

Call for papers – 2008 Association of American Geographers Annual Conference.
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<http://aag.org/annualmeetings/2008/index.htm>

Situating Sat Nav: Questioning the TomTom Effect

Session organisers:

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Context:

Comprehensive in-car satellite navigation (Sat Nav) systems have rapidly become affordable and ‘must-have’ mass-market accessories, advertised on television and the focus of ‘scare’ stories in the tabloid press. With their driver’s-eye position, dynamic maps and an authoritative voice telling you where and when to turn, these archetypal geographical gizmos depend on the ‘magic’ locational power of a cluster of unseen satellites and the global reach of corporations marketing the latest consumer fad. Sat Nav offers technologically sophisticated spatial data models of the world, but the technology quickly sinks into taken-for-granted everyday driving practices, such that its social and political significance is hard to assess. The gadgets themselves take space on the dashboard and windscreens, but also make new senses of space for the driver, well beyond the car. What exactly is the nature of this TomTom effect?

We invite theoretically informed analyses questioning the social effects, cultural meanings and political economy of in-car satellite navigation.

Suggested themes:

The politics of the socio-technical infrastructures and corporate practices underpinning collection and distribution of street maps and points-of-interest databases.

Consideration of the risks that flow from people’s unwitting trust in the truth spoken by their Sat Nav. How dependent are drivers on them? Do they raise confidence, make driving safer and empower people with enhanced mobility? Or is the promise of never being lost an illusion, hiding navigational blind spots and a loss of geographical autonomy?

The embodied practices of using Sat Nav and the ways in which these may be associated with social power, e.g. gendered, classed, aged, etc. Cultural meanings attached to Sat Nav. How people feel about granting decision-making control over to software? Cross cultural studies of Sat Nav.

The efficacy of these systems. How to evaluate the accuracy of databases and fidelity of routing algorithms when the internal workings are deliberately ‘black-boxed’. Impacts on aggregate trip behaviour, local traffic flows through neighbourhoods, by-passing speed cameras and traffic calming measures, etc.

Map and voice interface design and its possible deconstruction.

Hacking Sat Nav: artistic, playful, or subversive uses of the technology.

Navigational ethics, particularly relating to individual privacy and community rights.
The surveillant potential of Sat Nav as 'spy in the car' for states and corporations.

Proposed papers in the form of a title and short abstract (250 words maximum) should be submitted to Martin Dodge (m.dodge@manchester.ac.uk) by 30th September 2007. Further details on the paper requirements and registration for the AAG meeting are at <http://aag.org/annualmeetings/2008/index.htm>