

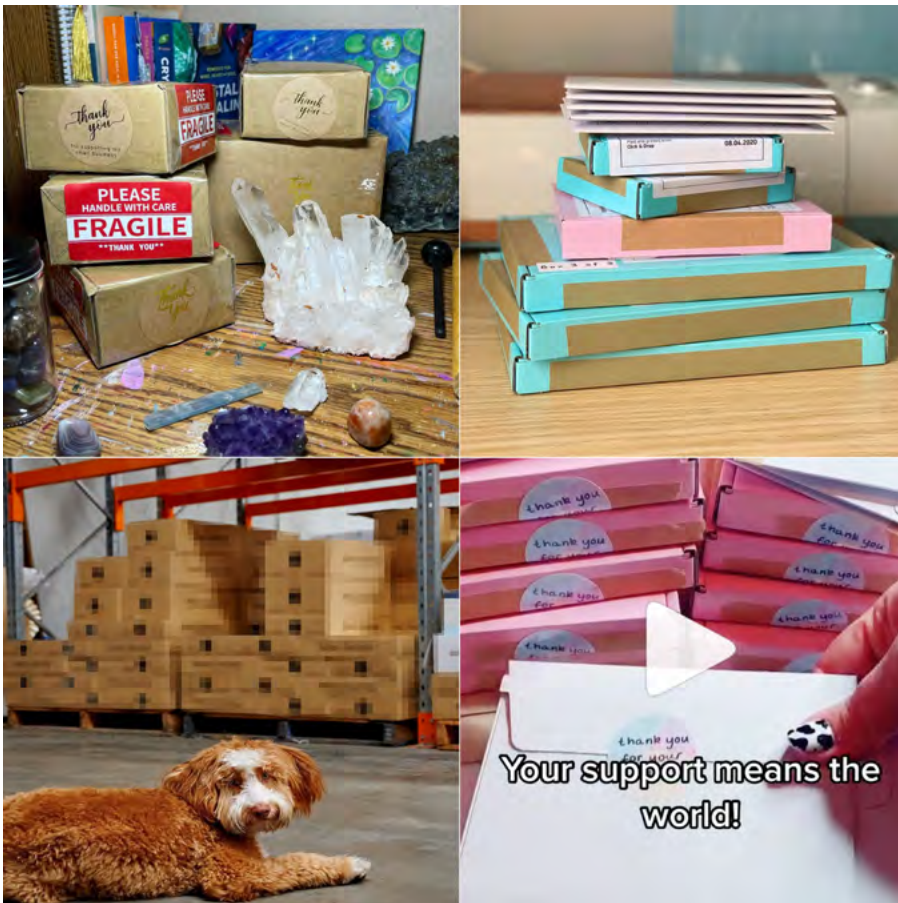
None Dare Call It a Supply Chain: Logistics as Conspiracy

Matthew Hockenberry

The resurgent impact of the Covid-19 delta variant in Fall 2021 has amplified the pandemic's supply chain disruptions. Stock has run out. Shipments have slowed. Prices have risen. Consumer demand is at levels that – in some areas – exceed all prior demand, with temporary price fluctuations giving way to rampant inflation. In this context, an absence of clear explanations for uneven distribution has provided a formative canvas for false, misleading and sometimes dangerous claims about the state of global supply. Refracting an array of imaginaries built around the obtuse operations of global logistics, narratives surrounding the supply chain have become a site for contested claims about the interconnected nature of contemporary life. Dislocated images of empty shelves circulate, their ubiquitous use in polarized political debates such that they have been flagged as misinformation. Photographs of vinyl sheets and cardboard inserts in awkward approximation of absent goods are mocked by some, but suggest to others signs of deliberate subterfuge. Even mundane maritime maps are assembled as evidence of – commenters claim – countries “under attack” (Reuters 2021).

Supply chains are mysterious. In that mystery, they become capable of enrolling all manner of messages, communicating all kinds of conflicting ends. This is hardly

Understanding of logistical operation has always been made piecemeal, formed from subjective experience and comparison to other, similarly complex, systems. This partial, personal nature is evident when consumers in the United States build an imaginary that places them at the end of the supply chain rather than as another node interwoven in its global circulations. The result is a discourse limited to the immediate, bodily, painful (and often temporary) unraveling of those ends – stories about contaminated pharmaceuticals or heavy metals found in children's toys, for example. More an affective knowledge than an intellectual one, it is something to be felt rather than thought. I have argued that this lends to a “material epistemology,” where an assembled object becomes the primary source for understanding its system of assembly (Hockenberry 2018: 491–92). What is most striking now is that these perceptions operate even in the absence of objects, fashioning conspiratorial accounts around the empty spaces they would otherwise have occupied. But these too are material in that they focus on material infrastructures. A snapshot of a shelf shows a shortage, just as colored icons locate ships waiting outside ports. In the confines of a photograph or screenshot, they communicate all that there is to say about their absent objects. What they do not – and cannot – capture is the cascading network of parts, places and processes responsible for rendering those singular scenes.



*Order packing processes
shared on Instagram
(#packingorders,
#shippingorders).*

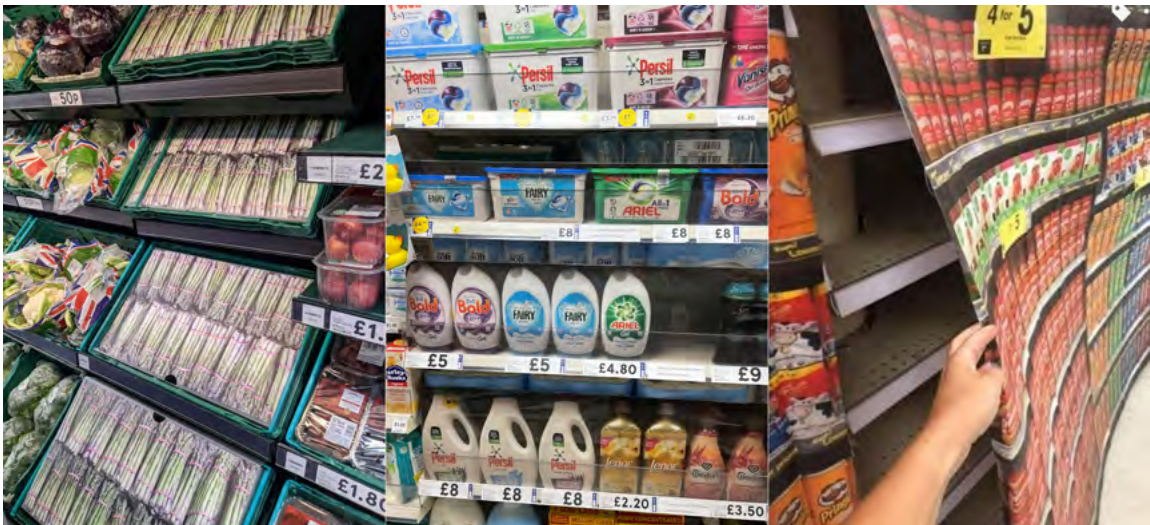
Photos (clockwise from
top): @saturntreasure,
20.12.2021;
@thedewdropdesigns,
7.04.2020;
@thedewdropdesigns,
24.09.2020;
@winejourney, 19.12.2021.

Writing about the work of merchants during the lockdown in the United States, Tamara Kneese (2021: 4) uses the term “logistics fetishism” to describe how documentation of packing and shipping goods on platforms like Instagram “imbued a networked, often invisible process with a sensuous aura” that “rematerialized” human qualities of labor. And indeed, this fetishistic quality is everywhere present in current conspiratorial accounts. But while Kneese finds in her images a means for reaffirming connection, these images stand apart from the fractured network they claim to depict. Assembled packages, posted by the person who packed them, fix a connection to a shipment. Snapshots of store shelves, on the other hand, communicate nothing fixed about the mechanisms responsible for stocking them. Full, they may be signifiers of comforting expectation or calamitous excess. Empty, they may reveal simultaneously temporary and terminal faults.

As with other dislocated circulations – images of crowds or city streets – many of the images from Fall 2021 offer no indication of their originary time and place. The condemnation or exoneration they provide can turn easily from one political use to the next: past reminders of Trump’s America in one context, present evidence of Biden’s America in another. Photographs of vinyl sheets and cardboard cutouts illustrated with fake groceries have been widely offered as evidence of food shortages. But there is no proof of when they were taken, or where. One with visible dollar signs was linked to Brexit, others from British retailers were attributed to the United States.

Images of shelf inserts (often of uncertain provenance).

Photos: @shitlondon, 22.10.2021; @GoatSarah, 20.10.2021; @QTRResearch, 16.10.2021.



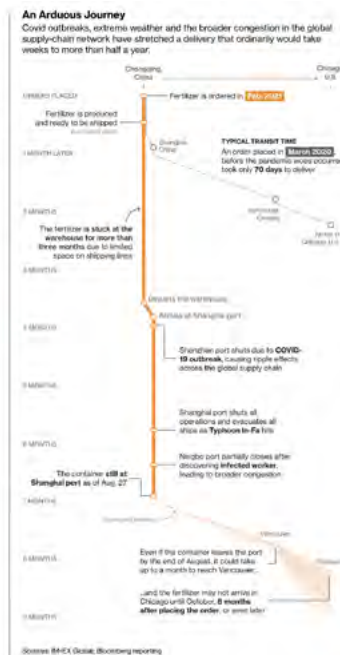
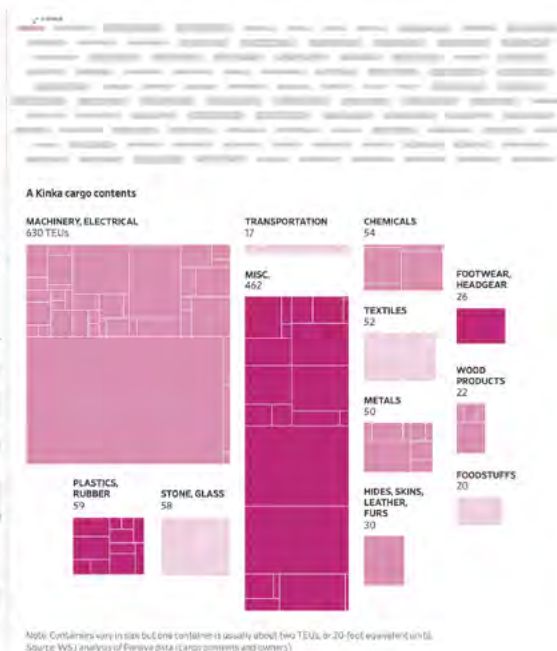
It is in the moment of breakdown – when the “server is down ... [or] there is a power blackout” – that one finds an “understanding of the relational nature of infrastructure” (Star 1999: 382). But given the scale of logistical infrastructure, this is not so easily arrived at. Even experts struggle to explain these interwoven connections, fashioning reports and visualizations that do what consumers cannot: explode a finished form across time and space to approximate the thousands of parts, people and places enrolled in its assembly. The ‘invisible’ work of contemporary logistics has been hidden for a reason – because it abstracts processes that could not be easily understood, rationalized or justified. American consumers who had not confronted the labor demands,

economic impacts or environmental costs of outsourcing and subcontracting pursued by multinational corporations now face a direct threat as the changes underlying them lay bare the fragility of consumption itself (Tsing 2009).

In Shannon Mattern's (2019) analysis of 5G network conspiracies, she suggests that concerns about health and environment in marginalized communities express fears about "how externally imposed, seemingly invasive technologies are sometimes experienced by people sensing their own vulnerability and disempowerment." Indeed, it "gives people more sense of control to imagine that, rather than random things happening, there are these shadowy groups and agencies that are controlling it" (Andrews 2020). When conspiracies about the 2020 US presidential election surfaced claims about the mysterious movements of ballots and 'surprise' reserves of votes, they not only shared similar cognitive deceptions, they prefigured the suspicion of the current moment. What these conspiracies get right is that the systems in question are massive, complex and diffuse. The operations of global logistics, working at the intersection of economic, material and social life, are beyond the individual perception of any single actor. But they are nonetheless critical to all of them.

Illustrating the supply crisis (diagrams of part suppliers, container usage and typical commodity journeys).

Photos: Nikkei Asia,
8.12.2021; Wall Street
Journal, 7.12.2021;
Bloomberg, 28.08.2021.



To suggest logistics as conspiracy is to ascribe intentionality to the failings of the supply chain. There is a crisis, but someone has ‘manufactured it’ – just as one would a mobile phone. Combining mistrust of the government and corporations with widening economic and political disjunctures, the majority of these accounts direct responsibility for orchestrating shortages toward the federal government, the president and his political party. Others suggest more shadowy international cabals. Common to all is the need to find a single fault for a system that has otherwise, they feel, been without one. But while logistics is concerned with the manufacture and distribution of

materials, conspiratorial logistics is more interested in the manufacture of absences. While a delivered object has, necessarily, a singular pathway that brought it into being, the account of the absent arrival remains open, accessible to political and social contestation. Rather than offering evidence of real conspiracies by corporations and cartels, these foster a more fundamental and unfixed suspicion. This is no longer an affective knowledge, but a *disaffective* one. The pain of supply chain contamination gives way to an overflow of anger, made all the more acute by the fear that the supply chain is no longer something that happens elsewhere. The supply chain works, must work, and – these users declare – it must do so at any cost.

“Conspiracy is the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age,” writes Frederic Jameson (1991: 356), “it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system.” But with the opacity of these systems, the momentum afforded by the global mass of their infrastructures, how could the total even be thought? As difficult as it is to figure the causes of supply chain failure, it is almost more inconceivable to recognize a system working as intended. After all, the failure to deliver goods has not meant a failure to profit off their anticipation. Nor was it a ‘failure’ that so many have been exploited, displaced or enslaved, or that countless countries and cultures have been mined in pursuit of the extraction of value at any cost. It is no mistake that supply chains stand amid the greatest period of environmental degradation in the history of the world, or that food, building materials and medical equipment are indefinitely delayed, but all sorts of junk can arrive the next day. Despite the attempt to find some external cause for this emptiness, there is no conspiracy here. There is just the supply chain.

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Matthew Hockenberry is a media historian and theorist who examines the media of global production. He is the editor of *Assembly Codes: The Logistics of Media* (Duke University Press, 2021) and his current project develops a media history of logistics, tracing how media forms shaped the emergence of logistical production and distribution in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He is particularly concerned with transitional moments in the histories of paperwork, telecommunication and computation. As a visiting scientist at the MIT Center for Civic Media he developed the first (of many) platforms for mapping global supply chains, and he writes regularly on the state of global supply through the lens of its most emblematic objects.

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