Today, the halls of TED and Davos reverberate with optimism that hacking, brainstorming, and crowdsourcing can transform citizenship, poverty alleviation, and education alike. In these circles, practices of digital media work are now celebrated as vehicles for social progress.

This talk examines a one-week hackathon in Delhi, a moment drawn from a year of ethnographic fieldwork at a Delhi design studio. The hackathon was a middle-class effort to develop software in support of participatory law-making in India. Hackathons grow out of software peer-production; for a few days, software designers convene to drive towards “demos” of promising, future technologies. The hackathon that is the topic of this talk nearly ran aground when faced with the specificities of Indian political life. I use this moment to examine the hackathon’s social organization of time and agency. This work suggests that understanding the cultural politics of digital media requires examining not only digital systems, but also processes of production.

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