Articles on Meir Tunnel’s LED upgrade, Berlin, Dartford Crossing’s free-flow ambitions, traffic forecasting and much, much more!

PLUS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coming soon…</th>
<th>Rooms with a view</th>
<th>Dr Alan Stevens, TRL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With driverless cars nearing the production line, how will they alter your ATMS landscape?</td>
<td>How smart thinking in the control room is redefining collaboration – and reducing operational costs</td>
<td>“Step by step we’re getting to where there’ll be completely autonomous vehicles in certain situations”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Best-case scenarios
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Countryside alliance
The technology champions bringing ITS to our rural areas

Blinded by the truth?

Does the multibillion-dollar red light camera sector owe its existence – and profits – to traffic engineers’ misapplication of the yellow change interval formula?

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**Answers for industry.**
56 Defying the laws of physics?
Why traffic engineers could be introducing error into intersections
Brian Ceccarelli and Dr Joseph Shovlin may ruffle a few feathers with their theory on why we have red light runners

Features

4 Pedestrian aware
Adam Saunders reports on Ko-FAS – Germany’s most expensive cooperative vehicles initiative

6 Keep on movin’
Lloyd Fuller and Leanne Keeble highlight some of the ways in which we’re thinking more intelligently about enhancing mobility

8 Payback time
Report on the cost and safety benefits that LED lighting is bringing to the UK’s Meir Tunnel

12 Field day
Andrew Morgan talks with Kapsch’s Tugrul Güner about 5.9GHz and the Testfeld Telematik FOT

14 Countryside alliance
The challenging subject that is rural ITS

22 Weather proof
Nick Bradley picks out some highlights V3.0 FHWA’s Best Practices for Road Weather Management

32 Tolling’s highest good
We get the inside story on how the MoPac express lanes project is set to change the face of tolling – and infrastructure funding – in Texas

38 Countdown to autonomy
Paul Godsmark asks whether the rise of the autonomous vehicle could mean the end of traffic management as we know it

38 Charge ahead
John Challen speaks with the Highways Agency’s Nigel Gray about the plans to introduce free-flow video and tag tolling on the Dartford Crossing

48 Centers of attention
Timothy Compston discovers the design features being embraced by traffic management centers to rejuvenate the way they operate

65 Troubled times
Charles Russell and Serbjeet Kohli contemplate new methods for accurate traffic forecasting in the face of economic uncertainty

Interviews

68 Eric-Mark Huitema
IBM’s smarter transportation voice discusses how connected vehicles will revolutionize TMC operations

71 Dr Alan Stevens
TRL’s chief scientist tells Max Glaskin how he thinks the future of intelligent transport will pan out

Regulars

10 City Slicker
England’s capital, London, comes under our regular statistical spotlight

75 Sam Schwartz
Sam ponders whether V2V is the ITS technology that will have the most impact on road safety

85 J J Eden
Our toll expert on how to increase the speed on the road to interoperability

95 Larry Yermack
One of the founders of the E-ZPass system, Yermack reflects on what we’ve learned in the 20 years since its creation

105 Smart Cars
In a new slant, Misener asks us to consider ‘Smart cars, emergency vehicle style’

110 Bulletin Board

112 The Burning Question
What types of weather data does your TMC collect and use – and how are these information sources utilized in your operations?
Foreword

“There are no such things as stupid questions, Master Bradley, just stupid people!” That’s what my mathematics teacher, Professor Rottenbury, used to revel in telling me — regularly, as he watched me struggling with long division, algebra and in the end even turning up for classes. But after a few retakes, some private tuition and what I like to refer to as state-of-the-art cheating, I got my pass — just.

Physics was a complete non-starter, though. But it’s what Brian Ceccarelli, author of our cover article (and the man behind the www.redlightrobber.com website), excels at. And following its citations for running red lights back in 2009 — in one case by 0.34 seconds on a yellow duration — it means. Physics and math is a Lingua Franca, he’s been on a mission to apply his equation and know with 100% certainty what it means. Physics and math is a Lingua Franca, and is the very reason the red light camera sector. Our feature on page 101, ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ school of thought.

One industry professional who agrees with the Cary crusader is Professor Alexei Maradudin — the inventor of the amber light formula. “Physics is an open book,” Ceccarelli says. “I can look at his equation and know with 100% certainty what it means. Physics and math is a Lingua Franca. There aren’t stupid questions, just stupid people!”

Ceccarelli’s findings — even be incensed by them — but something I’ve learned from traffic engineers is that this isn’t an industry that subscribes to the ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ school of thought. As you’ll read in our feature on road weather management (p22), there are always gains to be had — and sometimes we have to break from convention to get them. Our feature on page 14, meanwhile, highlights how technology is improving mobility and safety in our rural areas, where intersections especially are a cause for concern. And not a red light camera in sight!

While on the subject of improvements, you can now download Traffic Technology International as a free app for use on Apple and Android devices. Whichever platform you’re on, enjoy the read!

Nick Bradley, Editor-in-chief
Defying the laws of physics?

Brian Ceccarelli and Joseph Shovlin think we’re blind to the ‘fact’ that red light cameras are profiting from enforcing ordinances that prohibit the laws of physics. Although their arguments may fly in the face of the status quo, is there any substance to what they have to say?

Main illustration courtesy of Ben White
There continues to be a great deal of debate surrounding the effectiveness of red light cameras – on TV news bulletins, in the mainstream press, within the corridors of academia and even within these pages. Do they prevent or do they incite crashes? It’s not hard to find data supporting both cases. So in light of these inconsistent results, asking whether or not red light cameras prevent crashes isn’t necessarily the right question.

Red light cameras are intended to moderate driver behavior and cause drivers to run fewer red lights. But can drivers be trained in this way? There are some people who believe that their immediate goal is to catch red light violators, in doing so leading to billions of dollars of revenue. So the purpose here is to ask (and answer) why the industry is so profitable, why crash data is inconsistent and why drivers run red lights – the latter answering the former.

Down to the formulae
Underpinning the support of the red light camera lobbyists and government legislators – and beneath the pro-camera front
organizations and anti-camera activists – there is a single physical formula that models the behavior of vehicles as they interact with traffic lights. But it’s a formula that we’re convinced has been simplified and misapplied by traffic engineers and as a result it induces motorists to run red lights inadvertently and consequently break the local ordinances.

Red light cameras catch these inadvertent violations and send out citations. Is driving ability thus irrelevant? Is the ability to stop before the light turns red irrelevant? Good or bad driver, everyone must obey the laws of physics (see the It’s physics! sidebar).

Mathematically speaking
The first of the three formulae that determine the length of a yellow light, Formula 1 (‘the Formula’) applies to all traffic movements. Formula 2 narrows Formula 1’s scope by applying only to traffic decelerating at a constant rate into an intersection – for example, turning traffic. Formula 3 narrows the scope even further and applies only to traffic that doesn’t slow down when the light turns from green to yellow. Formula 3 only applies to unimpeded traffic moving straight.

But with traffic engineers universally applying Formula 3, are they actually forcing drivers in many situations to run red lights?

Formula 1 expresses the meaning of the yellow light duration for the general case for all traffic movements. The yellow light duration equals the time that it takes for a vehicle to traverse the critical distance. If a vehicle is farther from the intersection than the critical distance when the light turns from green to yellow, the vehicle has the distance to stop – and then yellow means stop. If the vehicle is closer to the intersection than the critical distance, then yellow means go. In order for the vehicle to legally enter the intersection, the light must remain yellow for long enough to reach the intersection. The Formula is a basic rate x time = distance formula.

Traffic signals: 1868-2013

1868: The two-way red-green traffic signal is invented in London
1920: William Potts, a Detroit police officer, invents the amber light. First signal head with amber light erected at Woodward and Michigan Avenue
1930: Institute of Traffic Engineers founded in 1930 in the USA
1939: Physicists Denos Gazis, Robert Herman and Alexei Maradudin (GHM) develop amber light duration formula. They restrict use of the formula to vehicles that approach the intersection from the critical distance at a constant speed \( v_s \), which is the maximum allowable speed. The formula includes the all-allowed clearance interval
1965: Institute of Traffic Engineers adopts GHM’s formula, which ITE writes into the Traffic Engineering Handbook 3rd edition. ITE omits GHM’s restrictions and omits the ‘naught’ in \( v_s \), leaving \( v \) subject to future misunderstanding. From then on, this formula is known as the ITE yellow change interval formula
1975: Institute of Traffic Engineers changes its name to Institute of Transportation Engineers
1982: The Transportation and Traffic Engineering Handbook from the ITE describes that the formula requires some drivers to beat the light
1983: ITE introduces gravity’s effects into the formula. Many jurisdictions adopt new formula. Surprisingly California with hilly San Francisco does not
1997: Herman, co-inventor of the original amber light formula, dies
2002: Dr Chiu Liu, physicist and civil engineer for Caltrans, and Dr Lei Yu publish paper in ASCE Journal of Transportation Engineering, Liu

It’s physics!
There are three related physics formulae that determine the length of a yellow light duration. First there’s the general formula (Formula 1):

\[ Y \geq \frac{t_p v_0^2}{2(a+G g)} + \frac{v_0^2}{v_{avg}} \]

The second (Formula 2) rearranges the terms and uses a constant deceleration:

\[ Y \geq \frac{2(t_p + \frac{v_0 (1 + v_l/v_0))}{a(v_l/v_0))}}{2(a+G g)} \]

And the third (Formula 3), the simplified form for straight-through traffic, is the ITE yellow change interval formula:

\[ Y \geq t_p + \frac{v_0}{2(a+G g)} \]

Where

\[ v_0 = \text{the yellow change interval; } \]
\[ t_p = \text{perception/reaction time (P&R time); } \]
\[ v_l = \text{the velocity of the vehicle at the intersection stop bar; } \]
\[ v_{avg} = \text{average velocity of the vehicle as it traverses the critical distance} \]
\[ v_{85} = \text{the } 85^{th} \text{ percentile speed of free flowing traffic. When } v_{85} > v_l \text{ use } v_{85} \]
\[ v_s = \text{the safe and comfortable decelerate rate of the vehicle} \]
\[ a = \text{the safe and comfortable decelerate rate} \]
\[ G = \text{the earth’s gravitational constant} \]
\[ g = \text{the grade of the road} \]

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We are not trying to justify all red light violators. We are looking at the vast majority of cases where red light camera violations are caused by the underlying physics.

Brian Ceccarelli, science and engineering software consultant, North Carolina, USA

The yellow light duration is a critical component within the issue of red light running.

The numerator expresses the distance:

$$\text{critical distance} = \frac{t_y v_0 + \frac{v_0^2}{2(a + Gg)}}{}$$

The critical distance is the distance needed to stop – i.e. the distance the driver travels while reacting to change from a green to yellow light and then braking to a stop. If you divide this distance by the average velocity the driver traverses this distance, the result will be the time that it takes to reach the intersection. That’s the minimum time required for the light to be yellow.

In its unsimplified form, the Formula allows all drivers in all situations to enter an intersection legally. It covers situations when drivers slow down at different rates, when drivers slow down at a constant rate as in preparing to execute turns, or when drivers go straight without being hindered by other traffic. Traffic engineers never use this Formula in its unsimplified form.

Formula 2 represents a specialized case of the Formula and applies to drivers decelerating at a constant rate into the intersection. Movements that fit this formula are vehicles approaching the intersection with intent to turn left, right or perform a U-turn, who are not in a queue waiting to turn. The average velocity is the average of the driver’s velocities at the beginning of the critical distance and at the intersection stop bar.

Formula 3 represents an even more specialized case. This is the Institute of Transportation Engineers’ (ITE) yellow change interval formula. By setting $v_i$ to $v_0$, this formula assumes drivers travel at their initial speed unimpededly through the critical distance. Once inside the critical distance, drivers must proceed at the speed limit or accelerate in order to enter the intersection before the light changes to red.

Going back in time...

Formula 3, the classic yellow change interval formula, first appeared in 1959 in a white paper written by physicists Denos Gazis, Robert Herman and Alexei Maradudin (GHM). In 1965, the ITE appears to have miscopied Formula 9 from GHM’s paper into ITE’s Traffic Engineering Handbook. From there it became known as the ITE yellow change interval formula (see There’s been a misunderstanding sidebar).

There are many rationalizations that traffic engineers devise to justify blanket

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There’s been a misunderstanding

Of all the authors of The Problem of the Amber Signal Light in Traffic Flow white paper, only Alexei Maradudin, a physics professor at the University of California at Irvine, remains alive to this day. Just a few months ago, Jay Beeber, the executive director of the grassroots organization Safer Streets LA asked Maradudin to set the record straight. And in a letter dated July 23, 2013 to California’s Traffic Devices Committee, Maradudin enumerated the don’ts of his formula “…in the hope that our work not be misunderstood and therefore misused”. In his letter, he wrote: “Applying the formula to circumstances where a driver must decelerate within the critical distance into the intersection results in a minimum amber time which is shorter than what is necessary to eliminate the dilemma zone.” Maradudin also emphasized some of these specific circumstances that did not apply. They include 1) Turning traffic where the speed limit is greater than the intersection entry velocity; 2) Traffic approaching two close-by intersections: traffic may have to slow down for the second light (or traffic waiting for the second light) before arriving at the first light; 3) Traffic going straight that slows down for vehicles entering and exiting the highway to and from business entrances and sidestreets near the intersection; 4) Traffic slowing down before entering the intersection as a result of traffic density, traffic turning in the lane and traffic changing lanes; 5) Traffic where the speed limit decreases on the far side of the intersection; and 6) Traffic slowing down due to pedestrians, railroad tracks and potholes and other hazards.

Use of the simplified formula and it’s not within the scope of this article to elaborate on them. But engineering judgment starts with the proper application – not the misapplication – of the physical sciences. The definition of engineering is the application of physics, chemistry and earth science. The mandate of every state’s statutes for professional engineers is that they comply with the laws of physics. Although signal head visibility, intersection geometry and human factors are important to computing proper perception/reaction times and comfortable deceleration rates, these considerations cannot come at the sacrifice of the laws of physics.

To traffic engineers who rationalize shorter yellow times using traffic flow goals or ‘drivers disrespecting the yellow’ arguments, we dismiss those arguments, just as Gazis, Herman and Maradudin did. We must provide the driver a solvable decision problem.

Understanding the physics
As long as all-red clearance times were sufficient for drivers to enter the intersection late but exit it before conflicting traffic gets the right-of-way, the problem was masked. But it became readily apparent when red light cameras – running 24-7 and catching every violation – exposed its magnitude.

We have no problem with the cameras in themselves. As a matter of fact, without them these underlying engineering errors wouldn’t have been discovered. And we are not trying to justify all red light violators. Everyone has seen drivers who, with plenty of stopping distance, speed up and enter intersections many seconds after a light turns red. These are the violators the cameras should be catching. Instead we are looking at the vast majority of cases where camera violations are caused by the underlying physics.

Using the simplified formula with common speed limits leads to 3- to 5-second yellow change intervals; the unsimplified formula requires 2 to 3 seconds more than those. Without understanding the physics, some jurisdictions try to appease the outcry by reluctantly adding a small grace time to the yellow. In Florida, for example, FDOT is currently transferring 0.4 seconds from the all-red clearance interval to the yellow change interval at some of its red light camera intersections.

Anti-camera organizations such as the National Motorists Association lobby governments to add one second to the yellow. Many organizations such as the FHWA and NTSB want engineers to use the 85th percentile velocity rather than the posted speed limit in the calculation. Attempts such as these add at most one second to the yellow. But this just skims the surface.

The New Orleans Regional Traffic Safety Coalition led by Steven Strength – a P.E. for
the Louisiana DOTD – set up a test course to measure the yellow duration needs for right-turning drivers. They measured about 6.2 seconds for several 40mph vehicles. But by conforming to Formula 3, Louisiana grants such vehicles only 4 seconds. Some jurisdictions ignore the formulae altogether (see Against the grain sidebar).

The case of Cary
Actual red light running data is hard to come by. Is this because the companies and municipalities involved don’t want the magnitude of the problem to come out? If driver behavior was modulating red light violations, you’d expect similar intersections would have similar violation rates. But this wasn’t the case in Cary, North Carolina, where the difference was the yellow change interval – in fact huge differences existed from intersection to intersection. At specific intersections we were able to track changes in yellow change interval based on changes in the violation rates. For example, a 600% increase of violations for a solitary left turn lane was due to the NCDOT decreasing the yellow change interval from four to three seconds. We saw a 50% increase of violations for straight-through movements on a different intersection due to the NCDOT decreasing the yellow interval from 4.5 to 4.4 seconds. Even a 0.10-second change has radical consequences.

Because engineers have been systematically introducing error, one finds the most red light runners near the intersections where most cameras take vigil? 

If one wants to increase safety yet cause more drivers to run red lights, one increases the all-red interval while decreasing the yellow change interval

Physics is an open book, so it’s doubtful that nobody is aware of the exact same statistics that we have, a pattern that is especially evident in Cary, Raleigh and Knightdale, North Carolina.

Crash course?
Intersections ripe for revenue can also be ripe for crashes but that is not a given. Crashes are a function of the combined yellow and all-red intervals. Red light running is a function of the yellow interval alone. Lengthening the all-red clearance interval reduces crashes without affecting the number of red light runners. If one wants to increase safety yet cause more drivers to run red lights, one increases the all-red interval while decreasing the yellow change interval.

This practice is par for the course for some transportation agencies. And because we’re striving for honesty, some of those DOTs do not decrease the yellows with the intention to cause more red light running. They decrease the yellows to increase traffic flow, but the result is the same – a sustained increase of red light runners. The goals of traffic flow and safety compete, a fascinating topic with a long history and in itself perhaps the subject of a future article.

Brian Ceccarelli is a science and engineering software consultant in Cary, North Carolina, who has a B.S. in physics. Joseph Shovlin, meanwhile, is a research scientist at Cree Labs in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina and also has a Ph.D. in physics.

References