

Pull up to my bumper: Where traffic and the economy merge

SEAN O'TOOLE - Dec 23 2010 01:50

'For many people in Johannesburg you are like the Oracle at Delphi,' I say.

Aki Anastasiou, the Talk Radio 702 traffic reporter whose upbeat traffic dispatches predict a very near and unavoidable future for many of Gauteng's urban commuters, laughs. It is not an overly enthusiastic laugh -- the ancient Greek oracle was after all a priestess.

"Well, ja, you know, look, um ..." says Anastasiou, whose Twitter profile describes him as a "trafficologist" (also "weirdo", "gadgeteer" and "technologist"). Anastasiou, who started reporting on traffic in 1989, is a committed Twitter user.

His handle is #JHBTraffic. Here is a typical Monday morning report, the terse language promoted by the social networking tool also offering a no-frills insight into life on the road in contemporary Johannesburg.

"ALERT -- Avoid these Highways > CLOSED ~ Benoni N12 West between Tom Jones & Snake ~ Alberton R59 North before Klipriver Drive."

The job of factually reporting live traffic news to a diverse and engaged listenership (and increasingly readership) has, in the past, seen Anastasiou reprimanded. Where he once might have said that a truck has "jackknifed and lost its load", Anastasiou now reports that it has "shed its load".

In the event, the cause of the "incident" -- traffic reporting routinely involves euphemistically softening the truth -- on the N12 is an overturned truck. Not jackknifed, overturned. By Johannesburg standards this is common. The mixture of fatalism and resignation in this statement probably explains why the city was awarded bronze in a recent global poll of the worst cities in which to be a driver.

Released in June, the IBM Commuter Pain Index ranks the emotional and economic toll of commuting in 20 cities on six continents. IBM, which is actively working in the area of "smarter transportation", questioned 8192 motorists on 10 key issues, ranging from commuting time to behavioural responses. Answers were numerically quantified and fed into a database that ranked each city on a scale of one to 100, with 100 being the most burdensome.

Only Beijing (99) and Mexico City (99) rated worse than Johannesburg (97), with Houston (17), Melbourne (17) and Stockholm (15) emerging as the least agonising commutes in this subjective, user-based assessment. Lagos and Luanda, both notoriously congested African cities, were not included in the survey.

'Existential threat'

Despite its limitations, the findings of the IBM index make for startling reading. In a recent *New Yorker* article, Moscow's traffic congestion -- the average commute time is two-and-a-half hours -- was described as an "existential threat".

Hyperbole? Think again. When Sergei Sobyanin took office as Moscow's mayor in October he made the city's traffic his first point of order at his inaugural meeting.

Yet Moscow only polled fourth. Are we simply a nation of whingers or do Johannesburg road users really have it that bad? The answer is a little more complicated than the question supposes.

A few years ago I chatted to former Harmony chief executive Bernard Swanepoel about his travels to

Moscow. It was 2004 and Swanepoel was hatching plans to create the world's largest gold-mining house using the swing vote of a minority Russian shareholder in rival Gold Fields.

"The drive from Moscow to the airport is absolute hell," he said. "Johannesburg is First World by comparison. My lasting impression of Moscow is that it needs a few fly-overs, highways and subways. Jeepers, that place is crowded." With cars, he meant.

In 1991 Moscow had 60 cars for every 1 000 residents. The current figure stands at around 350, which is roughly three times the national average of 124 vehicles a thousand (in South Africa it is 146).

National averages rarely tell you about anything much, especially why cities the world over are a congested mess. Just look at China. In a recent United Nations report on per capita car ownership South Africa ranked 53rd out of 133, Russia 57th and China 107th. Yet Beijing has more than 4, 2-million vehicles on its roads, with an additional 2214 being added every day.

Traffic jam

In August the city experienced a nine-day 100km traffic jam that made French filmmaker Jean Luc Godard's portrayal of a traffic jam in his 1967 film *Le Weekend* look bucolic.

There is an obvious meta-narrative that connects the traffic hell in Johannesburg to Moscow and Beijing. Political change has reconstituted these three cities into consumption-driven economies. In all three the motor car has emerged as the foremost symbol of individual empowerment, a sort of mobile Freedom Charter if you will.

This is by no means unique. The United States, with 765 cars for every 1 000 residents, is still the undisputed world leader in car ownership. Over the past half century it has built up a reliable base of knowledge on what happens when mobility is democratised. The abbreviated version: stuck.

"The more people attempt to increase their mobility by purchasing and driving cars," wrote Charles Wright, an American economist and transportation specialist, in his 1992 book *Fast Wheels Slow Traffic*, "the slower traffic flows and the longer it takes everyone to get to work."

Wright's insight might seem fatuous. In fact, if you really explore it, it is quite perverse. Rehana Moosajee, a member of Johannesburg's mayoral committee for transport, revealed the extent of the perversion in a television interview three years ago. "Congestion," she stated, "is really a symptom of an economy that's working very well."

Statistics support her pithy analysis. Between 1997 and 2006 new car sales almost doubled locally, from 367 000 to 647 000, according to statistics from the National Association of Automobile Manufacturers of South Africa. Although well off boom levels, sales in 2010 have nonetheless been robust (491 630), improving massively on last year's slack sales (364 752).

Whatever the exact numbers, road builders locally are struggling to keep pace. Nearly half (47%) of South Africa's roads are older than 20 years, a further third between 10-20 years old. Potholes and traffic jams are their legitimate offspring.

Projects

In 2007 Cabinet approved an ambitious R23-billion infrastructure plan known as the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project. The phased plan, which is overseen by the South African National Roads Agency (Sanral), aims to upgrade and implement a new highway network totalling 560km.

Many of the first phase projects, which focused on 34 interchanges, are now complete and the next big event on the horizon is the 42 toll gantries expected to come on stream in April 2011. These will function as a "sustainable revenue stream" for Sanral, which operates on commercial lines and at arm's length

from government.

Underpinning the new pre-paid electronic tagging system and volume-based approach to tolling is a desire to keep cars and trucks moving apace along the elegantly conceived multilane highways to and from Johannesburg. That this total solution is weighted in favour of a certain model of transport design is often elided in news reports.

"Southern African cities," reads a statement tucked away in the 2010 State of African Cities report, "have traditionally prioritised the private car and there is still a strong roads lobby that influences the transport agenda in its largest economy, the Republic of South Africa."

Authored by UN-Habitat, a United Nations organisation mandated to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities, the report notes that there is agreement locally that the focus needs to shift towards non-motorised transport, but that "designs for such alternatives are poorly supported and there is no clear indication of the direction cities should adopt for the future".

Both Anastasiou and his on-air competitor, Rob Byrne, agree that government needs to think beyond open roads for private cars.

"I think Johannesburg is growing at such a rapid pace that there is no further growth after this, in terms of widening the roads," says Anastasiou, who switched from "eye in the sky" helicopter reporting to a studio equipped with data feeds and heat maps five years ago. "The next step is better public transport systems. It is just a matter of two to three years before we are back to where we were last year, before the roadworks started."

'Highly networked'

Byrne, who updates SAfm and Metro FM listeners and *Morning Live* viewers from a highly networked home studio overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in Big Bay, near Cape Town, concurs.

"I lived in London for a long time and saw the M25 around London widened and widened," says Byrne, who cut his teeth reporting traffic in England before moving to South Africa. "They had to keep widening it because of a thing called latent demand." Additional lanes, he explains, give the impression of greater capacity, spurring demand for cars. "You very quickly get back to where you started."

The evolution of the highway in South Africa does not make for compelling reading, which might explain why there are so few books on the subject. "Part of the difficulty of coming to terms with roads," observed author Robert Macfarlane in a *Guardian* book review last year, "is that we rarely come to rest on them.

"There is no single point of view for a road; only the perception of transit, gained in transit. Roads, and especially motorways, are zones of mobility -- and as such they resist our conventional aesthetic categories."

Searching not only for credible information but also for observational reportage focusing on South African roads has over the past few years led me to some strange books. TB Floyd's *Town Planning in South Africa*, from 1960, isn't so much strange as quaint.

A 1951 count on Voortrekker Road into Cape Town, reveals Floyd, yielded a total of 9 541 cars at Koeberg Road and 10 509 at Church Street. When Midrand was still known as Halfway House, 4 791 cars were counted making the journey.

Nowadays the N1 highway between Pretoria and Johannesburg conveys an estimated 180 000 vehicles daily. Contrary to popular opinion, the route is not Johannesburg's busiest; that honour was ceded to the intersection of the N3 eastern bypass and R24 airport highway, otherwise known as Gillooly's. (The use of the apostrophe remains a moot point among many).

Like many sections of road in Johannesburg, there is very little correlation between the current personality of Gillooly's and the person it was named after. In fact, often the pairings are quite dissonant. William Nicol founded the theological faculty at the University of Pretoria, and James Gillooly owned a farm in Bedfordview, which he sold to the local municipality in 1944.

"Gillooly's is doing volumes of over 200 000 vehicles per day, making it the busiest interchange in Africa," says Anastasiou of an intersection I most associate with the smell of burning clutches, diesel fumes and *stompies* (cigarette stubs) twirling in arcs from stationary vehicles.

Lending perspective

Floyd's book helps lend perspective to this scene: Gillooly's interchange alone handles 80 000 more vehicles than the total number of cars licensed in Johannesburg in 1957.

Various factors have led to the huge growth in especially peri-urban traffic, including the desegregation of urban and rural space in the post-apartheid years, unchecked urban sprawl and a mass migration from public to private transport -- minibus taxis now transport roughly 65% of all commuters. Paradoxically, the motorcar is both cause and effect here.

There is nothing particularly unique about this scenario. Urban theorists have long been writing about how the car has transfigured the modern city, creating what urban planners Donald Appleyard and Allan Jacobs two decades ago described as a new form of city, "one of closed, defended islands with blank and windowless facades surrounded by the wastelands of parking lots and fast-moving traffic".

What intrigues me is how this condition has begun to manifest in our cultural artefacts, how writers and artists have started to parse traffic for clues about our contemporary urban condition.

Ivan Vladislavic is perhaps an obvious example, his 2004 book *The Exploded View* including a wonderful evocation of "the hurtling consciousness of the highway", to repurpose a quote from Don DeLillo. Vladislavic's book comes wrapped in a painting by Mary Wafer.

Over the past few years this talented young Wits graduate has also spent time pondering looking at Gauteng's highways, albeit differently to Anastasiou or Byrne, who pour over areas of red and scarlet on their screen-based heat maps.

It all started when Wafer, daughter of sculptor Jeremy Wafer, started photographing highway bridges and flyovers in the early morning.

"There was such an eerie atmosphere, the total silence, and then the occasional whoosh of a pantechinon," she wrote in her 2007 master's thesis. "The floodlights cast such a vivid glow, and the colours were so remarkably crisp."

These wide-eyed views, stolen while the highway was asleep, resulted in a series of deadpan paintings on road infrastructure. Their banality is deceptive, partly because Wafer was aware that the things she was painting were made to serve a white middle class.

'Reluctant'

Wafer's thinking here was partly informed by the writings of Clive Chipkin. Also a Wits graduate, Chipkin, a self-described "reluctant" architect and historian emeritus of Johannesburg's built environment, knows strange things about the city. He can tell you who built which bridge and when.

"The new peripheral elevated road system," Chipkin writes in his new book, *Johannesburg Transition* (2009), "took an amorphous spreadeagled city on the plains, tied it together in an urban package and provided a sense of recognition for visitors and locals alike." That's the nice part about them.

"But, as always, with Johannesburg's modernisation we must pause to observe deep-seated anxieties. All the advantages and betterment of the huge capital expenditure accrued to the white areas. The motorways, conspicuously, did not connect into the vast black ghetto locations. In part, they acted as a visual and movement barrier to reinforce segregation."

Chipkin's criticism, which has been tacitly endorsed in statements by Moosajee to foreign media, is not without nuance. He loves the bridges, in particular Bridge 6 at the Heidelberg interchange. At first I thought his fondness strange when I drove with him one day to look at it, the endearing nostalgia of an old man, but then I encountered artists Eugene Arries, Jonathan Cane and Zen Marie.

Earlier this year the trio showed a quixotic artwork at the Spier Contemporary 2010 of new South African art held at the Cape Town City Hall. Artwork is perhaps deceptive: their large mixed-media information display, which combined still photography and video testimonies from "insiders/native informants" (tow-truck drivers, the homeless, city officials tasked with keeping the white lines white) and "outsiders/experts" (intellectuals, artists), would not have looked all that lost at a conference for civil engineers.

As it turns out, Anastasiou tends to think along similar lines. Perhaps this is the "weirdo" in him.

"I still love the Crown interchange, in the city centre, and the double-decker section that goes past Braamfontein if you're travelling north on the M1," says Anastasiou, referring to a section of road conceived in the mid 1950s by urban planner Maurice Rotival in conjunction with American consultants. "It is an engineering masterpiece."

This is, of course, different to saying that it is beautiful, which you won't hear said much in relation to the congested roads in Gauteng, roads everyone knows but very few love.

Sean O'Toole is a journalist and writer who chiefly uses Cape Town roads nowadays

Source: Mail & Guardian Online

Web Address: <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-12-23-pull-up-to-my-bumper-where-traffic-and-the-economy-merge>

