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## Journal of Transport Geography

Volume 6, Issue 4, December 1998, Pages 241-249

Paper

# Off the road? Reflections on transportation geography in the information age

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[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0966-6923\(98\)00023-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0966-6923(98)00023-4)

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### Abstract

The traditional focus of transportation geography has been on the movement of people and goods; in this sense, the concerns of transportation geographers have been with life *on the road*. The information revolution creates opportunities for a growing proportion of interactions to take place in the frictionless realms of Cyberspace and thereby poses questions about life *off the road*. I use this opportunity of the Fleming Lecture to reflect on some of the challenges that information technology (IT) poses for transportation geography. I first describe and critique the two archetypical views of the world that I characterize as *on the road* and *off the road*. I then consider

1. (1) how IT can help improve people's access to opportunities and promote greater equity of access; and

2. (2) how IT can help promote greater sustainability. In reflecting on IT, access, and equity, I suggest expanding the notion of geographic context to include the personal relations, social networks, and cultural norms that make up social and cultural capital.

IT has the potential to increase access and equity through Intelligent Transportation Systems measures and via the substitution of telecommunication for travel (including the examples of distance learning and telecommuting). I argue that IT will expand access and equity only if it enriches social capital and that this will require innovative ways of meshing off-the-road with on-the-road practices. In reflecting on IT and sustainability, I propose education and place-based environmental management as two areas where IT might promote greater sustainability. But again, I stress the need for technology to connect with the on-the-road practices that create social and cultural capital. I conclude that transportation geographers need to think creatively about how the growing presence of IT can help mitigate inequality of access and push us toward more sustainable transportation. This will require understanding how IT-induced changes intersect with on-the-road processes, for that is where the most interesting questions lie.



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## Keywords

information technology; access; equity; social capital; sustainability

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↑ Prepared for Fleming Lecture in Transportation Geography 1996 AAG Meetings.

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