

Calling the traffic like it is



PICS: BRUCE SUTHERLAND / CITY OF CAPE TOWN

happened and prevent it from happening again.

Here we see too little enforcement by the authorities. People drink, and then pay less regard to speed. It's not enough to set up a few roadblocks – they need to be continuous and constant. In Australia, for example, you would not leave home without your seat belt, and you don't drink and drive there either. If you did, you would be a social outcast, and your circle of friends would diminish very quickly.

[In Australia if you drink and drive] you're a social outcast, and your circle of friends would diminish very quickly!

What about having a proper road traffic authority, where every car has a speed gun, and where road safety is all they deal with? That's the only way we'll crack this nut. It's not working the way things are.

People say it'll be expensive to do this, but have a look at the cost to the economy of the way things are; then come back and say it's too expensive to have a proper road traffic authority. Cape Town with its 'ghost squad' is starting to implement something like this, but it has to go further. It's human nature to push the limits if you know you can get away with it, and to go where you are going as quickly as you can.

And the taxis?

One idea I have would be to fine the owner instead of the driver... Make the owner responsible for driver behaviour, and see if that works...

What about our emergency services?

In some of the emergency services we see a great deal of apathy and poor morale. They just can't be bothered to do what they should be doing. That's not an indictment on any organisation in particular – it comes back to this whole inability to change, and believe in change. We just keep rolling with the status quo. But we don't have to accept it, you know, just because we're labelled a developing nation.

What kind of traffic information astonishes you most?

What we get quite a lot are calls like: 'Rob, I'm on the N3 driving at 130km an hour and have just been overtaken by a fully laden bus!' This is common.

And you often get some nut – always a man – who takes off his clothes on the side of the road and distracts people.

And then, I'm astounded by the number of drunk public transport operators. Why can't bus companies breathalyse drivers before they leave?

People ring up regularly and scream about their fellow drivers, about potholes, trenches, traffic lights not working... A guy who always phones in from Joburg to tell us how many days the traffic lights at a particular intersection have not been working: 'It's Day 13 today...'



ROB BYRNE probably knows more about rush hour than anyone else in the country – and has organised his life to avoid it. A radio broadcaster by profession and one of the first serious traffic reporters in the UK, he arrived in South Africa in 2002, en-route to his home country of Australia. He never made it back home: instead he settled down and set up TrafficNet, a real-time information network for radio stations nationwide. MOBILITY asked him what changes in traffic he has witnessed over the last eight years.

Who provides your traffic information?

I'd say 90% of the usable information comes from the motoring public; they phone in, SMS, even email.

We used to use helicopters – eyes in the sky. But we don't use them anymore, now we have more than enough eyes on the road. By the time the authorities report an accident to us it's probably already being cleared.

What are the biggest changes you've noticed?

No doubt, the increased traffic; there are more and more cars, volumes are growing... And our attitude toward the carnage on the roads – it has become so blasé, almost as if it's normal, a normal way of life.

We're not talking about it non-stop, we're sitting back and waiting for the next big one. OK, there're eight people dead today, maybe five tomorrow... We seem to be immune!

Why do you think this is so?

Probably most of us think that the battle to correct it is a losing one – apart from the few hard-core people who really want to make a change, most of us give up. It's just a way of life now. It seems to me that there is a lack of collective will to change.

What could we be doing?

In the UK, for example, if 11 people were dead, there would be some attempt to analyse what



Members of Cape Town's specialist unit – dubbed the Ghost Squad – operate in unmarked vehicles and focus on collision-causing traffic offences such as reckless and negligent driving, cutting in after passing and driving under the influence.

Based at Gallows Hill Traffic Department in Green Point, the Ghost Squad works closely with other specialist units in Cape Town Traffic Services such as Video Surveillance, Highway Patrol and Public Transport.

Other violations to be enforced by the Ghost Squad include checking on the display of number plates, the use of directional indicators, drivers using cellphones without hands-free kits, and the roadworthiness of vehicles.

Will BRT help congestion at all?

It's one thing to upgrade the infrastructure for BRT, but they're don't seem to be upgrading the feeder routes.

The amount of development here is staggering [Byrne lives close to Cape Town's new BRT route toward the West Coast]. Parklands is the fastest growing suburb in the southern hemisphere, I hear. But there is so little infrastructure there, massive growth and still only two lanes. Residential development has outstripped infrastructure and it's just adding to congestion.

So, while BRT is not before time, the feeder routes need assistance...

The way development is planned is also a problem. All the areas that are opening up for people with young families seem to be further and further out. So people have to live further and further from where they work. Why not go for higher-density mixed-use developments closer to work areas?

What days are the busiest?

Every day is a new day, a clean slate. But it always goes downhill very quickly. Thursdays has become crazy days. It used to be Fridays. But today [a Thursday], for example, by 7.30 am today there were already 6-7 major accidents on the Joburg highways,

in one of them a truck collided with a bakkie with 18 people on the back.

Do you find the same in other South Africa cities?

No, you don't get this in Cape Town and Durban. It's the same with the potholes in Joburg – Cape Town just doesn't have the traffic volumes that cause the potholes (although the Joburg Roads Agency says the potholes are caused by global warming...).

What's the worst place to drive?

The road between Alberton and Edenvale, any week morning, is a horrible section. Every morning there's some sort of incident... And if there's a problem on the R59, our traffic lines ring non-stop, more so than from any other route. There's so much traffic that the route is barely coping.

And the best place?

That's tricky to answer. I don't think there is one. I 'drive' on my feet. It's just five steps to my studio...

Anything else you're like to add?

I'm not happy about it, but I'm in a growth industry – our roads are completely out of control. So drive safely, OK... 

Digital Traffic Law Enforcement Services

Belstow Technologies (Pty) Ltd is a South African company operating from Johannesburg, Gauteng, providing traffic law enforcement solutions comprising the full spectrum of equipment and software systems to enable traffic authorities to enforce speed and traffic signal obedience and other offences.

The solutions include the supply of best of breed state of the art intelligent digital traffic cameras for recording violations, as well as a comprehensive back office software suite for the processing, management and administration of the entire traffic ticket process in South Africa. All systems are AARTO (Administrative Adjudication of Road Traffic Offences Act) compatible and capable of integrating with the e-NaTIS suite of offence management protocols.

Belstow provides both mobile and permanent cameras to monitor speed and red light violations. The cameras can be triggered by either piezzo cables, radar or laser beams and mobile cameras can track the speed of a vehicle from a distance of 1 500 m while recording speeds of up to 300 km/h, with as many as 3 vehicles per second in peak traffic.

The permanent cameras are intelligent and differentiate automatically between light passenger vehicles and heavy vehicles such as trucks and busses. They apply different speed limits in different traffic lanes adjacent to each other for the various categories of vehicles.

All cameras can perform remote controlled wireless downloading and can be equipped with GPS satellite positioning. The Belstow solutions are sought after internationally and bulk camera orders have been supplied to countries such as India and Azerbaijan.

Belstow prides itself on a high standard of service delivery and customer satisfaction. The use of its comprehensive integrated strategies results in high levels of finalisation and efficient law enforcement with improved driver behaviour patterns.

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