

## Fluid Knowledge and Transparency: Using the Web 2.0 to Promote Compassionate Consumption

Contemporary capitalism conceals the histories and geographies of most commodities from consumers. Consumers are usually only able to see commodities in the here and now of time and space, and rarely have any opportunities to gaze backwards through the chains of production in order to gain knowledge about the sites of production, transformation, and distribution. Over the past decades, the production of commodities has been globalized at a staggering pace, and yet our knowledge about the production of those same commodities has shrunk. The aim of WikiChains is, therefore, to encourage a different type of globalization: a globalization of knowledge that will harness the power of the Internet in order to allow consumers to learn more about the commodities that they buy.

A wiki website ([www.wikichains.com](http://www.wikichains.com)) has been set up to encourage Internet users from around the world to upload text, images, sounds, and videos of any node on any commodity chain. All uploaded information will be licensed under the creative commons framework and made freely available. The hope is that ultimately a large enough body of data will be assembled to allow consumers to find out information about the chains of all mass produced commodities. WikiChains will not push any particular political, ethical, or environmental perspectives. Rather, it is hoped that by simply facilitating the free flow of information to transcend barriers of time and space, the project will encourage consumers to be able to make informed economic decisions and be more aware of their economic, social, political, and environmental impacts.

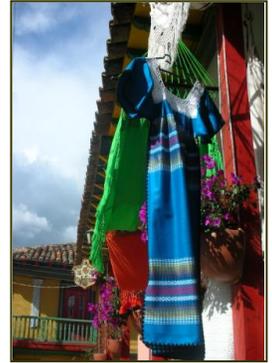
The project has clear pedagogic as well as research benefits. In the introductory human geography course that I teach, I am

encouraging groups of students to research and then represent commodity chains from the points of production in the Global South to the points of consumption in the Global North. Representations of these commodity chains will include not only statistics and maps that measure the intensity and direction of flows, but also pictures, videos, stories, comments and critique. Instead of building representations around static facts, the wiki framework allows represented knowledge to take on a fluid and changeable form. The student projects will therefore not provide a hands-on way to learn about economic geography, but also illustrate the ways that debates and links to supporting data are used to resolve disagreements about how chains should be best represented. The website can also be used to teach students how transparency, knowledge and interventions can affect development at any node on a commodity chain.

Beyond the classroom, it is also hoped that by simply facilitating the free flow of information to transcend barriers of time and space, the project will encourage consumers to make informed economic decisions and be more aware of their economic, social, political, and environmental impacts.

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Ráquira,  
Colombia  
(Photo: S. Mains)

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