

Chapter 54

Public Participation in E-Government: Some Questions about Social Inclusion in the Singapore Model

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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-developed its on-line 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 which this chapter discusses. In particular, it will consider the ways in which a digital divide within the Singapore model has emerged, despite specific policies to address such a problem.

INTRODUCTION

A trend towards reforming the public sector has emerged in many countries in recent years spurred, primarily by the aspirations of citizens around the world, who are placing new demands on governments. The success of government leaders is increasingly being measured by the benefits they

are creating for their constituents, namely, the private sector, citizens and communities. These 'clients' of government demand top performance and efficiency, proper accountability and public trust, and a renewed focus on delivering better service and results. (United Nations 2008, p. xii).

Technology is energizing grassroots politics of all stripes: call it powering up. (Alex Perry 2001).

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The powering up of grassroots organizations and local citizenry 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 until the next election, the contemporary political landscape in many countries is now a two-way street whereby communication and consultation between the electorate and the elected is an ongoing process. The ability of local citizens to provide feedback to those who are elected to lead and to deal with government bureaucracy in more efficient ways is now greater than before. The revolution that is leading to this transformation of government systems is electronic government or E-government.

E-government refers to the use of ICTs such as the internet and mobile phone as a platform for exchanging information, providing services and transacting with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. The more 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 technologizing the business of government. Rather 'it is about government harnessing IT to redefine its social technologies in order to remain relevant in a more participative, more interactive and more informational era' (Allen et al. 2001, 94). 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).

Following the increasing roll-out of E-government programs there has been a commensurate increase in academic debate and research focusing on a range of aspects of E-government. While those on the supply side have focused on issues of the supposed cost savings, increased efficiency and

improved public face of government the focus of those dealing with the emergence of E-government from the consumer's point of view have tended to focus on the impacts across a range of social areas (Abbott 2001, Silcock 2001, Bains, 2002, Van Der Meer and Van Winden 2003, Jho 2005).

From a social inclusion paradigm, it is questions of accessibility that are of most importance. Accessibility issues relate not only to the degree to which the required hardware is available across society, but also the extent to which potential users have the capability to access and understand online content and services. This relates to the widely discussed digital divide and has serious implications if only certain groups in society are able to access online services and information (Silcock 2001). Interest in the digital divide grew in prominence during the mid-1990s and today it remains an important component of public policy debate and encompasses a range of social, economic and political factors (Helbig et al. 2009, Warschauer 2003). 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 society. In terms of broad social inclusion goals it is a broader multi-dimensional view of the digital divide that is needed. This broader focus looks at not only the technological questions but also questions the extent to which everyone can utilize E-government 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

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