imposible salir airoso de la Av. Victoria, roca tarpeya trancada y sta monica ni se diga, hasta cuando?"). There's grumbling about speeding tickets (this Tweet combines that with another hoary topic, waiting in queues: "AWESOME waiting in line @ the courthouse to see if I can get mespeeding ticket reduced... #SMH" — and for the uninitiated, SMH is not shorthand for the Sydney Morning-Herald but "shaking my head"). There are boasts about speeding. Peaches Geldof followed up one such post with, "Just actually experienced a full on car crash." And Argentine racer Marcos Di Palma faced recriminatory legal action when his passenger posted a photo of a speedometer way over the limit. There are people reassuring followers in the wake of crashes or, in the case of wrestler Kurt Angle, pleading their innocence.

And there are even moments that pierce through the noise with their telegraphic power, such as this, from Channel 4 broadcaster : "Tokyo jammed with traffic: we crawling north by car to nuclear excusion zone and to Sendai fromm the air ghastly: what awaits us on ground?"

Twitter provides a kind of a metaphysical traffic report, probing not just road conditions but the heretofore unconnected, if jammed together, society of the road. In one sense, this is strikingly appropriate: Twitter founder Jack Dorsey, as Vanity Fair has noted, was "fascinated by the haiku of taxicab communication—the

way drivers and dispatchers succinctly convey locations by radio." The service he proposed would bring that to everyone, enabling "a missing human element to the digital picture of a pulsing, populated city."

Similarly, as a kind of samizdat language of the road, the tweets about traffic evoke an earlier, now largely forgotten form—CB radio—which is associated with truckers but once had a kind of underground network of users among everyday drivers. In Kenneth Tynan's masterful mid-1970s profile of Johnny Carson, there's a moment where the talk-show host tells the playwright he ripped the CB radio out of his car: "I just couldn't bear it—all those sick anonymous maniacs shooting off their mouths." Tynan, in a passage that anticipates the Internet (and Twitter), wrote: "I understand what he means. Most of what you hear on CB radio is either tedious (truck drivers warning one another about speed traps) or banal (schoolgirls exchanging notes on homework), but at its occasional—and illegal—worst it sinks a pipeline to the depths of the American unconscious."

Content aside, there are two main problems with traffic tweeting. The first is that, as with regular traffic reports, one's chances of receiving useful information are slim and depend on getting the right piece of data in the right place at the right time. (For one thing, most traffic info Twitter feeds have what must be a mere fraction of the area's drivers as followers.) When traffic inquiries are specific, Twitter can actually be useful—my Twitter network, for example, often features cyclists inquiring about the state of the Brooklyn-Manhattan bridge crossings after snow has fallen. (Others use the service as the latest way to broadcast "speed trap" locations.) But one has an infinitely greater chance of learning about a stalled vehicle by seeing it than by reading about it on Twitter.

Which brings us to the other massive problem: To be reading tweets about traffic, or sending tweets complaining about traffic, is to be diverting significant amounts of attention from the task at hand. The crash of a distracted driver creates more traffic than the tweets of a DOT reduce it (which raises the question of whether state traffic authorities should be in the tweeting business at all). It does seem a bit odd that while the government bans texting while driving, its own state agencies send out alerts to be read on a handheld device; the agencies protest the tweets are meant to be read before a motorist hits the road.

Of course, there are plenty of times when it's relatively safe to tweet while in your car; say, when you're in a stalled BMW on I-5. I prefer to read traffic tweets at my desk, where they read like a ticker tape of the transport stream, a secret window into the life of a city (one that I'm glad to take in from a safe remove). I'll punch in, say, "Lagos traffic" and read of epic congestion—"Whats wit today's traffic? Is anything special happening in Lagos cos evrywhere seems to be blocked. Na wa o!" (that last roughly translating to a kind of incredulous "OMG!")—noting with some curiosity that even though people in Lagos tweet about horrific traffic every single day, each day brings a fresh round of drivers seemingly surprised by Lagos' horrific traffic. Just as we do when we talk about traffic, Twitter traffic hounds seem to absolve themselves of any blame for whatever predicament they describe: As one tweet read, "Dear Sydney Traffic, you suck!"

Encountering a barrage of these tweets reminds me of a project called Traffic by the "conceptual writer" and poet Kenneth Goldsmith. In the book, Goldsmith transcribed the entire traffic report for a New York City holiday weekend. Here's a typical passage:

Everything else is not gonna be moving at all. And especially avoid the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridge going over to, uh, Brooklyn, they've been, uh, just an absolute horror show. You got tons of traffic on the FDR Drive coming down from the Triboro all the way to the Brooklyn Bridge. And also major delays along the West Side from the 120's on down to the Battery. No joke here. It could take you two to three hours to cut through that kind of traffic. Also big delays, uh, north from the, uh, it looks like from the 80's up toward the GW Bridge.

As Goldsmith told Bookforum, "Writers don't need to write anything more," he says. "They just need to manage the language that already exists." And every day, the traffic reports generate new narratives, serial

tales of jackknifed tractor-trailers, stalled vehicles, "sunrise slowdowns," and SigAlerts. Only now, the people in traffic are writing themselves into the story.

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