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Seeking Signs of Transparency: Audit, Materiality and Monuments to Active Citizenship in

New Delhi.

Abstract

In New Delhi the Chief Information Commissioner has ordered that municipal councillors should “proactively disclose” details of the amounts spent on public works via Hindi language notice boards displayed in every city ward. As “appropriate” technology designed to reach out to the common people the noticeboards are part of an ongoing technomoral project to develop and democratise citizen engagement with urban governance. An audit of the noticeboards carried out by Information Commission officials and Right to Information activists reveals that many are badly positioned or assembled from inappropriate materials. As such they are judged to be unreliable actants in the project to prefigure a more open and transparent city administration. A focus on the materiality and temporal orientation of the noticeboards however reveals them to be productive in other ways. We come to understand the noticeboards as monuments to earlier projects of active citizenship and as ongoing sites of contest or collaboration between actors concerned with their audit and remediation.

Policy makers and activists interested in promoting transparency and accountability initiatives are wont to repeat the century old aphorism that 'Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants' (Brandeis 1914, 92)¹. The idea that public money should be spent in the public interest, that accounts should be open to scrutiny, and potential conflicts of interest

exposed, speaks to grand narratives concerning the relationship between citizens and states, democratic participation, and the promise of technology. These are perennial debates about the shape of modernity within democratic nation states (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995) which extend far beyond New Delhi, the setting for this article.

These debates have given rise to policy paradigms, attendant networks of resources, technologies of rule, and legal mechanisms intended to operationalize transparency and accountability, which are global in scope. Whether it be within good governance agendas, in which a streamlined and efficient state and public services are intended to deliver value for money and support the functioning of markets (Anders 2005), or rights based agendas (Joshi 2010; Miller, Veneklasen, and Clark 2005), in which the state is cast as a provider of public goods monitored by a mix of state anti-corruption bureaux, civil society organisations and active citizens, the idea that information about state services should not just be collected but should also flow and be accessible to the public has become a familiar principle, if less often an everyday practice.

The normative use of this well-travelled metaphor, however, gives little indication of the complicated intersections between social processes and material artefacts through which information is supposed to be collected or disseminated and transparency and accountability achieved. Anthropology has contributed to an understanding of these issues by linking transparency and accountability mechanisms, and claims that they offer empowerment, to a disciplining neo-liberal agenda, and to Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality (Shore and Roberts 1993; Shore and Wright 1999; Corbridge et al. 2005). A

focus on the rise of 'audit cultures' (Strathern 2000a) has examined the global spread of accountability mechanisms in financial, governmental and academic institutions, the rise of a new managerialism and administrative attempts to link performance indicators to ethical codes (Rottenburg et al. 2015; Shore and Wright 2015). Tsoukas (1997) and Strathern (2000b) have identified the potential for 'tyranny' emerging from these attempts at social engineering arguing that increased availability of information, and claims that transparency is automatically benevolent, moral and leads to the rational management of social problems, may be less innocent than they appear. These critical perspectives have been informed both by ethnographic engagement in multiple sites around the globe and through academics' own experience of the application of performance indicators and impact agendas in higher education (Shore and Wright 1999; Shore 2008; Mitchell 2014; Knowles and Burrows 2014).

Even as UK based academics report the everyday pressures of university reform, a sentiment no doubt shared by officials around the world dealing with the strictures, and extra labour, of complying with transparency and accountability regimes (see Mathur 2012), other work has highlighted the ways in which transparency and accountability mechanisms such as rights to information may act as a gateway to gaining further rights, substantiating citizenship and turning the gaze of the state back upon itself (Baviskar 2010; Corbridge et al. 2005, 243–44; Gupta 2012, 174; Webb 2013; A. Sharma 2013). These accounts of 'active citizenship' (Houtzager and Acharya 2011) reveal processes of individual or collective action through which people might attempt to negotiate the provision of public goods, services or infrastructure through publicly sanctioned channels, and in doing so act as rights bearing

citizens making legitimate claims vis a vis the state, rather than through the informal collectivities of political society (Chatterjee 2004; Webb 2012; Harriss 2005). Here the active citizen becomes auditor, although one entangled in audit processes that are contested and politicized as they are worked through in everyday encounters and negotiations (Hetherington 2011; Webb 2012; A. Sharma 2013).

In this article, drawing on research carried out since 2006 with Delhi based information rights activists, I develop this work of thinking about active citizenship and initiatives for transparency and accountability by exploring how these are manifested through material artefacts. The artefacts in question are Hindi language noticeboards conveying information about spending on infrastructural maintenance by councillors of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). The notice boards are supposed to display information which is already available via the MCD website in the form of Word or pdf files. However these digital documents, usually written in English and using technical jargon, are neither easy to find nor accessible to many. Translating the information from digital English language documents into analogue Hindi noticeboards is an attempt to produce an “appropriate” technology for transparency and accountability, where appropriate means ‘designed in a way attuned to the material, political, and technological realities with which it works, and to the social actors who will be its users’ (Fortun 2004, 54). By producing an appropriate technology which might democratise processes of active citizenship and social audit through the “proactive disclosure” of information about public works the aim is to reach beyond the usual circuits of Delhi’s middle class Anglophone ‘civil society’ (Chatterjee 2004) and call forth from the Hindi speaking *aam log* (common people) what Evelyn Ruppert (2015) calls

‘data publics’: non-expert individuals and groups who can use the information to ‘do their own experiments, establish matters of fact, see the state for themselves and disseminate their results to others’ (2015, 129).

Through ethnographic vignettes drawn from participation in a day long roving audit of the condition of the noticeboards by government officials and civil society activists I explore how the valences of the different materials from which these bureaucratic artefacts have been assembled by MCD officials, and the ways in which they are positioned, matters to the auditors and to the wider project of democratising the disclosure of information. In this respect the article contributes to a literature² which, in focusing on the materiality, aesthetics, production and circulation of bureaucratic artefacts such as application forms, identification documents, files, orders, or websites, has drawn attention to the mediating role that objects play in people’s apprehension of processes of governance and development (Fuller and Harriss 2000; Tarlo 2003; Hull 2003, 2012b; Navaro-Yashin 2007; Mathur 2016; Riles 2006; Harvey, Reeves, and Ruppert 2013). This work helps to remind us of a fundamental issue in the working through of transparency and accountability initiatives. Which is that the process of accessing information, and the information itself, is entangled in the sociality, materiality, and temporality of bureaucratic artefacts and the environments in which they are encountered.

By bringing together grounded ethnography with insights drawn from the anthropology of bureaucracy, materiality and technology this article provides a new perspective in the study of what Bornstein and Sharma call ‘technomoral politics’. That is the ways in which actors

from state and civil society translate moral projects, such as the need for state transparency and accountability, into laws or policies requiring technological implementation, while presenting these technocratic acts as moral imperatives (Bornstein and Sharma 2016, 77). If we are to understand how technomoral politics emerges in the world then we need to pay close attention to the materiality of the technologies that it produces.

Taking off from the position that materiality matters to transparency and accountability this article makes a further contribution through a focus on the temporal orientation of the noticeboards and their role in a longer term project to enable the disclosure of information. Just as anthropologists understand the mediating role of objects and technologies in bureaucratic processes so also do the activists, officials and policy makers with which they carry out research. It is the possibility that the information the noticeboards carry might generate data publics (Ruppert 2015) interested in working with the information to discipline unruly bureaucrats and political representatives which drives the activism and audit encounters described in my ethnography. The noticeboards are fetishised by both activists and government officials as objects able to act in the world and prefigure a future in which people are not required to petition government for information as supplicants (see Mathur 2016, 23; Hull 2012b, 93) but rather are engaged and empowered as citizens by the proactive disclosure of information.

What emerges from my ethnography of this audit event, however, is not an assessment of whether the noticeboards either are, or will ever be, effective in democratising the dissemination of information, activating citizens or helping to discipline bureaucrats or

municipal councillors. As we will see they are at best unreliable actants for prefiguring a more transparent or accountable city administration. Rather I would argue that what is significant about the noticeboards is their role as *monuments* to a shift in the conceptual relationship between citizens and state that has already taken place. As examples of appropriate technology for transparency and accountability the noticeboards are monuments to the juridical mandate of the Right to Information Act to demand that government proactively release information (Government of India 2005, sec. 4) and to the history of technomoral activism within both civil society and state which both preceded and seeks to implement that mandate. They are '*lieux de mémoire*' (*sites of memory*) for the project of transparency and accountability that act as 'technologies for the reification of pasts and the creation of expectable futures (Rowlands and de Jong 2007, 15)

As Murawski (2017) argues for post-socialist Poland and post-apartheid South Africa, and Kaur (2013) argues for India, the political morphology of monumental public buildings and large scale national development projects such as dams or nuclear facilities can act as useful sites for the analysis of shifts in political, social and economic organisation. As Kaur notes for India's nuclear projects, although as objects they are overdetermined by their function they can also be understood as iconic monuments to post-colonial Indian modernity and national strength, indexing an era of centrally directed developmentalism in which the state was cast as provider and protector vis a vis the citizen (2013, 134–35). Similarly we might understand the public information boards we encounter in this article as objects overdetermined by their intended function as providers of information while also seeing them as manifestations of an ideal-typical conception of the appropriate relationship between state and citizen in

contemporary India. Distributed around the city the signs are monuments to decentralisation, to post liberalisation discourses of citizen as empowered consumer on the one hand and as rights bearer and claims maker on the other. They are monuments to the emergence of a contemporary ideal of transparency, accountability and good governance which imagines the potential of a dispersed multitude of active citizens monitoring the state from below, even as they index the difficulty of materialising this ideal in everyday life.

I will develop my argument across three sections. In the first and last ethnographic sections we travel with a hybrid government/civil society activist audit team searching for public information noticeboards at MCD depots across the city. We encounter a variety of examples each assembled from different, more or less durable, materials. Some feature computer print outs glued to wood or metal boards, some are hand lettered in oil based paints onto durable metal signs or depot walls. In their placement the boards are variably visible, sometimes hidden, or even absent. Through the audit team's mission to assess the MCD officials' willingness or ability to craft digital documents into 3 dimensional objects the everyday entanglements of human and non-human agencies which underpin the project of disclosing information are revealed.

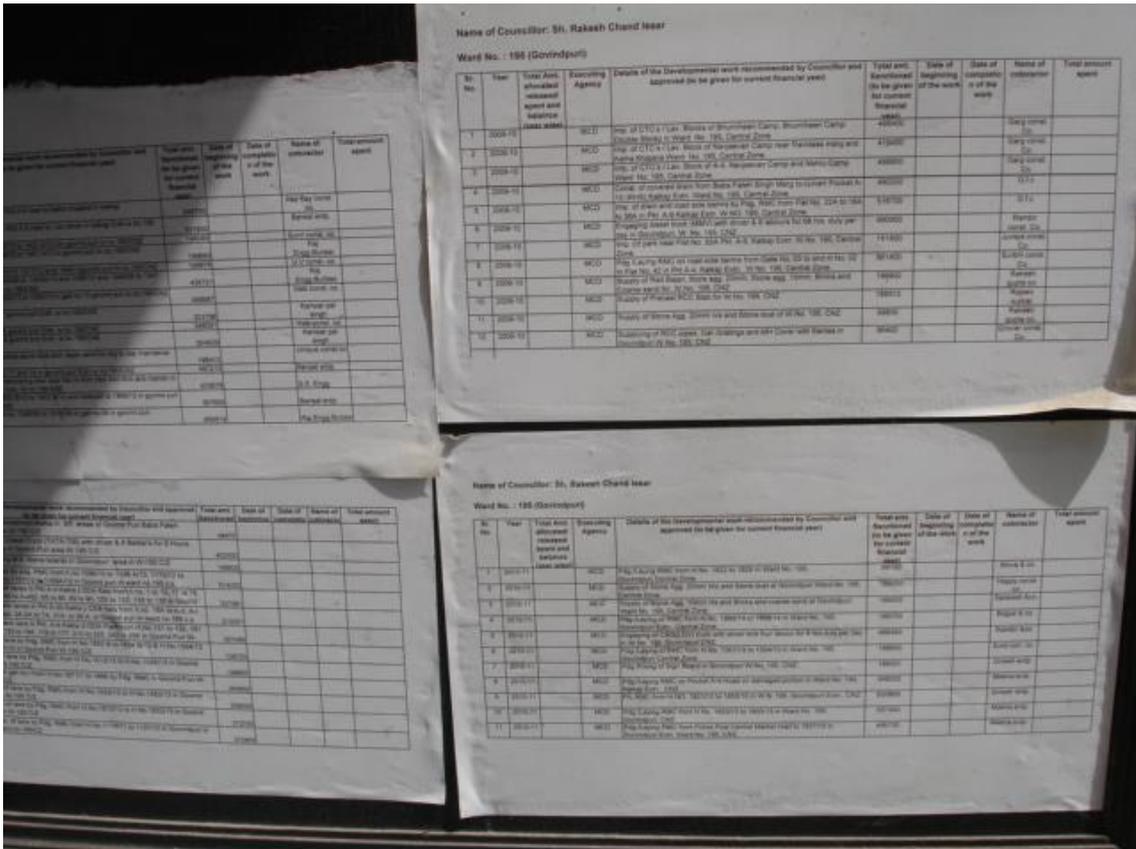
These vignettes of my day out with the audit team bookend an account of the emergence of Right to Information activism as a mode of active citizenship in Delhi, particularly in response to concerns about political accountability, corruption and the maintenance of the city's infrastructure. I outline how section 4 of the Indian Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005 (Government of India 2005) demands that, wherever possible, government should proactively disclose information to the public. To develop my account of how bureaucratic

objects index the relationship between citizens, political representatives and the state, and activist critiques of state opacity, I compare two types of public noticeboard, isomorphic in shape and construction but emerging from very different technomoral projects. One noticeboard is a manifestation of political society, indexing the distribution of resources to constituents by politicians as part of electoral politics. It claims responsibility for nearby road repairs on behalf of a south Delhi councillor but does not reveal details of the cost or allocation of the contract. The tendering process remains opaque and the sign does not invite questions about how public money was spent. The other noticeboard is a manifestation of the new ideal of transparency and accountability in public spending, detailing the names of contractors and amounts spent on local infrastructure repair projects in a north Delhi ward. In comparison this noticeboard indexes openness and what, for promoters of governmental transparency and accountability, is a fundamental shift in the relationship between the citizen and the state, facilitated by the passing of the 2005 RTI Act. Technologies which are appropriate to the task of disseminating information to the public, such as this noticeboard, are a *sine qua non* of this project to deepen democracy, and the mission of our inspection visit is to make sure that they are present and of good quality. This noticeboard board and its siblings then are manifestations of a long term project of active citizenship, legitimised by the juridical mandate of the RTI Act, which, through processes of audit and remediation, act as monumental sites at which the implementation of transparency and accountability is maintained, contested and policed.

Searching for signs

On a warm Friday morning near the end of March 2012 I was travelling through central south Delhi in a car with workers from the Delhi citizens' group *Satark Nagrik Sangathan* (SNS), a Delhi based non-governmental organisation which promotes the use of citizens' Rights to Information to monitor government expenditure and performance. These were Savita, a young middle class woman who worked full time for the group; Aftab, an postgraduate student on an internship; and Kira, a high school student, and daughter of one of the women who had founded SNS, doing some 'work experience'. We were following a white official car carrying representatives from the office of India's Chief Information Commissioner (CIC), the inspector, a short middle aged man in a beige safari suit, and his younger male assistant. The CIC officials were carrying out a surprise inspection of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi's (MCD) provision of noticeboards detailing the expenditure of public funds by city councillors on repairs and improvements to public infrastructure in their constituencies. The SNS workers were there to monitor the inspection and I had been invited to come along for the ride.

Our first stop on a long list for the day was a municipal compound for storing construction materials with a two room concrete office standing inside. The lone MCD official present, surprised by the appearance of six people with clipboards and cameras, directed us to a plywood board framed with a narrow wooden moulding. It was propped against the front of the office and on it were pasted four yellowing sheets of A4 paper. The sheets were print outs of documents available through the MCD's website and listed details of work carried out under the authorisation of the local councillor, the amounts spent, start and finish dates and the names of contractors.



(Image 1. The first notice board that the audit team encountered. A4 paper printouts of documents downloaded from the MCD website. Photo: the author)

The notice board at this MCD office, such as it was, had been made following a 2011 order by Shailesh Ghandi, a prominent Right to Information activist who had been appointed as Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) of India in 2008³, that the MCD should properly implement section 4 of India's 2005 Right to Information Act regarding proactive disclosure of government information. The order had been issued in response to a written complaint signed by 318 people organized as part of a campaign by SNS to assess the performance of local councillors (see Chief Information Commissioner: Govt. of India 2011b). The CIC's order began by noting that the lead complainant had asserted that in accordance with the Right to Information act:

the details of funds spent by the respective Councillors of the Corporation should be available *suo moto* for the knowledge of the general public of the respective areas/wards. She states that the 272 Councillors of the Respondent public authority are allocated certain amount of funds each year, viz. 2 Crores in 2008-09, 50 lakh in 2009-10 etcetera⁴ and that Section 4 of the Right to Information Act envisages that such information should be available in the public domain. She acknowledges that this information is available in English on the website of the Respondent public authority, however it cannot be accepted that the common man or a person of limited means has the resources or the knowledge of operating or availing such information through the website. (2011b, 1 italics in original)

The CIC's order goes on to argue that the Right to Information is a fundamental right for all citizens of India, that it is the duty of government departments to release information primarily on their own initiative, and that when they fail to do so it creates the need for both citizens and government to waste time, effort and resources making and processing Right to Information applications. Finding in favour of the complainant the CIC had ordered that in all 272 wards in the city:

A sign board of appropriate dimension shall be installed, mentioning the details of expenditure of the current year and that of the previous year, of the Councillor funds of each respective ward in the format appended herewith. The Board shall also mention the exact link/URL to the page on the website of the department where the information can be viewed. No acronym/abbreviation should be used. This information shall be displayed in Hindi and shall be installed at a location having maximum public view in each ward. The board installed in each ward shall contain details of the expenditure of the Councillor fund of that particular ward. This will be maintained and updated each year within six months of the closure of the previous year, by the head of the public authority, or the officer(s) so directed by him in writing. This should be done by the 15th of March 2011. (2011b, 2)

Thus the order had produced both the noticeboard that we had found in the MCD depot, and the necessity for an implementation audit carried out by a collective formed of

government and civil society actors. Our outing was marking the passing of the 1 year anniversary of the deadline for compliance.

At the MCD depot in South Delhi the inspection party could see that the MCD workers had made an attempt to manifest the CIC's wishes in a material form, but the four pieces of A4 paper pasted to the board in front of us lacked a number of the required features. Yes, paper and plywood had been assembled to form a noticeboard, yes the board was on public display, in the unlikely event that a concerned member of the public should stray into the compound from the busy flow of the street outside. But the information on the board was in English, not Hindi. The text, in a font size of, perhaps, eleven, contained many abbreviations and technical terms and did not direct the reader to the appropriate section of the MCD website. The paper was also beginning to peel from the board and the ink to fade in the sunlight. It could not be expected to last the year required. This board then was an inadequate manifestation of the CIC's order. The deficiencies were duly noted by the CIC's inspector and by the SNS workers on a pre-prepared complaints form (image 2). Then we all jumped back into the cars to head for the next site.

Format for monitoring the board display on works of Councilor, Ward

Number and name of ward- _____
 Name of Councilor- _____
 Exact Location of board- _____

1. Checking the board

1.1 Is the board installed at a visible place- Yes/No Yes No
 1.2 Is the information displayed on the board legible- Yes/No Yes No

2. Checking the information

2.1 Is the name of the ward and Councilor legible and correct- Yes/No Yes No
 2.2 Is the information available in Hindi- Yes/No Yes No
 2.3 List the years for which information is available on the board- _____
 2.4 Date of latest work available on the board- _____
 2.5 Total number of works listed on the board- _____
 2.6 Are any acronyms/abbreviations used on the board- Yes/No Yes No
 2.7 Is the exact link to the government website where this information is provided mentioned on the board- Yes/No Link given- _____
 2.8 Which of the following columns are available on the board (please write yes/no for each column)

Year	Total amt allocated/spent and balance (year-wise)	Executing Agency	Details of developmental work recommended by Councilor and approved	Total amt sanctioned	Date of beginning of work	Date of completion of work	Name of contractor	Total amount spent
Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No

3. Please attach a photograph of the board

4. Additional Comments- The board is installed but not according to CIC orders. The information is posted on the board on A4 sheets.

REPRESENTATIVE
CIC

COMPLAINANT

REPRESENTATIVE
OF MCD

(Image 2. The pro-forma complaint form used by SNS workers to monitor compliance.

Photo: the author)

Through this opening vignette we can begin to see how the condition and position of public information boards is key to information activists' attempts to democratise the Right to Information and also how they offer 'material indexes' (Gell 1998, 13)⁵ of the different social agencies involved in that process. Engagement with the network that supports the material presence and appearance of the noticeboard in the MCD compound offers a means through which to make inferences about the agency of, and tensions between, the activists who made the initial complaint to the CIC, the CIC himself, and the MCD officials tasked with producing the signs to comply with the CIC's order. For the CIC and RTI activists the noticeboards are intended to act as remote agents enabling the proactive disclosure of information, part of a process in which citizens, particularly those without access to digital media, are potentially transformed into *active* citizens able to hold the government to account. The audit visits carried out by the CIC's officials and the civil society activists are intended as a check that their agency is being distributed properly and not subverted.

However, as Edensor (2011) cautions, we should be careful not to put too much emphasis on these human forms of agency in case they mask the role of non-human actors in these processes. The noticeboards are assemblages of different materials that are crafted and positioned within the wider environment of Delhi. Their agency is entangled in material networks which include non-human elements, including the environmental effects of dust, pollution, rain and bleaching sunlight. Like the 300 year old Manchester church in Edensor's study of urban materiality the noticeboards require assessment, maintenance and repair if they are to remain connected to the regulatory networks that give them their intended purpose (2011, 2005). This is particularly the case with the information that the boards carry

which is vulnerable both in the sense that the materials that the information is made of may decay and in that the passing of time requires that the information be updated. As we will see in what follows in this way the noticeboards reflect the larger assemblage of the city itself. As forms of appropriate technology acting as '*lieux de memoire*' (sites of memory) (Rowlands and de Jong 2007, 15) even as they disclose information about the past repair and maintenance of the city, they themselves require scheduled maintenance and repair in a process which requires policing by the government agencies and active citizens whose earlier efforts prompted the construction of the signs. They are simultaneously indexes of, and monuments to, the ongoing development of the city, of action to monitor public expenditure, mitigate against corruption and deepen democracy. As monuments degraded by forces of decay and disintegration they require that these processes of citizens' vigilance and remediation be entered in to and in the process develop what Deborah Cherry calls 'afterlives' as their continued existence becomes a site of contest or collaboration by actors 'as much concerned with projections of a future, as with reconstructions of the past or mnemonic recollection' (Cherry 2013, 1). To further flesh out how the materiality and temporal orientation of the signs index the technomoral politics of transparency and accountability it is worth considering the recent history of Right to Information activism in Delhi.

Deciphering the urban palimpsest: the Right to Information, active citizenship, and maintaining the city.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw an international efflorescence of Freedom of Information (FOI) laws (Mendel 2008) as a number of countries leapt onto the good governance bandwagon. The zeitgeist was reflected across India's states. Interlinked campaigns for Rights Based Development and projects of state reform tied to international donor priorities prompted some states to pass FOI legislation, although these laws were often relatively weak (Singh 2011, 44). The movement towards a national level law in India gathered momentum during this time bringing together a socially entangled mix of 'civil society', legal, bureaucratic and political actors to work on the drafts from which the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005 finally emerged (Jenkins and Goetz 1999; Pande 2008; Baviskar 2010; P. Sharma 2015). Upon its passing it was certainly a law fit for a modern democracy, even if the process of its implementation has proved to be complicated and contested.

Delhi got its own state level RTI law in 2001. Activist groups and individual "RTI crusaders" in the city started to work with and promote its implementation very quickly afterwards, work that continued with the passing of the national RTI law in 2005. Of these urban groups *Parivartan* (Change), a relatively small social movement group based in the north east of the city led by Arvind Kejriwal, a fast rising star of social activism, became perhaps the best known (Jenkins 2007; Bornstein and Sharma 2016). A graduate of the elite Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kanpur Kejriwal had been a senior official in the Indian Revenue Service before becoming a full time activist. He went on to become a leading figure in the India Against Corruption protest movement of 2011, then in 2012 formed the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) which won 67 of 70 seats in the 2015 Delhi assembly elections on an anti-corruption

and public service reform ticket. At the time of writing he is Chief Minister of Delhi. We might take Kejriwal's political trajectory as an indicator for public concern and frustration about perceived corruption, lack of governance and the functioning of local services in Delhi, although the popularity of the AAP project is not assured as the 2017 municipal election results show⁶.

Other activists who had spent time working with Parivartan split off to form groups doing similar work, notably the *Satark Nagrik Sangathan* (Citizens' Vigilance Organisation) in South Delhi in 2003 and *Pardashita* (Transparency) in East Delhi in 2007. These groups, coalitions of educated middle class activists and the working poor, are part of a wider Right to Information scene which gathers a range of people from across Delhi's social spectrum, of differing political hues, and including entities such as middle class Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs), local, national and international NGOs, and implementing agencies from within the civil service (Webb 2011, 98). As Rajiv Kumar, one of the founders of *Pardashita*, explained to me. The aim of these groups was to encourage the use of the Right to Information Act amongst the general public so that it became a common and generalised practice. He likened the everyday work of popularising the RTI to making a path across a field of grass. Some would have to do the hard work of leading the way but once the path was made many would find it easy to follow (pers comm 2007).

Delhi's climate and pace of development present a number of problems for those attempting to maintain the infrastructure of the city. The expansion caused by summer heat can buckle roads, leaf fall, dust, silt and rubbish can block drains, wet weather and a lack of

bare ground to absorb water can cause floods which further erode surfaces, as do the grind of traffic and the installation of new infrastructures such as broadband cables, gas and water pipes (Gosain, Khandelwal, and Kulshrestha 2009; Coleman 2017). Settled for centuries, expanding into the plains around it and with a growing population of more than 18 million the city is a palimpsest. New layers are constantly being added, a process of urban recomposition overlaying the decomposing or demolished surfaces of previous works.

Holding government to account for the development and maintenance of infrastructure and services in the city became a key issue for those working with the RTI in Delhi. Early Parivartan campaigns promoting the Delhi RTI law published pro-forma RTI applications to assist people in applying for information concerning street sweeping and sanitation, the quality of road construction and the amounts spent by elected representatives (Parivartan 2004). More recently the Satark Nagrik Sangathan have joined with the news media in researching and publishing report cards covering the performance of Delhi's elected representatives⁷ (Satark Nagrik Sangathan 2013) a key feature of which has been to detail the amounts spent by representatives on local improvement projects in their constituencies.

The "Councillor Funds" and other Local Area Development (LAD) funds provided to elected representatives for a variety of discretionary improvement or repair works have long been a concern for anti-corruption campaigners. The works are carried out by contractors overseen by the relevant municipal authority for the representatives' constituency. Being public money information about how these funds are spent is subject to the Right to Information Act. Records of spending made visible in locally appropriate ways as mandated by the Right

to Information Act are elements of the 'modern technologies of memory' (Basu 2007, 232) through which Delhi's citizens might come to understand how the urban palimpsest is built up.

Anti-corruption campaigners' concern about the spending of public infrastructure funds by political representatives reflects wider public suspicion and media reports that the flow of funds form part of the 'dirty river' of political patronage and influence (Harriss 2005; also see Price and Ruud 2012), through which public goods are channelled to corrupt contractors, spent on works which are unnecessary or of low quality, and used to raise politicians' public profiles close to election campaigns⁸. Political representatives can be held accountable at election time or through lobbying if the voting public feel that improved infrastructure has not been delivered. However, this form of 'vertical accountability' (Goetz and Jenkins 2001, 364) is sporadic. To bypass this verticality and foster a different form of political subjectivity Right to Information campaigners aim to enrol people as active citizens in continuous processes of information gathering to allow them to better understand how the city's infrastructure is being repaired and developed. Here the active citizen, working alone or in the collective form of a citizens' or civil society organisation, is intended to augment, and oversee 'horizontal' (2001, 364) government systems for internal audit and accountability. It is this active oversight that results in a citizens' group such as SNS making a complaint about the poor provision of public information noticeboards, and ultimately accompanying the CIC officials on their inspection of how the resulting order has been implemented.

The earlier campaigns to reveal information about political representatives discretionary spending had focused on citizens lodging individual RTI applications on paper as part of attempts to address local grievances (Webb 2012, 2013). These applications had to circulate in the bureaucratic system with the potential for delay or obfuscatory replies. The thrust of the campaign to get noticeboards installed was to obviate the need for paper applications by encouraging the public authorities in Delhi to abide by Section 4 of the Right to Information Act of 2005. This sets out the need for government to organize records properly, to facilitate access to them, and that it should:

be a constant endeavour of every public authority to [...] provide as much information *suo moto* to the public at regular intervals through various means of communications, including internet, so that the public have minimum resort to the use of this Act to obtain information (Government of India 2005, section 4; 2 emphasis in original).

Section 4 is important, and arguably under implemented, because it helps to circumvent a number of problems the public may face in accessing government information in India. A brief list of these would include difficulties in dealing with the graphic requirements of the state, form filling and the like (see Hull 2008; Cody 2009), caused by intersecting issues of low literacy and social exclusion, the slow pace of an RTI appeals process stifled by 'pendency' (delays in processing) (RAAG and NCPRI 2009, 41; Rukmini S. 2014) if information is refused at first application, and the significant risk of violent, even murderous, retaliation where information requests affect the interests of what Harriss-White calls the 'shadow

state', officials working with contractors or mafias to appropriate state resources (Harriss-White 2003, 88–90; also see Thakur 2011; Webb 2014).

Section 4 goes on to order that information must be disseminated taking into account the most effective method of communication in that area and using 'notice boards, newspapers, public announcements, media broadcasts, the internet or any other means, including inspection of offices of any public authority' (Government of India 2005, section 4; 4). Here then is the part of the RTI Act perhaps most clearly intended to offer unmediated access to information. The Act *demand*s that information should not be kept back unnecessarily. The means should be provided for its distribution, *unasked for*. Transparency and accountability should be an automatic part of the process of modern government and made manifest through artefacts such as the noticeboards that our team was auditing. The noticeboards are emblematic of a technomoral discourse (Bornstein and Sharma 2016) of anti-corruption which conceptualizes pieces of information, in this case about the repair of the city, as objective truths waiting to be precipitated as revelations that will wash away the dirt of conspiracy and corruption, as ways of 'making the invisible visible' (Strathern 2000b, 309).

However, despite the ideal of transparency and accountability encapsulated within section 4 the possibility of the connection between citizen and information being made has to be observed to have been manifested, it cannot (yet) be taken on trust. Audits are required and with them an infrastructure for their delivery. We might think of this audit infrastructure as an assemblage (Collier and Ong 2005) comprised of a variety of actors, events and locations, analogue and digital records, and which connects different scales,

from global agendas of good governance, rights and state reform to local bureaucratic and ethical practices. The auditing infrastructure as we encounter it in this article is comprised of actors connected to activist networks which campaign for the Right to Information; and the personnel and material resources of the office of the Chief Information Commissioner (CIC). Despite rhetorical and policy frameworks that bracket off activists into the sphere of 'civil society' and functionaries such as the CIC into 'the state' (see Lewis 2008), in the audit event they join to form a hybrid entity working across a 'porous state-nonstate border' (Bornstein and Sharma 2016, 81). A blurred boundary that has emerged in the context of neoliberal good governance reforms (Bear and Mathur 2015) in which the practice of incorporating civil society and market actors into processes of policy consultation, drafting and delivery has become widespread (Gaventa and McGee 2010; United Nations 2008)⁹.

Our audit of the noticeboards is a simple inspection then, a day out bumping around the city looking for bureaucratic artefacts in order to assess their condition. But it is also entangled in local histories of concern and activism about transparency, accountability, corruption and the city's development, legal-rational processes of order making, and transnational discourses of governance and rights.

To help us think this through in the context of Delhi I will compare two isomorphic examples of signs relating to councillor funds and public works which index different ideas of the public, transparency and accountability. The sign in image 3 is intended to appeal to a voting public that holds political representatives periodically accountable through elections. The sign in image 4 is intended for the consumption of a 'data public' (Ruppert 2015) comprised

of active citizens concerned with holding officials to account through continuous processes of transparency, accountability and access to information.



(Image 3: A sign claiming responsibility for recent road repairs in south Delhi. Photo: the author)

In image 3 a hand painted and lettered sign claims responsibility for road resurfacing works in the name of Aarti Mehra, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) councillor for the Hauz Khas constituency in South Delhi until 2013. Sturdily constructed of welded angle iron and covered in durable gloss paint the sign is edged in the saffron and green party colours of the BJP. It offers the passing public the simple message that the work has been carried out ‘for your convenience’, is headed with the exhortation ‘Public money – in the public interest’ and signed off ‘Aarti Mehra – Councillor’. Signs similar in construction and style are a familiar sight across the city. This one appeared next to a 50 metre section of new road made of interlocking cement blocks in the middle class neighbourhood that I lived in in South Delhi.

The sign advertises the councillor’s democratic mandate to distribute funds on the public’s behalf and help her constituents through the improvement of local infrastructure. The presence of the newly surfaced road alone does not communicate this relationship. The new road plus the sign, in party colours to connect improvements to local and national political discourses, makes the relationship explicit. By talking about public money and the public good the councillor’s sign invites the viewer to treat the process through which the road has been repaired as a ‘black box’ (Harman 2009, 33–34). That is as a stable taken for granted process in which the input, public money, produces the output, road repairs, without the need to consider the mediating mechanisms or relationships which transformed one into the other. It is telling though that when I mentioned the sign to my landlord his cynicism towards the motives of political representatives was evident. For him the new road was welcome but was timed to win favour in the forthcoming elections. He dismissed the sign

with a wave of his hand and a comment about the venality of politicians. The implication was that if anything should be taken for granted about the process of repairing the road it would be that corruption and self, rather than public, interest were significant motivations.

In contrast the public information board in image 4, although identical in the way that it is assembled from welded steel and hardwearing paint, attempts to do a different job.

वार्ड नं. 95 करोल बाग जोन

क्र. सं.	वर्ष	कुल राशि	काम का नाम	काम का नाम	काम का नाम	काम का नाम	काम का नाम	काम का नाम	काम का नाम
1.	2010-11	50 लाख	ई.ई.(एम)II	गोठों बंदोबास्त के लाने	481072	2-10-10	1-12-10	एच.टी.	481072
2.	"	"	"	टी सोलर लान करे पर मेड का प्रयोग	499530	7-09-10	6-1-11	जे.टी. मल्ल	499530
3.	"	"	"	प्रसाद नगर	479587	7-10-10	6-1-11	एच.टी. मल्ल	479587
4.	"	"	"	सौ.सि.कॉलोनी 484/488, 48/49 में बांध	499250	28-10-10	27-1-11	वी.के. मल्ल	499250
5.	"	"	"	18/18 नंबर पेटल नगर	482933	28-10-10	27-1-11	जगत सिंह	482933
6.	"	"	"	सौ.सि.कॉलोनी 484/488, 48/49 में बांध	499250	28-10-10	27-1-11	वी.के. मल्ल	499250
7.	"	"	"	फुटपाथ हदय व ने का करे काम के लाने	482933	28-10-10	27-1-11	जगत सिंह	482933
8.	"	"	"	सौ.सि.कॉलोनी 484/488, 48/49 में बांध	499250	28-10-10	27-1-11	वी.के. मल्ल	499250
9.	"	"	"	प्रोविन्सियल का कार्य 47/1 से 47/15, 48/5-48	485540	28-1-11	25-4-11	सुरज कुमार	485540
10.	"	"	"	ईस्ट पेटल नगर	485540	28-1-11	25-4-11	सुरज कुमार	485540
11.	"	"	"	फुटपाथ का निर्माण करे पर शक में	499400	28-1-11	28-4-11	के.के. मल्ल	499400
12.	"	"	"	एन एच 47/1 से 47/15, प्रसाद नगर	485540	28-1-11	25-4-11	सुरज कुमार	485540
13.	"	"	"	LMV काम करे के लाने	485540	28-1-11	25-4-11	सुरज कुमार	485540

(Image 4. A sign detailing works, contractors and costs outside an MCD Depot in Karol Bagh Zone, Delhi. Photo: the author)

It tells a much more complicated story about councillor fund expenditure, identifying individual works and contractors, start and finish dates and final costs. Placed outside the appropriate MCD depot, rather than next to the works described, the sign indexes attempts to open up the black box of city maintenance and reveal more of the process through which works are carried out by attaching responsibility to councillors, contractors, and the municipal engineers that sign works off. Acting as a location at which the maintenance of the city is memorialised it invites people that might encounter it to learn more about how the repair of the city is managed and perhaps to become active citizens by using the information to identify and challenge poor quality work and perceived corruption. Encountered in context, however, the ability of an object such as this to do the work expected of it may be limited by a number of factors. This is certainly the case for the sign in image 4 which we will meet again at the end of the day out with the audit team in March 2012.

Back on the Road

The next two sites on our tour were no more satisfactory than the first we had found with the paper sheets pasted to the wooden board. One was an MCD depot on the southern edge of the city. Looking around for the noticeboard we were directed inside the one room compound office by the lone official present. The information we sought was printed on an A4 sheet of paper, which had been stuck to the wall above head height in the back corner of the room, a position that it was hard to interpret as being on public display. Noting the non-compliance on the audit form the party moved on to the next location. This was a larger walled compound with a more promising information display. Two sturdy notice boards

were in place, about one metre high by one and a half metres wide, made of blue painted metal and mounted so as to be visible from the street over the compound wall. The boards were hand painted and lettered in Hindi and gave the relevant ward numbers, the name of the councillors responsible, identified that the boards held information about the spending of councillor funds and featured columns relating to the current and preceding four years. Of the two boards, however, one carried no information and the other had the now familiar pieces of A4 paper printed from the MCD website, with information in English, pasted onto the year columns. The papers were grimy with dust and sun bleached. One had started to peel off and the top half was hanging down, obscuring the bottom. The boards themselves seemed to have the traces of older writing underneath the blue paint, but it was difficult to tell what previous information might have been erased by the attempt at compliance with the new transparency regime.



(Image 5. MCD councillor fund noticeboard with decomposing A4 paper sheets. Photo: the author)

The MCD officials manning the compound seemed bemused by the inspection.

Responsibility for the condition of the sign appeared to be above their pay scale and having carefully noted the signs' deficiencies on the complaints form we rolled off to find another depot in the south east of the city. After an hour of combing a grid of new streets and buildings, many still emerging from the ground, and with many stops to ask directions, our party gave up the search and moved on. No information, no noticeboards, no depot in fact.

At last, in a ward in the south central zone of the city our party found a sign that, very nearly, fitted the requirements. On entering the gate of the depot we were greeted by a noticeboard at least 2 metres high and about 6 metres wide. It was bright white, made of metal sheet bolted to a steel frame. The information had been printed in Hindi onto the panels by a mechanical process, providing a durable and glossy finish. The script was at least 50mm high. Although the sign was at the back of the yard behind some parked vehicles it was prominent and could be seen by people passing the gate of the compound.

Unfortunately this wasn't the sign we were looking for. It gave information relating to spending from the "MLA" (Member of Delhi's Legislative Assembly) local area development fund, complying with a related order from the CIC. The information relating to the councillor funds was further inside. The MCD officials manning the depot took us to a covered area outside the office where a blue hand-painted sign a metre and a half high by 3 metres wide gave details in Hindi of councillor fund spending for the previous year across the 3 wards that the depot serviced. The board even had the number of the CIC's original order at the top making it possible to trace the reason that the board had been made.



(Image 6. The audit in process. The CIC's inspector looks on as an SNS worker records details of compliance. Photo: the author)

After the compliance had been noted the Junior Engineers (JEs) at the depot invited us for refreshments. We had been on the road for a while and the CIC officials seemed keen to accept. As we sat in their sparse office nibbling biscuits and sipping masala tea from small plastic cups the JEs explained how they bore a 'heavy burden' as so much of the work of the continuing repair of the city was carried out by them. They added that making the signs only added to that burden but that they were happy to do it. The lead inspector from the CIC's office sympathetically pronounced that they should not worry as the noticeboards were in good order. The SNS workers, playing the role of austere representatives of citizens' vigilance, remained sceptical and seemed keen to forgo the hospitality and move on to the next site. We still had more northerly parts of the city to cover before the depots closed for the day.

As the day wore on we transferred from the hired car to an auto-rickshaw and continued to bump around different zones of the city following the inspector's official car. Searching for, and sometimes not managing to find, municipal depots, we encountered signs in a variety of styles and media. The ephemeral and often illegible printed A4 paper sheets pasted on to different surfaces of some of the southern wards were replaced in the north central zone of the city with the durable metal signs we encountered in image 4. Each perhaps a metre square attached to steel legs and with information hand painted in Hindi. The information was not necessarily as dictated by the CIC's order, and there was no way to tell if it would ever be updated, other than by a repeat inspection, but mostly the signs in the northern wards we visited were placed in public view outside the walls of the appropriate MCD depots.

At the very end of the day, on what was intended to be our second to last visit before the municipal depots closed, we were lucky enough to observe a noticeboard being installed. Arriving at a depot in the Karol Bagh zone the CIC inspector asked the Junior Engineer present why there was no noticeboard on display. The JE directed three men to the rear of the compound office and they returned carrying a sign of the hand painted metal variety. As it happens this was the sign we met earlier in image 4. Taking it outside and just to the left of the main gate they quickly dug two holes to take the legs, mixed some sand and cement and fixed the sign in place against the compound wall. Although the installation of the board was late by many months the Junior Engineer, showing no contrition, then generously invited us in for tea and biscuits and, much to Savita from the SNS team's frustration, kept the CIC's officials in polite conversation on a variety of topics until 5pm. When we finally broke free and went to the last depot on the list it had closed for the day. No noticeboard was visible.

The audit team's visits show how the CIC's order has been manifested in different ways at different locations. While the order was reasonably clear about the content of the information that the boards should provide it had been less specific about the materials from which they should be made. The lack of clarity concerning the construction and durability of the noticeboards had produced a variety of forms. Where information boards had been produced using fragile paper pasted to durable boards, obligations relating to the physical design and placement of the board had sometimes been fulfilled even though the requirements relating to the proactive disclosure of information had been affected by both

the content and the weathering of the papers attached. Where noticeboards were made of durable materials, steel and gloss paint, the information was sometimes partial, and, as in the last case, the board was not installed until the audit team arrived and bore information that would need to be refreshed soon after.

I have established that the notice boards are intended as appropriate technology for transparency and accountability where, as Kim Fortun notes, appropriate technology is ‘designed to fit into its local setting, synchronized with available material resources, expertise, and labor time’ (Fortun 2004, 54). They appear in the cityscape because of the CIC’s order, and their construction, ability to resist the city’s environment and potential for providing citizens with the opportunity to become actively enrolled in projects for transparency and accountability¹⁰, emerge from the local processes through which they are crafted within the different wards of the city. By paying attention to the materiality of the boards we are reminded that the information that they are supposed to transmit to the public cannot be separated out from the valences of the different materials from which they are constructed. Neither can it be separated from their location in either space (where they are or are not encountered) or time (whether the details of public spending need to be updated or not). However, if the noticeboards do not reliably transmit information to the public they remain significant as signs that efforts to institute good governance and active citizenship have extended across an often unruly city and as sites of memory at which the agency of local human and non-human actors and the juridical mandate of the RTI Act intersect.

Conclusion – The afterlife the audit event.

An awareness of how significant this intersection between materiality and agency is in the work that the noticeboards are supposed to do was demonstrated by an adjunct order issued by the CIC to address the findings of the audit that we had carried out (Chief Information Commissioner: Govt. of India 2011a). The adjunct order reports the result of a “showcause” hearing in April 2012 to which a number of MCD officers had been summoned to explain why they had not complied with section 4 of the RTI Act by making good quality noticeboards. The order admonishes them for their ‘shortfalls’ in doing their duty and adds, cuttingly:

It is unfortunate that subsequently citizens went about monitoring this simple activity and found that the order had not been complied with properly. All government officers must feel ashamed if they are found wanting in a simple activity of this nature. Citizens are bound to doubt if the public authority and the officers are incapable of doing more complex jobs which are expected by MCD (sic). (2011a, 2).

The adjunct order goes on to congratulate those officers who had properly overseen the implementation of the original order, particularly those in charge at the depot with the large metal sign who had complained of the heavy burden of their work when we visited them.

Then the CIC turns to the issue of the material construction of the noticeboards and raises the threat of disciplinary fines:

The Officers present have assured the Commission that all wards will have boards in the Hindi language displayed prominently where citizens can see them and that citizens will have no cause for complaint on these. *These boards must not be made of paper or cardboard and should be made on a wall or of metal or wood/flex.* All the officers present have committed to the Commission that the boards will be there in all 272 wards of Delhi before 01 May 2012. They have also agreed that in case the boards are not installed by then it would be reasonable for the Commission to impose penalties on the defaulting officers. (2011a, 2 my emphasis)

Perhaps we can sympathise a little with the officers at the MCD depot when they talk about the 'heavy burden' of the work required to repair the city day by day being compounded by extra demands that they assemble appropriate technology for new regimes of transparency and accountability. They may even consider these forms of 'coercive accountability' as 'tyrannous' as academics have found the application of neoliberal audit regimes to higher education in the UK (Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 2000, 57; Strathern 2000b, 309) and would rather be trusted to get on with their jobs. However, the campaign to institute noticeboards relating to councillor funds flowed directly from longstanding concerns about failing infrastructure and a wish to clean up the 'dirty river' (Harriss 2005) of electoral politics. The history of information rights campaigns, urban governance initiatives and popular anti-

corruption politics in Delhi show that public trust in bureaucrats and political representatives is, at best, low.

As Harvey, Reeves and Ruppert (2013) argue in their analysis of transparency initiatives in the UK, Kazakhstan and Peru the release of information about the workings of government into the public domain is done in response to perceived past moral failings, revelations of scams and scandals, and in anticipation of moral failings to come. This future orientation means that transparency and accountability initiatives, and the material technological assemblages that they work through, are always provisional and contingent. The moral certainties fostered by the release of information about what is happening in the present is always being stalked by the uncertainty of data obsolescence. Rather than building trust about the workings of government as transparency initiatives proliferate they are generative of further mistrust and suspicion at what might be hidden (2013, 299–300).

As I have shown public information noticeboards in Delhi, manifested through technomoral campaigns to reform the relationship between citizens and the state, exhibit this future orientation. They are intended as steps along what Rajiv Kumar of Pardashita, quoted above, called the “paths in the grass” made by earlier activists for people to follow and potentially experience how active citizens might hold the state to account. However, the CIC’s adjunct order shows that as ‘transparency devices’ (Harvey et al 2013) noticeboards are also generative of mistrust and suspicion and requiring of further audit and assessment. They are perhaps particularly generative of mistrust because of their status as forms of “appropriate” technology. Intended to provide information to the “common man” who may

lack internet access they are the analogue to digital transparency devices such as the MCD's mcdonline.gov.in site for Delhi or the National Portal of India (india.gov.in) site nationally. Assembled from a variety of more or less durable materials and positioned around a fast developing city the signs are supposed to be simple and democratic but are also time consuming and labour intensive to assemble, audit and update. The CIC's adjunct order clearly articulates an understanding of the way in which human and non-human agencies intersect in the noticeboards. Both in the contest played out between active citizens and recalcitrant officers through the juridical proceedings of complaint, order, audit and adjunct order making and in the concern over the valences and specifications of the materials from which the boards might be assembled.

An ethnographic focus on how human and non-human agencies intersect in the noticeboards also helps us to think of the boards as sites which, even if they are judged as failing or inadequate by those tasked with auditing them, are productive in other ways. By traveling along with the audit of the noticeboards and tracing its afterlife through the orders of the CIC we come to understand the noticeboards as monuments to forms of active citizenship that have already taken place and which need to be renewed and sustained through new cycles of action. As locations through which the afterlives of a technomoral politics of transparency and accountability are lived out the noticeboards index the more than two decades of, ongoing, contestation and collaboration between civil society and government actors in Delhi and India more widely. When encountered they are evidence that the infrastructure and ideals of transparency and accountability have been at least partially woven into India's hegemonic practices of governance, and subsequently into

Delhi's landscape. But they also evidence the continuing difficulty of materialising and stabilising the proactive disclosure of information through forms of technology deemed appropriate for the common people.

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Endnotes

¹The instances of this repetition are too numerous to provide an exhaustive list. The metaphor is as popular with former world leaders (Obama 2009) as it is with transparency campaigners (see Sunlight Foundation n.d.) and English language journalists worldwide.

² See Hull (2012a) for a detailed overview.

³ Shailesh Gandhi was CIC from 2008 until 2012. A short media profile can be found here

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/RTI-activist-Shailesh-Gandhis-term-as-CIC-comes-to-an-end/articleshow/14495657.cms>

⁴ A lakh is one hundred thousand, a crore is ten million.

⁵ For Gell indexes are visible signs from which observers might make causal inferences about the actors and processes through which objects are produced. He does not argue that the meaning of objects can be simply read from them as if they are texts, but rather that a partly hypothetical notion of the social agency behind an object might be inferred by an observer from its appearance.

⁶ In the Delhi Municipal elections of 2017 of 272 seats the BJP won 181 seats, the AAP 49, the Congress party 31 and others 11. The AAP had not contested the municipal elections before and benefitted from the collapse of the Congress vote, but could not capitalise on anti-incumbency. The BJP retained power and gained almost as many new seats as the AAP.

⁷ Political representation in Delhi is organized at three levels, national, in that it has Members of Parliament who sit in the Rajya and Lok Sabhas (upper and lower houses of parliament), Members of the Legislative assembly who form the Government of Delhi for the state like entity known as the National Capital Territory (NCT), and Councillors elected to represent city wards that form the municipal corporations of Delhi. The Central Government has responsibilities for law and order in the city, and some oversight over urban development. The distribution of responsibilities can cause tensions when different political parties or coalitions are in control at different levels of government.

⁸ A typical example of this critique, amongst many others is Jagannathan, R. (2011).

⁹ The appointment of Nandan Nilekani, one of the founders of the Indian IT services giant Infosys, to a ministerial level position of chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) (also known as Aadhaar), is a case in point. Nilekani was tasked with overseeing issuing every citizen of India with an individual identity card intended to streamline access to government services.

¹⁰ For more on the ways in which activist organisations attempt to enrol people as 'active citizens' in Delhi see Webb (2012) and concerning projects to create active citizens through writing and literacy see Cody (2009, 2013).

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