

# Signal fading on radio traffic reports

November 27 2009, By DAISY NGUYEN , Associated Press Writer

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(AP) -- For more than 20 years, Mike Nolan was known to radio listeners as the "eye in the sky." He flew over Southern California freeways in his single-engine plane, reporting on the nation's worst traffic.

These days, he broadcasts about [traffic](#) snarls and lurking gridlock without leaving the ground - without even leaving his home in this Los Angeles suburb. Sitting in a chair behind computer monitors and a television, Nolan gathers traffic data and broadcasts live on two radio stations a day.

"What I'm best suited to do is look out the airplane window and tell people what I see," Nolan, 60, said. "When I was grounded, that world changed considerably so I had to reinvent myself."

His return to earth reflects the evolution of the traffic reporting business as a faltering economy forces news operation cutbacks, technology displaces traditional reporters and motorists increasingly rely on cell phones and GPS to monitor live traffic.

Most traffic news is now generated by reporters on the ground monitoring police reports, live highway cameras, data from ground sensors that can detect traffic speed and tips from drivers.

Reporters can be hundreds of miles away away from the scene and detail the latest traffic jams to three or four radio stations in the same hour, sometimes using aliases. Rebecca Campbell might report at the top of

the hour for the Fox sports station using her own name, then 20 minutes later appear as Toni Jordan on an alternative rock station. For a station popular with Latino listeners, she goes by the name Lena Macias.

Even as traffic reporters have had their wings clipped in recent years, the airwaves ahead appear even more bumpy.

Music stations competing for listeners have been cutting back on disc jockey banter, and some industry veterans believe traffic reports could fade altogether.

"A number of years ago it'd be unheard of to have an FM station in L.A. without traffic reports," said Don Bastida, vice president of operations for Airwatch, one of the nation's largest traffic-reporting services. "Now traffic reports on the music stations become just an interruption that gives the listener an opportunity to hit the button and move on to the next station."

He said traffic reports will remain on the AM dial, but they'll decline to the point that they'll only be offered as part of a news story when a major incident happens.

The region's top-rated pop station, KISS-FM, recently dropped afternoon traffic reports after AMP-FM, a new Top 40 station received higher ratings without traffic updates.

Metro Traffic, a division of Westwood One Inc., began consolidating its 60 traffic reporting operations around the nation last year to just 13. As a result, reporters in the Washington D.C. hub also cover traffic news for Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina. Some plane and helicopter reporting flights were cut as part of cost reductions that will amount to \$55 million to \$63 million annually.

Airwatch, a subsidiary of radio giant Clear Channel Communications Inc., has 60 reporters and producers working around the clock to provide traffic updates to more than 40 Southern California stations. They sit side by side in a small studio overlooking an Orange County freeway, staring at computer monitors and TV screens as they speak into the microphones, sometimes talking over each other as they file live reports.

Airwatch's revenue grew each year for nearly 10 years. But in late 2007, seven reporters lost their jobs when Clear Channel downsized the operation.

Nolan was one of them. He took a substantial pay cut to work from the ground. He chose to work from home rather than commute 40 miles roundtrip to the Airwatch studio in Santa Ana.

He now takes a few steps from his bedroom to his study to start his split shifts, from 5 to 9 a.m. then 3 to 7 p.m. He puts on a headset, turns on the stopwatch application on his iPhone, and pulls up a half-dozen Web pages to gather traffic information.

When it's his turn to come on at the top of the hour, 20 minutes past and bottom of the hour on KFI-AM and twice per hour on KOST-FM, Nolan rattles off a list of congested freeways in 40 second to one minute bursts.

Growing up in the San Fernando Valley in the early 1960s, Nolan saw freeways expand deeper into suburbs. Flying over Southern California day in and day out gave him an understanding of traffic patterns that enhance his reports from the ground.

When he reads traffic maps on the computer, he can picture every tunnel, hill and curve and knows when drivers should be slowing down. He can suggest alternate routes and knows what type of incident is likely to cause more misery.

He said that kind of knowledge can't be replaced by GPS-equipped gadgets.

"The radio reporter is going to tell you what's going on where you're going to be in addition to where you are," Nolan said.

Bastida at Airwatch predicts that in a few years, motorists will steer further away from the radio as carmakers add even more navigation systems and Internet-access equipment to vehicles. Airwatch has a growing service providing traffic updates directly to navigational units in vehicles.

"There will be jobs for people gathering and inputting the traffic data, but jobs for broadcasters will be going away," Bastida said.

Not everyone has a bleak outlook.

John Frawley, executive vice president of broadcast operations for Metro Traffic, said traffic news remains a big draw on news and talk stations. He says a device may tell drivers where the traffic jams are and how far the backup is, but it doesn't explain the cause.

"When our people come on, people pay attention," Frawley said.

"They're interested that somebody else is suffering in traffic, too."

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Citation: Signal fading on radio traffic reports (2009, November 27) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-11-radio-traffic.html>

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