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WHOSE CHANGE IS IT, ANYWAY?

Towards a future of digital technologies
and citizen action in emerging
information societies

Colophon

First published in April 2013 by the Knowledge Programme Hivos.

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www.hivos.net / www.hivos.org

Design: Tangerine –Design @ Communicatie advies, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Cover photo:



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Table of Contents

Summary	7
Introduction	9
Case Study: India Against Corruption: Questioning the Radical Potential of Citizen Action-driven Change	11
Axis 1: Locating Change: Resistance Versus Revolutions	13
Axis 2: Understanding Change: Rights-based Approach and Paradigm Shifts	17
Axis 3: Reconfiguring Change: Between Failure and Success	19
Tying Things Together	22
Case-Study 2: Shanzhai Cultural Campaign in China: Citizen Action in Networked Societies	23
Axis 1: Aligning Change with Crises: The <i>Shanzhai</i> Spring Festival	27
Axis 2: <i>Shanzhai</i> Citizenship: From Being to Becoming	29
Axis 3: Spectacles, Networks, and Citizen Action	30
Conclusion: Notes for the Future of Citizen Action and Change	33
References	36

Summary

This thought piece¹ is an attempt to reflect critically on existing practices of “making change” and its implications for the future of citizen action in information and network societies. It observes that change is constantly and explicitly invoked at different stages in research, practice, and policy in relation to digital technologies, citizen action, and network societies. However, we do not have adequate frameworks to address the idea of change. What constitutes change? What are the intentions that make change possible? Who are the actors involved? Whose change is it, anyway?

Drawing on the Hivos Knowledge Programme and on knowledge frameworks around youth, technology, and change from the last four years, this thought piece introduces new ways of defining, locating, and figuring change. In the process, it also helps understand the role that digital technologies play in shaping and amplifying our processes and practices of change, and to understand actors of change who are not necessarily confined to the category of “citizen”, which seems to be understood as the de facto agent of change in contemporary social upheavals, political uprisings, and cultural innovations.

Methodologically, this thought piece attempts to make three discursive interventions: It locates digital activism in historical trajectories, positing that digital activism has deep ties to traditional activism, when it comes to the core political cause. Simultaneously, it recognises that new modes of political engagement are demanding and producing novel practices and introducing new actors and stakeholders. It looks at contemporary digital and network theories, but also draws on older philosophical lineages to discuss the crises that we seek to address. It tries to interject these abstractions and theoretical frameworks back into the field by producing two case studies that show how engagement with these questions might help us reflect critically on our past practices and knowledge as well as on visions for and speculations about the future, and how these shape contemporary network societies. It builds a theoretical framework based on knowledge gleaned from conversations, interviews, and on-the-ground action with different groups and communities in emerging information societies, and integrates with new critical theory to build an interdisciplinary and accessible framework that seeks to inform research, development-based interventions, and policy structures at the intersection of digital technologies, citizen action, and change by introducing questions around change into existing discourse.

¹This thought piece has been a labour of love, passion, and politics, and owes great intellectual gratitude and debt to a wide range of people who generously gave their time, resources, and critical acumen to shape the ideas. While it is impossible to thank all of them in person, I do want specially to mention all the participants in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who participated in the Digital Natives With a Cause? knowledge programme and the Knowledge Team at Hivos, who have always helped ground my thoughts and ideas into something more than philosophical indulgences. Particular people (Fieke Jansen, Remko Berkhout, Josine Stremmelaar, Amis Boersma and Seema Nair at Hivos) have been challenging and inspiring knowledge partners who give me space to think and challenge me to think better. Maesy Angelina, Philip Que-Sell, Momin Mallik, Kara Andrade, Nilofar Shamin Ansher, Shobha Vadrevu, Noopur Rawal, Rebecca Shield, Namita Malhotra, Maya Ganesh have been patient interlocutors who suffered through my mixed-up thoughts and writing and gave them shape and clarity, helping me to put thoughts into words. This thought piece would have been very nearly unreadable without their inputs and thoughts.

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Introduction

If there is one thing that defines the first decade of the 21st century, it would have to be the increased visibility of citizen actors using digital networks to emerge as agents of change. Around the world, as we witness different crises ranging from natural disasters and economic meltdowns to cultural censorship and compromised civil liberties, there is an unexpected number of citizens – often enabled by digital participation and collaboration technologies – staging protests, demonstrations, and uprisings, demanding their rights from authoritative regimes. These collective mobilisations of citizens are not limited to particular geo-political regions; even in the case of specifically local causes, we have seen a global audience engaging with the spectacles of the rise of the citizen. From flashmobs involving labour unions in massive malls in China to what is now recognised collectively as the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa, from Occupy Everything movements in the US to anti-corruption campaigns in India, we have seen strategic and specific use of digital networks, tools, platforms, and gadgets that have facilitated citizen action around the world.

Debates around these forms of citizen engagement are nuanced and agree, despite their mutual disagreements, that we are witnessing new and accelerated processes of change around the world. The chief point of contention is about where to focus attention in describing the change: should we attribute this change to the emergence of digital technologies and the new networked conditions they create, which enable political participation? Or should we understand this change as a result of human and social response to existing conditions of crisis, which are exacerbated as well as mitigated by this digital turn?

Many public intellectuals and academic researchers have attributed this large-scale convergence of citizens for social and political causes to the ubiquitous presence of digital technologies (Shirky 2008, Joyce 2010, Wales 2012).² They show how anonymity, the presence of the Internet as an alternative public sphere, and the persistence of social networks despite censorship and containment, have led to the emergence of new modes, strategies, and structures of political engagement allowing ordinary citizens to catalyse the change that they envision in their immediate environments.

On the other hand, others (Vaidhyathan 2011, Vishwanathan 2002, Carr 2008, Gladwell 2010) insist that the over-determination of the centrality of digital technologies in coinages such as “Facebook Revolution” and “Blackberry Riots” distracts from the larger political contexts and human conditions that often inform these demonstrations of deep-seated discontent. They demonstrate that, beyond the spectacles created by and through digital networks, there is a much larger body of civil and political society which forms the historical context for these revolutions.

Polarised as these positions might be, an emerging consensus (Scholz 2012, Davidson 2011, Morozov 2011, Sassen 2004, Zuckerman 2010) suggests that we need to look at both the legacies of political protests and the emergence of digital public spheres in order to understand these surprising uprisings. While debates persist about the relative importance of different actors in the revolutions, those involved have similar presumptions and use similar language to account for these revolutions

The conviction of change: No matter on which side of the human/technology divide they fall, there is a strong conviction on either side that change has occurred. This change is supposed to be self-explanatory, and rich visual and textual evidence that captures the spirit, momentum, and scale of these protests is presented to support this conviction. However, there is very little attention paid to what constitutes this change. We still struggle to define where exactly the change is located and how the change is defined. Most analyses attribute a “newness” to these phenomena and provide new forms, strategies, methods, modes, and mobilisations of political engagement.

² Activists such as Julian Assange and Aaron Swartz have also contributed to this through their active engagement and lobbying with these questions.

The language of a revolution: Again, on both sides, whether hopeful or despairing about the nature of these uprisings and their futures, there is a sense of excitement and turbulence that presents these events in a language of a revolution. Within the larger globalised complex, these specific and local events seem to signal a global overhauling of systems of governance, commerce, and civic life that have been slowly disintegrating in a rapidly changing world. Hence, not only do they take the radicalism of these events as given, they also produce accounts of change which might not necessarily be supported by an actual event or its ambitions.

Privileging action over actor: In the debates, there remains a privileged focus on the actions rather than the people involved. It is presumed that we know who these citizens are and how they view themselves in these different contexts. There is a clear idea that we already know the people taking the streets and often putting themselves in danger, and that what is important are the processes they initiate. So we have an imagination of an older kind of citizen who is merely adapting to the new digital environments and bringing about the changes that are possible there. Similarly, not enough attention has been given to the changing nature of state-market-civil society relationships and the role they play in these much-celebrated actions.

Blind spots: As a result of these kinds of presumptions, the discourse inevitably reaches expected conclusions:

- There is an endless celebration of protests in regions where these were not expected, protests as a novel form of citizen action, without actually reflecting on questions of their sustainability or on the systemic changes they might be able to bring about.
- The inability of many of these events to produce anything more than symbolic change or a new structure that resembles the older, challenged structures produces rising despair and scepticism about the future of citizen action.
- Silence among those who are not a part of these changes and who cannot claim stakes to the futures that they are envisioning leads to an elision of alternative or resistant voices in the region.
- Because these events are accounted for only through a language of change and revolution, there are only two pre-wired responses, success and failure, made available in the analysis, precluding more hybrid forms for understanding the discursive and material effects of these events.
- The persistent emphasis on the causal and intertwined nature of technology and citizen action narrows the scope of analysis by taking both of these concepts as self-explanatory. It presumes that citizen action is the only way to characterise these changes, and also refuses to acknowledge interventions which do not fit definitions of “citizen action”. Simultaneously, the focus on the use of technology, rather than on technology as a part of the infrastructure of change, excludes other actors, such as government and the market, from the analysis.

Rationale & Structure: In this thought piece, I attempt to see the important implications these presumptions and blindspots in the existing discourse around digital activism and change have for our understanding of the future. As a response to these persistent blindspots and presumptions in existing discourse and approaches, I present six different, interrelated axes along which we might be able to understand and build the conditions for interventions at the intersection of digital technologies, citizen action, and change. These axes are informed and inspired by both the research and knowledge produced by the “Digital Natives with a Cause?” Knowledge Programme and critical conversations with different stakeholders in emerging information societies.

The first cluster of axes addresses the imaginations, intentions, designs, visions, and structures of change that are implicit in our current thought and practice. Change is continuously a part of the digital activism–transformation discourse, but remains severely under-theorised. Change is the intention of the action. Change is the process through which the actions occur. Change is the catalyst for and the desired result of the different actions that we observe and understand as digital citizen action. Change also becomes the originary point for despair that marks the new spate of digital action, recognising the discrepancy between the intention and the result.

This cluster posits three theoretical and tactical frameworks for understanding change. It begins by examining the language of change discourse. The digital turn seems to have produced many

narratives that herald change but do not necessarily end by transforming anything fundamental. The language, often populist in nature, takes on the battle cry of a revolution, but ends up reinforcing the status quo. Similarly, change to processes – deeply embedded in a rights-based discourse, for example – do not necessarily lead to structural changes. They can, in fact, undermine the radical potentials and promises of an action and lead to a gentrification of politics. These approaches also bind change in a binary of success and failure: there is a celebration of any change, without examining if it structurally transforms conditions, or there is a narrative of failure when visible changes do not occur, oblivious to the new ways in which the thought of change alone might instigate the new structures that are produced.

These ideas are concretely understood by grounding them in a case study examining the India Against Corruption campaign, which suffers from these approaches. It shows how we need to distinguish between resistance and revolution, each performing a specific function in relation to the status quo; the second is to question the “rights-based” paradigm of change that has become the default condition of contemporary citizen action; the third is to look at the problems of failure/success narratives and how we can build a critical political practice without falling into these easy binaries.

The second cluster of axes examines the practices, tactics, and material histories of change, trying to locate change, not as a universally understood concept, but within contexts, histories, and political movements. It begins by proposing that change needs to be understood in the context of a crisis. Demands for change or change as a catalyst for action is tied in to various crises, which draw from histories as well as from our imagination of the future. Bringing in time, space, context, and ways of relationality, the crisis does not need to only describe the present, but the larger structures of life and being. It further posits that we need to unpack our understanding of “citizen” in “citizen action”. The citizen needs to be understood as a particular construction deployed in order to mitigate crises and to provide a promissory note for a precarious future. However, citizenship has an implicit code which allows only certain kinds of people to claim it, and thus produces a manageable politics, as opposed to unruly politics. The third axis in the cluster looks at the ways in which we have come to recognise “action” within networked and information societies and how we need to move beyond a “spectacle imperative” to look at more transient, undocumented by significant acts that are central to the civil and political landscapes of change.

These ideas are grounded through a case study of an “event that did not happen” in China, examining the *shanzhai* spring festival. Through analysis and descriptions, I show how recognising crises as the ontology of change leads to formation of new narratives, based on how we locate crises and what we seek to resolve. The second step is trying to destabilise the comfort with which we characterise all political action as citizen action and question the hegemony that “citizen” as a category introduces to this new global discourse of change. The last axis places the problem within the network society, looking at how the over emphasis of digital technologies can “make invisible” practices, processes and ways of action which do not lend themselves to easy intelligibility within our technology frameworks. Through these two interrelated but separate symptomatic case studies from India and China, the thought piece builds a methodological rupture that appreciates the richness of the existing practices of making meaning of the contemporary. It provides a critique that does not ask for a disbanding of current approaches but instead seeks to build upon them and reposition them, to strengthen our presence, interventions, and knowledge in the field. Also, instead of focusing either on the technological or the human (or citizen) as a point of entry that is already defined, it posits “change”, and our affective, aspirational, and complicated relationship to notions of “change” and the future, as a way of producing a better-nuanced understanding of citizen action in networked information societies.

Case Study: India Against Corruption: Questioning the Radical Potential of Citizen Action-driven Change

In the current spate of political mobilisations – in the Middle East and North Africa, in Spain and in the United States of America, in Thailand, China, India, and other parts of the Global South – there has been much hope and talk about how a revolution has occurred. There are several phenomena

that characterise this state of revolution: the middle classes taking to the streets to claim political space, the overthrow of existing governments, especially more authoritative regimes, bypassing and questioning the state's sovereignty over its subjects, and a demand that rights and resources be more equitably shared and owned. From agitations for better financial safety and security and more participatory forms of governance, there have been (to varying degrees) successful revolts celebrated by those who despaired at the massive consolidation of power and capital that marked the late-capitalist global societies at the end of the 20th century.

In India, the largest citizen-action movement was the India Against Corruption (IAC)³ campaign, spear-headed by erstwhile Gandhian activist Anna Hazare. In early 2010, Hazare started a fast-unto-death⁴ strategy to protest against a perceived increase in political corruption. Building upon a scandalous decade that exposed billions of dollars misappropriated and misused by different governments and a hand-in-glove collusion between state and market interests at the cost of citizen rights, benefits, and services, Hazare, supported by strong civil-society representation and opposition political parties, called for the appointment of an ombudsman who able to question and investigate the integrity and ethics of the entire state apparatus, irrespective of political status or standing.⁵ This call for the appointment of a Lokpal⁶ (protector of people), both at the national and statelevel, led to a viral movement in India, where tens of thousands of people across the country came out in support of this anti-corruption motif. Mainstream media and digital networks took up the battlecry of "I am Anna Hazare"⁷ and brought people to demand their right not to be victimised by government corruption. Public demonstrations, candlelight vigils, open letters and discussions, and spectacular acts of public fasting in solidarity with Hazare marked this movement.⁸

The story of the Anna Hazare campaign is the stuff political thrillers are made of. The involvement of political parties and civil-society organisations, the extraordinary exposure in the media, a series of accusations and counter-accusations which often forgot the issues at hand, an exposé on the intentions and histories of the people who had lent voice to the movement – all add up to strange and complicated stories. However, as the Lokpal Bill was in Parliament and eventually ratified to meet protestors' demands – though not all their demands – there was a sudden lull in the campaign. This campaign, which was supposed to change India forever- to produce a peoples' revolution for a corruption-free India - suddenly faced reduced interest and support. So on 27 December 2011, when Anna Hazare began his fast demanding a stronger version of the Lokpal Bill in Mumbai, about 5,000 people turned up, as opposed to the 50,000 people IAC had expected and planned for.⁹

The passing of the bill by the Parliament – in whatever form – assuaged the public about the government's lack of concern about corruption.¹⁰ In a matter of six months, the revolution that was supported by 3.2 million netizens and had inspired millions of people across 52 cities in the country suddenly disappeared from the media and public consciousness. It no longer incited citizen action and resulted in nothing more than adding yet another piece of legislation to the existing body of corruption legislation. Last heard, the IAC and Anna Hazare's team were at a loss for what to do next and are in search of a new cause.¹¹ While the politics (mislaidd or otherwise) of the movement are complicated enough, what is particularly interesting for this paper is how this citizen-action revolt lost its intensity in a few months and disappeared from all public interest¹² and media reporting¹³ without actually leading to the kind of change that was promised.¹⁴

³<http://indiaagainstcorruption.org/> accessed 5 February 2012.

⁴<http://in.news.yahoo.com/indefinite-fast-only-option-anna-hazare-144205887.html> accessed 20 May 2011.

⁵<http://www.hindustantimes.com/Anna-Hazare-to-start-fast-unto-death-for-strong-Lokpal-Bill/Article1-681415.aspx> accessed 5 April 2011.

⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Lokpal_Bill accessed 12 February 2012.

⁷<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0-yF8hWRk> accessed 12 February 2012.

⁸<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/17/anna-hazare-arrest-inspired-indians> accessed 20 August 2011.

⁹<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/gandhian-anna-greeted-by-asparse-gathering-in-mumbai/1/166128.html> accessed 4th January 2012.

¹⁰<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-16344145> accessed 10 February 2012.

¹¹http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-01-06/india/30597115_1_team-anna-arvind-kejriwal-anti-graft-movement accessed 11 February 2012.

¹²<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/gandhian-anna-greeted-by-asparse-gathering-in-mumbai/1/166128.html> accessed 28 December 2011.

The Hazare-led campaign was characterised by three features articulated both by its core team as well as the public discourse around it:

- It claimed to be a revolution that was going to change the structure of governance for an equitable future;¹⁵
- It signalled the arrival of digital and Internet technologies enabling new citizen – activists constituencies in the country;¹⁶
- It sought to provide a sustainable future by recalibrating state-citizen-market relationships in the country.¹⁷

Based on these claims, two strains of discourse have emerged in India. There are those who have now despaired at the state of politics in the country, where web-based mobilisations around “middle class” problems gentrify the landscape of political intervention, but also produces “failed movements” which generate an enormous amount of energy and attention but quickly lose political fervour, replacing action and sustained fights with visibility and demonstration. There are also those who have seen IAC as a pivotal turning point for the country, where the people mobilised to voice their discontent. There is a new awakening of a middle-class public consciousness, and it is seen as a good sign that the people are recognising the dissonance between political structures and everyday experiences, and organising themselves for better governance. Both of these positions have supporters and detractors, and the tension between them is productive because it keeps either faction from becoming smug or self-satisfied, and hopefully propels further political action.

However, there is a definite idea among the varied stakeholders that a revolution did occur. The narratives of despair maintain that the revolution is not yet over, and we need to put more energy into de-corrupting the country; the narratives of success endorse the passing of the Lokpal Bill and the subsequent appointment of an ombudsmen as the first step toward spurning corrupt practices from the country’s system. Neither position questions that change occurred, and there are multiple references to the revolution that was just around the corner; the difference is only in figuring out whether the promises have been delivered or still need to be fought for.

By focusing on what the imaginations of change were, whose change was being fought for, and within what structures change was located, I want to re-examine the IAC phenomenon and suggest that the ways in which the entire campaign was orchestrated as well as the ways it was received, challenged, and critiqued, served to maintain the status quo without actually being critically aware of this, and that there are a few distinctions that we need to make in our understanding of change that might help shape the debates differently. I shall reconstruct and analyse the case study across three different axes of change: the first is to make a distinction between resistance and revolution, each performing a specific function in the support of the status quo; the second is to question the “rights-based” paradigm of change which has become the default condition of contemporary citizen action; and the third looks at the problems of “failure/success” narratives and how they reduce the possibility of a critical political practice.

Axis 1: Locating Change: Resistance Versus Revolutions

If we focus on not only the actions but on the basic structure within which ideas of change existing the IAC (as well as in other campaigns similar in structure, if not in content) we need to begin by locating change. What is the understanding of change with which we were working? What are the kinds of changes being imagined? Whose change was it, anyway?

¹³<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Anna-Hazare-calls-off-fast-cancels-jail-bharo-campaign/articleshow/11280038.cms> accessed 28 December 2011.

¹⁴<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-16344145> accessed 28 December 2011.

¹⁵<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5u5vOwIE62w> and <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=8260&Cat=13> accessed 10 January 2012.

¹⁶<http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/203518/20110824/anna-hazare-s-campaign-awakens-middle-class.htm>, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-08-17/social-media/29896044_1_anna-hazare-second-freedom-struggle-hazare-campaign and <http://www.watblog.com/2011/04/07/anna-hazare-janlokpal-bill-campaign-takes-off-on-facebook-twitter/> accessed 2 February 2012.

¹⁷<http://annahazare.org/rti.html> accessed 3 February 2012.

One of the most basic structures within which change can be placed is the triangulation of state-citizen-market (SCM) relationships. As a structural model, it can be mapped as a non-linear, reciprocal flow of information wherein each entity interacts with and helps in conceiving the other two (Chatterjee 1986, 1993). For example, the state emerges as the arbitrator of rights and justice, ensuring that market logic does not compromise the essential rights of the citizen. The market checks and balances the state's public-services monopoly, challenges existing models through innovation and experimentation, and engages with the citizen to counter the potential hegemony of state action and policy. The citizen becomes the embodied manifestation of state-market negotiations, emerging as a consumer and a civicus, questioning possible collusion of state and market, entering into specific rights and obligations contracts with both the state and the market.

This triangulation is in no way static, and can only be imagined as a series of interactions and negotiations involving all three actors. It might appear from such an actor-network model that the actors are pre-defined, and have definite roles to play. However, it is a more fruitful exercise to understand the actors as only coming into existence through and being defined by the interactions and negotiations, each contingent upon the responses and actions of the other for its own actualisation (Engels 1884, Kothari 1997).¹⁸ Change is indeed integral to sustaining this relationship structure (Chatterjee 1993, Escobar 1995).

Technologies have a particular role to play in defining and supporting the conditions of change each stakeholder demands of the others. There is a rich political discourse that recognises three different kinds of technologies at play within the basic SCM model that defines the notion of the future – not merely a future to inhabit, but a future to be created, one wherein this particular model is viable and feasible, thus continuing this structured change:

Technologies of the state are geared towards shaping the governmental structures that establish the sovereign authority of the state to produce subjects who can become bio-political work forces for and assets to the state's intention of expansion and growth through new labour capitals (Gibson-Graham 2001, Heidegger 2003). These technologies are helpful in enshrining the existence and survival of these citizen-subjects through a rights-based discourse. They assure a biological future (Lightman 2003, Turkle 1999) which can be banked on even as it exposes political subjectivity to precarious and invasive acts of governance.

Technologies of the market are aimed at defining modes of labour and consumption (Chakrabarti et al 2007) that allow citizens to actualise their affects and desires through different modes of engagement which are more than the personhood granted to them through the vocabulary of rights (Althusser & Balibar 1970). These technologies assure us of the futures with material resources, managing resource infrastructures upon which leisure and happiness depend. Simultaneously, they deplete resources that are outside of capital-based consumption processes, and ignore the infrastructures which cater to those who are not a part of market economies.

Technologies of the self are what define the ethical and individual universe of choices and belonging that help the citizen to make specific demands of patronage, protection, and equity in order to become the bodies to which they aspire (Foucault 1970). These technologies produce a sustainable imagination of the species, assuring biological survival and social processes of belonging and empathy (Fox et al 2006). At the same time, these technologies change the discourse around the human body, imagining a post-human world embedded in databases and archives, in information

¹⁸ It is also good to note that this model is not all-inclusive and the formulation of these actors and their roles is more blurry than is proposed in this model. State-like structures exercise different powers over the bodies that are marked as citizens. Markets often produce partnerships with the state that compromise the rights of the citizen. Not all bodies are allowed to be marked as citizens and non-citizenship sometimes has dire consequences for the biological and political survival of the person. In certain regimes, the very act of declaring oneself as a citizen is a political action which can lead to great violence upon the bodies claiming that position. Questions of identity and subjectivity formulate the citizen as not a homogeneous monolithic entity even within the same geo-political contexts. The problems are further intensified by the multiple registers of the globalisation complex within which these three actors operate. These problems and contestations are most clearly available at the micro level, where power capillaries make themselves visible, and it is imperative to unpack them. However, for the sake of the macro argument that this proposal seeks to make, we shall work with the basic SCM model in order to complicate it later.

sets and circuits of reproduction, which can underplay the biological and visceral risks and precariousness experienced by individuals and communities.

These technology apparatuses thus constantly negotiate between assurance and precariousness (Langton 1993) to produce the SCM relationships model under discussion. They mitigate the risks of the present by giving us assurances of the future drawing from the probability of the past. However, when any (or all) of the actors in this model experiences a crisis wherein the risk of the present is not worth the promise of the future, it leads to a paradigm shift in relationships, accompanied by a radical and dramatic shift in the technology apparatus (Pieterse 2001). This paradigm shift is what we understand as change. This is a change-based model of resistance, where energies are geared towards sustaining the status quo, and reinforcing the current system of governance, whose non-functioning is only a failure of infrastructure, administration, policy, or law that can be corrected. This is not radical change. This is not a revolution or a complete overhaul of the system. This resistance-based change is in fact an integral part of the system and is encouraged, in the shape of state reform, corporate social responsibility, and citizen action.

On the other end of the spectrum from this resistance-based change is the notion of a revolution – increasingly invoked when discussing the current spate of citizen action. Revolutions have a different moment of origin, however. Revolution-based change emerges when the future becomes unimaginable or implausible and the present (hetero-spatial and temporal) does not provide the necessary infrastructure for biological, political, social, or economic survival and satisfaction. This is the emergence of a revolution. Unlike resistance, which is an integral part of the SCM equilibrium, revolutions seek to overthrow the established relationality (Prakash, 1996). Revolutions are propelled by and orchestrated through new technologies which reconceptualise the nature of governance, of production, and of life (Castells 1996). Revolution, then, is a different kind of change, and it is aimed at destabilising the established structure of relationships and transactions, thus articulating a future that is radically different from that which exists. Ironically, revolutions do not promise more secure and stable futures, but instead amplify the precariousness of the future. Resistance, conversely, amplifies the precariousness of the present, while assuring us with promises of a stable future in which the current system achieves its true potential. (What about Marx?)

This distinction between resistance and revolution is the key to reading the promises of the current uprisings. Revolutions, as I have formulated here, lead to precarious futures which can no longer be articulated by existing relationships and transactions. They don't only change the mode of governance; they undermine the fundamental premises of governance and lead to the production of new categories, identities, and structures of governmentality. Subsequently, we find new ways of defining citizenship and of understanding state structure and the role that different actors play in facilitating interactions between them. Revolutions do not lead to assurances or stability. Rather, they produce turbulence and a collapse of existing ways of life, labour, and language.

Resistance, conversely, seeks to reinforce the status quo. Resistance might arise from any of the three actors in the SCM model, and it might also engage critically with the current structure. The ambition of this critical intervention is nevertheless to bolster existing relationships and address problems so the model may survive. It introduces modes of engagement, ways of operation, and frameworks of legibility which do not question or undermine the status quo in any way. Instead, it builds scaffolding around the existing problems, in an attempt to produce a re-evolution of the contemporary structure as something towards which the model must build.

Reading IAC as Resistance

It is through this distinction between resistance-and revolution-based change that I want to re-visit IAC. I want to suggest that it is futile to discuss whether IAC was a failure or a success. Rather, I want to examine whether it imagined the kind of revolution-based change it promised. The campaign presented itself as a political citizen-action intervention, thus claiming that its vision of a “corruption-free India” was a way to challenge existing governance structures. If we look at a brief history of corruption and change in the country, a different picture emerges.

Before Anna Hazare first went on his now-famous hunger strike on 5 April 2011 and catapulted the campaign to mass attention, there was a series of events already in motion. IAC had already

registered as an NGO and was trying to make a point about how the various anti-corruption committees set up by the government, especially the Shunglu Committee to investigate the Commonwealth Games (CWG) scandal, were ineffective and did not have adequate powers.¹⁹ On 14 November 2010, around 10,000 people assembled at the Parliament Street police station in New Delhi to protest the rampant misappropriation of CWG funds, humiliating India on an international stage.²⁰ At the same time, the country was already a buzz about the Radia wiretapping tapes²¹ demonstrating extreme collusion between market lobbyists and government leaders in the country. This was closely followed by the 2G spectrum scandal,²² which highlighted both the amount of money and the level of government authorities involved in political corruption. In the aftermaths of the WikiLeaks scandal, there was already an atmosphere of suspicion and a call for disclosure of “black money” by the Indian political elite.²³ The leaked diplomatic cables describing an Indian legislative aide showing a US embassy official “chests of cash”²⁴ used to bribe Indian lawmakers voting on an Indo-US nuclear deal in July 2008 stirred fresh controversy.

The beginning of 2011 saw Indian corporate leaders like Azim Premji and Keshub Mahindra demanding a reform of the “widespread governance deficit in almost every sphere of national activity, covering government, business and institutions”.²⁵ State ministers were already signalling their commitment to a “war on corruption” in their own constituencies. The Supreme Court of India had recognised the fact that corruption was a burning issue and had ordered all trial courts to expedite the handling of corruption cases.²⁶ The president of India, Pratibha Patil, announced in a public address to the Parliament of India that measures to ratify the United Nations Convention Against Corruption will be implemented through legislative and administrative measures in order to achieve better transparency and accountability in the country²⁷. We witnessed a worldwide fifty-city Dandi-March II,²⁸ which was organised by People for Lok Satta and IAC. In March 2011, India’s premier cricketer, Kapil Dev, became the first celebrity to draw peoples’ attention to corruption when he wrote a letter to the prime minister²⁹ complaining of the inadequacy of CWG corruption investigations and petitioning for the Lokpal bill.

I want to show that corruption was already a national issue in India. The state, citizens, and the market were already denouncing the widespread reach of corruption, and certain measures were already being requested by different groups. Corruption had emerged as a national concern and there was an overwhelming sense that, if not dealt with efficiently, it might undermine India’s visions of itself as articulated in the Vision 2020 or India Shining campaigns, both at the national and international levels. So, when Anna Hazare started his indefinite fast as a response to the prime minister’s rejection of his demands for a stronger anti-corruption bill, with strong penal actions and more independence for the Lokpal and the state ombudsmen (Lokayuktas), Hazare found his political opponents. Till then, the government, just like any other public actor, had also announced its commitment to fighting corruption.

Hazare’s demands were not antithetical to the government’s avowed vision. The dissonance was in how he wanted it to be implemented. The IAC campaign, contrary to its own articulations and public reception, was not proposing any dramatic change. It was merely amplifying the possibility and potential for resistance-based change, which is a part of the country’s everyday functioning. Its

¹⁹<http://www.indiaagainstcorruption.org/events.html> accessed 8 January 2012.

²⁰http://theradicalhumanist.com/index.php?option=com_radical&controller=news&cid=304&Itemid=54 accessed 12 December 2011.

²¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radia_tapes_controversy accessed 14 February 2012.

²²<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/summary-of-cag-report-on-2g-spectrum-scam/135326-3.html> accessed 19 November 2010.

²³http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-01-19/india/28371595_1_black-money-liechtenstein-bank-simple-theft accessed 20 January 2011.

²⁴<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12769214> accessed 19 August 2011.

²⁵<http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/NewDelhi/An-Open-Letter-to-our-Leaders/Article1-651546.aspx> accessed 19 January 2011.

²⁶<http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/supreme-court-fast-tracks-corruption-cases-84632> accessed 5 May 2011.

²⁷<http://www.pravasitoday.com/read-pratibha-patils-speech-at-inauguration-of-7th-regional-conference-of-adb-oecd-anti-corruption-initiative-for-asia-and-pacific-region> accessed 20 March 2011.

²⁸<http://www.dandimarch2.org/> accessed 12 February 2012.

²⁹<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/kapil-dev-writes-to-pm-for-strict-anticorruption-law/770422/> accessed 2 April 2011.

political promise of a revolution was quickly appropriated by the state, and India now has another piece of legislation to control corruption, without any change in the material practices, social structures, and cultural negotiations which actually produce widespread corruption in the country.

Axis 2: Understanding Change: Rights-based Approach and Paradigm Shifts

Another way of understanding change in the IAC movement is to see its alignment with a rights-based approach. Resistance-based change is often geared towards demanding particular rights, and infused with a strong politics of hope that these movements will produce solutions and resolutions (often mediated by technologies) for our future. This is not meant to provide an alternative framework to a rights discourse. The call for rights, which addresses the state as its central interlocutor, helps to produce a momentum which leads to greater parity and transparency. When looking at narratives of change, however, we need to consider whether the change is geared towards providing an alternative to the existing system or whether it is a resistance-based change that builds caution and contextualisation into the new designs of SCM configurations (Rajadhyaksha 2011).

This is a good spot for us to dwell on how rights- and resistance-based change operates. The IAC campaign demanded a right not to be affected by corruption; here we see the pre-wired trajectory of political demand and rights-based politics, and the limitations to that structure. The movement began with the idea that it is geared towards a hopeful change and concluded quite abruptly because there was a recognition that change had happened, and that this change, at least for the larger populace, was enough to mitigate the risks of the present and the future. Moreover, this change is located in a technological and digital infrastructure that needs to be built in order to have more transparent, open, and equitable modes of governance.

Once success has been acknowledged, there is also an immediate recognition that it was centrally negotiated through new technologies, and that the digital shift, while pervasive, is uneven. The advances being made in the rights-based movement are going to exclude many groups, such as Dalits, feminists, sexual minorities, etc., because it concentrates only on fiscal and financial corruption and not moral- or social-transparency deficits. The excluded groups provide a critique of this movement and demand to be better integrated both as stakeholders and as beneficiaries of this change. The state and the market both intervene to produce new technological and governmental innovations and ideas, building new networks, apparatuses, and infrastructure to accommodate for practices and penetration of these changes. New technologies are often posited as the means for change, and to expand its effect.

In order to flatten the horizons of this technologised paradigm shift – to make it more successful and to ensure that it becomes ubiquitous and pervasive – all three actors come together to talk in a common vocabulary of change and rights (Achuthan 2011). With different interests on each side, they start a new network of interaction that contests, challenges, and negotiates the new terrains marked by these new technologies. The language they choose overlaps as they articulate the futures of these technology landscapes, however. There are three concepts that have emerged through this discourse, agnostic to its source of origin, that mark the ways in which we understand SCM actions in the digital turn that we have now established as the inescapable condition of our times.

Access: One of the ways in which the question of unevenness of technologies and change has been addressed is through the trope of access. It is generally accepted that more access will lead to more even participation. The ICT4D portfolios across countries seem to press for larger, affordable, ubiquitous access to digital and Internet technologies as a solution to problems of inequity. We get binaries such as the Haves and Have-Nots, Digital Native and Digital Migrant, which all posit the new technology model as the desirable one, and seek to rehabilitate those on the outside.

In this curative model the analogue citizen is expected to transition to the emerging new paradigms. Earlier categories of discrimination or exclusion are now replaced by technology exclusion. Instead of resolving the older problems, we are presented with technology exclusion as one of the biggest challenges, and access as the de facto answer. Access becomes the catalyst for larger

infrastructural development, digitisation of public resources, and expansion of market economies as more users need to buy interface time in order to avail themselves of different state–market services. Access, while indeed desirable for the possibilities that it offers, is in no ways a means of resistance. It is the validation of digital technologies' success story, insisting that all citizens must now become digitally enabled and that the responsibility of the state and market is not towards solving citizens' problems but in giving them access. Access also leads to production of new social rights – the right to information, the right to technology, the right to be connected, etcetera, which often compete with the basic human rights in execution and prioritisation.

Inclusion: The idea of access is immediately followed by the notion of inclusion. Learning from the distributed and multitudinous structure of digital and Internet technologies, we now talk of inclusion as a new mode of engagement. The mere inclusion of the citizen as the beneficiary – the intended recipient of the traditional centralised model of governance – is not enough. It is now thought of as imperative that the citizen be included in the processes of governance by giving him a voice and a say, by making sure that his voices are included in the processes by which the SCM model will be created.

It is presumed that inclusion will lead to better and more sustainable, nuanced, and context-appropriate modes of development. While this is true, the importance given to inclusion obfuscates the fact that the only voices included in this process are those that give opinions on how the technologised model can be built. There is very little space for including ideas which might fundamentally challenge or resist the status quo of technologies being deployed and ask for a different set of technologies. The rhetoric of inclusion involves the users in story-telling, but not in defining the conditions of building the narrative (Pokharel 2010).

Presence: Once access has been granted and the citizen has been included in execution and implementation of the new model – with its in-built resistance and negotiation structure – there is a clear promotion of presence as a way of maintaining equity of power. Presence makes sure that the new digitally disempowered – people who have been given access and included in the models of development, but still on the margins and fringes of this new model – are now acknowledged and their voices given weight. A new discrimination now comes into being, which plays out along the older lines of affirmative action, quotas, etc.

These three concepts eventually get enshrined in a language of rights, so that what it means to be a human being, a person, and a citizen are all reconceptualised according to the modes and methods developed by these new technologies (Bhabha 1994). What emerges appears to be a radical model of the SCM relationship, because new kinds of resistance are articulated and revolts are staged (Bloor 1992). The radical potential that is articulated in the visions of resistance is immediately subsumed in an older language of rights which demand the citizen to emerge only as a normative, good citizen who is legible to the state and can fight for right only from that normative position. This “An-Other” model not only replicates the problems of analogue structures but also inflects, amplifies, and augments these through the new techno-discriminations that emerge. The new model is not “An-other” model of governance – something that seeks to challenge the existing structures – but a new way of accounting for the older structures without having resolved any problems. This is nowhere more apparent than in the IAC movement, where the right to be better governed by the appointment of an ombudsman immediately led to the petering out of the movement's political ambitions. Once the right was granted, corruption was no longer the focus of attention, and energies were devoted to the implementation and fair use of the right. The celebrations around its alleged success fail to recognise that India already has a vast amount of legislation and law around curbing corruption, and that another piece of law is not going to address either the systemic or the structural causes which produce corruption and its related problems.

This is the problem with the politics of hope and a rights-based approach. It is so infused with the joy of possibilities and potentials of the paradigm shift that it doesn't compare the precariousness and assurances with the earlier structure. It in fact, comes to celebrate precariousness as a desirable condition that overthrows existing power structures and produces tenuous identities and

relationships. However, these processes are only a continuation of the older processes of negotiation, and perpetuate power centralisation and ensuing injustices while serving the benefits of the state and the market, so that the more things seem to change, the more they remain the same.

Axis 3: Reconfiguring Change: Between Failure and Success

This third axis of critique and analysis offers a different way to look at IAC (but also at other similar such “citizen action” movements globally) and change our expectations of change. The critique that I have produced so far – of resistance-based change and a rights-based approach – is not to suggest that this is the end of critique and all search for radical transformations is futile. On the contrary, the attempt is to suggest that there has to be a more critical way of engaging with the possibility of revolutions that goes beyond the pre-wired responses of success and hope that these approaches offer.

I submit revolution-based change is actually couched in the responses of failure and despair. There are very few accounts of failure within the technology-change discourse. Stories of failure are about how promises of intervention were not achieved. They are recognition of the fact that our resistance- and rights-based approach to change did not fulfil the visions and promises of change with which we began. Failure is considered the end-point of these interventions, and generally finds closure in the politics of despair echoed in laments of inequity, inaction, and apathy. I want to suggest that in these mostly invisible or discarded narratives of failure are possibilities for tracing hybrid forms and conditions of revolution-based change which were so threatening to the status quo and produced such precariousness that they were snuffed out before they could do lasting damage. In the particular case of the IAC campaign, this precariousness lies in the extreme and radical questioning of democracy as a model of governance and of the sovereignty of the state to provide equal rights and justice to the people. The concentration on its success – which is to give more regulatory control to the state – does not recognise the irony of asking the state to reform itself, staging a farcical spectacle in which the accused and the judge are the same.

It might be time to consider the histories these narratives of failure invoke, as well as the ways in which we can approach them as new points of origin for radical transformation.

Failure: Within a certain neo-liberal paradigm of efficiency, risk-taking, resource management, etc., failure immediately translates into the non-working of a system or an idea. Failure is posited, more and more, as a negative category that signals the stop of the great grinding wheels of civilisation. I want to suggest, however, that failure is a relative gradation and not an absolute category. Failure of a particular process or system is identified by different people in different relationships with the system. More often than not, failure is defined as the inability of a system (or an idea, or a process, or a person) to meet the intentions of its design and execution. In other words, when we set out to do something and are unable to achieve it, this is considered failure. Such a closed definition of failure doesn't accommodate for the serendipity in, growth of, change to, and adaptation of systems which fail to achieve the original intentions. It fails to account for the fact that even when systems fail to achieve their intended goals, they create new networks, infrastructures, and conditions within which unprecedented and unexpected successes might happen.

Let us locate this within our discussions of the technology paradigm shift. If we are not to go the politics of hope route in understanding how the SCM has changed because of the technological revolution, we are left with a pre-wired response of failure. If the technology paradigm shift has not resulted in a success, then it must be a failure. Thus, we will have critics who will point out that billions of dollars have been invested in ICT4D projects which have failed to achieve the ambitions of development actors. E-governance projects which were floated to ensure efficient public-delivery systems have been stymied by the local eco-systems to which they belong. The promises of the World Wide Web – of being free, of being open, of being collaborative – are constantly being compromised by the logic of market economies. The potential for self-transformation and world change are “abused” by users who spend a large part of their time trawling for porn and sharing

pirated material. These critics will maintain that the promissory note digitisation offered has now been proven a dud: we are looking at a failed technology revolution.

Such a critique, while it does warn us about the weaknesses of the systems we are working with, often overlooks the fact that while the systems might not have actualised their intentions and goals, they have still produced a new way of thinking, looking, working, and being for all actors in the SCM model, even as they failed. In order to look at how these systems have changed (and in turn have been changed) as they interacted with new forms of practice and thought, we need to look at another idea that emerges from politics of despair – hybridity.

Hybridity as a concept has been used in various disciplines to mean different things. It has been evoked to talk about amorphous identities, porous boundaries, entangled ideas, localisation, appropriation, innovation, etc. I am proposing a working definition of hybridity: When the original design of an idea meets the material practice of its manifestation, so that it cannot be contained either by its intended design or by its existing practice, what we get is hybridity.³⁰

This definition of hybridity allows us to perform two specific functions. One, it gives us a new lens to look at failure as it is understood in contemporary discourse. Instead of looking at failure as a negative thing that needs to be avoided, it helps us look at failure as an inevitable part of all designs. It is in the nature of designs to be abstract blueprints which, when they meet the field, will change and deviate from the original intentions. This is not failure. This is hybridity. It is a way by which the idea and the action come together to form new ways of being and acting.

The second function that hybridity helps perform is to evaluate systems through positions other than those of the architects of that system. For the powers-to-be, the system might have failed if their ambitions were not achieved. They would see its additional appropriations as abuse. For users, however, for those interacting with the system, this is a way of appropriating elements in a way that makes sense to local practice and ideas. In India, they call it *jugaad*– making things work. In China it emerges as *shanzhai*. In different parts of the world, hybrid systems – flexible systems that can adapt to local demands and mutate to be integrated into everyday practices – are the systems that have been successful.

This relationship between failure and hybridity offers us a way into understanding the idea of **revolution**. There is, within failure, an in-built idea that things have changed dramatically and drastically. Failure of a technology system (not its dysfunctionality but its abuse) would mean that instead of a **re-evolution** of the SCM power relationships and structures, what we have is an actual revolution – a condition that undermines the accepted roles, relationships, and actions of all the actors in the SCM model.

Let us ground this in the concrete example of a string of uprisings that have been dubbed Facebook and Twitter revolutions. The success stories of citizen action mediated by social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Blackberries, etc., have been widely documented. There has been much discussion about whether we should attribute these revolutions to technology or human agency. Battle lines have been drawn and both the sides of the argument produce convincing and persuasive points, each acknowledging the validity of the other. What remains unquestioned in these arguments is whether these were actually successes. For those who were able to use social-media platforms to organise, disseminate information, mobilise people and resources, and for the people who support them, these were true successes.

If we start looking at the original design of Facebook and Twitter, we will have to admit that these were actually instances of failure. Facebook never promoted itself as a political tool. Twitter was not designed to bypass censorship and authority in order to produce guerrilla protests. Both corporations must in fact have been shocked at the way in which users appropriated them to spark the biggest uprisings in this century. Corporate logic didn't view these as potentially subversive and dangerous

³⁰ This draws in parts from Kant, Heidegger, and Butler, who unpack and open up hybrid models of being, meaning, and body in their large corpus of work. None of them articulates hybridity in this fashion, but they were instrumental in my own understanding and formulation of the concept.

spaces, leading to the banning and censoring of these services in different countries, resulting in a loss of revenue. Nor was it the intention of governments (which not only allowed these platforms into their countries but also invested in the infrastructure) that these entertainment and social-interaction technologies be appropriated for political upheavals.

These were true failures – or rather true hybrid structures, where design and practice came together to form new kinds of actions and ideas, which cannot be contained either by the intention of the design or the geography of practice. They fundamentally question the roles and responsibilities of actors in the SCM model. They offer us a way of escaping the either/or debates of technology versus human beings, and look at hybrid forms of being and interaction as the ways by which revolutions can be staged and understood.

In this light, Hazare, then, was not questioning either the state's authority or its vision of a corruption-free India. He instead resisted the modes of operationalisation the government was setting in place and demanded a structure he thought was more efficient. Which is why we had the strange case of an "India against corruption", which presumed in its articulation that it is fighting against an India that is pro-corruption. Or, to put it more simply, there was a hypothetically corrupt India, which precluded anybody who sided with Anna Hazare. By implication, anybody critical of Hazare's campaign automatically became the enemy. Once the government was able to demonstrate its own intentions of supporting the cause, however, we were left without an enemy to fight. Citizen resistance was assimilated in governmental practice. What we saw with the IAC campaign was how resistance led to a re-evolution of the SCM model, wherein the state remains the protector of public interest, citizens invoke the state to protect their rights, and the market becomes a stakeholder in this state–citizen dialogue. The revolution which was supposed radically to overcome the democracy- and trust-deficit of the state becomes a way of endorsing the state's centrality and importance in a rights-based discourse. The movement lost its political teeth, its claims to radicalism, and its intentions of creating new modes of governance, only to strengthen the very system it had set out to oppose.

The IAC campaign, which used digital technologies and mobilised an urban middle class around the new social right of not being affected by corruption, managed to do nothing more than highlight corruption as a new axis of discrimination and inequity without actually engaging with older systemic forms of exclusion. Many Dalit, feminist, queer, and rural groups pointed out that the movement was essentially urban and flattened out older forms of political protests and battles in the country.³¹ It mobilised the nation around a neo-liberal politics of class, while undermining approaches to existing problems in Indian politics. In six months, the campaign showed that a supposed revolution was nothing more than an amplification of the resistance that was already a part of larger governmental structures in India. Reading the Anna Hazare campaign as resistance rather than "failed revolution"³² allows us to understand the nature of these movements, complicating the claims of radicalism they put forward.

Supposedly revolutionary citizen action in different parts of the world is often amplification of existing relationships rather than a recalibration of them. The Anna Hazare campaign, for me, shows that we need to look at citizen action and its claims more carefully. I have shown how citizen action, or rather, action of a particular kind, by citizens, is the basis of the SCM model within which we work. Most governance structures depend on citizens acting in specific ways. Citizen action is a part of maintaining the status quo. It often takes the form of resistance, demanding that their rights be protected or certain demands be met in order to ensure that the present conditions assure a stable future.

This resistance, even though it claimed radicalism, became a mere reinforcement of the existing paradigm. In order to understand the political implications of citizen action that leads to change, we

³¹<http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/Samar/I-am-not-Anna-Hazare/Article1-734414.aspx> and http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-08-24/india/29921916_1_dalit-intellectuals-caste-system-hazare 8 January 2011.

³²http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-12-29/mumbai/30568193_1_low-turnout-team-anna-anna-hazare and <http://www.timesofassam.com/headlines/indian-democracy-where-anna-hazare-failed/> 10 January 2012.

need to start looking at actions which actually lead to revolutions and reformulation of state–citizen relationships. If citizenship is an abstraction premised upon biological survival, social relationships, political identification, economic transaction, and personal aspirations that are embedded in material practices, it might be more fruitful to see what goes wrong in order for the persons to reproduce themselves as citizens and amplify their actions. Instead of taking citizen action as a given, we need to unpack what citizenship means in specific geo-political and temporal contexts, and what leads to everyday practices being invoked, read, and amplified as radical citizen action.

Tying Things Together

The change we are talking about, which has received so much attention in recent discourse, needs perhaps to be better understood. Drawing from our discussion of re-evolution and revolution, it is necessary to contextualise this change in earlier legacies which are further contained with geo-political and socio-cultural histories. Change, as it has been heralded in the discourse informed by politics of hope, has been imagined as a monolithic entity, universally viable and defined through certain parameters which often emerge from contexts other than those at stake. Thus, certain ideas of democracy, citizenship, freedom, openness, etc., get too easily transplanted to processes and people not necessarily shaped by or operating through those terms and contexts.

But change is about perspective (Ben David 2011), and it is contingent upon the ways of looking at, looking through, looking by, looking for, and looking like (Wheeler 2011). Who gets to define the change? What are the discrepancies between the spectacles and realities of change? What gets missed when change is being determined by existing power structures with a vested interest in identifying a reworked status quo as change? Do we determine abstract conditions of change and then locate it in turbulent spaces, or do we learn to develop a vocabulary of change that undermines the power relationships within existing SCM models? These questions help us develop new, relevant frameworks for identifying change, but also help us unravel our own interests and influence in identifying certain kinds of change. They also remind us that change is not always desirable, and that we often engage in a process of subconscious filtering, refusing to look at the darker sides of change which threaten not only to undermine existing power relationships, but to build new regimes of terror and tyranny (Tsou 2011).

Here is what we need to keep in mind in understanding the changing face of citizen action:

- First, we need to question the language of radical potential that citizen action often deploys. Instead of accepting the avowed ambitions of overthrowing current structures of negotiation, the language needs to be deconstructed to see its alignment with existing agendas and visions.
- Second, there is a need to evaluate the kind of change that is espoused by citizen action. Groups that are excluded, bodies that are not allowed to be a part of the mobilisation, the larger systemic changes it produces, and historical contexts need to be factored into an account of such change. We further need to read this change as either informed by resistance or revolution, by tracing the politics of hope and despair and the ways in which it offers pre-wired responses of success and failure. It is of further help to see whether its performance (linguistic or otherwise) is actually in resonance with what it does.
- Third, and last, we need to find the accounts of failure, discontent, or critique that are often made invisible in celebrating change. Instead of giving the expected answers of whether the change has been successful or not, it is fruitful to locate hybrid structures which offer possibilities of truly radical revolution, which produce precariousness rather than an assurance that is premised on reinforcing the status quo.

Case-Study 2: Shanzhai Cultural Campaign in China: Citizen Action in Networked Societies

In this second case study, from China, I am still trying to look at different approaches to identifying change, but locating the change discourse within another set of configurations. One of the easy relationships that have been established between digital technologies of/for/and change has been a causal one. It presupposes that the digital is here and hence it produces change. There is also a reverse causality which suggests that there is a need for change and people are using the digital and information technologies to bring about their vision of change. In both these narratives, which have been dominant in identifying effective change, there is a resilient silence concerning the role digital technologies play in shaping our understanding of change. The digital turn or the paradigm shift that is often hinted at when talking about information societies or network societies is not merely an extension of the existing ways of understanding the world around us. It is the product of a new explanatory framework, which can either give the feeling of change by re-mapping and re-telling the stories of citizen action through new lenses (the Actor–Network Theory, for example), or it can be completely blind to those phenomena or events or actions which do not fit its framework.

This is the story of the “Shanzhai Spring Festival Gala”, an event that promised to be one of the biggest challenges to state hegemony over information and culture production in China but became an example of a “failed” protest. However, unlike the IAC campaign, its failure is not in not achieving its goals. The failure in fact lies in the fact that it never occurred. In its non-happening, however, it managed to produce something else – a new kind of action, collection, solidarity, and movement which doesn’t get acknowledged in the stories about it. The casestudy draws on media reports, discussions on Chinese bulletin boards, and scholarly material on China’s information ecology to produce a narrative.³³

The case study looks at the hyper-visibility of mass mobilisations that has marked the recent understanding of citizen action in different parts of the world and examines how it exerts such a visual hegemony that other, quiet, but significant protests often go unnoticed. In the production of images that can become global spectacle, only certain kinds of discourses are made possible through technology-mediated citizen action. This discourse is often alienated from specific histories, particular contexts, and the affective articulations of the communities involved. It leads to a gentrification of contemporary politics that discounts anything that does not fit into the quantified and enumerated rubric of citizen action in network societies.

In looking at the extraordinary case of an “event that did not happen”, I hope to introduce three other axes through which we need to complicate our understanding of change, locating change within three different contexts. The first is recognising that visions of and mobilisations for change respond to a certain crisis, and the need to understand the context of that crisis; the second is unpacking who gets to be citizens and what gets missed in characterising something as citizen action; and the third is the emergence of the network as an explanatory metaphor of our times and how it produces a “spectacle imperative”.

The Shanzhai Spring Festival: Context

China Central Television (CCTV) is China’s state-owned television channel, and has been central to Chinese cultural consumption for many decades. Every Lunar New Year’s Eve, most mainland Chinese families gather in front of the television to watch the Spring Festival Gala, which has been the most-watched TV show in China since its debut in 1983 (Zhong 2011). It has become a national ritual used, like the flag-raising ceremony in Tiananmen Square, to transmit state-sanctioned ideologies, affirm shared cultural values, and integrate small family units into the big family of the patriarchal nation–state. Since the turn of the millennium, as Chinese media opened up to commercial interests, the cultural domination of the gala has also been translated into an economic monopoly under the auspices of CCTV’s biggest “official profiteering” cultural institution, which has

³³ A lot of the material cited in this casestudy is originally in Chinese. I want to thank Xia Chen Yue for her generous help in both locating the material and translating it into English.

inflamed widespread dissatisfaction among citizens. The gala's absolute monopoly on the New Year entertainment market and its skyrocketing advertising figures are not a reflection of its business success in a free market, but the result of a nexus between state control and market efficiency (Lu 2009).

CCTV's monopoly in the Chinese television industry is a prime example of what emerges from China's economic liberalisation without political democratisation. More than three decades of economic liberalisation and reform under the one-party dictatorship of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have created a public-private partnership wherein the market and the authoritarian state have blended to form strange bedfellows. After 1978, like many other institutions in China, the "throat and tongue" of the CCP have diluted ideological fervour with doses of harmless entertainment and sanctioned investigative journalism (Zhong 2010), and gradually transformed CCTV into a profit-making market entity. The political clout of CCTV is easily translated into economic gains, consolidating its dominant status in the TV industry. CCTV's intricate ties with the state mean it is a state apparatus able to carry out subtle and effective propaganda.

The spectacular Spring Festival Gala is the height of "indoctrination packaged as entertainment", and usually takes a professional team of thousands working for almost half a year, and is CCTV's fattest cash cow. CCTV's role as the "official profiteering monopoly" (Zhong 2001) is exemplified by its voracious practices in maximizing profits under the auspices of the state. What makes the gala so successful is CCTV's unrivalled advantage in straddling two economic models, which allows it to organise the gala under the logic of a planned economy, absorbing talents and resources and attracting media attention through political influence, but sell it based on the logic of the market, courting advertisers with rating statistics and guaranteed returns (Chen et al 2010).

In recent years, however, the gala finds its popularity receding as sophisticated audiences well versed in the language of entertainment (domestic or otherwise) slowly lose interest in the event. While the gala could easily capture the minds and hearts of Chinese people in the "imagined community of the nation-state" (Han 2009) in the pre-Internet era, where packaged ideologies were delivered through "a small screen remote-controlled by the state" (Zhao 1998), in an age of networked computers, it more often than not ends up unexpectedly provoking resistance or even rebellion in disgruntled audiences engaged in a culture of deep cynicism and "playful irreverence" in Chinese cyberspace (Bai 2010).

In the latest Internet trends such as muckraking, parodies, and joking in the Chinese virtual sphere (Yang 2009), CCTV and its beloved gala have become objects of ridicule. Other media and their journalists, long resenting the tyranny CCTV exerts, have happily ridden the wave of online public opinion. By its 25th anniversary in 2008, the gala found itself besieged by headlines and online posts that exposed the inside story of its economic hegemony (Zhong 2010) and denounced it as "vanity fair". Even though the show is losing popularity, under the system of official dictates and market profits, the gala survives in China despite its degrading quality and mounting controversies, and no serious competitor dares to challenge its supremacy.

Shanzhai and the claims of digital empowerment

The central hegemony of the Spring Festival Gala in defining and transmitting notions of what it means to be a good Chinese citizen was unquestioned and unchallenged before 2008, when Lao Meng, a 36-year-old migrant wedding planner in Beijing, decided to create an Internet-based *shanzhai* (parody) of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala, involving grassroots cultures and ordinary people from the streets. The idea met with great public enthusiasm, and resonated with the popular discourse of cloning or imitation known as *shanzhai*.

In traditional Chinese, *shanzhai* refers to "villages in the mountain with stockade houses" (Li 2010). It is usually associated with medieval folk-stories that depict gangs of bandits who set up a mountain fortress to escape a corrupt imperial court and who perform outlaw deeds justified in the eyes of the people – very much like Robin Hood, who robs the rich to feed the poor. The popularity of *shanzhai* resurfaced in 2004, with the Chinese hardware and electronics industry. It was the beginning of an informal economy of low-priced brand-name knockoffs manufactured in small production units in

south China (Qui, 2009). In the tense global environment around piracy, *shanzhai* was celebrated as grassroots ingenuity subverting the powers of capitalism. To Internet users in China it embodied a spirit of parody and playful irreverence, and became an anti-establishment symbol in the cyber vernacular.

By 2008, *shanzhai* was one of the central cultural icons of Chinese Web 2.0, and cyberspace was full of photoshopped images and mash-up videos of, for instance, a *shanzhai* national mascot – a trimmed dog dyed black-and-white to look like a panda (Canaves and Ye 2009). From rebellious heroes in classic literature to parodist cultural icons from Internet subcultures, *shanzhai* topped Google's list of the most popular search terms in China in 2008, and became a symbolic embodiment of digitally empowered grassroots democracy in the country.

Early *shanzhai* discourse retained a resistant materiality in the informal economy of low-price economics that sought an alternative to Western modernity (Wu 2010). *Shanzhai* in Internet culture also served a positive function as the newly-found voice for a suppressed population in a transitional authoritarian context. By the end of 2008, *shanzhai* rhetoric, with all its connotations of a digitally empowered grassroots creativity, channelled and regulated by government censorship apparatuses, had witnessed accelerating commercial recuperation efforts to inject fresh blood into a burgeoning digital-attention economy (Lanham, 2007). The *shanzhai* spring gala harnessed these energies and articulated a grassroots challenge to CCTV's cultural and economic monopoly and the mainstream cultural ideology it symbolises through an orchestrated and emotionally charged story of digital democracy, anti-establishment heroism, and grassroots resistance and rebellion. The rhetoric of *shanzhai* revealed a strong desire for bottom-up revolt against the authoritarian status quo, and the gradual formation of a resistant identity that relied on a global discourse of digital democracy but refused to be limited by the Western concept of political democracy in terms of voting and elections. The revolutionary potentials of the affective stories and narratives eventually petered out, however, as the *shanzhai* campaign never came into material existence.

The Event That Never Happened: Staging the *Shanzhai* Spring Gala

The first public spectacle of the *shanzhai* gala was a white wagon travelling along major streets in Beijing, with a red slogan painted on its side door: "*Shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala: Pick a fight with CCTV, extend New Year's greetings to people across the nation!" The Website under the slogan was www.ccstv.com, "China Countryside Television", which parodied CCTV's reign. *Shanzhai* came to media attention when journalists from *The Beijing Times*, a Beijing-based metropolitan newspaper, ran a story on it and found Lao Meng, the brains behind the campaign, talking to people on the streets:

I imitate you (CCTV) but am better than you in many ways. CCTV's gala is the business of a few big directors, but I count my shown on the wisdom of netizens across the country. It is a gala by the grassroots and for the grassroots! We gonna beat CCTV at its own show! (Li 2010).

Lao Meng emerged as a *shanzhai* rebel very quickly. In an interview in December 2009, Meng said that he had sensed and shared the growing discontentment in cyber communities over CCTV's monopoly and wanted to "do something about it". He soon found out that he was not alone. As he said in the same interview,

I knew that readers would be interested, because I dared challenge CCTV. Do you know that many media institutions are also resentful of CCTV? So, to a certain extent, the system has helped me execute my ideas. Think about it. If I just threw an ordinary spring festival gala for my neighbours, I bet nobody would be interested. If they really think that I am a hero, then the hero is known in times of misfortune. Only under China's current social system, can *shanzhai* gala prosper. People want to see how I pick a fight with CCTV and what the consequences would be. To us an allegory: there's this huge elephant in the forest that everybody hates. Suddenly a tiny ant comes out announcing that he is going to rape the elephant. So all the animals get excited and cheer him on. What's funny is that the ant is so small that the elephant is not able to find it, let alone kill it. (Meng 2009).

This image of a tiny but audacious ant that challenges the giant elephant in the interest of the community is such a powerful archetype that it found immediate resonances with netizens in China, who were also witnessing the *Cao Ni Ma* and Backdorm Boys phenomena around the same time. Couched in the myth of technology-engendered democracy, the *shanzhai* campaign received enormous public support on the Internet and extensive media publicity. It also garnered huge financial support and advertising as new stories were told by participants with dreams of stardom who poured into Beijing.

Even in its claim to subversion, however, there was a tacit consensus about what to tell and what not to tell. Affective and personal stories that speak directly to people's emotions were played up while rational reflections about the causes that led to their victimisation were carefully self-censored. The empowering and liberating aspects of the *shanzhai* campaign were celebrated, whereas the commercial and potentially exploitative sides were dodged. Story-telling became a process of self-branding in which participants mixed their own interpretations and imaginations of a digital grassroots democracy with society's expectations to make media-friendly tales of a mythical movement and radical subversion.

In many ways, this *shanzhai* campaign became a space where citizens were able to articulate those dreams and grievances which maintained their statusquo as citizens and never let them embody an unbecomed citizenship. The unarticulated critique of the structural problems that had led to failed dreams among the young participants eager to join the campaign remained not only tacit, but also only at the level of a myth. The attention was always on how ordinary people had a voice, and that the campaign offered them a platform where this voice could be heard. It deployed a double-bind where the citizens were simultaneously portrayed as unhappy and hence claiming a change, and yet the change was always restricted to the transformation of personal affective and material circumstances. The *shanzhai* spring gala promised to ameliorate the living conditions and social status of people participating in it, without actually entering into a political battle. It was a peculiar way by which a narrative of disempowerment was seen as empowerment, without bringing about any change at all.

The commentaries around this were charged with revolutionary fervour:

People who walk with naked feet will not be intimidated by those who wear shoes. Provincial TV stations dare not compete with CCTV for audience ratings. But this grassroots citizen has nothing to be afraid of: 'I have nothing to lose, and all I could lose are the shackles that bind my feet!'. If anything, from the moment that this ordinary citizen painted his car with the slogan 'Pick a fight with CCTV, extend New Year's greetings to people across the nation', he is already a winner, no matter what. (Ye & Zhang 2010).

Others indulged in imagining the *shanzhai* campaign as posing challenges to CCTV's monopoly, thus questioning the state's hegemony over their lives.

It has never occurred to us that a 'Beijing drifted' who posted his idea of organizing a shanzhai spring festival gala on the web could evoke so many responses! It is likely that CCTV, who has monopolised the golden time of New Year's Eve, would have a grassroots competitor who is going to 'grab a slice of this cake'. *Shanzhai* gala has brought the popularity of 'grassroots culture' to a new apex! (Chen and Wan 2008).

As expectations mounted, the *shanzhai* campaign became a political quest in the public imagination, and was endowed with significance beyond its entertainment value. The discourses of "grassroots versus authority" or "citizen hero versus CCTV" heralded a bottom-up revolution just around the corner. At the same time, there was rising discontent about the commercialisation of this "people's movement" as financial support and advertisements were solicited. Headlines lamenting "the commercial incorporation of *shanzhai*" (Zhang 2008) or "the metamorphosis of *shanzhai* gala" (Ye and Zhang 2010) with emails and comments from disappointed netizens started pouring in. When the

shanzhai campaign announced its plans to cooperate with Guizhou Satellite TV, a state-owned provincial TV station in Western China, there was a collective bemoaning of the death of grassroots resistance as it is appropriated by mainstream culture. The alignment with a corporate TV station also hit a nerve with the state, that feared that the *shanzhai* gala would pose a real challenge to CCTV's ratings if broadcast simultaneously via satellite to a national audience.

Government regulatory agencies started taking measures to make sure that the competition did not succeed. The SARFT first issued an order forbidding all provincial satellite TV stations from broadcasting the *shanzhai* gala, and sent a warning to Gui Zhou TV, which had just signed a contract to broadcast the *shanzhai* gala on New Year's Eve (Xu 2009). On 20 January, five days before the scheduled event, the "Coalition of Online Audi-Video Service Providers", an NGO set up under the auspices of the SARFT, sent out a notice titled, "A notice of boycotting the online dissemination of the *shanzhai* spring festival gala" to all Internet-based audio-video service providers in China, warning them against carrying any content related to the *shanzhai* gala (Jiang and Ma, 2009). Websites, which had signed contracts with Lao Meng to broadcast the gala live backed out. There was a drill of "cultural inspections" by government teams who asked for copies of the programme and talked to participants and volunteers. The situation grew so tense that eventually plans to broadcast live were aborted. A recorded dress rehearsal which was later aired on the Website of a Macau-based TV station found met with a cold response.

And so, the big revolution which was supposed to fight the tyranny and hegemony of the CCTV cultural program as well as the authoritarian Chinese regime never came. The people, who were already disillusioned by the commercialisation of the project, rallied one last time in support when the government cracked down on the *shanzhai* gala, and there was a series of headlines such as "*shanzhai* gala symbolises the ascendance of grassroots discursive power" (Zhang 2009) or "the silent exit of the *shanzhai* gala doesn't hurt its value" (Han 2009). As Wu (2010) argues "*shanzhai* culture expresses the dissatisfaction of an awakening '*minjian*' force which has a closed, authoritarian and monopolistic system."

Such a resistant identity, constructed through Internet-based communal resistance against dominant power and ideology, might spell positive change in an authoritarian regime in transition, but is limited by its symbiotic relationship with the dominant system on the one hand. The *shanzhai* campaign gains legitimacy, currency, and value only because of the popularity of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala. It is legitimised solely by its opposition to CCTV and does not have any capacity to bring about social change. Instead, it offers a benign space where people can voice their discontent and produce narratives of loss without altering the material and political status quo. In fact, in a stroke of irony, Beijing Satellite TV, a leading state-owned TV network in China, appropriated the idea and launched a formal "Internet Spring Festival Gala" in 2010, sponsored by China's major portal site Sina.com and the state-owned telecommunication company China Mobile.

Axis 1: Aligning Change with Crises: The *Shanzhai* Spring Festival

If we agree that visions of change are tied to visions and experiences of crises, it might be worthwhile to understand how we posit crisis. The cause-and-effect relationship between technology, change, and crises generally concentrates on the crisis as a particular problem which needs to be solved. In other words, the emphasis is on specific concerns with the existing system, which can be rectified. So, for instance, in the case of the *shanzhai* spring festival, the crisis is clearly defined as the hegemony of the Chinese government over means of media and cultural production. The spring festival, emerges as a solution to that problem, and when it fails to achieve that resolution, it is easily read as a failed movement.

One way to expand understanding of the crisis is to look at the notion of precariousness and the future. It might be better to understand crises not as short-term pathologies which can be cured through the administration of citizen action. Instead, crises need to be understood as fundamentally located in the existing systems, making them redundant, or threatening to make a future impossible. The 21st century has been a witness to such crises which produce incomprehensible precariousness

of the present we live in and an unimaginability of the futures we are to inherit. These states of crisis are experienced by all three actors in the SCM model and can, indeed, be a point of origin for understanding demands for radical transformation and change.

For nations, states, and governments, dealing with an unprecedented questioning of territory by the global flow of ideology and capital has led to a crisis of authority. Even as authoritarian states seek to maintain their hold over subjects, democratic nation-states are facing a persistent resistance that questions the state's authority for providing a promissory note for the future. From increasing fears around environmental sustainability to a dissidence exercised by bodies that cannot actualise their citizenship rights, we are looking at a radical re-thinking of the role of the state and its sovereignty (Osiatynski 2006). Digital technologies and peer-to-peer citizen structures fostered by market expansions often facilitate this questioning, leading to a crisis in governance and forms of community formation.

These crises of authority go hand-in-hand with an indescribable crisis of production and hope within the market. Following the global economic crisis wherein established arbitrators of our economic futures – banks, stock markets, speculative financial circuits, real-estate – have lost their faith-holding and emerged as not only in conditions of collapse but also likely to produce crises in the future – an international quest for safety and security. In the surplus economies we have seen with the rise of technologised globalisations, there is now increased recognition that current conditions directly affect the most fundamental universal human rights – access to food, water, shelter (Dreze 2004, Mander 2008). The libertarian dreams of markets shaping human conditions of consumption and production have collapsed; we now have a post-capitalist future which is also increasingly available only to those who can afford it (Gibson-Graham 1996). Huge inflation rates, bad economic management of resources, and the gradual but steady de-humanisation of the poor into absolute destitution and unbearable debt have given rise to a politics of despair, leading states and citizens to oppose and question the role that markets have to play in our futures.

While both these organised structures are trying to mitigate these crises and re-invent themselves – often forced by post-ideological flows of bodies and ideas – the citizen has also experienced risks that were unimaginable just two decades ago. At the turn of the century, there was a huge celebration of the individual and the infinite expansion of his/her sensorium through digital technologies. Extension of the human into the post-human through creation of synthetic life forms and affective machines has brought into question the very definition of a biological human being (Ihde et al 2003). An exclusively anthropocentric model of development has resulted in a deformed ecology which can no longer support the demands we have made to sustain the human condition (Rostow 1990). Along with this destabilising of the biological is the undermining of human importance in societies where jobs have become unstable, communities of belonging have deteriorated, and the rights enshrined in subjective and identity politics appear grossly inadequate to allowing citizens to live with dignity and happiness (Hardaway, 1991). Increasingly we see the state and the market impinging upon citizen rights and resources in order to sustain themselves, constantly pushing the individual, the citizen, the subject, into a biopolitical mass, without space for the personal, the private, and the affective. These risks manifest themselves in our reproductive futures – both biologically and as a collective, where young people find it impossible to see propagation or community-building as a probability (Pickering 1995, Wheeler 2011).

The cases that we know and the stories that we tell are located in these critical contexts and need to be understood as symptoms of this malady rather than ailments in themselves. In the case of the *shanzhai* spring festival then, the first point of departure would be to see it as a response not only to the media and culture industries, but to the very conditions of rights and citizenship in China. Historical and political analyses need to be initiated, not only to understand how “better democracy” or “open societies” can be created in China, but how citizens themselves envision democracy and openness. The contexts that give rise to the vision of change are also tied closely to the imaginations of particular forms of governance and how this might have promises of assurance (Wyer 2001, Visvanathan 2002) and how these contexts are driving all the three actors to “become digital” (Gasser & Palfrey 2007).

Axis 2: *Shanzhai* Citizenship: From Being to Becoming

One of the most interesting aftermaths of the *shanzhai* spring festival and its non-happening is what the people involved in this movement think. The entire phenomenon has been read as an act of citizen action. It has enabled us to read cultural negotiations as political, and the presence of digital networks and technologies as central to the imagination of citizen action in spaces which do not have more formal structures for contesting or challenging state authorities.

It has been variously pointed out that citizenship is not an identity. Rather, it is the condition that makes different kinds of identities possible, which is to say that we don't experience citizenship as a conscious form of being. One does not wake up every morning and realise herself as a citizen. And yet, every other social, cultural, and political identity we experience or deploy is validated only by virtue of being a citizen. This form of imagination often precludes looking at the unevenness of citizenship and the forms of exclusion which are often at work in deciding who gets to call herself a citizen. An individual is not born a citizen, but has to go through a series of rituals to make herself into a citizen. And yet, in the popular discourse around citizen action, citizenship is presumed. The citizen in "citizen action" is a presumed, understood, legible, and intelligible entity, the most crucial unit of governance and administration. The much tossed-around ideas of body-politics and bio-politics, one dealing with the individual and the other with the individual as a representative of a much larger community, rely on citizenship as the marker of life.

This leads to a peculiar situation in which, even when dealing with those who do not have the rights to be or are not allowed to be citizens, citizenship is offered as a curative model. New categories are developed in order to recognise them as citizens with partial or unactualised rights, and the curative model we saw in the SCM process is repeated. Citizenship might be granted to new bodies, inclusive practices might be initiated to include new constituencies in the citizenship debate, affirmative action that seeks to address historical inequalities might be set into place – and yet it enables merely a transformation of a non-citizen into a citizen, without any material changes in his life. This, for Hannah Arendt, was the distinction between "having rights" and "having rights to rights". Merely granting citizenship does not resolve any of the problems that excluded individuals and communities might face in their everyday lives. Citizenship is not a material condition but an abstraction that promises certain safeguards against precariousness of biological survival, political identification, and social relationships in the future.

New technologies have a huge role in producing these conditions. In China, for instance, the weight of a document that proves that you have the right to negotiate with the state is immense. In India, the government is already rolling out a biometric-based unique identification scheme that tags all citizens as recognisable entities which can enter into transactions with the state. The process of being made a citizen is both empowering and traumatic: on the one hand, it allows one the possibility of participating in a rights-based negotiation, thus asking for better equity, justice, and power from the state. On the other, it constrains one to being subject to the state, closing all avenues of negotiation the minute there is an attempt to overthrow the state's central presence. In other words, the condition of being a citizen is to define one's self in relation to the State and thus enter into a rights-based approach to change.

The *shanzhai* spring festival also produced *shanzhai* citizens – citizens who used their citizenship while remaining in a condition of non-interaction with the Chinese government. They did not engage in "unruly politics" (Khanna 2012), but managed to produce pirate identities which, by their very presence, challenged the existing mechanisms of governance and regulation. This notion of *shanzhai* citizens is worth holding on to, because it gives us a different idea of subversive action and change. It allows us to think of change, even when engaged through civic action, outside of a resistance- and rights-based approach. The participants in the *shanzhai* spring festival did not appear as folk heroes. They did not become political leaders, and indeed, in their orchestration of the festival, they didn't enter into a dialogue with the Chinese government. In fact their attempt was to

destabilise the state as the central interlocutor of rights and justice, and they tried to develop a pan-national tribal movement to look at alternative modes of operation.

They were not automatically pirates or terrorists or warriors. They were not putting themselves in conditions of antagonism with the state by launching a campaign against it. Instead, they were able to harness the power of digital technologies of mobilisation, networking, and collaborating to show that different configurations of control, regulation, and organisation are possible. If we understand the *shanzhai* spring festival as an impulse to develop these new kinds of *shanzhai* citizenship, then it offers a new reading, one of hybrid success, in which the event itself might have not happened, but it introduced conditions of change and new kinds of power negotiations which propagated a series of interventions in the political landscape of China. It is common in various cultural warrior circles actively launching (legal or semi-legal) attacks against information control and regulation in China to refer fondly to the “event that did not happen”, because while it might have failed to produce a spectacular image of overthrow of control, it produced *shanzhaic* citizens who were able to find new modes of negotiation to bypass, supersede, and escape the restrictive conditions that are imposed upon them by their contexts.

I want to suggest that the new, in the instances of digital activism that have marked the recent spate of uprisings and revolutions around the world, is the production of *shanzhai* citizenships which not only resist power structures, but also challenge our preconceived notion of citizenship.

When talking about new digital action, there has been much discourse about the new modes of engagement, mobilisation, operationalisation, orchestration, etc. The novelty is also identified in new kinds of bodies participating in revolts and demonstrations often without traditional actors at the centre. This newness, while it does produce new forms of citizen action, does not necessarily produce new structures within which “citizenship” and “citizen action” can be understood. It doesn’t fundamentally affect the ideas of change, and might end up giving an illusion of change when it is trying merely to give a new vocabulary to older, structurally flawed processes. In fact, these modes and processes are easily at the service of any act of intervention, and not necessarily characteristic of digital activism. They can also be deployed for destructive and darker interventions, which might not be politically progressive or helpful. From the Arab Spring to the Occupy Everything movements, from flashmobs to human-flesh search engines, they repeat themselves, enabling people to produce blue-prints of digital activism that amplify the speed and scale of older movements without actually offering specific new systemic and structural changes to citizen action.

Axis 3: Spectacles, Networks, and Citizen Action

The network has become one of the default metaphors through which we understand citizen action. Because citizen collectives increasingly use digital networks to orchestrate their movements, we have taken for granted that we live in networked societies. The idea of network society is so easily accepted that we think of it not only as the inescapable but also the “natural” state of being – benign and without political intention or design.

The non-happening of the *shanzhai* spring festival allows me to unpack and critically question the explanatory power attributed to the notion of a network and how a network-based approach to change produces blindspots that can have serious repercussions on our notions of political thought and intervention. One of the most potent ideas that the network concept produces is that the world, interconnected and “flat”, is accessible in commonly shared languages and vocabularies.

Viral dissemination of local material and international commentary around it within a network promotes the idea that specificity, context, historicity, and decoding are no longer relevant, and digital objects can be uprooted from their temporality and geography and relocated in the new context of infinite circulation within a network. This leads to a specific trend that seeks to describe these objects only through the terms and ideas that the objects have inspired and are embedded in. For example, within network studies, inspired by the network effect which has taken the social Web by storm and by the actor-network theories that reduce all activities to transactions and negotiations within a

system, there is a strong emphasis on using network tools to describe networks. It is a process by which description and explanation are conflated, and transforms specific persons/things and relations into interchangeable nodes and lines in a diagram. This is also a process that assumes that the very act of discovering the existence of networks is enough as an end result, thus often privileging technology as the unifying power behind networks, which no longer need to be explained. An approach like this is able to perform certain alarming moves. It first presumes that a legible, intelligible, and manageable network exists in similar fashion despite geographical and temporal differences. There might be a plurality of networks, but these networks can be visualised and understood in a graphical language that allows for certain characteristics to metonymically stand in for the event or the phenomenon it manifests. This also results in what I am calling the “spectacle imperative”, in which the only way by which the network can be understood is as a planning tool or a theoretical diagram which seeks to cartographically explain the network without relating it to the material realities and lived experiences that mark and shape events.

Not surprisingly, such analyses erase local political concerns in favour of an application or a digital platform that seemingly cures the problem. Although understanding universal network characteristics is important, this emphasis risks making the notion of a “networked society” a banal cliché, incapable of addressing the differences between various “networks” or the transformation of a network itself as more than a sum total of transactions. Thus, for instance, “Twitter Revolution” as a term widely used to describe events from Moldova to Egypt gains currency over the more localised histories which cannot find such easy “spectacle” in the digital networks.

As the influential network scientist Duncan Watts (2003) has argued, “rather than going out into the world and measuring it in great detail, [network theorists] want to construct a mathematical model of a social network, in place of the real thing...” This substitution entails “making drastic simplifications” in which real-world phenomena are “represented in almost comic simplicity by dots on a piece of paper, with lines connecting them”. These simplifications, which cause us to overlook material practices, inspire network scientists to “tap into a wealth of knowledge and techniques that will enable us to address a set of very general questions about networks that we might never have been able to answer had we gotten bogged down in all the messy details”. The study of networks, then, and also establishing the network as a context within which politics and change can be studied, is a problematic proposition. Because in its self-referential universe, the network obliterates all conditions or exteriority and any phenomenon is explained only through its relation to the other phenomena in that network. This lexical and structural co-dependence promotes the idea of universalised networks which are diverse but homogeneous, and specific but replicable. Simultaneously, there is a contained analytical framework that claimsto offer a comprehensive view but only manages to mimic (Bhabha 1994) the status quo of the dominant power structures. Like Borges’ infamous map that has replaced the territory, the network comes to stand in metonymically for a reality that it seeks to explain, but only hides.

If something cannot be tweeted – reduced to a byte-sized morsel, turned into a twitpic, available to be shared virally, and disseminated using mobile applications – then that something is not only going to fade into ignominy but might never appear in the discourse around digital activism and change. This is not an argument about information overload and attention deficit. It is not a suggestion that there are lots of alternative and interesting voices that are not heard or made visible on the Internet. I am, instead, arguing that the network doesn’t even allow for voices and spectacles, stories and events to be created, unless they fit the parameters of network principles and algorithms. So strong is this documenting and archiving principle of the digital realm, that the event, the action, the transaction, and the actor all need signatures and reified spectacles without which there is no record which can become the site of making meaning. As the faux philosophical question that has been memeing its way on social media asks, ‘If a tree falls in a forest, and nobody tweets about it, has it really fallen?’

The network society thus not only recognises events as the only evidence for change and movements, but also demands that they be events which meet the following criteria:

The event has to be legible – it can be written, quantified as data, visually mapped, attributed to definite actors, and graphically reduced to transactions, actions, and processes.

The event has to be intelligible – once it has been documented, it can be sorted, put into databases, forced to reproduce itself only in a language that the network understands, and can be extricated from its contexts of meaning making, where the technologised characteristics are more important than the actual catalysts and energies that made it possible.

The event needs to be accessible – it is a resource that needs to be amplified, managed, and granted access to rights and resources, producing new ecosystems of governance through which the radical potential can be introjected back into the very structures it set out to oppose.

The network has become such a “natural” form of being, its function is understood as so particularly benign, that it is often used as a neutral condition through which citizen action is understood.

The *shanzhai* spring festival gala stands in stark contrast to the spectacles of massive mobilisation that we have seen around the world in recent years. Both academic and popular discourse has marked this as a non-event, in which the hope the event promised was not actualised. Subsequent analyses have suggested that Lao Meng was merely using the language of subversion to market and commodify a people’s movement. The absolute ease with which the government could crack down on and halt the event has been seen as an illustration of how ineffective citizen-driven actions remain in China. A narrative of despair has emerged, which looks cynically at the idea of citizen action and suggests that there is no real future to citizen-driven change in authoritarian contexts. The critics also look at how only the privileged and those who wanted to align themselves with the aural networks of consumption and celebrity (much like reality TV participants) promoted and participated in this festival, and how it side-lined the real problems of China’s poor and the underprivileged. The offer of symbolic victory that the *shanzhai* spring festival gala would have offered, for many critics, remains only that – a symbolic victory that doesn’t lead to any material changes in the lives of those who have to struggle for their basic human rights.

While all of these critiques are important because they remind us of the echo-chamber within which digital citizen actions can become glorified, there is another way of looking at this entire phenomenon as a non-event rather than a failed event. If we begin with the premise that the *shanzhai* spring festival gala was not an attempt by the citizens in China to ask for more creative stake in cultural production, but a way radically to question the hegemony of the state and its cultural apparatus in their everyday practice, we start unravelling a different thread. It might be possible to suggest that the *shanzhai* spring festival gala was not only successful, but offered such radical negation of the state’s ability to legitimise such productions, that it could not be accounted for in the existing narrative frameworks. It produced an event which offered great promise and potential, and politics of hope to subsequent generation of activists in China who were inspired by this non-event and the opportunity it shaped for a new kind of digital activism.

This was no longer the digitisation of older forms of activism or using new tools for older collectives. It was activism that led to a non-event that could not be made sense of within the explanatory frameworks of the state. It was not legible, because it could not be written or mapped. In its very being, it was a spectacle that could not be consumed, thus becoming both symbolic and non-present, allowing it to become everything and nothing simultaneously. It was not intelligible because it did not lend itself to cinematic culminations of the promised *shanzhai* performances or new grass-roots programming. It remains, right now, the most documented process in China, for an event that never happened. It was not accessible, because the citizens (middle-class, affluent, connected) who were spearheading and participating in this event were reproducing themselves in collectives towards an event that was designed to fail. In interviews as well as on discussion boards, different people had always talked of the *shanzhai* spring festival gala as an impossible dream – something that they could not see happening because it was unthinkable. In participating in this impossibility, without a language of revolution, but through the vocabulary of fun and the grammar of cultural production, they demonstrated a strong desire to bring about a change in the way things are.

This was no longer a dialogue with the State to improve the living conditions in the country. It wasn't an old-school appeal through democratic processes like petitions, campaigns, or legal suit. Instead, by using the aspirational form of global spectacles in our networked world, they produced a non-event which remains elusive and invisible in the annals of activism in China. This non-event, in its not-happening, produced a dramatic discursive moment in China, which has now attained a cult-like mythological status, much like the Shanzhai stories in Chinese history. This particular moment has incited people to think of themselves as agents of change, harnessing the power of the digital to collaborate, exchange, share and find common critical sensibilities that are learning both from the local contexts and the global spectacles of change. While the *shanzhai* spring festival gala, in its non-happening, could not present us with a global spectacle which can be shared and celebrated – and was thus written off as a failure – it also gives us a different insight into the idea of citizen action and the inadequacy of our network tools to unpack it.

If we read this entire event through the normative structures of networked digital activism –an event which can be virally disseminated to become a part of the global spiritus mundi – then it is indeed a failed project where the rights of the people for better access, more control, and higher participation in democratic cultural production were not granted by the state. However, if we read it through the lens of a non-event, it becomes one of the first campaigns within China that does not address the state to grant it power or legitimacy. The citizens were not petitioning the state to allow them to produce an alternative cultural production. Instead, they were side-lining the state, refusing to acknowledge their relationship with it as citizens, and producing something that was more threatening than a petition or a formal protest would have been, because it refused to reproduce itself in a language and form that the state would have understood.

Precisely because of its non-event nature, it did not engage in politics that would have forced it to become legible, intelligible and accessible to the state, the *shanzhai* spring festival gala started a different political engagement that offered better opportunities to talk about citizen action that threatens to topple the dominant status quo in the country. Instead of falling into the network-inspired rubrics of success and failure, forcing all actions to render themselves as cartographically presentable spectacles, we need to build new frameworks and vocabularies that understand the real potential for radical action in technology-driven citizen action in emerging information societies. The idea of a non-event defies the polarised debates that use network tools to determine whether citizen action is good or not, successful or a failure, and instead looks at the hybrid, tenuous, and subversive kinds actions which can lead to a sustained political change and transformation.

Conclusion: Notes for the Future of Citizen Action and Change

This thought piece has grown in its thinking. It is as much a critical reflection on work done through the “Digital Natives with a Cause?” (Shah and Jansen 2011) knowledge programme as it is on the larger discursive landscape of understanding change. Its focus on change as the entry-point for citizen-action and technology debates responds to demands, declarations, and celebrations of change that have not actually qualified what this notion of change is. The thought piece doesn't have immediate solutions and blueprints for rethinking change, but it has tried to identify the inadequacy of our existing vocabularies and frameworks, as well as the shortcomings of the tools we are developing, within research and practice, to account for the changing face, form, and function of citizen action. It is part introspection, part reflection, part fiction, and part invitation to different stakeholders to help understand, account for, and build towards sustainable forms of change without either buying into the romance of the digital turn or dismissing it with techno-scepticism. The hope is that these different axes, when woven into existing narratives and future frameworks, will provide a more critical and fruitful understanding of our histories and their bearings on our futures. The case studies have helped to disassemble and disarticulate the comfortable discourse around citizen action that has gained so much currency with the emergence of digital and Internet technologies. In the process, it has shown how there are new questions to be asked and older ones revisited, while emphasising historicity, context, continuity, and transformation as the necessary pillars upon which accounts of technology-mediated citizen action and change have to rest.

I end with some notes about where and how we need to apply these axes to our existing work and to future interventions in the hope that there will be different engagements and collaborations that shall help question, strengthen, and explore this framework further.

Historicity: One of my biggest concerns, which I share with many colleagues and friends in the field, is the schism between the old and the new that plays out so strongly when talking about contemporary citizen action. It is almost as if we have invented new ways of being citizens and that the long, rich and problematic history of power, revolutions, and mapping of the futures is suddenly redundant in talking of the digital. This separation of a long-standing discourse around these questions robs us of a critical political edge that desperately buys into easy “production”-based impulses of social innovation and tools for change. A major challenge in this thought piece has been to show that histories (multiple and fractured) play a significant role in shaping contemporary and future civic action.

Our presents are the futures that our pasts had imagined. While the modes of engagement and forms of organisation might be different in the age of ubiquitous communication, the questions that serve as catalysts are not new – equity, justice, rights, liberty, etc., are ideas that have shaped the very idea of being human. It is necessary for me to reflect on our work with the “Digital Natives with a Cause?” project that, at the core of much of the action and intervention by the young, are crises that have recurrently surfaced through our histories. The scope of the crises, the packaging, dissemination, and spectacles are unprecedented, and need new attention; but the core of the crises are similar, and there are lessons to be learned from history about the nature and form of structural transformations.

The different axes of change that have been mapped in this thought piece force us to account for histories in different ways. Histories are the contexts against which change needs to be defined. Genealogies of existing power configurations and contestations can show us patterns that might seem revolutionary but are often merely a part of the processes that support the status quo. Digging around for histories of contemporary interventions also show us the interstices where the failed or the invisible impulses and affects often lie, thus offering new ways of reading our engagement with change. History gives us a sense of how some patterns of negotiation are actually endemic to the sustenance of the status quo and do not lend themselves to radical reconfigurations for the future.

Context: The rhetoric of the digital age is one of flatness and homogeneity. Even as we create more and more spectacles of the local, these spectacles are in a global idiom of intelligibility which often wipes out contextual nuances and ways of engagement. Increasingly, the quest to document everything so that it becomes accessible, intelligible, and legible to a global power nexus between the state and the market makes invisible the protests, the discontent, the collective spirit of resistance and revolution which works through capillaries of action and thought which cannot be captured in forms that can be circulated through digital interfaces. Contexts need to be understood, not only as the sites of intervention, but also as shaping the imaginations of the political and the form of collective action. Contexts also help us locate the notion of a citizen as specific to those particular geo-political and socio-cultural coordinates, thus exploding the universal doctrines of rights, justice, and citizenship, and highlighting the ways in which the local adopts, shapes, and designs technologies for its own usage.

Continuity: There is an urgent need to move away from the schisms between new and old activism, characterised by the use of traditional and new media forms. The distinctions are fruitless, and often counter-productive. It has to be understood that the earlier struggles of citizenship actually support contemporary civic action, which in turn shall provide new voices and ways by which future interventions will be built. The technological disconnect is merely a superficial one, and buying into the idea that the digital is necessarily removed from traditional forms, is to ignore both the ecosystem of information and communication technologies, as well as the ways in which existing interventions provide points of inspiration and departure for new actors to engage with politics in their immediate environments.

Transformation: Expectations of dramatic transformations that can be captured as spectacles on ubiquitous imaging devices has depleted our understanding of change in current citizen-action accounts. Inspired by actor-network models that reduce all human existence to a series of transactions which can be reified, commodified, and circulated within a network, those with these expectations, have stopped thinking about structural and systemic changes and depend more on generation and distribution of spectacles of change. Transformation needs to be better understood, however. It has to be explored not only as a narrative of visible change, but also a manifestation of critical thought, questioning, and reflexivity. Transformation is not merely about material practices, but also the reasons and the infrastructures of these practices. Looking at affective behaviours, the inspirations, aspirations, and desires of change is as important as documenting the processes of transformation. It is therefore necessary to stop looking at access-based, technology-determined accounts of citizen action, and map out the different ways in which people's expectations of survival, existence, dignity, and being human shape the ways in which futures are being imagined.

This thought piece has argued that we should build new approaches not bogged down by older forms of resistance-based, rights-oriented spectacles which take the guise of critical thought and intervention, but often end up in the service of maintaining the status quo. It has sought to explore new ways by which we question the currency of our existing vocabularies – citizens, revolutions, change, networks – and develop new frameworks that can help account for the history of citizen action as well as its future. I hope that these axes and the call for a more nuanced discursive practice will catalyse thought around the very idea of change – the actors, processes, technologies of change – and how we can build a framework that goes beyond the intimacy of the interface and the seduction of the network, to look at cross-temporal and longitudinal accounts of citizen action in the future.

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