

# The data processor for the road network

## An exclusive interview with Jan Cools

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Jan Cools, CEO of Be-Mobile, doesn't give many interviews. "In B2C we don't need to get our name out there, as our customers are mostly highway authorities and engineers," he explains. However, there is a high chance that Belgian readers on the move will have encountered the business regularly. Its best-known products are the parking application [4411](#) and the route planner [Slimnaarantwerpen.be](#). In Hasselt, the business provides a dynamic system for free parking spaces, while in the Netherlands it runs the app [Flitsmeister](#), a counterpart of Coyote and Waze with an impressive 1.45 million users. The business, which now employs about two hundred people, has been majority-owned by Proximus since March 2016 and took over the French company [Mediamobile](#) at the end of last year. Its aim is to become the data supplier for road traffic not just in Belgium and the Netherlands, but in France, Germany, Poland and Scandinavia too.

**You supply traffic data to different players but also run Flitsmeister. Is that the odd one out?**

**COOLS:** *It's our showcase for the new traffic management system, a place where we can pilot applications. For example, we're in the process of linking a thousand smart traffic lights to moving vehicles in the Netherlands, something we ultimately also want to bring to our automotive services.*

**Is Flitsmeister a Dutch Coyote?**

**COOLS:** *Yes, it's a radar detector that's seen incredible growth. We invested in it three years ago and since then it's doubled in use.*

**Cools shows us the app's dashboard, a map of Western Europe map showing little dots that are mainly active in and around the Netherlands.**

**COOLS:** *Right now (at 4.30 pm on a Wednesday) there are 45,000 people who have their Flitsmeister app on. If we compare that with other apps, the density is a lot higher than that of Coyote. Our app is used an average of 21 times a month with an average session length of 31 minutes. That's almost every working day.*

**So does that mean you know where and how fast these 45,000 people are driving?**

**COOLS:** *Of course we can only use the aggregated data, but we do so to make very precise traffic measurements.*

**Be-Mobile is also involved in various data solutions connected with mobility. Does that make you a competitor of TomTom or Google/Waze? (TomTom sold its Telematics division to Bridgestone a few days after this interview)**

*COOLS: I see them more as customers. We've often worked with TomTom, sometimes bundling our data into their automotive offer and at other times using data from them. Google is the odd one out here, and has its own policy for both maps and traffic. It's a competitor to all navigation operators, but for us it's only a rival to Flitsmeister. But we're seeing Flitsmeister growing, despite the arrival of Waze. Once you're known and trusted as a local player, your users stay with you. We're also adding new features to our app, with speed trap detectors and warnings for ambulances.*

(Cools points to the Flitsmeister data dashboard.)

*COOLS: There are currently eight ambulances with their sirens on in this area. Everyone in the vicinity receives a warning on the app, provided the ambulance itself gives permission to send out the signal. In fact ambulance operators also tell us that they notice that cars pull over more quickly when they are connected to our system.*

**But the bigger goal is to map as much traffic as possible?**

*COOLS: What we do is virtualise the traffic infrastructure data: the capacity and availability of the roads. There are the providers who bundle services for connected cars in the broad sense of the word: mobility apps, connected or semi-connected cars, fleet management or toll collection platforms. We see these connected cars as all having an individual demand for mobility. We want to bridge the gap between the infrastructure providers and the users. In this respect, we have much better local connections than the service providers, who are usually international players.*

**You talk about linking information of this kind to traffic lights. Is that already happening in Belgium today?**

*COOLS: This is done via our C-ITS platform - Collaborative Intelligent Transport System. It's vehicle-to-vehicle or vehicle-to-infrastructure communication. Initially traffic management was carried out using cameras or pneumatic road tubes. For the last three or four years, the infrastructure operator has also been able to look at data from connected vehicles for this purpose. But instead of a sign above the road with a recommended speed or a traffic light that remains green for longer, the information can also be sent back to the vehicle.*

**How does this work in concrete terms?**

*COOLS: A De Lijn bus can drive towards a traffic light and request priority. We have an algorithm for this where we look at if the bus is on schedule, but you can also link it to factors such as how full the bus is. A full bus that's behind schedule gets higher priority than an empty bus that's running on time.*

**Is this already being applied in Belgium?**

*COOLS: We're currently in the test phase for rolling this out, initially in the Netherlands as they're a bit further ahead. But we're also working on a pilot project with De Lijn. Another use case is letting vehicles know when the light will turn green. This is nice for cars, but it's particularly helpful for trucks. Stopping and moving off again costs an average of one euro for an HGV. With ten thousand trucks driving around and stopping all day, such*

information is particularly useful. A third example is adjusting the traffic lights themselves more efficiently. Today this is done with pneumatic road tubes or a camera that determines how heavy the traffic is for the light. In the longer term, we want to be able to adjust the lights' settings more effectively with data from connected cars.

### How does the acquisition of Mediamobile fit into the picture? Is it mainly about scaling up?

COOLS: We've taken them over for three reasons: we are moving into new regions (France, Scandinavia, Germany and Poland), their position in the automotive sector was much stronger, and they want to add our traffic management expertise in those regions. But Mediamobile definitely isn't the only acquisition we'll be making: hopefully it's the first in a series.

HANS VAN WINCKEL, head of strategy at Be-Mobile: Historically, Be-Mobile has grown from communication about road congestion by radio, for example to Volvos via RDS TMC (Radio Data System - Traffic Message Channel) which allows us to send real-time traffic information. This requires local broadcasting agreements. Mediamobile had these, but for a larger geographical area. The OEMs, in this case the car manufacturers, are naturally interested in providers that can cover a larger geographical area.

### Is local presence your strength in comparison with major tech players?

COOLS: I think so, yes. We specialise purely in traffic, and this is the area where we've built up our expertise. We see businesses mainly coming from telecom and IT, but our approach is from a specialisation in traffic.

Suppose you want to close a road or a tunnel locally for a number of hours. A city like Amsterdam can make this information available via Google, or Flitsmeister. But a city like Dendermonde, or even Antwerp, isn't easily able to inform all those who will be affected. Google currently has no interest in local infrastructure and local content. So here we position ourselves as a service provider for the highway operator that supplies the data to connected vehicles, while at the same time using data from those connected cars for traffic management purposes.

### Do self-driving vehicles make things easier for you? Vehicles of this kind are connected and can supply even more data.

COOLS: There are different ways to get one hundred percent connectivity. The classic way is for them to be connected when they roll off the production line, but there are still exceptions here. Others assume that everyone runs an app while driving. The third way we are working on is electronic toll collection. Hopefully this will be brought in for cars, just as it already has been for trucks, probably by 2022. With electronic tolls for cars you immediately have 100% connected vehicles, so Flanders can be a frontrunner for once. This is much faster than the initiatives from the car industry that are gradually moving towards a standard.

### How does fleet management fit with the toll collection side of the business?

COOLS: Traditionally, fleet management is a form of asset management - calculating consumption, carrying out remote diagnostics and so on. We're not involved in that. We are mainly active in the area of mobility management and traffic management: the impact of traffic jams on large fleets which may then, for example, affect the port, where you have

*a lot of HGVs driving in and out. By mapping this you can engage in dynamic fleet management.*

*VAN WINCKEL: Specifically, this means that if the port knows exactly when a truck will arrive, which is something they don't know today, they can adjust their capacity better.*

*COOLS: Suppose an accident happens in Herentals: you know that all the traffic coming from Kempen, or from Germany, will arrive an hour or two late. With accurate information about that delay you can then dynamically assign trucks a new slot, but to do this you have to be able to track them. We're therefore going to launch Flux this year, a free app for trucks that we're currently testing. Trucks can use it to communicate with each other, and if they give their consent, the port can also track them. At the moment trucks arrive in Antwerp from all over Europe, each with its own on-board unit system that the port or the terminal operators have no connection with. If the port can persuade them to use Flux and consent to tracking, they will automatically be registered, and dynamically allocated a slot, which means that they can drive straight to the terminal on arrival.*

## Everything depends on tracking vehicles. How far can your technology trace individual users?

*COOLS: We can't trace individual users, but we do work with anonymous aggregated data. What we also do is monitor anonymous individual trips for short periods to determine average speed, but we don't know who the user is.*

*With Flitsmeister we also give warnings when an ambulance is coming, but users must first give permission. The advantage of having Proximus as a shareholder is that it's very GDPR-sensitive. We were one of the first within the business to be compliant.*

*VAN WINCKEL: Certain applications are very moment-based. If we give specific speed advice, it applies to that moment and that location. But we don't need to retain that information afterwards.*

## But what if the police show up tomorrow asking who stopped at the E40 car park in Sterrebeek yesterday at around 8 pm?

*COOLS: We can't give them that information. Technically it can be done, but we've implemented it in such a way as to make it impossible.*

### Be-Mobile

- Established in 2006
- Number of employees: 200
- 2016: acquires Dutch traffic app Flitsmeister
- March 2016: Proximus becomes majority shareholder

- November 2018: acquires Mediamobile, a French company in the same sector

## 5 business units

- Traffic: for highway and infrastructure operators
- Automotive: for car manufacturers
- Fleet management and toll collection
- Mobility payment: including parking via 4411
- Flitsmeister: companion app in the car