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# Digital Natives in the Name of a Cause: From “Flash Mob” to “Human Flesh Search”

YiPing (Zona) Tsou

## The emergence of newly imagined communities

The dominant discourse around use of digital and internet technologies has been either mired in celebration or pathologisation. On one hand are the people who bask in the participatory power of Web 2.0 technologies, announcing the emergence of new public spheres and democratic spaces of engagement and expression. On the other hand are the detractors who remain sceptical of the ‘newness’ that digital technologies bring, often repeating the axiom of how, more the things change, the more they remain the same. In this discourse, even though the warring lines are clearly drawn and the dialogue is often fraught and tense, there is something that remains unexamined and unquestioned – In the imagination of either of the warring factions the users who remain at the centre of the discourse are identical.

Scholars and practitioners alike, whether they are hopeful all the way, waiting to witness the bright, promising future that the information and communication technology (ICT) is going to bestow upon us, liberating all the oppressed from the tyranny of the authoritarian regimes and repressive censorship, or skeptics who stay alert of “the dark side of internet freedom” and are addressing the issue with sentiment of disillusionment, mourning for the failed (or not yet fulfilled) promise of a digital utopia, presume that the beneficiaries and architects of this new public spheres are still well intentioned, progressive, liberal and tolerant users. Sure, there might be occasional exclamations at questions of piracy, pornography, bullying, etc. but it is always believed that there is something intrinsic in the nature of the internet that ‘cures’ the existing evils of our times. Even in the discourse

around these subversive activities, there is a resilient hope that the 'user' of cyberspaces would necessarily be a civic-minded person.

However, as blogger and commentator Evgeny Morozov perceptively points out, no matter how wistful we are, social media and Web 2.0 do not always foster civic engagement and democratic reform. In effect, the very tools the revolutionaries use to undermine the authoritarian governments are just as likely to grant dictators with more powerful weapons to crush a popular uprising or any budding rebellious force.<sup>1</sup> This essay tries to look at the 'other' side of cyberspaces to show that digital natives and the causes they espouse are not automatically desirable. These new generations of prosumers, who consume, produce, share and disseminate information in participatory and collaborative ways, can also mobilise their resources for regressive and authoritarian ambitions. This essay shows, how, in this age of ubiquitous computing, hitherto contained violences find greater supporters and audiences than ever before. The very platforms and techniques of user-generated content archives, collaborative production of information, peer-2-peer loose affiliations and an unregulated space for germination of ideas can also lead to the production of a digital native identity that can be dangerous and destructive.

It is not the intention of the essay to be steeped in paranoia and call for a censorship or regulation of the internet spaces. Rather it seeks to make us aware of the biases we hold when talking about digital natives by locating them only in progressive liberal contexts.

In the process, it also develops a new way of understanding contexts, which are not only about the geo-politics but also about the imagined histories and legacies, ambitions and aspirations that we attribute to digital natives.

In order to make this argument, I look at two significant processes which have emerged with participatory technologies, use the same technological impulses and yet achieve very opposite results. The first is the phenomenon of flash-mob – a viral networking mobilisation that calls for people who do not know each other but are connected with each other through the technologies and digital platforms that they consume, to come together in public spaces and perform a series of unexplained, often bizarre actions that subvert the logic and intended design of the spaces. Flash mobs have been used successfully as political statements, cultural innovation, social rejuvenation and a tool for mobilising large numbers of people to engage in civic and leisure activities collectively. The second is the phenomenon of "Human Flesh Search" (人肉搜索 *renrousousuo*) that has lately gained currency in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan – The Human Flesh Search is a peer-2-peer network that harnesses the 'wisdom of crowds' to search for people who might have offended a community or a collective but escaped the ire of the mobs

by remaining anonymous online. Human Flesh Searches mobilise masses of people online or offline to identify certain violators of 'morality' that the community seeks to punish because the 'crimes' might not be punishable by the law. In looking at both these, I'd like to lay bare the grey area between the bright side of a cyber-utopia that would be attained through the egalitarian progressive values built in the prevailing discourse of ICT and the other side that we tend to overlook where the risk of alternative use, or purely abuse of the internet, lies in the name of a cause.

## Digital natives with a thousand voices

With the advance of technology, the world seems to have become widely wired, operating on the common language of digital literacy. In this wired world emerged what the scholars called 'Digital Natives', which is still a highly contested term.<sup>2</sup>

The *Digital Natives with a Cause?* Knowledge Programme began with each of us seeking to define and identify with the term Digital Native; however, the real journey started after all participants from different regions and cultures agreed to disagree that we do not wear the term Digital Native uniformly. Some of us proudly claimed the title of 'geek' and declared "geek is the new sexy" while others exclaimed "we are not all techies!"<sup>3</sup> Some members felt "staying offline" sounded worse than "committing suicide" and some believed in "the right to unplug" or "to lurk online".<sup>4</sup> Probably the only thing everyone agreed on was the fact that, apart from a very (un)privileged few, no matter what we do, most of people today can hardly operate outside the parameters of digital technologies.

"When in doubt, Google" is a motto virtually shared by all of us. Turning to social networking websites and mobile devices has become an everyday activity so embedded in our routine that we do not even feel we are "utilising" the digital technology. Surrounded by all pervasive digital devices as we are today, even though we do not claim or avow to be digital activists who aim for a radical, social reform, our concept of activity/activism is being so radically reformatted that we are constantly inventing new modes of engagement with public events, the much condemned "slacktivism" or "clicktivism" included.<sup>5</sup> Criticism aside, the dominant discourse tends to have a positive outlook on the emergent imagined communities shaped by digital technologies, attributing the recent progressive and democratic development to digital natives who speak the new-fangled language of this information age and hence are supposed to act upon a greater cause for the betterment of the world.

In fact, such discourse is quite powerful as shown by the comments after successive revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa which are taking place in 2011. The world seems to have witnessed the glory that is

the “smart mob”, a gathering of those who know how to utilise the communication technologies, and are able to connect and mobilise themselves, and successfully congregate in a physical space so as to make social impact in person.<sup>6</sup> The mass media and a vast array of commentators along with popular bloggers sing in unison, eulogising over these “smart mobs” who symbolise a new face of revolutionaries armed with their smartphones and other high-tech gadgets, and predict a latest wave of revolution employing tactics unseen before the advent of digital technologies.<sup>7</sup> Such success stories have set many other authoritarian regimes on high alert, including the People’s Republic of China<sup>8</sup> that took quick steps to ensure that such mobilisations of masses questioning the authority of the government do not mushroom in the country.<sup>9</sup>

### The dark force of digital natives

The PRC government has been known for its strict control over the “internet freedom” (or more precisely, speech freedom both online and offline) while ironically, everyday civilian Chinese are among the most destructive and intrusive hackers that pose a serious threat to cyber-security all over the world (aside from China itself). However, these Chinese hackers, though not in direct association with the central government, are more in line with the Communist party politics than against it.<sup>10</sup> Their cyber-attacks are often instigated by nationalistic prompts and mainly targeted at the so-called offending countries instead of challenging the overriding ideology of the Communist Party, and rarely focus on the domestic public affairs within China.<sup>11</sup> In effect, some Chinese patriotic hackers even call themselves “red hackers” and are highly esteemed among the general public as they appear to set a model for the nation.<sup>12</sup> The acclamation for these hackers is akin to the accolade for the brave smart mobs, who purportedly aspired to “activate” a revolution via social networking sites and digital communication tools in an attempt to achieve democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) discourse. Of course, hackers are not equivalent of smart mobs in that they simply manipulate the systems so as to make a virtual announcement of their existence without making a physical presence in public. Simply put, even though they may make an impact socially, in reality their faces remain hidden behind the screen.

Locating digital natives in China helps us unpack the different presumptions that build the idea of a Hacker. They are not necessarily hackers, but there are undeniably some overlaps, and if the aforementioned mentality is any indicator, it would not seem so surprising when there is no serious attempt at a Chinese version of a “Jasmine Revolution” initiated by the smart mob in the PRC.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, if we know the socio-historical context of China, then there is no surprise at all why a smart mob has never become a driving force in the

PRC that compels any political or social change so far. In effect, ever since the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 (a series of students' non-violent demonstrations for economic reform and liberalisation) were met by a militant massacre (which was claimed to never have taken place by the PRC press and media),<sup>14</sup> the authorities concerned have been successfully suppressing any potential revolt with the aid of their 'Law of the People's Republic of China on Assemblies, Processions and Demonstrations' enacted right after the Tiananmen crackdown.<sup>15</sup> Hence the political gathering in public could cause the participants a great risk of ending up in prison. Accordingly, any open gathering even just purely for fun, such as flash mob activity, is still few and far in between.<sup>16</sup> While the smart/flesh mob is somehow kept in check in the PRC, there is a curious collaborative cyber activity called “人肉搜索引擎,” or simply ren'rousou'suo, literally and graphically translated as “Human Flesh Search Engine”.

This Human Flesh Search Engine, according to James K. Yuann and Jason Inch, the authors of *Supertrends of Future China*, seems to share many of the characteristics of Clay Shirky's networked social collaboration: “Enabled and made cost-effective by technology, channeling an existing motivation that was not possible to act upon as a group before”.<sup>17</sup> But while the types of group-forming that Clay Shirky, in his book *Here Comes Everybody* describes as “flash mobs” have been staging certain anti-authoritarian demonstrations (such as the flash mob gathering in Belarus where people came to a public square in the capital Minsk to do nothing but eat ice cream together while the government agents still treated this as an illegal assembly and arrested some of the young participants),<sup>18</sup> such flash mobs are hard to spot in China. Even in the few successful mobilisations that attracted media attention, flash mobs in the PRC seem yet to have evinced any element of confrontation and have been often described as a whim of fashion to the public.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the Human Flesh Search, which basically deploys similar tactics and mechanics, and draws on the wisdom of the crowds, crowd sourcing, Friend-of-a-Friend structure, and may well be deemed an alternative form of flash mobs, has virtually turned into a nation-wide operation that engages and mobilises a great and growing number of Chinese internet users (often referred to by the Chinese media as '*netizenwang min*' or 網民” who would stay online virtually all the time). Although similar occurrence of crowd-sourced virtual detective work has been seen in other countries, quite a few commentators claim Human Flesh Search is a culture-specific phenomenon that had started as early as the year 2001 in China and quickly spread to other parts of East Asia (Taiwan in particular).<sup>20</sup>

## Witch Hunt 2.0: Digital natives with a chase

The allegedly first case of Human Flesh Search took place in 2001 when a netizen posted the Hong Kong actress Ziyao Chen's photo online and claimed her to be his girlfriend. This instigated the other unbelieving netizens to start a crowd-sourced detective network through Chinese forums and bulletin boards and discover her true identity - stripped off the vested interest and exposed the naked truth, the pure "flesh". But it was not until 2006 with the "kitten-killer" incident in which a video of a girl crushing a kitten to death with her stilettos was posted online, that *Renrou Sousuo* became a widely known and fast spreading phenomenon in the PRC.

Within hours of the posting of the said video, indignant Chinese netizens scrutinised the footage and traced back the unknown 'faceless' perpetrator in the video to her exact locale by mobilising human and digital resources aided by their smart gadgets. They initiated a project on Mop forum<sup>21</sup> calling for "hunting down the lady and the cameraman" which went viral on many popular forums and soon formed a nationwide network of "human flesh search" powered by a combination of computer networking skills as well as human connection. An anonymous netizen traced the original video link and revealed the video was posted by someone registered as Ganimas. Then the crowd followed up to conduct keyword search in Baidu (China's equivalent of Google) and quickly discovered many purchases of high heels (the above stilettos included) under the same user ID, and since online transactions need certain verification of personal information, Ganimas was quickly nailed. Meanwhile, another netizen identified the locale of the incident as his/her hometown in Heilongjiang province and provided similar photos featured on local government's tourist information website, which further prompted a Google Earth search confirming the locale. With this crucial information, a man who had done transactions with Ganimas and worked in a local TV station followed up on the leads. Four days after the search began, the traditional media picked up the story, and people all across China saw the kitten killer's photo all over the TV and newspapers. And the lady, Wang Jiao, was soon identified by a netizen who lived in the same town and had seen her working as a nurse in the local hospital.<sup>22</sup>

In less than a week, the cyberposse exposed every single detail of this woman's life—including her real name, age, marital status, whereabouts (address of domicile as well as office), which resulted in constant bombardment of thousands of malicious phone calls and even death threats, and eventually led to her forced suspension from her position and eventually she had to leave her hometown.<sup>23</sup> If there were a theme song for this incident, it would probably be "Ding-Dong! The witch is dead! Now let's go searching for other witches among us!" As we can sense from internet comments, media coverage

and even official response, the majority seems to have taken this case as a “just” execution, which has probably spurred more netizens to take on a self-appointed mission to go on more of such “witch hunt” in ensuing years.

In fact, by the year of 2008, it had become so popular that Google even made a mock webpage of *Renrou Sousuo* for the April Fool’s Day prank in simplified Chinese, recruiting experts with “a spirit of Gossipism and preferably a casual and cavalier style” along with volunteers as long as the applicant “owns a computer, a telephone, some chalks, a box of napkins, a whole set of 40 volumes *The Charts of Popular Gossip Figures*, sixteenth edition (large print)”.

The descriptions of this manpowered, all-powerful search engine are hilarious, especially when they proudly declare their mission statement, and no one can render it better and more poetic than the Google Translator itself. *Renrou Sousuo* does not have an inherent or consistent cause: “the truth behind a certain door”, “public recognition of a moral position”, “the most beautiful jungle girl”, “the most touching Alpine herdsmen”, “the most mysterious desert cave”, “the most romantic encounter”.... An infinite possibility seems to lie in such endless search for truth and justice, beauty and romance, and everything that touches a heart and strikes a chord with the audience. Poetic, isn’t it? It seems to start out as such an innocuous and effective way of searching and sharing the information.

However, Human Flesh Search has gradually turned into a double-edged sword, cutting through the line between good and bad.<sup>24</sup> Tom Downey, *The New York Times* journalist, elucidates such a conceptual turn in his article entitled “China’s Cyberposse,” pointing out that “[t]he popular meaning is now not just a search *by* humans but also a search for humans, initially performed online but intended to cause real-world consequences.<sup>25</sup>

As the name suggests, the Human Flesh Search graphically depicts this kind of search that is conducted by human connections rather than machine-based algorithms to locate the sources of information as well as calculate the relevance of the data for the sake of ferreting out and hunting down the human target who has committed all sorts of wrongdoings, ranging from telling a lie (as in the allegedly first case), blocking the ambulance and flashing the middle finger,<sup>26</sup> refusing to yield the seat to the elderly,<sup>27</sup> abusing a cat,<sup>28</sup> sexually harassing a girl,<sup>29</sup> having an affair,<sup>30</sup> hit-and-run<sup>31</sup> to anything that is considered “immoral” or “improper” by the wide wired world which could virtually go wild in the name of justice and vengeance.<sup>32</sup>

As aptly put by Downey, “[t]hey [Human Flesh Searches] are a form of online vigilante justice in which Internet users hunt down and punish people who have attracted their wrath. The goal is to get the targets of a search fired from their jobs, shamed in front of their neighbors, run out of town.” Kevin Bloom, a writer and critic based in South Africa, further points out that after the



“kitten-killer” incident, what used to be “a form of harmless crowd-sourcing, suddenly became a network for fed-up social activists with a taste for non-conceptual blood”.<sup>33</sup>

In a sense, the prevailing Human Flesh Search Engine feeds on flesh and blood of those who are accused of committing misdemeanours, moral vices or simply dissidence; in other words, it has somehow transformed into a man-powered censorship machine spontaneously run by the civilian netizens, operating “search and punish” mechanism.

Not only is the Big Brother watching you, but now that the little brothers and sisters join force to monitor all the aberrant and deviant who do not act in conformity with the societal norms, social mores as well as political ideology, a more effective surveillance has come in force from the bottom-up.

Hence, any case of aberrant behaviour, once spotted, recorded and uploaded online, could trigger moral panic as well as mass hysteria and can lead to public shaming and lynching of the target by the angry mob.<sup>34</sup>

Human Flesh Search, in this sense, is just like an updated, modern and perhaps more “civilised” form of medieval witch-hunt, with the same self-righteous mentality, the modern cyberposse equipped with the new technology would sniff out “the witch” in no time. Once the human target has been singled out from a myriad of “open calls for human flesh search” [人肉搜索令], without so much as a trial but a persecution, the net vigilantes would go into great lengths to expose every single detail of the targeted individual’s personal life, flaying the flesh and blood alive, and condemning the privacy of the sought to a virtual death. In a grim case, such Human Flesh Search has even caused an actual death.<sup>35</sup> Despite grave admonitions some commentators put forward, warning us of the consequences of misuse of technology and privacy violation, the term “人肉搜索引擎 *renrou sousuo yingqing*” has become so trendy that the youth have started to use “Human Flesh *ren’rou*人肉” as a verb. Discussion forums are always inundated with “calls for human flesh search人肉搜索令” to the point that the expression “人肉他! *ren’rou ta*”, literally translated as “human flesh him/her”, has taken on an uncanny nuance of cannibalism.

One signature picture posted on Mop.com, from which the term “Human Flesh Search” originated, in which two girls are waving knives with blood on them, and the slogan at the right bottom reads “We are the chopper gang”.<sup>36</sup>

## Mob 2.0: Digital natives with/out a cause

Some scholars have taken positive positions and made optimistic predictions about the Human Flesh Search Engine, thinking it could remedy deficiencies of the legal systems and redress the failing moral values in the Chinese society, such a mechanism of “search and punish” has a serious flaw when the issues

it readdresses are not so clear-cut black and white. This is aptly pointed out by Bloom.

Nestling somewhere between the related concepts of “tyranny of the majority” and “the irrationality of crowds,” said flaw was illustrated in June 2008 by the story of a young woman named Gao Qianhui, who just wanted to watch her favourite programme on television.<sup>37</sup>

Gao became a target since she recorded a video to give full vent to her frustration about the three-day national mourning period for Sichuan quake that disrupted regular TV schedules. The video was clearly for her to rant and rave, but her remarks such as “Come on, how many of you died? Just a few, right? There are so many people in China anyway,” triggered a Human Flesh Search to, again, hound down the “witch/bitch”. Within hours, her identity was exposed, and the next day local police came to arrest her, albeit without any legitimate reason to detain her.<sup>38</sup>

However, the “tyranny of the majority” and “the irrationality of crowds” are even more palpable in the case of Grace Wang (王千源), who was a freshman at Duke University when she tried to mediate the two camps between the pro-Tibet independence and pro-Chinese protesters in April 2008.<sup>39</sup> The netizens again reacted as one, mobilising the wired world to dig out her personal information in an attempt to punish her “treason” in siding with Tibetan independence. The Human Flesh Search instigated by the nationalist sentiment was so powerful that once her parents’ home address was posted online, they had to flee from their house and go in hiding for the sake of safety.

It is not unheard of that “the wisdom of the crowd” could verge on “the noise of the mob,” which is probably best manifested by the innumerable edit wars on Wikipedia talk pages where people engage in heated discussion about certain edited page yet end up in fierce verbal swordplay and personal attack. In most parts of the world, fierce and brutal though such warfare of ideologies is, none has ever gone “physical” and actually attacked people beyond the virtual domain, which is not the case with a lot of “virtual wars” on discussion forums and bulletin boards that have gone “real”, or rather, real dirty in the Human Flesh Search phenomenon in China.

Both cases demonstrate the ease and speed with which people can be mobilised for a cause, whether it is just or not, it would be justified by the mob mentality when “all becomes one”. Just as the saying goes, “the mob has many heads, but no brains”. In carrying out a shared cause, the individual netizens coalesce to form a vigilante group of some sorts, often bordering on a lynch-mob mentality. Thus, once the mob is formed by any sensationalised call for Human Flesh Search, the authenticity of the piece of information shared might not be of primary concern, and no one would actually go into length to first examine whether the poster is telling a lie. There has been

a weird sentiment “we are in this together”, so no one can really question whether the original poster has the right to initiate such search, and even if the mob got the wrong target, the cause is still right.<sup>40</sup> In fact, whenever such a cyber mob is formed, “right is determined by a kind of process of consensus-building where the strongest, earnest, motivated voices may dominate,” as Yuann and Inch perceptively point out.<sup>41</sup> Those who believe that internet and communication technology can serve as a power equalizer and has greater democratic potential may feel disappointed since the Human Flesh Search in China has proven quite the opposite.<sup>42</sup> ICT does not help equalise distribution of resources, and by extension, power in the digital age. In some sense, it empowers people with tools and skills to begin with, and as the optimists expect, there have been indeed some successful cases of Human Flesh Search that exercise citizen surveillance. Yet most of the time, they have nothing to do with governmental officials but merely an ordinary someone who used to be able to hide among the crowd. But now, as we can see from the miserable outcome of those who have become the target of the Human Flesh Search, they are forced to face a multitude of netizens, anonymous, gregarious and ubiquitous, executing many-to-one surveillance in perfect unison.

There is no way to hide from the public gaze when everybody is watching everybody, but don’t panic, we have nothing to worry about as long as we “stay in line” both online and offline, we will live together in perfect harmony, happily ever after... Or at least, so says the Communist Party, stressing a utopian vision of a “harmonious society”.<sup>43</sup> Under such a big banner, all the surveillance and censorship seems to be justified, and in some sense, these internet vigilantes, cyberposse or “norm polices” are in line with the “red hackers,” working hand in hand with the dominant ideology, fighting against the enemy abroad while hunting down the enemy within who disrupts the “harmony”. Freedom of speech? Personal privacy? Democracy? That’s heresy of the West! When Mob 2.0 is mobilised, “the many” has become ONE (and this ONE cannot be challenged) even in the so-called democratic society such as Taiwan.

## **Out of many, comes ONE**

As soon as the controversial ruling of disqualification during the mid-bout of a Taekwondo contestant Yang Shu-chun from Taiwan when she was leading 9-0 at the Asian Games on 17 November 2010 was announced, the whole wired world in Taiwan was immediately flooded with indignant posts and many started to investigate the “truth” by gathering information from different sources, uploading live recording of the match online.<sup>44</sup> Their coverage of the story appeared online almost instantaneously, if not faster, than all the mainstream media reports in Taiwan and overseas.<sup>45</sup> When our official association and government was slow in reaction, many digital natives initiated campaigns

on Facebook and some even went to lengths to translate the incident into English to spread the word out.<sup>46</sup>

While all voices chanted in unison, targeting the Korean judge and Chinese officials, the dissidence stood out: A student posted remarks on his Facebook, declaring that he was “totally supportive of the Korean’s ruling” and that he “felt great since Korean judge’s hard-line dealing would give Team Chinese Taipei a good lesson”. The reaction was immediate and sensationalised. The online community soon proved the old saying still goes: “Unity is strength” by executing Human Flesh Search to dig out every bits and pieces of his personal information and share it with the whole world. In no time, his blog was inundated by furious posts accusing him of being a “traitor”, his cellphone kept receiving foul text and voice messages, and he claimed to be stalked when he walked home. Eventually he shut off his Facebook account, agreed to be interviewed and warned those who had harassed him that he had the freedom of speech and would file a lawsuit if they did not stop harassing him.

It seems that the Human Flesh Search, though done in different regions and by different people, manifests exactly the same pattern and exercises a routine that hunts the heretic all the way from online to offline life. Of course, digital natives in the PRC and Taiwan claim they are doing this for a cause, and a noble one in their sense, to find and stop/punish the immoral, but exactly who lays down those rules and standards to judge and evaluate the ‘morality’, ‘integrity’ or ‘patriotism’ of someone whom we may never even know in person and meet in life? Who has the right to decide who ought to be searched or punished? How do we know whether the cause is justified and wouldn’t turn into an excuse? When the multitude of voices becomes ONE, it could be a dangerous sign. Even though most of us start from the “right” side (or so we believe), it is hard to say we would never end up on the other side.

## The name of the cause

Clearly, there is no returning of this digital revolution, and the newly imagined communities that we call Digital Natives are of a thousand voices, fighting for a variety of causes, may not be all progressive, liberal and striving to make a change for the better. The ICT grant us a new set of powerful tools, but a social tool is only as good or as bad as the people who are using it.

No matter how “liberating” and “empowering” we imagine the tools to be, *a tool is a tool is a tool...* Meanwhile, it does not matter what certain flash mobs or smart mobs have done in the past, digital natives all over the world are not of one face, there is an undeniably dark force breeding among us. On occasion, the changes could be violent and the causes could verge on or end up as excuses to exploit the ICT so as to hunt down any dissident or “peace-breaker” that disrupts “harmony”.

The Causes that we espouse and the ambitions that we enable with the use of digital technologies and the tools that they provide, hence, need to be questioned. Merely the use of digital technologies do not make us digital natives – the impulses, the aspirations, the desires, the contexts, the impetus and the motivation, all add to understanding our relationships with digital and internet technologies. It might be true that one becomes digital and is not born so, but before one becomes digital one wears many different identities. Not all of these identities necessarily endorse individual freedom and rights. The technologies that allow us to create processes of change for a just and equitable world are also technologies that enable massively regressive and vigilante acts that exercise a mob-based notion of justice. Maybe we need to add qualifications to our understanding of who a digital native is. Maybe we need to define not only the users, but also the politics behind their actions; And we definitely need new frameworks and vocabularies to account for a section of the population who might be equally skilled and fluent with these digital technologies but produce another kind of change, using the same tools and processes that we rejoice in.

## Endnotes

- 1 See the introduction of the *The Net Delusion — The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. <http://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/publicaffairsbooks-cgi-bin/display?book=9781586488741>.
- 2 Marc Prensky coined the term digital native in his work *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* published in 2001. In his seminal article, he assigns it to a new group of students enrolling in educational establishments. The term draws an analogy to a country's natives, for whom the local religion, language, and folkways are natural and indigenous, compared with immigrants to a country who often are expected to adapt and begin to adopt the region's customs. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital\\_Natives](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_Natives)).
- 3 Maesy Angelina's comment left on the art installation at the Thinkathon.
- 4 *The Digital Natives With a Cause?* blog. <http://www.digitalnatives.in>.
- 5 Slactivism (sometimes slactivism or clicktivism) is a portmanteau formed out of the words slacker and activism. The word is usually considered a pejorative term that describes "feel-good" measures, in support of an issue or social cause, that have little or no practical effect other than to make the person doing it feel satisfaction.
- 6 Howard Rheingold's definition from *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*.
- 7 <http://tribune.com.pk/story/122242/a-new-wave-of-revolution/>; <http://www.miller-mccune.com/politics/the-cascading-effects-of-the-arab-spring-28575/>.
- 8 [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?-tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=37487&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=25&cHash=91247-dc039a331a186c9182ccd731b2](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?-tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37487&tx_ttnews[backPid]=25&cHash=91247-dc039a331a186c9182ccd731b2); <http://www.insideriowa.com/index.cfm?nodeID=17818&audienceID=1&action=display&newsID=11615.#.VZuLhaaFbSc>
- 9 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/04/jasmine-in-the-middle-kingdom-autopsy-of-chinas-failed-revolution/>; <http://www.miller-mccune.com/media/media-and-revolution-2-0-tiananmen-to-tahrir-28595/>; <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/asia-pacific/uprooting-the-chinese-jasmine-revolution/article1987779/page2/>.
- 10 In a 2005 Hong Kong Sunday Morning Post article, a man identified as "the Godfather of hackers" explains, "Unlike our Western [hacker] counterparts, most of whom are individualists or anarchists, Chinese hackers tend to get more involved with politics because most of them are young, passionate, and patriotic. [...] Jack Linchuan Qiu, a

- communications professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong who spent the 2001 hacker war logged into mainland forums, agrees. "Chinese hackerism is not the American 'hacktivism' that wants social change," he says. "It's actually very close to the state. The Chinese distinction between the private and public domains is very small."
- 11 <http://www.popsci.com/scitech/article/2009-04/hackers-china-syndrome?page=2>.
  - 12 "This culture thrives on a viral, Internet-driven nationalism. The post-Tiananmen generation has known little hardship, so rather than pushing for democracy, many young people define themselves in opposition to the West. China's Internet patriots, who call themselves "red hackers," may not be acting on direct behalf of their government, but the effect is much the same." <http://www.popsci.com/scitech/article/2009-04/hackers-china-syndrome#>. "A 2005 Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences survey equates hackers and rock stars, with nearly 43 percent of elementary-school students saying they "adore" China's hackers. One third say they want to be one." <http://www.popsci.com/scitech/article/2009-04/hackers-china-syndrome#>.
  - 13 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/04/jasmine-in-the-middle-kingdom-autopsy-of-chinas-failed-revolution/>; <http://www.miller-mccune.com/media/media-and-revolution-2-0-tiananmen-to-tahrir-28595/>; <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/asia-pacific/uprooting-the-chinese-jasmine-revolution/article1987779/page2/>.
  - 14 <http://globalspin.blogs.time.com/2011/06/04/22-years-after-tiananmen-shadow-of-crack-down-looms-large-over-china/>.
  - 15 See <http://www.ahga.gov.cn/falv/GAZHFLFG/FL/1083.htm>; <http://reason.com/archives/2009/06/04/china-after-tiananmen>.
  - 16 There are indeed some fun incidents of youth dancing or playing a prank in public. Nonetheless, occurrences of a smart or flash mob that have taken place in the PRC are, demographically speaking, relatively insignificant and sporadic compared to the prevalent and vigorous happenings elsewhere. But they do have websites set up for flash mob gathering such as <http://www.hlo.cc/>, <http://www.artmy.cn/> but there are few successful mobilisation drives known to the public. In effect, the coverage is few and far in between at its best.
  - 17 In their blog article "China's Human Flesh Search Engine - Not what you might think it is...", James K. Yuann and Jason Inch share a lot of insights on this phenomenon which they argue is unique in China. <http://www.chinasupertrends.com/chinas-human-flesh-search-engine-not-what-you-might-think-it-is/>.
  - 18 See "Ice cream politics: flash mob in Belarus" posted by Howard Rheingold on October 3rd, 2006 <http://www.smartmobs.com/2006/10/03/ice-cream-politics-flash-mob-in-belarus/>.
  - 19 Almost all of the flash mob activities that have successfully took place in the PRC so far have been staged like a performance, most people either sing a song or dance, or perform a skit at best. Here are the rare news coverage in English: "'Flash Mob' Puzzles Bystanders" <http://www.china.org.cn/english/entertainment/220084.htm>; "'Flashmob' of 12 Proposed to One Girl in Beijing" <http://english.cri.cn/3100/2006/09/03/202@134346.htm>.
  - 20 For an insightful overview of this argument in English, see "Human Flesh Search: Old Topic, New Story" posted on Friday, June 27, 2008 by Xujun Eberlein <http://www.insideout-china.com/2008/06/human-flesh-search-old-topic-new-story.html>; in Chinese, "Manpower Search: Cyber public space, Social Functions and Legal Regulations" [人肉搜索：網絡公共空間、社會功能與法律規制] [http://cdn851.todayisp.net:7751/article.chinalawinfo.com/Article\\_Detail.asp?ArticleId=47680](http://cdn851.todayisp.net:7751/article.chinalawinfo.com/Article_Detail.asp?ArticleId=47680).
  - 21 Mop Forum is one of the most popular social networking sites in China. You can read more about it at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mop.com>.
  - 22 See Dongxiao Liu's Human Flesh Search Engine: Is It a Next Generation Search Engine?
  - 23 <http://hplusmagazine.com/2009/06/02/search-and-destroy-engines/>.
  - 24 You can still access it at <http://www.google.cn/intl/zh-CN/renrou/index.html>. As the article "China's Human Flesh Search Engine - Not what you might think it is..." points out, "The fact that day was April 1st should tell readers it was meant as tongue-in-cheek (and may not entirely be a joke - a number of search engines have tried human-assisted search and

- relevance checking), but it put a name to a movement that has been happening online in China for some time: Online collaboration by Netizens to search via the power of China's massive 225 million Internet users." (<http://www.chinasupertrends.com/chinas-human-flesh-search-engine-not-what-you-might-think-it-is/> posted on May 25, 2008 3:56 pm). A famous online magazine in Hong Kong dedicated a feature on this phenomenon entitled "Human Flesh Search"—Is it a Demon or an Angel? 「人肉搜索」是惡魔還是天使" which has provided a comprehensive overview of this controversial issue. (<http://hot.wenweipo.com/2008035/>).
- 25 [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07Human-t.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07Human-t.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all); See the list among the most notorious cases in China: <http://xzczt.gicp.net/show.asp?id=205>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_flesh\\_search\\_engine#Notable\\_examples](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_flesh_search_engine#Notable_examples)
  - 26 "University student under fire for ambulance incident": This Human Flesh Search took place in Taiwan in December 2010 when a doctoral candidate at National Taiwan University allegedly blocked an ambulance that was rushing a gravely ill woman to the hospital and gave it the middle finger. The incident caused public outrage and the man was charged with causing bodily harm and obstruction of official business. (<http://www.taipetimes.net/News/taiwan/archives/2010/12/30/2003492244>; <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2011/02/02/2003495037>). For the video footage and an English discussion on a Malaysian forum, see <http://forum.lowyat.net/topic/1700216>. For a detailed documentation <http://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-tw/%E6%96%B0%E5%BA%97%E6%95%91%E8%AD%B7%E8%BB%8A%E9%98%BB%E6%93%8B%E4%BA%8B%E4%BB%B6>.
  - 27 Take the most recent case in Taiwan for example: a young woman refused to yield the seat to the elderly and got into a fierce verbal fight, which was recorded and posted online. <http://www.nownews.com/2011/06/15/91-2720382.htm>.
  - 28 Such cases of animal abuse and cruelty have instigated many cases of international internet vigilantism and calls for web hunt, as in the case with "vacuum kitten killer" who suffocated two kittens in a plastic bag after sucking the air out with a vacuum, which had infuriated many animal rights activists, animal lovers, and Facebook users across the world to unite to hunt down the man and revealed him to be a 25-year-old bisexual porn star based in France. <http://news2.onlinenigeria.com/odd/64590-Vacuum-kitten-killer-hunted-after-making-snuff-movie-suffocation.rss> by James White 24/12/2010; <http://teddylhilton.com/2011-01-13-boy-who-killed-kittens-identified-as-gay-porn-star>.
  - 29 "Chinese official shamed by 'human flesh' search engine": A government official accused of molesting a girl in a restaurant has been fired from his position. (04 Nov 2008) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/3377338/Chinese-official-shamed-by-human-flesh-search-engine.html>.
  - 30 See "Commit adultery in China, Web vigilantes will hunt you" by Greg Sandoval (posted on November 25, 2008. [http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023\\_3-10107679-93.html](http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-10107679-93.html)) and "Human Flesh Search: Vigilantes of the Chinese Internet" ([http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view\\_article.html?article\\_id=964203448cbf700c9640912bf9012e05](http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=964203448cbf700c9640912bf9012e05)) New America Media, News feature, Xujun Eberlein, Posted: Apr 30, 2008. In December 2007, a 31-year-old Beijing woman named Jiang Yan jumped off the 24th floor balcony of her apartment. A post on her blog before her suicide blamed her death on her husband's extra-marital affair. News of this "death blog" spread on the Chinese internet and soon, a mass of outraged netizens launched a Human Flesh Search Engine to track down the guilty parties. Within days, every detail of her husband's personal life was all over the internet. For months, this man, his alleged mistress and their parents were bombarded with attack messages and even death threats. In March, the husband sued three websites for cyber violence and privacy violation.
  - 31 The most infamous case took place in the PRC when Li Qiming, driving a black Volkswagen Magotan, hit two female students at Hebei University on October 16, 2010. Li continued to drive on after hitting the two students, one of whom later died. When Li was stopped by campus security guards, he yelled, "Li Gang is my father". (<http://china.globaltimes.cn/>

- society/2010-10/585212.html). For a detailed documentation, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li\\_Gang\\_incident](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Gang_incident).
- 32 Tom Downey has provided quite a comprehensive coverage of the infamous cases taking place in the PRC. ([http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07Human-t.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07Human-t.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all)).
  - 33 “Human-flesh search engines: China takes instant justice online” by Kevin Bloom. <http://www.thedailymaverick.co.za/article/2010-03-16-human-flesh-search-engines-china-takes-instant-justice-online>.
  - 34 “A witch-hunt is a search for witches or evidence of witchcraft, often involving moral panic, mass hysteria and lynching, but in historical instances also legally sanctioned and involving official witchcraft trials.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witch-hunt>.
  - 35 “Human Flesh Search Ends in Bloody Case”: It all began with an unexamined lie, the man claimed he was abandoned by his girlfriend after supporting her for four years, and that he had terminal leukemia and would like to see her again. After having successfully mobilised Human Flesh Search, he tracked her down and stabbed her to death in public. [http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/video/2009-05/17/content\\_11388430.htm](http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/video/2009-05/17/content_11388430.htm). For a detailed narrative of the incident in Chinese, see [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_5ee0e8640100d74v.html?type=v5\\_one&label=rela\\_prevarticle](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5ee0e8640100d74v.html?type=v5_one&label=rela_prevarticle); <http://big5.eastday.com:82/gate/big5/news.eastday.com/s/20090225/u1a4200069.html>.
  - 36 Pan, Xiaoyan, “Hunt by the Crowd: An Exploratory Qualitative Analysis on Cyber Surveillance in China”. *Global Media Journal*. FindArticles.com. 22 Jun, 2011. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_7548/is\\_201004/ai\\_n53931440/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7548/is_201004/ai_n53931440/).
  - 37 “Human-flesh search engines: China takes instant justice online” by Kevin Bloom <http://www.thedailymaverick.co.za/article/2010-03-16-human-flesh-search-engines-china-takes-instant-justice-online>.
  - 38 For the video, see “Online lynch mobs find second post-quake target; Liaoning girl detained by the police” [http://shanghaiist.com/2008/05/22/online\\_lynch\\_mo.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2008/05/22/online_lynch_mo.php). For a series of discussion and rebuttal, see “Internet Mob Rides Again – Liaoning Bitch-Girl” <http://blog.foolsmountain.com/2008/05/21/internet-mob-strikes-again-liaoning-bitch-girl/>.
  - 39 “Chinese Student in U.S. Is Caught in Confrontation” <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/17/us/17student.html?st=cse&sq=china+tibet+Duke&scp=1>.
  - 40 “人肉搜索 若搜錯了,誰才能 平反?” “What if “Human flesh search” got it wrong, who should we find to “redress [a grievance]?” [http://big5.home.news.cn/gate/big5/www.xj.xinhuanet.com/2009-01/22/content\\_15526532.htm](http://big5.home.news.cn/gate/big5/www.xj.xinhuanet.com/2009-01/22/content_15526532.htm).
  - 41 <http://www.chinasupertrends.com/chinas-human-flesh-search-engine-not-what-you-might-think-it-is/>.
  - 42 Pan, Xiaoyan, “Hunt by the Crowd: An Exploratory Qualitative Analysis on Cyber Surveillance in China.” *Global Media Journal*. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_7548/is\\_201004/ai\\_n53931440/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7548/is_201004/ai_n53931440/).
  - 43 The construction of a Harmonious Society (和諧社會 héxiéshèhuì) is a socio-economic vision that is said to be the ultimate end result of Chinese leader Hu Jintao’s signature ideology...The idea has been described as resembling characteristics of New Confucianism in some aspects. In a country where political class struggle and socialist slogans were the normative political guidelines for decades, the idea of societal harmony attempts to bring about the fusion of socialism and democracy. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmonious\\_society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmonious_society).
  - 44 Just to list a few videos with English subtitles or commentary: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09Ht711Jdkg>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgiAx-zDpIQ>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9drPmoXTKE&feature=related>; and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydZh9It7Wds&feature=related>.
  - 45 Since most of the news is in Mandarin, I only include reports in English here: “Taiwan taekwondo athlete in Asian Games sock sensor row” (17 November 2010, Last updated at 15:30 GMT) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11775465>; “Taiwan fury after



athlete's Asian Games disqualification in China" (November 17, 2010 - Updated 20:50 GMT) <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/SPORT/11/17/asian.games.china.taiwan/index.html>; "Taiwan taekwondo storm casts cloud over Games" (Wed, Nov 17 2010) <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-52974420101117>.

- 46 Here is a partial list of Facebook pages for reference: <http://www.facebook.com/AntiRogue#!/justice.For.Taiwan.Yang.ShuChun>; <https://sites.google.com/site/dirtytaekwondo2010/>; <http://www.facebook.com/AntiRogue>; <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=161214030582670>; <http://www.facebook.com/pages/zhi-chi-yang-shu-jun-wo-men-ting-nai-dao-di/140944652624862?ref=ts&v=wall>; <http://www.facebook.com/pages/yang-shu-jun-shi-ge-shi-jianqing-zong-tong-fu-li-ji-xiang-zhong-guo-biao-da-zui-zui-qiang-lie-de-kang-yi/169393219756510>. Screenshot of his Facebook page taken by a PTT user: <http://img408.imageshack.us/img408/7568/facebookqs.jpg>; "學生書PO文挺韓網友人肉搜索" <http://video.chinatimes.com/video-cate-cnt.aspx?cid=10&nid=42491>; "po文失格大快人心挺韓 網友引公憤" [http://www.ctitv.com.tw/news\\_video\\_c14v22957.html](http://www.ctitv.com.tw/news_video_c14v22957.html).

## Annotation

Nandini Chami

YiPing Tsou, in her essay 'Digital Natives in the Name of a Cause,' explores how the very 'same technological impulse' of 'viral networking mobilisation' underpins two very different kinds of political actions: the radical *Flash Mob* protests that epitomise the resistance of pro-democracy interest groups against authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, and the digitally-enabled vigilante justice drives as exemplified by the *Human Flesh Search* phenomenon in China and Taiwan. The latter uses crowdsourcing as a witch-hunting technique to ferret out and punish individuals whose online conduct is perceived as being disrespectful of prevailing moral codes. Through a case study analysis of *Human Flesh Search*, Tsou seeks to demonstrate that there is nothing inherently democratic about the online public sphere, contrary to the assertions of techno-deterministic and

Internet-centric political theorists (Shirky 2011; Johnson 2012). In her view, the positionalities of the actors in the online public sphere, as shaped by their specific socio-historical contexts, determine the kinds of political action that ensue – and she is primarily interested in challenging naive theorisations of digital activism that automatically ascribe progressive intentions to any effort that falls under the umbrella of Internet-enabled and Internet-mediated political action.

However, it is important to avoid extending Tsou's analysis to justify a social determinist theoretical standpoint on digital activism, that reduces everything to a function of pre-existing social and political forces without paying adequate heed to the new affordances that the ICT-enabled public sphere offers, for participatory communication and collaborative action. It may be more productive to adopt a median approach that unpacks the dialectics between the digital platforms of Web 2.0 and the field of political action (Fuchs

2012), recognising the co-constitutive relationship between technology and society. In particular, this approach, grounded in critical theory, requires us to examine the specific ways by which social media (and other participatory digital spaces) “stand in contradictions with influences by the state, ideology and capitalism” (Fuchs 2012), in specific historical moments.

Such structural analysis offers another pathway to explain the differential (and sometimes contradictory) political outcomes produced by the very same technological affordances of openness and collaboration – a useful counter-analysis to an agency-centric theory that locates these differences as stemming from variances in individual political motivations (which is the position that is implicit in Tsou’s essay). This kind of analysis is also helpful in building on Tsou’s critique of the

inadequacy of ‘openness’ as a value, in pushing the progressive political agenda forward. For this analysis helps us identify the limitation of the mainstream imaginary of ‘online openness’ that over-valorises “purposeful individual actions rather than (challenging) systemic bias” (Reagle 2012) in realising an inclusionary vision of transformation (even in those web-based communities such as FOSS whose members profess a commitment to democratic ideals).

Pushing this analysis to its logical conclusion, we start to recognise that to realise the affordances of the Internet and ICTs for furthering a transformative political agenda, it is important to create participatory digital spaces whose organising principle is ‘openness with equity’ rather than ‘*openness per se*’ (Gurumurthy & Singh 2013).

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