Chapter 33

Government–With–You:
E–Government in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

Singapore's e-government model is considered to be among the best in the world. Over the past decade, the Singapore government has constantly developed and re-invented its online presence. International comparisons have consistently rated Singapore as one of the most advanced e-government nations. However, despite significant progress towards full e-government maturity, some issues of full public participation remain. It is these issues that this chapter discusses. In particular, it considers the ways in which a digital divide within the Singapore model has emerged, despite specific policies to address such a problem.

INTRODUCTION

The Singapore e-Government Masterplan 2011-2015 (or eGov2015) ushers in a new era, where the Government aims to shift from a "Government-to-You" approach to a "Government-with-You" approach in the delivery of government e-services. The goal is to facilitate more co-creation and interaction between the Government, the people and the private sector to bring about greater value creation for Singapore and our people.

Increasing the participation of local citizens in the daily life of governing has been an enduring though not always an intended aspect of what is called the ICT revolution. Where once politics at all levels was about merely electing officials and leaving it to them to do what is best for the country, state or region, the contemporary political landscape in many countries is now a two-way street whereby communication and consultation between the electorate and the officials they elect is an ongoing process. As such E-Government has become a major concern for many nations around the world over the last two decades or so, with the ability to use Information and communication technology (ICTs) considered by many policy makers as part of 'the indispensable grammar of modern life' and a fundamental aspect of citizenship in the ever expanding information society (Wills 1999, 10).

While many models have been developed (Coursey and Norris 2008) the most common type of E-government model focuses on providing easy access to citizen centered services and generating efficiencies in government administration. However, it is widely acknowledged that a mature and robust E-government is not simply related to the technologizing of government business. Rather 'it is about governments 'moving stepwise toward the adoption of more sophisticated e-government offerings, moving from information to transactions to integration and ultimately to transformation (Coursey and Norris 2008, 532). Moreover, as noted by advocates of E-government, developing a successful E-government sector is associated with a range of beneficial outcomes including the potential to foster strong and robust political debate, enhanced civil society and strengthened relations between citizens and those who govern (Martin and Byrne 2003).

In adopting an E-Government philosophy or framework, governments proclaim an intention to be inclusive and equitable in providing e-services to its public. However, as with many social and economic policies and processes, outcomes may be far from equitable. Within discussions around policy and ICTs the emergence of digital exclusion alongside broader discussions about social exclusion and inclusion entered the political discourse during the 1990s (Selwyn 2002) with debates around the 'information haves' and 'information have-nots' (Wresch 1996), 'information and communication poverty' (Belnaves et al. 1991) and the 'digital divide' (Jurich 2000, Parker 2000).

Segments of populations are excluded from the use of and benefits from E-Government services for a variety of reasons. Often discussion about the digital divide concentrates on the interaction between individuals, technology and society and tends to present on a technological determinist argument. From this point of view the argument is that once on-line there is no gap and that everyone can utilize the internet and benefit from the information and consultation opportunities provided.

In terms of theories around social exclusion / inclusion it is a broader multi-dimensional view of the digital divide that is needed. As Giddens (1998, 104) and others (Berghman 1995, Walker 1997) point out social exclusion/inclusion is about a range of mechanisms 'that act to detach groups of people from the social mainstream'. In terms of E-government this broader focus looks at not only the technological questions but also questions the extent to which everyone can utilize content once on-line (DiMaggio and Hargittai 2001)

For a start, the provision of a basic level of telecommunications infrastructure is an important step in the E-government process as inadequate provision may well hinder the widespread adoption of E-government services (Graham 1998, Healey and Baker Consultants 2001). The success of E-government will also depend significantly on the extent to which online content is usable, relevant and up-to-date. Potential users will be turned away if online content does not meet their needs and if information is frequently out of date. Without wide acceptance and usage by the public, the potential for a growing digital divide within the citizenry is high. Furthermore, in addition to access to hardware and infrastructure, if a broader concept of the digital divide is considered, then a complex collection of factors need to be accounted for (Warschauer 2003). Social inclusion is one such factor.

It is within the context of understanding the social inclusion issues surrounding E-government that this chapter is set. It aims to make a contribution to the growing literature dealing with the development of E-government and its broad social implications by considering the development of E-government in the Republic of Singapore. In what follows the chapter first considers the broader development of an E-government presence in the Singapore context and the extent to which local citizens are accessing E-government content. The chapter then examines the issue of social inclusion and the Singapore model before considering future trends and conclusions.

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