



CASE STUDY:

Investigating the blogosphere to gauge public perceptions of road pricing in the GTA

About [Nexalogy Environics](#) - *making connections visible*

- Nexalogy Environics employs advanced textual analytics to filter through the overabundance of social media data in order to reveal key actors, emerging issues, and networks of influencers that are vital to our clients' success.

General approach

1. Dataset capture and archiving – after identifying and isolating social media objects relevant to the topic, our qualified analysts clean, filter and prepare the blog posts for the mapping process.
2. Quantitative and qualitative analysis – we map social media opinion areas through proprietary semantic mining and visualization software. Using this system as a point of departure, human analysts review and contextualize top actors and messages manually, employing content analysis techniques.
3. Reporting and strategy – we produce insight-driven reports with key findings, strategic and tactical recommendations and outreach and engagement strategies, all dependent on client needs.

Case study goals

- Assess public perceptions of *road pricing* (i.e. transportation fundraising tools such as road tolls) in the blogosphere.

Research process

- Isolated blog posts related to six key terms related to “Toronto” and/or the “GTA”: “road pricing”, “high occupancy toll lane”, “express lane”, “traffic congestion”, “the big move” and “road tolls”.
- Apply human and automated methods to identify major themes, trends, and connections in the blogosphere conversation that would otherwise remain hidden.

Research background

A recent report by the Toronto City Summit Alliance, *Time to Get Serious: Reliable Funding for GTHA Transit/Transportation Infrastructure*, identified the urgent need to improve regional transportation and funding options in the Greater Toronto Area to ensure the GTHA has sustainable and equitable transportation able to better support its residents' mobility and quality of life.

Recent findings from Nexalogy and Environics Research Group suggest concern about the impact of traffic congestion on mobility and quality of life is growing among the GTA public, and that most discussions in the blogosphere agree something needs to be done, validating public intervention. Although the sense of urgency about some kind of intervention is growing, the range of possible interventions being discussed in the blogosphere is limited: conversation on this topic is marked more by frustration than by new ideas.

The social media space is filled with active conversations, the airing of opinions and the formation of debates about topics that shape broader public opinion. Increasingly, social media traction is a precursor to wider public discussion, offering insight into public opinion formation online, a useful strategic complement to more traditional forms of public opinion research.

Case study: key findings

- General public opinion in the blogosphere appears prepared to accept that addressing traffic congestion in the GTA requires public intervention, and even trade-offs.
- There is strong sentiment that traffic congestion in the GTA negatively affects residents' quality of life and their economic well-being.
- Some tolerance for trade-offs exists, but details and types of road-pricing policy options, such as road tolls, are generally not well understood amongst bloggers.
- Few blog posts link road pricing mechanisms to congestion reduction, suggesting road pricing schemes may gain greater traction with the GTA public when also positioned as a means to address traffic congestion.
- Toronto and the GTA are also being discussed by bloggers from other places: A number of other cities in Europe and North America are present as both subjects in and of themselves as well as in comparison to Toronto.
- This study tells us that there is ample space and opportunity for social media engagement in the road pricing debate- and the overall transit policy conversation. This means stakeholders could begin to move policy messages into this space through engagement and outreach strategies and tactics.

Map of the conversational network



Traffic congestion taking a toll

Active bloggers, concerned citizens and less active bloggers alike are troubled by the economic and personal effects of traffic congestion. “Traffic congestion” is closely associated with conversations about transportation alternatives such as bikes and streetcars, and the quality of life experienced in GTA homes, streets and schools. Bloggers are pre-occupied with what traffic congestion means for their neighborhood *and* their livelihood, but not all accept that solutions must come at some price. Concerned citizens, especially individuals blogging from the point of view of industry, agree that change is needed, but are among those least likely to want to pay for it through means such as road tolls.

Macro-micro disconnect

Notably, while the effects of traffic congestion on GTA residents' economic productivity and quality of life is a prominent concern, few blog posts link road pricing mechanisms such as road tolls to the alleviation of congestion-related problems (auto emissions, dangerous streets for pedestrians and cyclists, etc.).

Indeed, discussions of traffic congestion and road pricing are two fairly distinct conversational poles in the blogosphere. Those who are actively talking about tolling and other road pricing mechanisms do so in terms of macro considerations such as revenue generation for the city. They typically do not discuss how road pricing tools can ease traffic congestion. This likely reflects the tendency to date on the part of the City of Toronto and the Mayor's office to discuss road pricing mechanisms as a source of funds, rather than as a tool for reducing congestion as well.

Arguably, if road pricing is to gain public acceptance – and neither tend to be perceived as an unfair money-making scheme, nor spur NIMBY-like reactions from GTA residents – toll advocates must encourage a conversation, in the blogosphere and beyond, that casts road pricing as socially beneficial, and not just as a correction for financial shortfalls.

Contact

info@nexalogyenvironics.com

+1-514-272-8349

5369 Boul. St-Laurent, #220
Montreal, QC H2T 1S5

<http://nexalogy.com>