The ghosts from your e-waste

— Farid H.

From Seelampur, Delhi

There is no place such as Delhi's Seelampur, the largest electronic waste (e-waste) market of the world and the last stop on the non-buckled road of the circular economy.

You may have some images in mind of landfill sites full of dirty washing machines, stacks of forever silent TVs and buckets of numb smartphones. But the first image striking me while walking down the Seelampur neighbourhood was the absurd comparison with a slaughterhouse. As ashamed I was with this analogy, it was quite a challenge to take my tech-nerd eyes off this geeky morbid spectacle: the entrails of our once-beloved digital companions were lying in the open air.

Electronic waste is one of these untold dark tales of our overconsumption. More and more places such as Delhi's Seelampur are crawling under e-waste from all over the world, continuously flooded with the debris the wealthiest ones have preferred to forget about. But in these very same places, some have decided to remind earlier and careless users of their lost digital self in an uncanny and almost karmic way.

Among piles of scrap waiting to be sorted, I spotted Rudra. He paced up and down between the connected wrecks, without wearing personal protective equipment like any other worker from the informal economy. However, unlike e-waste recyclers, Rudra was more interested by the immaterial than the material.

Some strange cables trying to escape from his backpack were giving it away. Rudra is one of the *"Seelampur sorcerers"*, extracting troublesome information from decrepit e-waste to haunt their original owners. I spent an afternoon with him, chasing digital ghosts of dead data.

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>
> — Rudra

Rudra, why everyone in Seelampur is calling you a sorcerer?

Well, I'm always a bit concerned when someone calls me a sorcerer.
To be clear, this isn't a question of religion or precepts. It's only because what I do seems to be magical. I dismantle smartphones, computers and servers then, in a way, I bring back online the resting data. Again, this isn't a matter of second life or afterlife, in a spiritual sense, but I still see them as ghosts returning to the ones who generated them in the first place.

You know, there is this science fiction writer who said *"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic"*, In my case, I feel it's more like any advanced relationship to data is indistinguishable from magic. *(Laugh)*

But back to your question about being called this way, I guess it's partly my fault. Very often, I'm posing as a modern sorcerer to keep me from having to explain what I actually do with the hardware I collect every day.

And for how long have you been doing this?

For three years now!
I've never completed my IT degree due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but I always had a special interest in digital and connected stuff. In the same time, I was seeing more and more discarded machines dumped in our streets, with smartphones and computers coming from Europe and even China. It turned our district into this *landfill-slash-market.*

You know, over the years, you start paying more attention at this stream of waste coming from somewhere else. Your eyes learn to recognise how working pieces look like. And finally, one day, you end up seeing evanescent forms floating above the memory chips and the disks, telling you they are more just than plastics and metals. I have become aware that something was awaiting to be freed from their former silicon bodies. This is when I started my journey as one of the *Seelampur sorcerers*, as my fellow dismantlers say.

You mentioned that what you do with e-waste isn't a form of magic, but still it sounds really mysterious and intriguing to me.

How do you proceed with the data you find?

I said it was not magical, but I think like a magician: I don't reveal all my tricks! Maybe I could rephrase your question as *"how can one extract data ghosts from e-waste?"*.

Well, I've gathered some tools for that, with hardware and software. First you spot the pieces that may store data, usually the ones with memory chips. I'm part of several WhatsApp groups tracking new e-waste arrival every week, to make sure I don't miss the most interesting pieces. I'm especially interested in obsolete servers used for cloud services and decayed smartphones. Sometimes you have to take pieces apart, and occasionally to slightly repair them.
Then you can start to extract the remaining data and metadata still stored in the chips or the hard drives, purging them in the same time. This is the irony: people get rid of their device so fast, because it has suddenly stopped working or because a new model is out, that they neglect to fully clean them.

Most of the time, it's easy to find the owner of the data: it can be a person, a company or a manufacturer. I choose which data are both the most valuable and the most embarrassing memories for the owner. Ghosts should be unwelcome presences, at least, according to me!

Finally, comes the haunting itself: I use a disposable email address to send the data to their former holder. It's like if a part of your past life was coming back to torment you...

How do you think people feel having their data coming back to haunt them?

I guess they must think it's a hacker job... But I make sure they know why their data are back haunting and obsessing them. I often send an altruist message saying something like *"Look, here are the ghosts of your data, maybe you didn't want them to be gone at the start, so welcome them back or make them disappear for good"*. This is the rule, I don't keep a copy of what I've extracted. The ghosts are unique.

You know, in Bengal, some other extractors, or sorcerers if you prefer, are doing something similar, but in a more offensive way. They send the data haunting back the Western users as a warning about the ecological impact of their electronic waste. The threat is clear: their data will keep haunting them back until they stop throwing their tech trash in our lands. I agree with this intimidation: all these leaking batteries and polluting PCBs are afflicting our health and local environment. It's a kind reminder: as there is no such thing as an intangible computer cloud, neither there is a faraway void where their old machines magically disappear. To be honest, I don't feel bad when the haunting happens to the big tech companies sending to us their so-called obsolete machines. They deserve to be haunted. It's karma.

A few months ago, I've also learned some former *Sakawa boys* are doing the same in Ghana. It's a new type of scam: pay us or your data keep resurfacing. In my opinion, that's fair, millions of us are trying to thrive in an unregulated polluting industry. Actually, maybe we need less e-waste dealers and more e-waste healers!