Making conversation about ethical consumption with followthethings.com

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Introduction

‘[followthethings.com] serves at one level as a portal for geographies that both track and unpack chains of connection, for example, between producers and consumers. With only modest resources it makes smart use of social, digital and longer-established communications media (e.g. printed bags) in order to play sophisticated games with the tools of corporate marketing. The results give a rich account of, but simultaneously critique, the market and other realities that shape the experience of producing, consuming and disposing of products. 'Follow the things' is also interesting for the way it serves to support a range of forms of scholarship, from promoting new research findings and sharing news of relevant books and films, to informing university and school student' projects’ (Smith 2015).
Maquilapolis (documentary film, 2006)

Carmen becomes an activist and rallies her co-workers, in a David-and-Goliath struggle, to challenge Sanyo by filing a claim with the labor board. … Lourdes, as also documented by her video diary, can’t just sit by. She helps organize a community group, the Chilpancingo Collective for Environmental Justice, to fight for an cleanup of a toxic waste dump left behind by a departing battery-recycling factory (Anon 2006a np).

The Song of the Shirt (poem, 1843)

...a lyric poem that first appeared unsigned in the 1843 Christmas number of Punch magazine. The poem impersonates a needlewoman living in poverty, purporting to quote her joyless work song, which she sings while she mends clothes “With fingers weary and worn, / With eyelids heavy and red.” … The poem was Punch’s first great success, temporarily tripling the magazine’s circulation. (Anon 2013 np)
‘... adopting internet technology in order to provide information in a strategically structured manner expresses protest through expertise’ (Kneip 2009).

‘A young girl comes up to Beuys and asks: 'Is this art?' Answer: 'A special type of art. One can think with it, think with it’ (Beuys & Schwarze 1972).
‘[The] authored tradition [of participatory art] ... seeks to provoke participants, and [the] de-authored lineage ... aims to embrace collective creativity; one is disruptive and interventionist, the other constructive and ameliorative’ (Bishop 2006).

‘Because you said ‘Don’t email me a question. You have to write it on the blog, unless it’s embarrassing’, it stopped everyone being cagey and keeping their ideas’ (Katie T). ‘It was like we were all in it together, all in this ‘survival module’ in a good way!’ (Lowenna). ‘I just felt bonded to other people’ (Elaine). Everyone was really keen to throw ideas out or just be there’ (Tommy).
‘[The Sim Sweatshop] game was fund to play! Well, I say ‘fun’ ... if you missed your targets then you didn’t get paid enough so the next day your energy was really low because you couldn’t buy enough food to eat and then screen went blurry and it was harder to move the pieces and basically you could never complete it ... most people saw it as a really good way of learning what it’s like in a sweatshop ... a lot of people talked about how it made them feel, and the frustration’ (Jack).

‘[One scene in The Forgotten Space’ showed] two factory workers in China and it was just filming them doing everyday things like washing their clothes and going shopping. And to me that was the moment when I suddenly realised, ‘Oh my God! They’re like me’ (Rachael).

‘...the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work to be completed’ (Eco 1962).
2. Making conversation

Cries for help found in Primark clothes (a.k.a. 'labelgate')

I’m sure they will track down the worker and give them a beating. How dare they spoil our enjoyment of cheap clothes. Honestly, people how do you think it’s possible to sell jeans at £3 a pair? Someone somewhere is getting exploited and working for nothing (Source: Brookhurst 2014, np [link]).

I hope she don’t give the dress back to the shop because they will trace the worker and sack her (Source: Carpenter 2014, np [link]).

I’m not (Source: Gallagher 2014a, np [link]).

Please don’t give it back (Source: Fogarty 2014, np [link]).

Oh I won’t be giving it to them, I don’t know who’s done it but it’s bad (Source: Gallagher 2014a, np [link]).

I teach Sustainable Leadership (ethics etc) I wonder Rebecca, if I could have the dress? It will make a really interesting student discussion. I would be happy to pay for the dress (Source: jayne2709 2014, np [link]).

This label is bogus (Sources: Hines 2014, np [link]).

It is a little funny how both of these [label finds] are from the South Wales area (Source: wyeiphonemen 2014, np [link]).

Perfect labels with same font, end up being bought in the same town. seriously guys? (Source: Davies 2014, np [link]).

This has to be a fake. If you’re going to fake something don’t make it in nice block printing and perfectly spelled (Source: gatherer 2014, np [link]).

The label clearly looks like it was posted into the picture (Source: Winsted 2014, np [link]).

From the picture here, to me it looks like the message was written with a sharpie or something. I want to see the stitches otherwise (Source: Apps 2014, np [link]).

The woman has stitched in the label herself to get this attention, people will do anything to try and get themselves in the paper/famous these days (Source: Hartman 2014, np [link]).

She wrote it herself to attract attention of media. Primark clothes are made in Madrid (Source: Babayova 2014, np [link]).

Well that’s OK then... Panic over. Phew, I really believed these sweatshops and exploitation of workers in the Far East was real for one minute. The point is that these places do exist, and Rebelka’s £10 dress was more than likely made in one of them, regardless of who has sewn the extra label in (Source: Edwards 2014, np [link]).
2. Making conversation

Electrical

Phone Story

As a piece of game design, Phone Story is unremarkable, but as a piece of 21st-century agitprop, it is ingenious, using the very device it is criticising as the vehicle for its criticism, which gives a whole new meaning to the term metacritical. (Source: O’Dwyer 2011 np link)

Very well presented message. Game is fun. Took me awhile to figure out the relationship between the progress bar and the red goal line as too small. (Source: Fantastic! 2011 np link)

Actually I laughed at the scene where you cached dropping Chinese workers. It was so funny. (Source: chronius9 2011 np link)

This is cruel but hilarious. (Source: Alghaillani 2011 np link)

Cruel to who? Apple? (Source: Larsen 2011 np link)

To the guy who killed himself. (Source: Alghaillani 2011 np link)

Um, to the dead workers and their families? Of course, if you get joy out of such things, I guess there’s little to be said about you. … Yeah, nothing’s classier than making fun of people who are dead, right? (Source: Yokupurro 2011 np link)

I don’t think the intent is to make fun of their deaths, but to bring attention to the poor conditions which ultimately led to their death. Definitely not the right way to go about it though. (Source: Takahashi 2011 np link)

In that case, you shouldn’t play GTA 4 because it’s making fun of a war veteran from the balkan wars with Posttraumatic stress disorder. (Source: Marques 2011 np link)

I like dark and off humor as much as the next person, but this is plain sick. Very sad. (Source: Eheart 2011 np link)

Seriously? The purpose was clearly to raise awareness about the issues in a way that would get a lot of attention, not to mock the victims. … Next time try looking at the source of the thing in question before you decide to condemn it publicly (Source: Larsen 2011 np link)

The suicide jumping game needs to be updated as Foxcorn has taken the rather bold step of installing nets to catch would be jumpers and moreover, without lowering salaries. (Source: Mahler 2011 np link)

I’ve seen the video now and I’m no longer interested. I had no idea that the fricking game LECTURES you while you play for like 30 seconds before cutting you off. What fun is that? (Source: Sevaks 2011 np link)
2. Making conversation

Louise Mensch on Occupy London-LSX (HIGNFY)

If anti-capitalists cannot use iPads or purchase coffee from Starbucks and be considered legitimately opposed to capitalism, then surely an advocate of free market principles should have to avoid travelling along publicly-funded roads, must be prevented from using the internet (which was developed by the Pentagon), should be prevented from flying for the same reason, and be denied access to the latest in medical technology (the product of state-funded research and development) (Source: RacialCleansing 2012 np link).

"Do you use roads? Do you use electricity? Do you buy food from supermarkets? Do you use the internet? Do you own a toothbrush? Do you use anything that modern society provides? If so, you're not allowed to complain about any part of the system. So shut up peasants and get back to work – or return to your squalid hovel if you have no work." She's the perfect Conservative – which is the biggest insult I can think of (Source: DougieMcD 2011 np link).

As a result of the misfeasance of bankers and executives in the private sector who wanted 18 million in their bank accounts as opposed to 15 million, millions upon millions of innocent people have lost their homes and their jobs, and the next generation feel hopeless and disillusioned at their career prospects and the possibility of owning their own home. And you frown upon the young who have taken to the streets in protest because some may at one point have gone to Starbucks. Shame on you (Source: durbancoulshefica 2012 np link).

... they do kind of take her quote out of context. She says? "Starbucks", they say "coffee". There is a difference between Starbucks and an independent cafe. She didn't say everyone should return to a stone-age system, she said they can't go to Starbucks. Forgive me for giving her the benefit of the doubt. I don't agree with her, just saying (Source: phisfishfish 2012 np link).

Not really, she set the context: I.E. you can't complain about capitalism when using a franchise that operates along capitalist values. The point Mensch made is ridiculous though, and that is what they are pointing out: the protesters weren't demanding the dismantling of capitalism, they were asking for an end to the parts of capitalism that have been proven, time and again, not to work for the good of the majority of humanity (Source: Stubborn2030 2012 np link).

Given that Starbucks has been attacked in the past for being a stertotyptical evil capitalist corporation I can see the point she's making. That said she made the mistake of trying to be too serious (after the initial attempt at humour) on a comedy show and where most of the audience and panellists disagreed with her. That was never going to look good (Source: Richard a 2011 np link).

Well yes, I agree that she came across as patronising, smug, unlikeable and rather unfunny. Even if they're not all against capitalism as such I'd say the majority are likely against the mass accumulation of wealth. It seems funny to me to spend a day protesting against this only to then march over to Starbucks and hand Howard Schultz some more profit. They should at least have looked for some local cafes, it's still capitalism but it would be reinvesting in the local economy at least (Source: StraikKnopfler 2012 np link).

She has a point, it's a shame she didn't turn it around and drive it home though. You don't argue against Capitalism and then go and line up at the worlds largest coffeehouse corporation for your trim soy mocha latte with sprinkles... as far as the coffee goes, for crying out loud at least support your local fair trade suppliers ... you get MUCH better coffee than this "tollist" water at Starbucks and it's "fighting the fight" against Capitalism (Source: RoseSheN 2012 np link).
‘...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?’ (Ingold 2007, 2-3).
Q: how can we be sure a product is ethical? ... [FRD founder Carry Somers]. ... there is not one easy answer. We are asking people to Find Out, Be Curious and Do Something About It. We have a fantastic ethical fashion trump card game online, where you can rate the clothes in your wardrobe against that of your friends on the website www.free2work.com (Anon 2014, np)

3. Working with materials
Making conversation about ethical consumption

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie:

The danger of a single story

TEDGlobal 2009 • 18:49 • Filmed Jul 2009
Subtitles available in 43 languages

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