

Critical making with web2.0: on the material geographies in/of followthethings.com

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Abstract

Recent reviews of new media scholarship have criticised it for paying little attention to the social and environmental (in)justices in its technical infrastructure. At the same time, scholars of social and environmental (in)justice are experimenting with web2.0, using wikis, blogs, twitter and other social media to conduct and disseminate their research. These strands have collided in the making of a website called followthethings.com which simultaneously critiques the injustices embedded in everyday things, whilst also being made and maintained using everyday things, most notably a laptop, its software and the technical infrastructure of web2.0. Drawing on an emerging literature on critical making, this paper explains what has been learned about the material geographies of web2.0 and commodity activism through this making process.

Key words: critical making – web2.0 – material geographies – trade justice – commodity activism

¹ This is a 'nom de plume' used by Ian in his 'solo' writing, to acknowledge the fact that he never works alone (see Cook *et al* 2008).

1. Introduction



Figure 1: followthethings.com's homepage (screengrab from 17 January 2015)

followthethings.com is a website designed to have the look, feel and navigation of a familiar online store. But it's stocked with research examining films, art, activist and other work that encourages shoppers to critically consider their relationships with those who make the things that they buy. Its purpose is to encourage careful thought and lively conversation about trade (in)justice, and to encourage and inform new work in this genre of commodity activism. Its material geographies aren't, however, only those followed by the work it showcases. These are entangled with its own, via a design process working with and through the new media ecology of web2.0, and centred on an Apple MacBook assembled in China and purchased in the UK by the site's designer. This paper is about the making of this website, and what reflections on this process can contribute both to emerging 'critical making' and commodity activism literatures.

It takes as its starting point Cook and Woodyer's (2012) assertion that 'We need to develop forms of critique that inspire hauntings, feed feelings, come alive, leap out and grab us, ... that are not just about vital materiality, but are themselves vitally material'. Here, Ingold (2007, 2-3) asks: 'might we not learn more about the material composition of the inhabited world by engaging quite directly with the stuff we want to understand: by sawing logs, building a wall, knapping a stone or rowing a boat? Could not such an engagement - working practically *with* materials - offer a more powerful procedure of discovery than an approach bent on the abstract analysis of things already made?' This paper's answer is 'yes'. We could and have done this, by making and stocking a website, working practically with materials including keyboards, hard disks, screens, wifi routers, digital cameras, fibre-optic cables, servers, software, networks, labour, ideas, emotions, conversations, experiments, relations, students, interns, colleagues, academic research practices and a 'do it yourself' ethic taken from activist and hacker literatures. Yes, too, this has generated a 'powerful procedure of discovery' about the material geographies of web2.0. The 'kind of flow' of such 'critical making' work is rarely accounted for in academic literatures (Ratto et al 2014). This paper tries to provide one.

2. Whose hair is it anyway?



Figure 2: a hair extension and other product photos from the followthethings website.

In the summer of 2008, I caught the end of a TV documentary film called *Jamelia: whose hair is it anyway?* The British singer was in India, with a hair extension that she had worn on a TV lottery show in her hand, walking through a city looking for the person whose hair it had originally been. This was an amazing tale, full of unlikely twists and turns, in which she finally met a woman in Chennai who had had her beautiful hair shaved off in thanks for her daughter's recovery from an illness. The temple where this had been done had sold her hair to a trader, and used some of the money to feed hungry people. I was keen to find a copy and show it to students in my *Geographies of material culture* module. The way that Jamelia's quest had been filmed and edited seemed to perfectly illustrate a core argument in its 'follow the thing' literature, that:

'In conducting multi-sited research, one finds oneself with all sorts of

cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments. These conflicts are resolved, perhaps ambivalently, not by refuge in being a detached anthropological scholar, but in being a sort of ethnographer-activist, renegotiating identities in different sites as one learns more about a slice of the world system' (Marcus 1995, 113).

Throughout the documentary, Jamelia is filmed chatting with her daughter on her mobile phone, making sure she is OK, saying how much she misses her, and at its conclusion she meets a stranger thousand of kilometers from home who had sacrificed her beautiful hair for her daughter. Central to the film's story are surprising, positive, powerfully emotive and empathetic mother-daughter relationships. Jamelia says at the end of the film that she 'felt honoured that I have worn such cherished hair' (Cook 2011a, np). I decided to share this find with colleagues in the international geography community. I emailed the *Critical Geography Forum* (CGF) outlining what I'd seen and putting forward an idea: 'If anyone knows / uses other commodity following films (and related resources), ... I'm happy to compile and set up some kind of online, updatable list' (Cook 2008, np).

3. The proliferation of 'follow the things' work

Twenty five years ago, studies of the 'social lives of things' were thin on the ground. Few studies of the material geographies of commodities had been undertaken. This meant that those wanting to do this kind of research had little to be inspired by. And those wanting to use these studies in their teaching had little to work with. Now, it seems, we are spoiled for choice. Longstanding arguments about global capitalism being safe from sustained popular critique because its consumers encounter it commodities in abstract, fetishized forms (Jhally 1987), have been challenged by the proliferation of popular and academic work aiming to, as Arjun Appadurai put it in 1986, 'follow the things themselves ... [to] illuminate their human and social context' (5). A growing body of mainstream newspaper articles, popular books, documentary films, NGO campaigning, art practice and academic publications have highlighted the low pay and unhealthy conditions of workers producing iconic and everyday goods for consumers around the world, and include their retailers and consumers in the stories told as (un)knowingly implicated and responsible actors (Foster 2007, Farquharson & Waters 2010).

Work in this 'follow the thing' genre aims to engage its audiences in unfolding 'detective work' narratives, to be evocative and thought-provoking, to encourage empathetic appreciations of commodity relations, to generate and inform discussions about trade (in)justice, and to encourage change (Cook *et al* 2006, Cook, Evans *et al* 2007a, Foster 2008). It wants consumers, corporations, governments and international trade regulators to take more responsibility for the historically hidden, exploitative relations of global capitalism (Freidberg 2004; Hughes 2005). It serves an important pedagogic role for university, school and

popular educators looking to provide their students with tangible entryways into abstract academic debates about, for example, commodity fetishism, globalisation, neo-liberalism, trade justice, legal geographies, nature-society relations, the politics of knowledge, and theories of embodiment, connectivity, materiality, relationality and affect (Cook *et al* 2006, Gough 2004, Evans *et al* 2008). And, because its politics, aesthetics, practices, pedagogies, uses and effects are invariably discussed online and in print by its makers, participants, commentators and critics, it has inspired, informed and enabled the creation of new ‘follow the thing’ work by a wider range of makers including school and university students (Barnes 2006, Graham 2010).

4. A quirky, clicking little universe of its own

I liked how it was presented and showed a more ‘real’ side of Jamelia. I particularly liked the clip of her talking on the telephone to [her daughter] Téja and the clip when she shed a tear after watching that little child get his head shaved off unwillingly. Oh, and I also liked how Jamelia went out of her way to track down the lady who’s hair Jamelia wore on the National Lottery. It was very informative and somewhat emotional, too. I’m a 21 year old male, so the documentary wasn’t really aimed at me at all, but with that said, I did leave having a lot more understanding & respect for women’s hair (Amethyst21 in *Off_Da_Enz et al* 2008 [link](#)).

Everyone featured seemed happy to give their hair, but I guess there is a flipside to it too that wasn’t shown in the program! The english schoolgirls though, who said they didn’t really care if the hair came from dead people – ewww! I’d rather I knew it came from someone alive 😊 (ellaonfire) / ... [Jamelia] was on Richard and Judy saying that the for some reason she wasn’t allowed to go into the darker side of the business because of a backlash from the industry, I can’t remember what she said but she seemed to make the point of the programme void (caligulasmate) (Source ellaonfire *et al* 2008 [link](#)).

Figure 3: screenshot of part of the ‘discussion’ on the ‘Whose hair is it anyway?’ page (Cook 2011a).

The ‘*follow the things*’ website began as followthethings.wordpress.com: an online list compiled using this free and easy-to-use blog platform. It contained work I’d collected, used in teaching, or heard about, over the years. It was, from the outset, a *curating* project: an attempt to name, define and gather together in one place diverse examples of a ‘follow the things’ genre of commodity research and activism. But I also researched how each example had been discussed online, in subscription-only newspaper databases and in academic literatures, and what impacts it seemed to have had on audiences, workers and corporations. Clicking the hyperlinks from its home page took visitors to that example’s page, on which the findings from this research were presented as a series of quotations, each with the original source referenced and with a link to the each source for readers to check (see Figure 3). Each example page began

with IMDb-inspired² database information, like the year of production, type of example, names of producers and production companies, availability and, where films were researched, an embedded original or a trailer.

The quotations that followed were arranged and edited so that reading a page was like reading the script of a detailed and informed conversation about that film, book, etc. (see Ashmore 1989). The aim was to create and invite shoppers into spaces of imagination and conversation that would provide - in a non-didactic, social-sculptural, online way - things to think about and with, during and after the reading encounter (Beuys & Schwarz 2006, Cook *et al* 2000). This would be a site whose "openness" [would be] based on the *theoretical, mental* collaboration of the [visitor], who must freely interpret an artistic datum, a product which has already been organized in its structural entirety (even if this structure allows for an indefinite plurality of interpretations' (Eco 2006, 30). I'd loved the way that a book that had I researched for the site (Hager Cohen 1997) had been described by a reader as taking her on a journey through a 'a quirky, clicking little universe of its own in which every piece of the puzzle fits and everybody has a part to play' (Schinto 1997, np). I wanted the 'follow the things' website to enable these kinds of journeys too.

5. The new ecology of information

The development of web2.0 has enabled 'follow the things' work to enter a new 'thriving' phase (Clarke 2008, 1874). The internet is no longer just a place for the transmission of finished work to relatively passive public audiences (Lovink & Niesto 2009). Instead, web2.0 new media ecology provides 'unprecedented opportunit[ies] for creating ... independent networks of research based production and distribution' (Dovey 2008, 243). Freely available wiki, social networking, blog, media-player, tag and 'mash-up' software, along with the increasing availability of relatively inexpensive computers, pervasive media devices, and internet connections worldwide, are said to have ushered in a new era of internet use characterized by 'making, sharing and collaboration' (Gauntlett 2011, 8). Here a hacker ethic 'promotes decentralization of authority and the idea that computers can be used for good', believes that 'all information should be free', and spreads that ethic via free, open access software and creative commons licensing (Milberry & Anderson 2009, 396). At the same time, commercial organizations like Google and Facebook own and shape architectures of mass interaction by providing 'free' online services that generate revenues by commodifying their user-generated content (*ibid.*).

Social movements, activists and artists have taken advantage of this new media ecology to 'raise their unfiltered voices' against corporations that have become increasingly vulnerable to scandalization online (Kneip 2009, 174). Trade justice

² IMDb is the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>), described on Wikipedia as 'one of the most popular online entertainment destinations' (Anon 2013 np), which began as a Usenet posting by British film fan and computer programmer Col Needham in 1990 (Schofield 2007).

activism has been able to draw upon both open access and commercial platforms and software to continue the tradition of 'embrac[ing] consumption as a platform from which to launch progressive political and cultural projects' (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee 2012, 6). Kneip (2009) argues that activists have used the internet in three main ways: first, to build websites that 'provide information in a strategically structured manner [that] expresses protest through expertise' (192); second, to use websites and social media to channel activism via predetermined campaign principles and actions that are implemented by volunteers; and, third, to use collaborative platforms such as wikis to enable, encourage and compile ideas and examples of 'self-organized micro-activism' (176). As new software and platforms emerge, new opportunities arise for activists to 'mess around with materials, select things, experimentally put parts together, rearrange, throw bits away, and generally manipulate the thing in question until it approaches something that seems to communicate meanings in a satisfactory manner' (Gauntlett 2011, 4).

6. The double meaning of shopping

Follow the things
a shopping site.

HOME 1. GROCERIES 2. FASHION 3. ELECTRONICS 4. MISC. 5. SHIPPING NEWS 6. HOW TO... 7. FAQ

HOW TO SHOP
Click on the tabs to browse, or enter what you're looking for in the 'search' box below... Follow the links, play the embedded videos, etc. to find the original film, book, artwork, paper, ... Print out the page setting this in context and hand it out for discussion... Follow the links to find the sources of the comments quoted... Learn how to follow things yourself... Submit your feedback or ideas in the reply boxes... Tell us about your shopping...

Follow the thing: papaya
Date: 2004
Author: Ian Cook *et al* (website: academic).
Type: academic journal article.
Full reference: Ian Cook *et al* (2004) Follow the thing: papaya. *Antipode* 36(4), 642-664
Availability: article (free access: Antipode)

Description
Cook follows his commodity from the field to the plane, to the London supermarket, and to the fruit bowl. Although the narrative appears linear, it is not, as cross-cutting connections are drawn among and outside its constitutive stages: to colonialism, to the World Trade Organization (WTO), to Western middle-class consumption aesthetics, to the diseases and pests of exotic fruits, to the character of international air cargo transportation, and to developing-world labour control and surveillance. This is an unbounded, dense network of associations. And precisely because it isn't a simple chain, the commodity itself is no 'trivial thing'; it is composite, defetishized, decrypted, reflecting all manner of trace effects. (source Trevor Barnes *et al* [2007] link).

The Idea
...if we accept that geographical knowledge through which one-worldly entities are shaped and which open from within an increasingly multiple, contradictory, transnational and often disjunctly represented, then the power of a new which think with these geographical entities and their working from one to the other through the commodity form... in that knowledge can work their way through their and along the way, what and made their own critical knowledge out of them. Cook and Chang (2004: 6)

Figure 4: screenshots illustrating the wordpress site architecture: navigating from its Home page via Department page to an Example page and, in the case, the original example.³

³ NB some photographs have been blurred due to copyright issues discussed later.

At this stage, followthethings.wordpress.com could only be accessed if you knew its URL. The design was basic. I didn't have much of an idea who its visitors would be, what they would get from the site, or how it could be designed to make it more interesting and user-friendly. So, I emailed the writers, filmmakers, activists and others who had produced the examples it featured - along with academics and teachers I knew who might want to use it - asking them to act as its 'user crew', to provide feedback on its design and content. They said it needed to be less text-heavy, more eye-catching and easier to navigate. So, I started to browse well-known UK grocery and 'Do It Yourself' websites like sainsburys.co.uk, tesco.com, asda.com and diy.com. I wanted to understand their visual design, how they presented shopping options, and how you had to move through their pages to make shopping decisions. I then tried to mimic this, as much as possible, using wordpress' blog templates and content management system (see figure 3). For example, this meant setting white as the site's background colour, using orange headlines and black text, creating 'Department' pages that included product photos and short descriptions of each 'product' that you could click to get to each example's page.

In the process, it struck me that I was turning followthethings.wordpress.com into a 'shopping' website, if you appreciated shopping's double meaning in English, which is both 'to seek or examine goods, property, etc. offered for sale' and 'to give away information about', 'to behave treacherously towards; inform on, or betray' (Anon nda, np). The site's design was also influenced by the examples that it brought together, in particular the cultural activist tactic of 'détournement': a form of critique that works 'less through negating and opposing dominant rhetorics than by playfully and provocatively folding existing culture forms in on themselves', through a kind of 'rhetorical jujitsu' (Harold in Sandlin & Callahan 2009, 98). Shopping's' double meaning, coupled with cultural activist design principles, meant that visitors could be imagined as 'shoppers'. Their first impressions would ideally be of visiting a familiar online store but, after clicking through the site, might then turn into vivid, puzzling, empathetic engagements with the hidden and often disturbing stories in the goods in store.

7. Other websites and apps are available

followthethings.wordpress.com wasn't the only website experimenting with web2.0 to get 'follow the things' research and activism online. Its design process also involved examining how others worked. We looked at, for instance, wiki-based projects involving the collaborative creation of new commodity following narratives. howstuffismade.org (2004-), for example, is 'a visual encyclopedia of photo essays produced by engineering and design students that document how objects are manufactured and investigate both the labour conditions of that manufacture and its environmental impact' (Tuters & Varnelis 2006, 362); and wikichains.com (2009-10, 2014-),⁴ is a 'website that aims to encourage ethical

⁴ Wikichains was taken offline after it 'quickly overwhelmed by hacking and spamming'. A revised version was being launched in early 2014 (Graham 2013a).

consumption and transparency in commodity chains' by enabling student and other contributors with knowledge of parts of commodity chains to co-create 'following' narratives online (Graham 2013b np: Graham & Haarstad 2011). We looked at projects aiming to make supply chains more 'visible' through the use of locative media, film, digital mapping, and/or sound files. *milkproject.net* (2004-5), for example, used GPS technology to trace and show the travels of milk from Latvian cows to Dutch cheese vendors, and illustrated these travels with GPS tracking animations, photos and interview quotations (Karin & Whitehouse-Lewis 2011); and *sourcemap.org* (2009-), is a 'volunteer-driven', 'free and open-source project' allowing 'users [to] produce supply chains maps, discover the likely toxicity, carbon footprint and recyclability of materials, and embed this information in their web sites or print a QR code to link their tangible products to their respective sourcemaps' (Anon ndb, np, & Bonanni et al 2009, np).

We also looked at projects that reworked the capacities of smartphones and pervasive media for trade justice ends. *Phone Story* (2011), for example, is a free smartphone game that allows players to 'Follow [their] phone's journey from the coltan mines of the Congo to the electronic waste dumps in Pakistan through four colourful mini-games' (Meyer 2011, np), and *Boycott* (2013-) is a free app that allows users to scan the barcodes on commodities, find out who owns the company that made them, and 'join user-created campaigns to boycott business practices that violate [users'] principles' or buy goods to support corporations that uphold those principles (O'Connor 2013, np). All of these examples were incorporated into the followthethings site: *Milk Project* and *Phone Story* were researched as examples (see Karin & Whitehouse-Lewis 2011 and Kemppainen et al 2012), and *How Stuff Works*, *Wikichains*, *Sourcemap* and *Boycott* were added to its 'follow it yourself' page.

8. Student crowd-researching

Compiled by Kate Adley, Richard Keeble, Pippa Russell, Noora Stenholm, William Strang and Tuuli Valo, edited by Eleanor Bird and Ian Cook (last updated March 2013). Page created for followthethings.com as part of the 'Geographies of Material Culture' module, University of Exeter.

Compiled by Anita Badejo, Josephine Korijn and Asya Rahlin, edited by Jack Parkin and Ian Cook (last updated September 2012) Page created for followthethings.com as part of the 'Anthropologies of global connection' course, Brown University.

Figure 5: screenshots from two example pages showing who created them, when and where (Adley et al 2013 & Badejo et al 2012).

In the summer of 2009, a friend and former colleague - Keith Brown - was visiting Exeter from the USA. He asked what I was working on and I showed him the wordpress website. I told him there were many more examples that I hadn't yet had time to research. He said he would be teaching a new undergraduate module at Brown University later that year called 'Anthropologies of global connection'. A few weeks later, he invited me to be a guest lecturer and suggested that I design some coursework for his students in which they would, in groups, research new examples for publication on the site. The site's basis in crowd-research began, and I re-designed my undergraduate 'Geographies of

material culture' module to follow suit. This approach was in part inspired by an exchange of ideas about ways to combine creative, group and public pedagogies to engage students in controversial trade (in)justice issues (see Angus *et al* 2000, Gough 2004 & Evans *et al* 2008). What we argued in this exchange was that students tend to more wholeheartedly engage in trade justice issues when they are given some new research to do together, knowing that the results of this will be presented to a public audience. We were taking these ideas online.

A collection of new webpage drafts quickly began to accumulate, and Keith was able to employ graduates from his module as research assistants to re-research and edit them to as near to publication-standard as they could, as well as to produce their own original 'follow the thing' work inspired by that research. The employment of our modules' graduates to work with us to develop the site continued at Brown and, the following year, at Exeter. Their work drew on existing (Brown) and new (Exeter) funding sources, the latter of which was intended to kick-start international collaborative research between staff at our Universities. What these opportunities have meant is that, since the 2009-10 academic year, our site has been 'staffed' - like *howstuffworks.org* and *wikichains.com* - by undergraduate students doing coursework for the site in the Autumn/Fall term, paid research assistants and / or interns working in the summer holidays, and us (mainly me) all year round working as the site's orchestrator and final editor for every page. This is why so many researchers, compilers, authors and editors are listed on the site's pages, and how *followthethings.com* became an international, collaborative, crowd researched project (Figure 5).

9. affective public engagement

In 'follow the things' work - within and beyond academia - the findings of research are increasingly being presented to audiences in less didactic, more engaging ways. In contrast to 'traditional' activist methods that 'attempt... to attract people to a cause by bombarding them with facts ... fiery speeches ... one-sided monologues ... and propaganda' (Verson 2007, 175), this paradigm of cultural activism 'involves the creative appropriation, creation, and enactment of culture, along with large doses of humor and creativity' (Sandlin & Milam 2008, 338). It does so by creatively reworking the knowledges and materials of consumer culture using cinematic / artistic / activist techniques of, for example, experiential narrative, exposure, juxtaposition and montage, parody, culture jamming, shopping interventions and critical making (Cook & Woodyer 2012). And its aim is to enroll publics in positive critiques of trade injustice through emotionally rich, intentionally puzzling, mischievous and collaborative sense- and judgment-making processes. What this aims to leave its audiences with is 'a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as the unprocessed encounter and ... a more unheimlich (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition' (Bennett 2001, 5).

The proliferation of this work has resulted from vibrant, diverse combinations of trade justice campaign issues, events, social networks, literatures, research techniques, forms of dissemination and approaches to activism and affective public engagement. This is typical of emerging scholar / activist work enabled and encouraged by the capacities and connections of web2.0, and encouraged in freely available online activist handbooks and toolboxes like *Do it Yourself* (Trapeze Collective 2007) and *Beautiful Trouble* (Boyd 2012). What this and related literature argue is that scholar / activist projects requires *teams* of workers with shared commitments and diverse research experiences, skills and contacts to creatively collaborate in significant new 'making' projects (Dovey 2008, Fuller 2008, Lovink & Niesto 2009). It also argues that, for this work to be successful, it needs the resources and combined expertise that will make it both *credible* (because of its basis in thorough, critical and committed academic research) and *engaging* (because of its basis in creative, collaborative, multi-media, web2.0 cultural activism) (Kneip 2009). This collaborative creative practice is iterative and always unfinished, mashes together academic and other reading, conversations, experimentation, play, critique, re-working and serendipity (Bleakley 2004, Darts 2004). It finds and works with whatever seems to 'click' and 'stick'.

10. moving on from wordpress.com

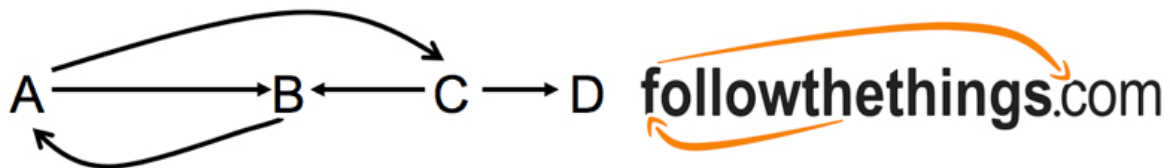


Figure 6: left, Trevor Barnes' lecture diagram illustrating commodity network complexity; right, the followthethings.com logo that used its arrows, with his permission.

The followthethings website still wasn't ready for publication, though. First, copyright concerns about the product photos had to be addressed. Since the wordpress.com site couldn't be found via an online search, I'd simply 'borrowed' them from the commercial sites I'd visited to see if / how I could place them on the page using wordpress.com' content management system. This had limited success as it involved adding series of white / invisible full-stops to keep them in place, which were then revealed on paper when a page was printed out. Second, the wordpress.com site didn't look anything like a 'real' shopping website, as far as I was concerned. I'd seen the importance of creating meticulously designed spoof websites in the Yes Men's 'identity correction' activism (Owens 2011). But, despite countless hours of experimentation, I'd found it impossible to design a convincing site using the available wordpress.com templates and content management system.

Fortunately, in January 2011 I bought a MacBook Pro for 'family use' and found in its free software a website design programme called iWeb. I taught myself to use it by designing the site that is now followthethings.com. I worked out how to

re-create the wordpress.com site's linked page architecture, copied across the page contents and began to experiment with its design, 'drag and drop' and widget-based architecture. As the new site came together, I realized that I could make it look exactly like a commercial online store. What was missing, though, was an eye-catching logo. Every online store has one in a fixed place at the top of each page. Wordpress.com, however, only allowed a title text for the site (see figure 4). The new logo was inspired by the purchase of the followthethings.com domain and two unconnected lectures. In 2009, I had given a lecture about the wordpress site at an international, interdisciplinary conference in Nicosia. Here, audience-members advised that the site should be more ambitious in terms of its geographical reach. It needed a logo that would be familiar to internet shoppers in many countries. The site's design shouldn't rely on resembling the online grocery stores that I'd been looking at because buying food online was a peculiarly British phenomenon. Then, I found some lecture slides online in which Trevor Barnes explained 'Commodity chains and consumption' to his undergraduate students in Vancouver.⁵ One of its diagrams caught my imagination and, with some design assistance from Exeter Geography's Drawing Office, was morphed into the new followthethings.com logo (see Figure 6).

11. critical making

Many scholar / activists now argue that it is no longer enough to train researchers to become 'discerning, detached and critical so that we can penetrate the veil of common understanding and expose the root causes and bottom lines that govern the phenomenal worlds' (Gibson-Graham 2008, 618). Additional training is needed in a 'range of ... practices that apply and express critique through physical artifacts and material-technical practice' (Ratto et al 2014, 86). In the follow the things genre, experiments in 'critical making' have generated powerful critiques of, with and *alternative to* the injustices of 'free market' capitalism. The *iPhone 4cf* (2010), for example, is a 'conflict free' smartphone advertised on a spoof website - www.apple-cf.com - where consumers were encouraged to download, print out and take to their local Apple store a form that would allow them upgrade their iPhone to a non-existent 'cf' version without charge (Parkin 2011, np). *Phone Story* (2011) is a smartphone game in which, to get through one level for example, 'while the narrator explains that most electronic devices require the mining of coltan, a conflict mineral in Congo whose demand spurs war and child labour, the player must use the touch screen to guide armed soldiers to bark at exhausted child miners in order to meet the goal in time' (Alexander in Kempainen et al 2012, np). And the 'real' *Fairphone* (2013) has been made and marketed to 'create a fairer smartphone economy by building a phone' whose 'raw materials come from conflict-free mines, ... [whose] manufacturers are paid a living wage, and ... [whose] open source operating system ... anyone can modify' (Salek 2013, np). In each case, the critical making process used 'the very device that [each] is criticizing as the vehicle for its criticism' (O'Dwyer in Kempainen et al 2012, np).

⁵ Download from http://www.followthethings.com/documents/ftt_trevor_barnes_lecture_slides.pdf

Critical making practices have been described as ‘a kind of flow’ (Ratto et al 2014, 89), in which ‘the role of the artist ... is not to give effect to a preconceived idea ... but to join with and follow the forces and flow of material that bring the form of the work into being’ (Ingold 2000, 98). The flow then continues as the work ‘invites the viewer to join the artist as a fellow traveller, to look *with* it as it unfolds in the world’ (*ibid.*). In the critical making literature, however, the specifics of ‘how it is done, what resources are required, and how it is communicated and taught ... remain under-addressed’ (Ratto et al 2014, 89).

12. making the new website work

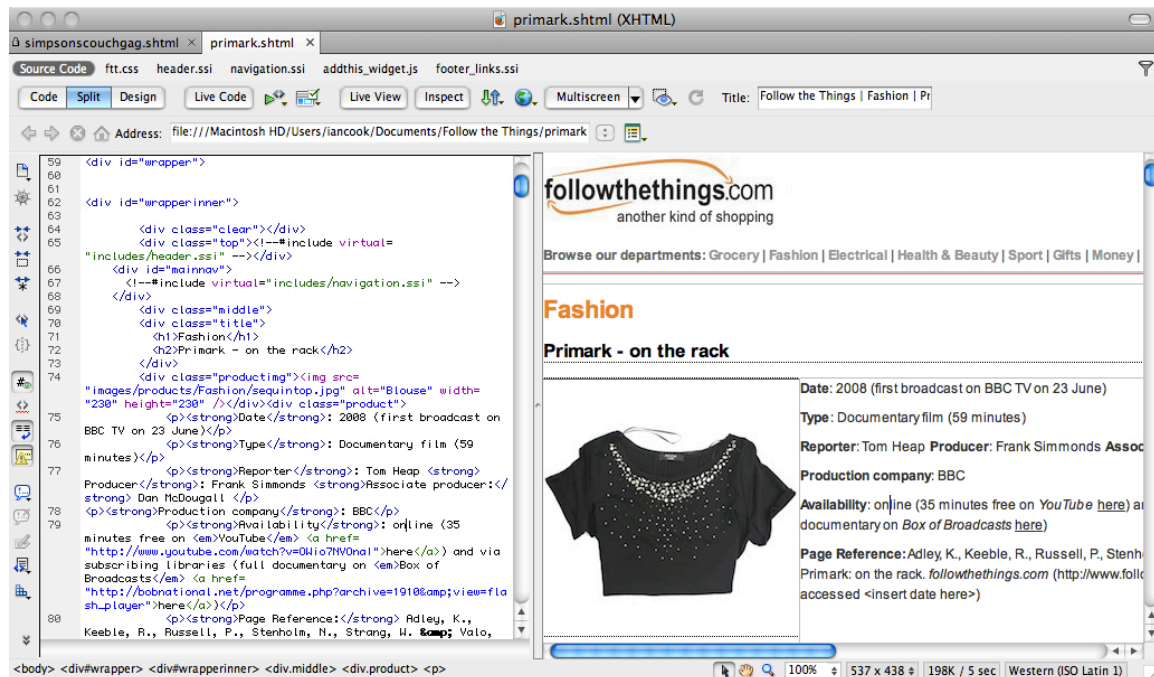


Figure 7: screengrab of Dreamweaver’s split code and design panes for one followthethings.com page (Adley et al 2013).

When the iWeb version of the site was finished later in 2011, I showed it to Ed Creed, the University Web Development Officer with whom I’d been working on admin-related projects. He described it as ‘clean’, unlike many academic websites, he said, that were too ‘busy’. He uploaded it to the University server as a password-protected site. However, when I logged in to show it during a seminar in Nottingham, the results were embarrassing. I’d checked the iWeb-designed site on both Safari and Google Chrome. But the seminar room’s computer used Internet Explorer, which jumbled up the different elements making up its homepage. Ed said this was because iWeb-designed sites are full of unnecessary extra html code that means that not all browsers can show it as it has been designed. He kindly volunteered to convert the whole site from iWeb to the industry-standard Dreamweaver, through which the site would look the same on all browsers. He then taught me to easily add new pages to the site using this

more complex software (see figure 7), and suggested that the University could continue to host the site after it went live. He recommended that I discuss this with the University's legal team.

Much of the necessary legal advice was provided in-house, but specialist outside expertise was also needed, with the whole password-protected site being reviewed by an expert on internet law. This, perhaps surprisingly, led to there being no concerns at all about the site's logo but genuine concerns about the embedding of YouTube and other online videos, which I was allowed to do only with written permission from their copyright holders. Negotiations then took place about what to include on the site's Legal pages,⁶ including the exact wording of a 'takedown policy' if complaints were received about a page, an agreement that the University would license the site from me so that insurance would be in place should a complaint result in a settlement in or out of court, and a checklist that had to be filled out and filed with a printout of each page to ensure that all copyright permissions were accounted for. This is when I began to buy the things that the site's examples had followed including a hair extension, ankle shackles and a Halloween Disney book (Figure 2). I photographed them, 'whited out' their backgrounds, and added them to the site's pages. On each's one checklist, I wrote that I owned their copyright.

13. material geographies in/of followthethings.com

A paper about web2.0-based activism could come across as the kind of new media scholarship in which the only attention economy and embodied human-computer relations are those of the designers and users of websites, games, apps and other digital content (Kinsley 2014, Perlow 2011, Taffel 2012). After all, I have sat for countless hours at an Apple Macbook researching, designing, photoshopping, embedding, cutting and pasting, linking, emailing and more. But I have also used that laptop to add to followthethings.com examples that entangle its purchase and use with the mining of conflict minerals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (*Gravesend* 2007: Bolland et al 2011) and the working conditions in electronic assembly factories in Shenzhen, China (*The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*: Cullen et al forthcoming). This, therefore, is not only a website that researches, curates, and makes public work that examines the material geographies of everyday things. Like *Phone Story*, it is itself an example of such work, constructed with and through the material geographies of this laptop and web2.0.

These geographies include networks of digital recording, communication and display devices, drives, routers, cables, servers and the factory workers who make them; the materials they are made from, including 'silicon, zinc, copper, tin, plastics, lanthanides, tantalum, gold, acetone, hydrochloric acid, benzene, arsenic, sapphire and silver' (Taffel 2012, 6) and the mine, quarry, rig and other workers who extract them from 'geological depths' and process them (Parikka

⁶ See <http://www.followthethings.com/legals.shtml>

2013); the energy sources that power them, along with people who extract and convert those sources into power; and the constitutive role that these play in globalized networks of contemporary capitalism. Taffel (2012) illustrates this point vividly by ‘following’, in bewildering detail, how a ‘simple’ Youtube clip is made, uploaded and streamed (see also Kinsley 2014 on a text message). Elsewhere and more in the public eye, Greenpeace International recently followed consumer uploading of digital content to ‘the cloud’ to the coal mining that powers Amazon and Microsoft servers (LaMonica 2012), and Channel 4 broadcast a TV documentary that followed fake facebook likes and Youtube views to exploited workers in ‘click farms’ in Bangladesh (Arthur 2013). followthethings.com will need a new ‘upload to cloud’ link and facebook ‘like’ button to fold these geographies into the site, to help further its ‘reconceptualising [of] ourselves as immanent in systems beyond the confines of our skins’ (Taffel 2012, 20).

14. keeping it alive...

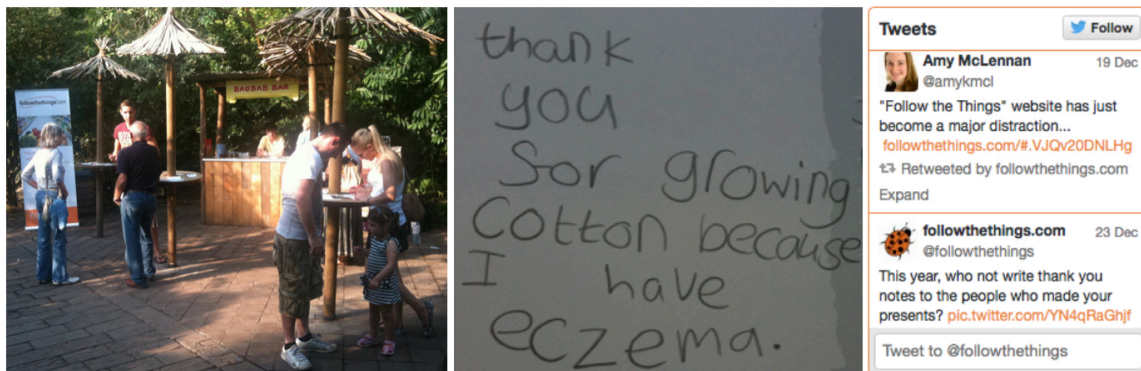


Figure 8: the launch event at the Eden project, a postcard written to a cotton farmer, and the twitter feed embedded on followthethings.com’s homepage.

In the summer of 2011, I worked with five interns to ready the site for its launch.⁷ We had been struck by the ways in which social media had been used to communicate and co-ordinate student occupations at Exeter University and across the UK in December 2010 (see Burton *et al* 2013) and were keen to experiment with them to publicise and coordinate followthethings.com’s work. We set up a twitter account, facebook page and blog, and added a widget to the site’s homepage to show the latest @followthethings tweets, along with facebook and wordpress icons linked to its facebook page and blog. In October 2011, the site was officially launched in the Humid Tropics Biome of the Eden Project in Cornwall, England. We asked passers-by to imagine what they’d say to someone who had helped to make something they valued, and write it down on a postcard. Most wanted to say ‘thank you’ (Figure 8, Cook 2011b).

⁷ All of the people who have worked on the website as interns, research assistants and summer school students are named on the site’s FAQ page <http://www.followthethings.com/faq.shtml>

A lot more has happened since then. To date, 76,000 shoppers have visited the site, from 191 countries, registering 240,000 page views;⁸ its facebook page has 317 likes, its twitter feed has 1,600 followers and its Klout social media impact is 48 (its peak score of 55 put it 'in the top 20% of social media users').⁹ We have sourced and distributed almost 5,000 free followthethings.com reusable shopping bags, used the site to teach trainee Geography teachers about thing-following pedagogies, created downloadable classroom materials, given numerous talks about the site, set more examples for students to research, employed more graduates as interns, co-developed a new strand of work involving Lego recreations, had the site peer-reviewed and recognised as an academic publication in its own right, seen the site discussed online and in academic and other literature, talked about it on an Open Access publication panel at the 2013 Royal Geographical Association (with the Institute of British Geography) conference, and much more besides. followthethings.com is an ongoing, unfolding, unfinished and unfinishable project which relies on, and lives in, the new media ecology of web2.0, where it needs continual 'feeding', via social media postings, on- and offline networking, and the regular addition of new pages and photos, to maintain and hopefully increase its visibility and influence. It is still in its 'honeymoon period', finding its feet. This is the first academic paper that tries to explain what it is, what's its trying to do, and who is, and can be, involved in the contributions it makes to awareness, activism, campaigning, policy-making, and trade (in)justice 'shopping'. The site is open.

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⁸ Google Analytics data, 21 January 2015.

⁹ This quotation is taken from the Klout app installed on my iPhone (screengrab 26 April 2014).

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