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Real Time Traffic: "The Big Revolution is Two-Way Traffic Data"

INTERVIEW: The world of real time traffic data is increasingly fluid. To get an overview of the market GPS Business News spoke to Roger Lanctot, senior analyst with Strategy Analytics, about the emergence of more efficient data delivery methods, two-way traffic data, the leveraging of Bluetooth monitoring data, traffic camera information and Nokia's potential to take over this industry.

Bigger pipes to the car and increasing two-way communication between vehicles are two factors likely to dominate real time traffic in the key US and European markets over the next few years.

That's according to Roger Lanctot, senior analyst with Strategy Analytics' Global Automotive Practice, who expects vehicles with traffic data to almost automatically become probes in their own networks.

In an interview with GPS Business News he began by giving an overview of the real time traffic data market in the US. Lanctot said the dominant player today for systems in cars is NAVTEQ with its Traffic.com-based solution. This is thanks in large part to the partnership with SiriusXM.



Roger Lanctot

In the more competitive mobile device space, he said INRIX is the dominant player – although the marketplace is changing rapidly.

"Or as rapidly as the automotive industry can change. This is why mobile is so significant because it can change in a heartbeat," he said.

"But we are talking about data and server-based solutions, algorithmic technology. That doesn't change quickly because what car makers, and even device makers, are looking for is global solutions. Those do take a bit of time to refine and roll out."



Dominant Platform

However, Lanctot said the connectivity profile is changing – and it's different in the US than it is in Europe.

He said despite the US having a digital radio infrastructure in place it had not yet become standard. "It's probably on its way to becoming standard in cars. An important reason for that is the

enhanced data services like weather, parking, news and of course TPEG-based traffic," he said.

"But HD radio is only available for about 50% of cars – and that's a real rough estimate."

Lanctot said while digital radio is in the process of getting deployed, the dominant platform for real time traffic remains satellite radio.

He said auto-makers are still embracing embedded or smartphone connectivity piece by piece in the car.

From a smartphone connectivity perspective, however, mobile is beginning to influence automotive solutions.

"That is manifesting with Ford SYNC and MyFord Touch, which is using the INRIX real-time traffic," he said. "I believe Toyota has adopted INRIX for the entune connectivity platform."

"Now, you have OnStar, which has a 2.5G embedded modem, currently using Traffic.com over the satellite radio feed, not over the modem into the car. They are planning to shift to TrafficCast actually for real-time traffic data."

Continued...

Monday May 2, 2011

David Montgomery



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TPEG Traffic Data

Lanctot said he believes that what has happened in Europe is significant for what will happen in the US as bigger pipes to cars continue emerging.

He said the recent Audi announcement was a huge development for the real-time traffic industry globally.

"The concept there was the delivery of TPEG traffic data over the customers' embedded modem. So you needed a bigger pipe than was available because Europe doesn't have a digital radio standard," he said.

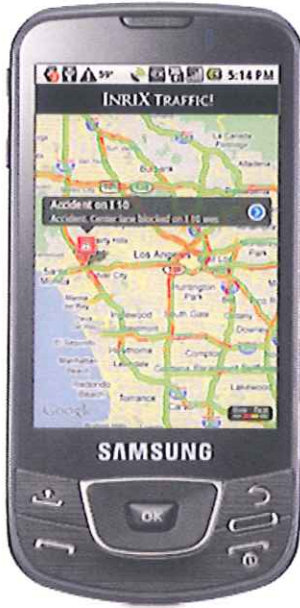
"It's a mess. You don't have this large landmass where there's a digital radio solution like HD radio in the US. So Audi made a ground-breaking decision to decide to take that TPEG data and send it over the SIM card. That's a really big deal."

However, Lanctot said the strange twist to the story is that in the US they introduced the same platform where the customer plugs in a SIM card – not their own SIM card.

But in spite of having a very big HSPA+ pipe to the car, traffic data is being sent over the Sirius satellite.



Traffic in AUDI dashboard in Europe



Android app from INRIX

solution with ClearChannel to be more accurate."

Continued...

Disappointing Experience

"The big problem is, and it's a controversial issue, is that my own personal experience with Sirius and XM has been extremely disappointing of all the services for real-time traffic data that I have used," he said.

"Now, it's hard to get real-time traffic right and I've yet to see anybody reproduce real-time traffic reality in complete fidelity on all occasions, in all places and at all times. It's a very difficult proposition.

"But I can tell you, I've had more negative experiences with satellite radio traffic data." Lanctot said he didn't know if the data cap on the XM flavor of traffic data had anything to do with this.

"I don't know if SiriusXM is having to reduce the data set they are getting from Traffic.com to report, but all I can tell you is that whenever I use that service, it's always a disappointing experience," he said.

"My experience has been validated by various Tier 1s that have done their own testing and found the Sirius real-time traffic data to be seriously wanting."

The analyst said he has HD radio in his car but gets the ClearChannel data feed over the FM side-band: "The ClearChannel is using INRIX for the predictive and so on, and I find the INRIX

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Probe Data

Turning to the European real time traffic data market, Lanctot said TomTom has in the recent past been the dominant solution with HD Traffic.

He said the great leap forward there was the use of Vodafone data: "What is interesting there is that they are saying there are getting a sufficient number of probes and are using them more than they are using the Vodafone data.

"What they have come close to but have not quite said is that they are not using Vodafone data at all."

Lanctot said that is an indication of the enhanced accuracy of the probe data – that it's a superior data source, which is where INRIX also benefits from its fleet relationships.

"Having probe data coming from a vehicle is always going to be superior to getting probe data from a device or cell tower signalling location data from a device.

"There's so much more work you have to do to make sense of the other data."

However, Lanctot said the suggestion now is that HD Traffic may no longer be the top solution. He said his understanding is that what NAVIGON is currently doing is superior to the TomTom offering.

"I can't vouch for that but it's what people are saying. That NAVIGON, which uses INRIX, has a competitive solution," he said.



False Positive

His own recent experience was comparing ITIS Holdings embedded in a BMW 7 Series driving in the UK with a TomTom with HD Traffic on the dash.

"The problem with the HD Traffic – and I think in the UK they are using the Vodafone data – is that with this cell signalling you get this, for a want of a better term, false positive," he said.

"You don't get incident data but what you are getting is flow. And I think there are some misinterpretations of the information that are suggesting there is congestion when there isn't."

Lanctot said this was reflected in TomTom's announcement in which they said they identify 200% more incidents than competing devices. He said that was great if those are real incidents.

"It's not clear that they really are. So that was sort of an unfortunate announcement by TomTom, which otherwise has a great reputation, product and service," he said.

"That I think was a little bit misleading and pointed to the fact that using that data you do get some false positive readings about congestion."

As to why that is, the analyst said it might have something to do with those signals only being useful when people move between one cell and another - and the data not being valid for people that are moving around within one cell.

"I know it's extraordinarily complex. So I salute the fact that TomTom, and ITIS too, have been able to use that sort of data and turn it into something commercially useful because no-one in the US has been able to do that," he said.

Continued...



TomTom HD Traffic

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He said AirSage, working with Westwood One (Metro Traffic), has come up with some kind of flow data that is being reported.

"They would tell you that they are still at the early stages, at least months away after I don't know how many years from a commercially releasable flow data service based on cell handset signalling," he said.

Bluetooth and Images

Another real-time data source that's emerging is the leveraging of Bluetooth monitoring data – BT sensors along highways that are being deployed for local traffic management infrastructure types of projects.

However, Lanctot said it will take time before TrafficCast's solution – BlueTOAD, which sniffs out passing Bluetooth-equipped devices - will have any significant impact.

"But it's out there and will play a roll eventually. Certainly Bluetooth is pretty much ubiquitous at this point. It just remains to be seen what that data will look like and what the downside or problems with it will be."

The analyst said another area where there's a huge source of debate in the industry is traffic camera information.

He said he wasn't sure he would recommend looking at traffic camera images while driving – and there is a challenge in orienting yourself to a place.

However, he said the images will improve, while sensors and the means to interpret the data from those cameras that is being gathered will be added – including vehicle counting and maybe even licence plate recognition or reading.



"That will have an impact and another wave of innovation that will hit real-time traffic. What you are seeing now are solutions in the car that will deliver maybe a still image," he said.

"To make that useful what is needed is an interface where you can ask for cameras on my route and so on. So the integration is still taking place and that will take time."

New Possibilities

Lanctot said with the emergence of bigger pipes and more efficient means of delivering data, the big revolution is

two-way traffic data – not just real-time but two-way involving probe data from the car.

This will give drivers the ability to report on incidents as they drive by, or passively to feed sensor data from cameras on cars: "People will have to open their minds a bit and think about what could be."

Lanctot said that in Europe, INRIX, ITIS and MILE Traffic and Travel are at the forefront of these solutions.

He said the sleeping giant is Nokia: "With all this probe data are they going to rise up and take over this industry? The missing piece there appears to be a vision of what a traffic experience should be and a standardised platform that could be rolled out globally.

"I think INRIX and ITIS, which has a licensing model for other countries, are in the forefront of creating standardised traffic solutions. NAVTEQ appears to be lagging here."

Finally, when it came to traffic, the analyst said the whole area is underestimated by some people and vastly misunderstood despite being absolutely critical.

"The important point is that if your traffic data sucks your navigation solution will suck. Because your navigation will be based on non-useful, irrelevant or inaccurate traffic information," he said. "You need good traffic data to have a good navigation solution."



TrafficCast's BlueTOAD

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