



Methods for Change

Follow the Thing

Dr Stephanie Sodero,

Dr Amy Barron and Dr Laura Pottinger,

The University of Manchester

Corresponding author

Dr Stephanie Sodero

stephanie.sodero@manchester.ac.uk

Follow the Thing



Follow the Thing is a social science method that traces the journey of a given product, from donated blood to fair trade coffee. It involves thinking with, and through, a specific good and its supply chain. The method surfaces often-overlooked processes, dynamics, and connections between people, services, and infrastructures. In doing so, Follow the Thing is used to understand interconnections and to explore and expose complexities, vulnerabilities, and injustices. It can offer insight into the journeys of goods upon which we rely, but that are often invisible until there is failure, disruption, or crisis, such as shortages of personal protective equipment during COVID. It makes visible these unseen journeys, cultivating an appreciation for their surprising geographic extent and complexity. By shedding light on the journeys that different products take, Follow the Thing can expose unjust working conditions and environmental harms, encouraging more ethical consumer and corporate behaviour. Follow the Thing draws on a range of methods that can broadly be thought of being on a spectrum from direct to indirect ways of following. Direct following requires greater access to the field and might include barcodes and tracking tags. For example, a barcode can be used to trace the journey of a box of trainers or a tracking tag can be attached to a fish to understand its movements. Indirect following includes participant observations, facility tours, interviews, and document analysis.



How does Follow the Thing create or contribute to change?

Follow the Thing, for the researcher and reader, transforms understanding of how the world works. In social science, this is referred to as opening a black box. When something functions well it is taken for granted or 'black boxed.' When there is a disruption, that black box is opened and its inner workings, good and bad, are revealed. For example, we turn on lights without thinking. But when there is a storm and the power goes out, it prompts some people to think about how the electricity grid works, in what ways it is vulnerable, and how it can be made more resilient. However, for research purposes, the thing in question does not need to be broken. Follow the Thing researchers can choose any 'thing' that piques their interest. Descriptive accounts, created by following things, shed light on larger dynamics and processes, illuminating what works well and what can work better.

What ideas or concepts influence this method?

During the last two decades, 'following' emerged as a popular method in human geography. Geographer [Ian Cook](#) and colleagues helped pioneer the Follow the Thing method. Driven by the aim of promoting geographically informed and ethically aware consumption, Cook traced the geographies of everyday things, looking at who made them, where they were produced and under what conditions. For example, Cook and colleagues researched the supply chain of a [papaya](#), which ranges from Jamaica to the UK, to understand the globalisation of food.

While early work traced consumer goods along supply chains, it now covers a wide variety of socio-political concerns including researching activist networks, energy, animals, chemicals, finance, policies, waste, and data. For example, Follow the Thing is used by commodity activists aiming to create a more socially just and environmentally sustainable fashion industry (e.g. [Fashion Revolution](#)).

The Follow the Thing approach is complemented by the mobilities paradigm, which emerged out of a recognition of the prevalence and importance of movement in contemporary society. These movements range from how children get to school to interplanetary tourism, as well as movements of objects, data, ecologies, and more.

Follow the Thing takes a 'more than human' approach. It goes beyond a human-centred perspective and instead, directly and indirectly, traces the complex journey of an object. The object, and the diverse networks of people, goods, regulations, and more, entailed in the journey of that object, are the focus. Moving beyond the human allows alternate perspectives to emerge that reveal connections, complexities, and contradictions that can inspire action on social and environmental issues.



Why might I want to use Follow the Thing?

- Follow the Thing exposes power structures that operate behind the scenes, revealing complexities, vulnerabilities, injustices, and even violence. The method does this by directing attention to areas that otherwise receive little media, policy, and academic attention because they are taken for granted, difficult to access, or hard to trace.
- The method sheds light on taken for granted processes and supply chains upon which people rely. It reveals diverse communities and environments working in often unseen and unappreciated ways, as well as how such overlooked processes are vulnerable to global environmental change, lack of labour rights, and more.
- Follow the Thing highlights unapparent connections between different people and infrastructures, such as a papaya farmer in Jamaica and a papaya consumer in the UK, as well as how connections are vulnerable to injustices and disruption, such as caused by the global climate emergency.
- It offers a flexible approach that captures dynamic timeframes, geographies, and rhythms.
- Depending on the target audience, Follow the Thing findings can be shared in diverse ways, ranging from news articles to fictionalised vignettes to graphic novels.
- This method allows the researcher to tell the story of a general or complex process through one specific journey. In this way, it takes a topic that is complex or mundane and weaves it into a compelling story that gives the reader an appreciation for a process about which they may have never given any thought.

Step by step guide to using Follow the Thing?

- 1. Identify what you want to follow.** Why this thing? What will following it allow? What are the start and end points of the journey? For example, in the case of blood donation, one possible journey is from the point of donation to the point of care. Remember that some things are more accessible than others - tracing a tomato from a local farm and following a bag of donated blood are very different projects.
- 2. Brainstorm potential ways of following this thing.** What kind of journeys does it involve? How might you trace such a journey? What access do you require to engage with your research themes? For example, researching technical aspects of logistics versus labour rights are different, though not unrelated, entry points requiring different research approaches.
- 3. Identify a starting point.** It is likely you will not fully appreciate the complexity of the full journey, as that is why you are undertaking this research. Therefore, identify a place to begin, such as a conversation with a key contact or a useful document, from which you can find out about different points in the journey, as well as if and how you might gain access.
- 4. Pursue available leads to keep following the thing.** Opportunities to Follow the Thing might include conducting interviews with managers who can give an overview of decisions and processes, conducting interviews with workers who can provide details on working with and transporting the thing, touring facilities, observing people and processes, reading documents, and/or partnering with organisations to Follow the

Follow the Thing



Step by step guide to using Follow the Thing:

Thing physically or virtually through video surveillance, tagging or barcodes. Identifying what to follow and how is an ongoing puzzle. It may take time to foster relationships with gatekeepers and there may be dead ends. Identify potential partners who can facilitate the research process.

If the thing you are following is difficult to trace, you could use more sophisticated technologies, like barcodes and tracking tags. Barcodes are used to track product journeys from origin to end creating valuable data on 'out of sight' warehouses and shipping activity, for example. Alternately, for more local supply chains, you might ask the person who is handling the thing to take photographs at each stage of the process. By capturing images that they feel are illustrative and notable, a photo diary is created in the field providing access and insights that are not directly available to the researcher.

5. Think about what kind of story you want to tell. When you have gathered enough data to trace a journey, think how best to tell the story given your research lens, data, and target audience. Different themes that researchers highlight include carbon footprints and other environmental impacts, consumerism and waste, fair trade, human rights, labour rights, supply chain resilience, and more.

6. Work with your collected data to create a story, choosing a medium that will be accessible and compelling for your target audience. For example, do you aim to educate the public or do you aim to change national policy? Look at everything you have gathered and take some time away to let the salient points rise and use those to anchor the story. Ground all points of the story in large and small details you gathered during research to create a picture that is representative of the dataset.



The starting point for the Bloodscape scavenger hunt featuring a Blood Bikes volunteer.

Follow the Thing



Fictionalised vignettes can be used to tell this story by drawing out specific elements of the general information gathered about the journey of the thing; emphasizing specific dynamics and overlooked movements and processes. There is a risk when people hear 'fictionalised' that they think that the story is made up. These vignettes are grounded in research but with the added flare of telling a broader story through an engaging, specific example.

7. When you have drafted the story, share it with key informants.

This will ensure that it is accurate and reflects their experience and understanding. Based on participant feedback, refine the story as needed. Keep in mind that some stories are sensitive in nature and participants may not be keen for challenging issues to be shared. As a researcher, use your judgement to represent your dataset while being conscious of power imbalances.

One option is to create a game that tells a story of following the thing. This interactive experience may appeal to a different and wider audience than written material. An example is a scavenger hunt. Bloodscape was a self-guided adventure that let participants experience Edinburgh, Scotland through the lens of blood. Bloodscape provided diverse experiences of blood through space and time, including changing trends, global campaigns, and Harry Potter (written in Edinburgh). The goal of Bloodscape was to broaden participants' understandings of blood as a vital good.



Another scavenger hunt stop exploring the links between travel, disease, and blood transfusion.



Examples of using Follow the Thing in social science research

Blood mobilities

Researcher: Dr Stephanie Sodero, The University of Manchester

This project used the Follow the Thing method to research vital mobilities, specifically how blood gets from the point of donation to the point of care.

As blood is a sensitive medical product, Stephanie could not physically follow it due to privacy issues. Instead, she traced the journey of an imaginary bag of donated blood in Canada by conducting interviews, touring facilities, and reading policy documents. Through these methods, Stephanie pieced together a picture of how donated blood travels from the point of donation to the point of care.

While blood donation is lifesaving, the behind-the-scenes details do not necessarily make for a compelling story. It is possible to tell a boring story about blood that focuses on technical details that are not of interest to a non-specialised audience. Instead of a dry report, Stephanie wanted to tell a specific, compelling story about a bag of blood drawing on the general information she had gathered. This story is not made up but grounded in research.

Based on her fieldwork, Stephanie developed nine fictionalised vignettes. The first started with the act of donating blood. The narrative used a fictionalised version of Stephanie and was based on her memory of donating blood. The narrative then follows the journey of the bag of donated blood.

In the narrative, four vials of blood are flown to a different part of Canada for testing to ensure the blood is safe. Once the blood is approved, it is processed into three components: plasma, platelets, and red blood cells. Each component goes to a different location, travelling surprising distances.

There are countless different routes blood can take, but Stephanie wanted to tell a specific story. A dramatic flair made the story more compelling. The narrative arc involves a car crash, an all too relatable event, with the vignettes showing the donated red blood cells being transported by an air ambulance and the patient waking in hospital to see donated blood being transfused. Fictionalisation of Follow the Thing permits researchers, stakeholders and readers to gain understanding of processes that are unapparent, as well as to explore and emphasize novel themes, such as climate mitigation and adaptation, lending a unique perspective that draws connections with broader societal issues.



Where else could Follow the Thing be used?

The Follow the Thing approach is useful for organisations, such as businesses, charities, activist organisations and government departments that are interested in thinking through unseen dynamics in provisioning, the environmental impacts of everyday products, and how these processes link to social and material inequalities. As the example above shows, organisations might also be interested in the lives of 'things' that are recognised as difficult to follow due to ethical, safety, and privacy issues. In such contexts the Follow the Thing method can be adopted using creative research approaches to reconstruct journeys. Here are some examples of where else this approach could be used:

- **Disaster scenario planning:** What happens when a disaster, such as an ash cloud, pandemic, or hurricane, causes disruption in a supply chain? From face masks to vaccines to everyday household items, a Follow the Thing approach can help health professionals and government officials think through provisioning and contingency planning.
- **Climate change:** Severe weather events impact global supply chains. For example, Puerto Rico is a major producer of pharmaceutical supplies. When it was hit by Hurricane Maria in 2017, there were widespread impacts on local healthcare provision as well as pharmaceutical exports.

- **Fairtrade** How does your [breakfast](#) get to your table? Tracing the origins and supply chains of a meal can expose unseen carbon footprints, environmental impacts, and social injustices.
- **Waste:** What happens to an object, such as your smart phone, when it is no longer used? Just as the process of creating a good is complex and surprising, so too are processes of breaking down and disposing of waste.

Top tips

1. Consider your target audience and the elements of the journey, such as time, speed, and location that you want to highlight. Develop a creative output tailored to these elements.
2. Ground all points in empirical evidence. While the specific journey may be fictional, it represents actual processes. It should be realistic, as well as being presented in a creative way.
3. Check in with your research participants to confirm that your depiction reflects their understanding of the 'things' journey.

Follow the Thing



Further reading

- Blood: **Vital mobilities: Circulating blood via fictionalized vignettes** (academic article)
- Cotton t-shirt: **My cotton t-shirt: From field to wardrobe** (video)
- Fish **Traceable Seafood Supply Chains** (video)
- Mardi Gras beads **Beads, Bodies, and Trash: Public Sex, Global Labor, & the Disposability of Madi Gras** (book)
- Papaya **Follow the thing: papaya** (academic article)
- Pharmaceuticals **Cradle to Grave** (art installation)
- Refugee Rights **What They Took with Them** (spoken word poem)
- **Dr Stephanie Sodero website**

To reference: Sodero, S., Barron, A., and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Follow the Thing' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



To read about more exciting social science methods, the full range of *Methods for Change* 'how to' guides can be found here