**Critique of** [**“The Cost of Delay”**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2021/global-supply-chain-issues-holiday-shopping/) **by The Washington Post**

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In this highly visual article, a team of Washington Post reporters explain the supply chain issues consumers experienced during the 2021 holiday shopping season by focusing in on four unrelated items all in high demand around the holidays. The story uses a children’s puffer jacket, a popular plastic children’s toy, an artificial Christmas tree, and a bottle of wine to illustrate why and how shoppers may see longer than usual delays in receiving goods.

One thing I like about this story is that it takes a seemingly small, individual experience, like an unusually long shipping delay for a single plastic Christmas tree and connects it to a hugely complicated system. I think approaching a large topic like the global supply chain from the perspective of a single item is a great way to break down the story into easily digestible pieces for readers. Additionally, sprinkled throughout the story are bold snippets of 2020 vs. 2021 comparisons of the manufacturing and shipping of each product, which further break the story into quick and simple facts.

Another thing I like about this story is the way in which the data is presented. The image below is an example of how the reporters show the significant obstacles throughout the manufacturing and shipping journey of a children’s puffer jacket.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

On the surface, the visualization immediately conveys a sense of complexity. The reader doesn’t even necessarily need to read every bubble of the data visualization to quickly understand that the jacket gets transported between manufacturers and distributers many times before it ever arrives at the door of the consumer. If the reader does take the time to read each bubble, the map is laid out like a “choose your own adventure” narrative. I think this is a fun way to add a note of levity to a complicated topic and gives the reader multiple ways to engage with the material on their own terms. The “choose your own” adventure format also highlights the extent of the supply chain issue and of the detailed research done by the reporters. Its highlights that every (reasonable) possible outcome was investigated for this report.

Other data visualizations used in this article serve as a useful vehicle for providing quick and easy context to the reader. The example below stood out to me as a great way to put the rising price of shipping containers into perspective. Without this visual tool, it would have taken much more time and space for the reporters to write out the exponential growth in shipping container costs, all the while, likely losing readers in a slew of numbers and ultimately failing to convey the drama of the situation.

Chart, line chart

Description automatically generated

I certainly would not have known the price of shipping container prior to the pandemic and therefore, I would have no context for understanding its price now. The line graph used in the article (above) quickly conveys this contextual information and it doesn’t take a math whiz to understand that the price of shipping containers has increased more than threefold since January 2020.

Finally, I like that that – while this is primarily a story about supply chain issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic – the use of data and clever data visualizations paint an impressive (and even alarming) picture of just how internationally spread out our supply chain is. Regardless of the pandemic and its effect on holiday shopping, this article is a useful reminder for consumers about the energy and money that is spent to create and ship every single item we purchase.

Overall, I think this article is well written and reported. I have just two changes that I would have made to improve it.

The first is that I would have selected a different collection of goods. I like the example of the wine, the plastic Christmas tree, and the children’s toy, but instead of the child’s winter coat, I would have liked to see something that is more ubiquitous and relatable than another children’s item. If applicable from a supply chain delay perspective, I think another winter-related item like a snow shovel, candles, or even an adult winter coat would have been more relatable to wider audience of childless readers.

The second is that I would have liked to see more humanization of the pandemic and the supply chain throughout the article. Again, the article is primarily about consumer goods during the pandemic, but ultimately, the pandemic itself is caused by a disease that has killed more than 5 million people worldwide. Throughout the article, the reporters write phrases like, “every step after that has become weighed down by backlogs and worker shortages” and “loading, transporting and unloading times are also longer.” I would have liked to see more reporting on *why* there are worker shortages and *why* shipping containers are taking longer to load and unload. Is it because the workers have died from COVID-19 or are taking care of themselves or family members while sick?

As the pandemic wears on, I think it’s important for journalists to continue to ground readers in the facts of this deadly virus, rather than leaning into idea that the pandemic and its restrictions and upsets to normal life are merely inconveniences to our own consumerism.