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Introduction: #Logistics

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Introduction: #Logistics

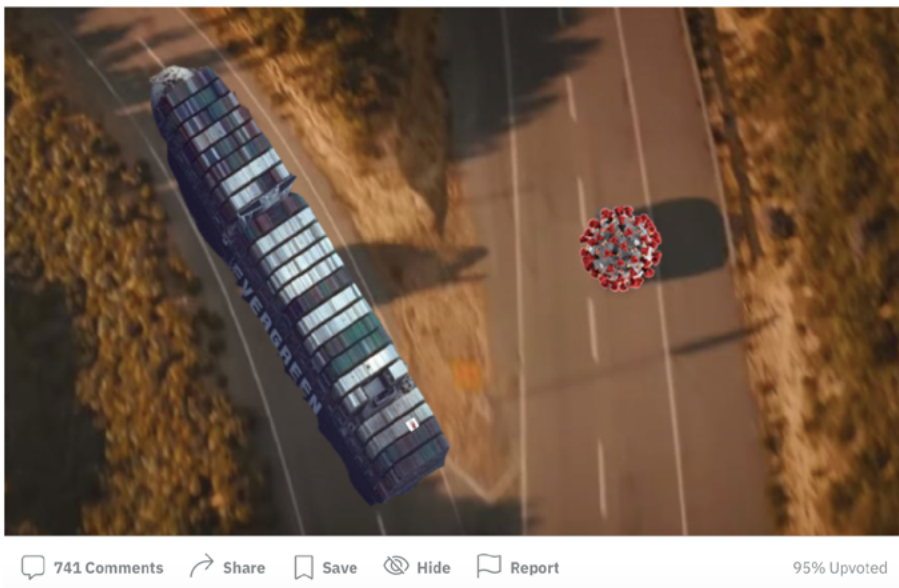
Julie Y. Chu and Tina Harris

In late March 2021, global commerce seemed to grind to a sudden halt when a massive container ship, the *Ever Given*, ran aground and blocked the entire Suez Canal for six days. Amidst a global pandemic that closed borders and triggered shelter-in-place orders everywhere, the sight of this immobilized ship – and the maritime traffic jam around it – finally crystallized what more than a year of Covid-related medical shortages, vaccine inequities, marooned travelers, supply-chain breakdowns, data gaps and panic buying had been pointing to in various guises. We were not just facing contemporary challenges that were global and interdependent in nature. The problems repeatedly animated by the pandemic – and made iconic by the *Ever Given* – were becoming legible as ‘logistical nightmares’. As the subheading of one *New York Times* article noted in October 2021, “We didn’t even have a logistics beat before the pandemic. Now we do.”¹

#Logistics – the theme of this *Roadsides* issue – takes up the hashtag that circled the world when internet memes of the *Ever Given* briefly flooded public imaginations along with a stream of alarmist news headlines that recast the fragility of the global order and its related crises in supply and shipping, finance and distribution, as distinctly logistical at their roots. This public marking of logistics as a newsworthy and viral

sensation came as something of a surprise while we set about organizing our initial call for submissions to this issue. Although both of us have spent substantial time doing fieldwork in key sites of logistical operations (Tina at airports in the Netherlands and Nepal, Julie at container seaports in Southern China and intermodal distribution hubs in the American Midwest), we were accustomed to thinking of logistics as mainly an opaque, muted or backgrounded field of relations – the wallflower industry of global capitalism next to the old-school appeal of manufacturing-cum-production and the newfangled dazzle of IT-driven high finance.

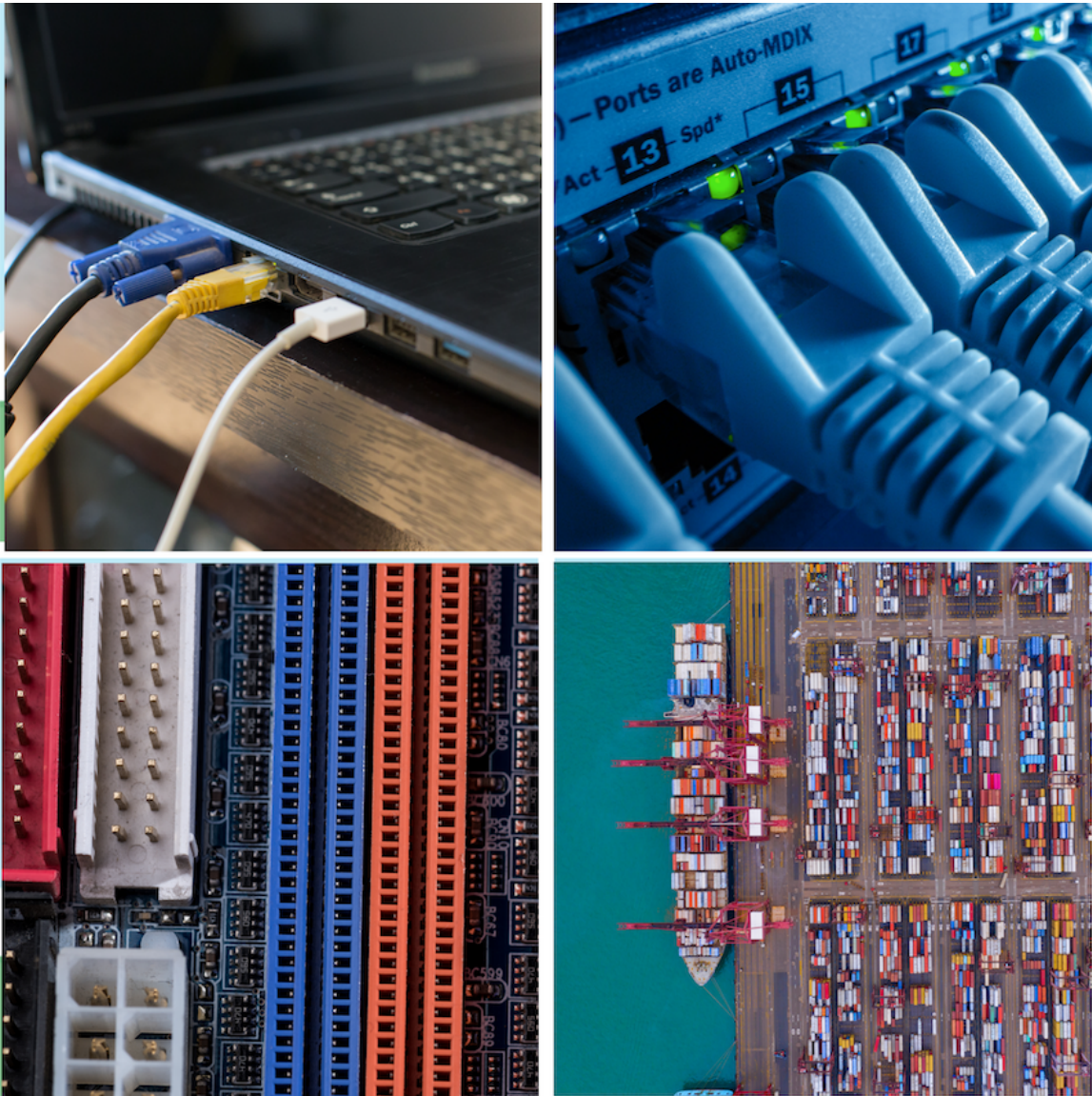
It's been a pleasure ruining the global economy with you.



Memeifying #Logistics: a Reddit post capturing the fragility of the global order and its related crises in supply and shipping.

Posted on Reddit by Nekrubobby64.

Originally a niche field in the military sciences, logistics has proliferated into the designs and reorganization of commerce and of social life more broadly as advances in systems thinking, information technologies and the invention of the standardized shipping container – with its related intermodal networks of distribution – came together in the latter half of the twentieth century. A few have dared to dub these developments “the logistics revolution” (e.g. Bonacich and Wilson 2008; LeCavalier 2016). Yet despite these grand proclamations and its military-colonial roots (Chua et al. 2018), logistics has continued to be seen as a mere add-on to manufacturing concerns in the market or, at best, as an unglamorous subfield of operations research in business management. Similarly, in academic research logistics figures mostly as a secondary dimension of infrastructure in its mundane register as “the study [of] boring things” (Star 1999: 377) or as the handmaiden to the particular flows that it mediates.



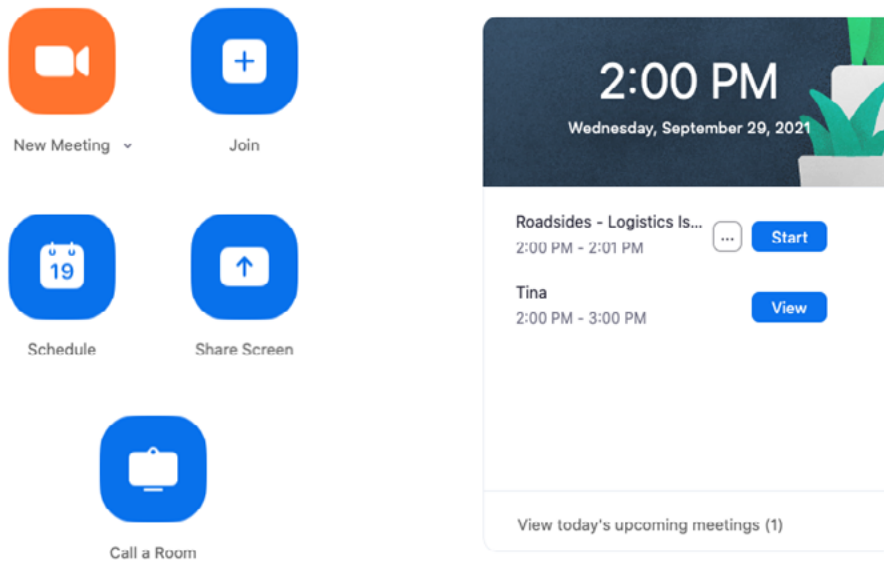
The spectacle in the Suez Canal looked to some like a surreal dream. But ports are much closer than we think; we were accessing the very news of the Suez Canal through another kind of port – our home data links. These various gateways of relay and distribution – institutionally mediated Zoom calls and emails – were the channels through which we were able to organize our own co-editing logistics: the work of delivering this issue according to certain standardized expectations and in line with the calendar (two issues per year with a spring target date).

Ports everywhere: On our laptops (top left), ethernet routers (top right), motherboard ports (bottom left), and the container shipping port (bottom right).

Images: Depositphotos.
Montage: Julie Y. Chu.

Aligning these ideas meant that we – seven hours apart and with contributors in several other global time zones – began with necessary calendaring and calculations of feasible timeslots via Coordinated Universal Time or UTC. The shared logistical devices that we used to interact across distance trace their genealogies to maritime imperial concepts; for instance, time coordination is rooted in the British colonial

project to institute Greenwich Mean Time as the ‘hub’ of time standardization, which allowed for more efficient control of imperial trade and territory. In addition, we both had childcare duties, which meant early mornings and late afternoons were out; while we worked on “#Logistics”, the logistics of care remained quietly in the background.



The logistics of co-editing – coordination via Zoom and calculations of standardized time: 2 pm CST (Central Standard Time, Chicago) = 9 pm CET (Central European Time, Amsterdam).

Screenshot by Julie Y. Chu.

As the title for *Roadsides* collection no. 007, #Logistics is intentionally performative as a way of capturing the operational effects of logistical designs that we negotiate daily and in particular through the whole process of co-editing: to organize, collect, store, retrieve and distribute flows across space-time. In this case, the hashtag reformats the word, Logistics, as metadata – a standardized higher-order piece of text – now algorithmically responsive to user commands for linking and ‘containerizing’ other texts and images for future searches and (re)distributions. In sum, the hashtag elevates Logistics from a semantic term to an operational one: it ‘logistifies’ the word, making #Logistics enact its own *modus operandi* (cf. Mullee 2021).

Moreover, #Logistics animates a key dynamic that pervades logistical phenomena. The hashtag and the term, logistics, take on a gestalt-like form in a shifting figure-ground relation, at times drawing attention to #Logistics as #<metadata> and then backgrounding the hashtag in favor of its semantic content as <#>Logistics. Just as the spectacle of the *Ever Given* was quickly replaced by the next news cycle as logistics receded once again into business-as-usual, #Logistics embodies these magical effects in its operation as organizing code – now you see it, now you don’t.

Our cover design – a collaboration between Julie and designer Shahira Bhasha – further plays with the logistical magic of figure-ground reversals. In one sense, the front and back covers can be read as graphic illustrations of the logistical networks of storage, relay and distribution. In another register, they work as fully operational logistical designs – machine-readable QR codes – for linking a viewer with the right device (try your smartphone camera?) to the deliverable digital contents of this issue. The back

cover offers a special ‘Easter egg’, a hidden feature, linking to [an earlier Roadsides piece](#) that laid some of the conceptual groundwork for this issue (plus, look for our whimsical oval “Where’s Waldo” amidst the boxy landscape in the illustration...).

Inside the covers of *Roadsides* 007, we take an even closer look at the various disappearing acts and occasional spectacles of logistics. What do we not see between the moment of the mouse click to the delivery worker ringing our doorbell? What is deliberately revealed, and which details of the organization and coordination of the data or supply chain are we prevented from fully understanding? What if – as Ruha Benjamin (2019) has claimed in her work on discriminatory design – a glitch in the system is more akin to *déjà vu*, covering up existing inequities? In this collection, we view logistics through an analytical lens, as both a metaphor for organizing the circulation of goods, data and people, and as a social conundrum to puzzle out or endure – as in the logistical nightmare of a stuck container ship, or a military convoy unable to proceed, or a port shutting down.

The materiality of logistical work is often obscured – tucked away in boxes, back rooms or back stages, and these underlying analogue practices are mistakenly viewed as distinct from their digital surfaces. Articles here explore the backdropped work of logistics – of office cleaners in Bhutan ([Wijunamai](#)) and the administrative files that facilitate the movement of container ships in southern Spain ([Leivestad](#)). These hidden workings, however, go hand in hand with the spectacles of logistics, whether animated by mass media ([Singh](#)), conspiracy theories ([Hockenberry](#)) or techno-utopic discourse ([Zhang](#)). While it is difficult to know the extent to which logistical work hides violent and poisonous traces of displacement and occupation, several of the pieces in this issue begin to disentangle and uncover these traces: the way extracting and moving metals in shipping containers link to toxicity contained by bodies along these routes ([Graeter](#)), how truckers absorb or “buffer” spatio-temporal burdens in maintaining the “just-in-time” illusions of delivery ([Hopkins](#)), and the ways satellite data shape the ‘remote’ and vulnerable inhabited areas of ground stations ([Bennett](#)).

The issue also introduces a new multimodal feature: the *Roadsides Breakdown*. This novel format zooms in on a specific single object, idea or event, and takes it apart piece by piece, allowing readers to interpret and understand the feature in more depth. Our debut *Breakdown* pieces show readers “How to Play” a simulated war game like a logistics strategist ([Sheldon and Mullee](#)), as well as “How to Read” the logistical traces of packages moving along algorithmically managed routes like a warehouse worker or last-mile delivery driver ([Veenhoven](#)).

Finally, we wish to thank all the [reviewers for this issue](#), including a special shout-out to Lucyna Talejko-Kwiatkowska for design feedback. *Roadsides* works with a double-open peer-review system, which means that the reviewers’ and authors’ names are known to each other. Given the short turnaround to ensure a timely publication, we are grateful to everyone involved in the behind-the-scenes logistical process for helping us deliver *Roadsides* 007 to you.

Notes:

¹ Thanks to Editorial Board member Christina Schwenkel for pointing this out.

² For best results, use a dedicated QR reader app on your phone. If you use your native camera app, you may need to experiment with angle and distance to get it to read.

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Tina Harris is Associate Professor of Anthropology and a member of the [Moving Matters](#) research group at the University of Amsterdam. She holds a PhD from the City University of New York Graduate Center. Her research focuses on aviation, infrastructure, cross-border mobility and the movement of commodities, particularly in the Himalayas. She is the author of *Geographical Diversions: Tibetan Trade, Global Transactions* (University of Georgia Press, 2013), and her articles have been published in journals such as *Cultural Anthropology*, *Antipode*, *Political Geography* and *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Her latest research project explores how aviation professionals around the globe are attempting to transform the future of flying in accordance with new climate legislations.

Roadsides is a diamond Open Access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.



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