



“ I made a choice that ITS would be the main career whilst radio was something I would try and do alongside... I did freelance work... doing the traffic on BBC Radio 2 ”

Wireless communicator

Nick Simmons and I first met when he was a young radio presenter and I was an aspiring one, running my university station. He was presenting a Children in Need show and I volunteered to answer the phones. Our paths have crossed on and off ever since – but not on the radio! Nick rose to run not one but two radio travel news services – AA Roadwatch and then Trafficlink/INRIX Media and in the middle was one of the founding managers at ITIS. He’s recently departed INRIX so I caught up with him to find out more about his thoughts on 25 years in the business, and where he thinks it’s going.

INTERVIEW BY PAUL HUTTON

Q So Nick, if things had been different we could be sitting here like Smashy and Nicey discussing the radio industry, yet here we are as, in some people’s eyes at least, Intelligent Transport Systems experts. So, in your case, how did it happen?

Nick Simmons was once described by Radio 2 DJ Steve Wright as the “godfather of traffic news”

I think it was about being in the right place at the right time rather than having a well thought out plan. When I joined the AA as a traffic reporter, the UK commercial radio industry was in its infancy. The AA wanted to position itself as a leading provider of traffic information and so the operation took on a life of its own and

grew quickly and in parallel with the growth in local radio including BBC. In those early days Roadwatch was a very journalistic function, with hardly any technology. Scripts were handwritten until we acquired an early BBC Micro computer. There was no one single reliable source of data, so AA Roadwatch was a bit like



a newsroom, sourcing information from as many different places as possible in order to build a complete and hopefully accurate picture of what was happening. It was far from being an exact science and we have come such a long way in terms of the underlying availability and accuracy of traffic information. I remember making my regular round of check calls to the police desperately trying to cajole the slightest snippet of information from them – the whole process relied hugely on people, building a trusted and good working relationship and overcoming the culture of sharing as little as possible with all things “media” apart from a few exceptions where we worked enlightened individuals and forces.

In those early days people would cheerfully tell me that if they heard a jam reported on the radio they probably would not bother with an alternative route, pretty confident that by the time any delay had made it onto the airwaves then it would, in reality, have long been cleared! And often they were right. I regularly found myself leaving the AA studios in Stanmore at the end of a shift only to encounter bumper-to-bumper traffic on the M25 that had come as a complete and unwelcome surprise! Today, one of the really satisfying things about delivering travel information is that it is basically correct, there is so much more technology to underpin the quality of the content although it took a while for drivers to notice the change and be more confident in what they were being told. Anyway, by luck rather than by design, I managed to combine a career on the radio with delivering traffic!

Q Yeah, when people asked me why I didn't stick with radio, I guess my answer is that while my heart was in sitting in a room talking to myself in between records, the radio industry was changing and maybe becoming a bit less fun, while there was a lot of fast-moving innovation in ITS. Did you feel the same?

Yes, and I think around the time that presenters were no longer allowed to

choose the music that they played then radio stopped being quite so much fun. So I made a choice that ITS would be the main career whilst radio was something I would try and do alongside, and I was fortunate because right up until about 2 years ago I still did freelance work on the radio. In fact I think one of the last things was covering for Lynn Bowles doing the traffic on BBC Radio 2. But you are right, ITS did seem to be moving forward very quickly and looked like an exciting place to be, and even back then clever people were coming up with exciting ways to capture and deliver better quality traffic information in innovative and high tech ways although in reality it has taken a quite a while to actually deliver on some of those early ideas and concepts!

Q You were instrumental in making AA Roadwatch a major brand on the radio, weren't you?

I was certainly part of a team that created something that grew and felt special! The AA was a great place to work, at the time it was very much a club as opposed to being a business and was run for the benefit of its members sitting somewhere between the public and



private sector. There were some very supportive and farsighted people in the senior management team who really championed the growth of Roadwatch. And I worked with lots of talented people, many just starting out on their careers but some of whom would go on to be household names like Nick Moran, Fiona Phillips (left) and many more.

Q So what made you, for a while at least, step back from day-to-day work with radio and switch to ITIS?

I stayed at the AA for more than 10 years, which was never the plan! And during that period inevitably I suppose I increasingly seemed to spend less time in front of a microphone and more in meetings getting more involved in the next generation of traffic based products, like premium rate telephone lines and RDS TMC. The business was growing and my job was constantly changing, I was never tempted away because none of the alternatives were on the same scale or anything like as exciting! But then the dot com or information technology bubble of the late 1990s came along and so did the opportunity to join ITIS. It just felt like the right time to move on from

A Volvo RTI navigation unit with TMC





quite a large organisation whose core business was not ITS, to a start-up where it absolutely was, although I remember at the time it seemed like a big and frightening decision to make!

Q Back in the day, I seem to remember Floating Vehicle Data was a bit hit-and-miss in its quality, but fixing the bad bits in the early days made it the reliable data source we have today...

Do you know, even in the very early days of FVD the quality was actually pretty good and certainly much better than I'd expected - the issue was always expanding coverage and growing the fleet away from the strategic road network. We also needed to manage expectations and be realistic about what exactly the data could and could not deliver, mindful too that there is no such thing ever as the perfect dataset. It was so exciting to have this consistent source of data that by default followed pretty much wherever the severest traffic congestion occurred. And capturing it from the vehicle rather than

Nick was involved in delivering the first British RDS TMC service, using ITIS floating vehicle data



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infrastructure at the roadside for just about the first-time made good sense and had a pioneering feel about it too. And we knew that as technology improved the data could only get better and cheaper to produce. It was a really exciting time and I remember how surprised various network operators were when we showed them our demo system monitoring all their roads in real time. And of course the historic FVD data proved to be really interesting as well, working with the DfT back in 2004 and using the data for congestion monitoring was certainly a key milestone in the growth of ITIS.

Q When ITIS bought my old company Trafficlink, you were sent in to run it because of your previous experience. Is that something you wanted to do or did you get it by default, because you were the only person who knew that business?

Well, I was really enjoying my business development role at ITIS, particularly being involved at the very early stages of relationships and products. It was also a pleasant change not to be managing lots of people, which can so often be a distraction from the actual job that you are supposed to be doing particularly when they include the high maintenance creative types that you often encounter in the media.

But when ITIS acquired Trafficlink it was fairly obvious that I would get involved with that business. I suppose I'd had a break from supplying content to media for around 10 years so although the core business was pretty recognisable plenty had changed too. I actually enjoyed getting involved again much more than I expected. As I have already mentioned, perhaps the biggest change over my career has been the considerable improvement in the accuracy of the content. This time

around there was more of a focus on working with customers to develop the service as opposed to being on the back foot and explaining why a massive queue had not been reported!

I did combine the two roles for a while and actually one of the most enjoyable things about working at ITIS was being part of a team where not everyone had a traffic or media background so we tended to look at things with a fresh perspective and our best decisions were often made as a result of a combination of questioning received wisdom but from a reasonably informed perspective.

Q How important was it for the overall ITIS offering that you had the journalistic data set that Trafficlink offered?

Very! Although I think that when the team at ITIS first created FVD the original thought was that people would be quite happy to go wherever their navigation system directed them - but it turned out that actually there was an appetite for as much supplementary data as possible and not just the effect but the cause too. It was really helpful to know if a delay was caused for example by a broken down truck that would take three hours to remove or late running roadwork that would be quickly cleared. This helped drivers make much better informed decisions. So adding journalistic or cause data to the FVD effect data really helped provide the complete picture

Q We worked together on delivering the Traffic Radio contract for the Highways Agency. In hindsight, should the Government have been providing a radio service?

That's quite a difficult question to answer and part of me really can see both sides. The private sector tried and failed on a couple of occasions to deliver Traffic Radio type services and these have been run very successfully by the public sector elsewhere in the world. ITIS had operated our own digital radio station in London - Travel Now, but the much slower than anticipated growth in DAB and in particular the long wait for digital radios to become fitted in volume



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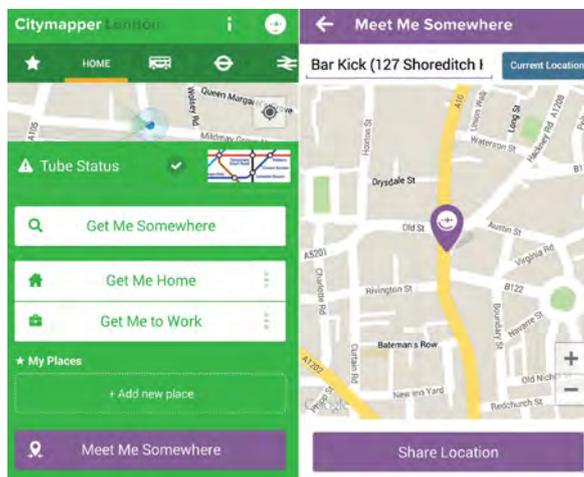
in cars made that commercially unviable.

In the case of Traffic Radio, part of me welcomed the HA's involvement and of course the revenue associated with the contract to help deliver the service, but another part of me questioned the timing and the large sums of money required to create and support the DAB infrastructure at a time when the private sector wasn't, although the service itself was actually good value and as you know very popular with the admittedly small but loyal and growing audience it built up.

Throughout my career the question of where the line should be drawn between the public and private sector has never been clearly answered. I guess it depends what side of the argument you are at any one time.

There is very definitely a role, in my opinion for government to act as a catalyst and help kick start services that the private sector can then take over. Today's RDS TMC service is an example of something that would have been much more difficult to implement without support and even encouragement from government.

Q Transport Direct has gone too – is this showing that it's up to the private sector to deliver the services to the travelling public? I thought Transport Direct was a great service and I am sorry to see that it has gone, it was a good example of the government coming up with something that worked really well and at a level of functionality that the private sector probably wouldn't choose to deliver at the time but then being unable or unwilling, perhaps even embarrassed, to be seen actually promoting and telling people that it existed! And that was a problem with Travel Radio too, examples of a couple of great initiatives but awareness amongst the public was always very low. However,



the broader point is that yes, there are increasingly other places where most of this content can now be accessed, the recently revamped BBC travel site is a really good example and still comes from public sector with extremely comprehensive data but also of course Google and apps like Citymapper are active in this space. The challenge as ever is services that operate consistently and everywhere. I think that there is a gap in the market for the ultimate travel app but that is another story.

Q And then along came INRIX to buy ITIS and they inherited a media company. What changes did that bring?

Well it brought the opportunity to think globally about how old and new media consume traffic information, how that might be monetised and what changes might occur in the future. One thing it showed me was that traffic and particularly how traditional and new media consumes traffic information is instantly recognisable wherever you are in the world, and a radio or TV traffic reporter in China operates in much the same as one in America or the UK. The real question was whether to disrupt some of the existing models, ultimately it is a question of when not if and my predication is that there will be some big changes in this

The Citymapper app – can the private sector deliver consistently and everywhere to replace the

landscape over the next two or three years.

Q What's next for you, will you stick with ITS and traveller information, or are you looking for challenges elsewhere?

Well having been around the ITS sector for more than 25 years now, I don't want to move away entirely, especially as some of the concepts we envisaged at the outset are really only just becoming a reality. But it is also refreshing to experience other sectors too. I am working with a couple of start-ups, one of which is in the ITS space, the other in a different sector altogether and I am really enjoying being back in that early stage environment.

But to go back to where this interview started, media and ITS have both come a long way in 25 years and whilst the fundamentals remain the same I do think technology and social media in particular offer some really interesting opportunities to create and deliver content in disruptive and innovative ways to the real benefit of the end user so maybe there is one more opportunity to combine the two?

Q So will we hear you on the radio again? Maybe you and I could co present on North Norfolk Digital or something?

[smiles] I'm not sure that's the best use of our time...



NICK SIMMONS is working on a variety of business opportunities
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