

## IPS Digital Frontiers Seminar on Citizen Participation in Policy Development and the “Democracy Machine”

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THE DIGITAL FRONTIERS SEMINAR on Citizen Participation in Policy Development and the “Democracy Machine” was held on 22 June 2017. Policymakers, academics and private and people sector leaders were invited by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to discuss the concept and practice of citizen engagement, and how it would be applicable to policymaking in Singapore. The speakers at the event were Melissa Tan (Deputy Director, Office for Citizen Engagement, Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth) and Professor John Gastil (Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at the Pennsylvania State University). Senior Research Fellow Dr Carol Soon from IPS’ Arts, Culture and Media research cluster moderated the discussion.



In her opening remarks, Dr Soon introduced the discussion as the fifth in the series of the IPS Digital Frontier Seminars, which looked at new phenomena, new trends and new methodologies relating to digital technologies. This seminar addressed new practices and methodologies in the domains of citizen engagement and deliberation.

## The presentations

Ms Tan spoke about the [public sector's ongoing efforts to deepen citizen engagement and participation in Singapore](#) and why this is important. For the nation, it helps to strengthen social cohesion and national resilience in an increasingly volatile world. At the individual level, it is a way for all Singaporeans to contribute towards a shared future. Citizen engagement and participation also allows citizens and the government to create new initiatives together and build trust.

In recent years, a major citizen engagement programme in Singapore was Our Singapore Conversation (OSC), a series of national conversations held from 2012 to 2013 on citizens' vision, values and priorities for Singapore. About 47,000 Singaporeans participated in the conversation. Following the OSC, various public agencies initiated a series of "high-touch" engagements. Through this process, public officers not only derived rich lessons in engagement, but also discovered that Singaporeans were keen to participate and lead some of the initiatives. Ms Tan said that the government hopes to increase the level of citizen participation — from citizens being mere receivers of public services to co-creators of policies and programmes. To achieve this, she said the role of public officers has to shift from service providers or regulators to civic enablers. The role of citizens must correspondingly shift from customers to partners.

Next, Professor Gastil spoke about a ["democracy machine"](#), a web-based database or service that would integrate existing digital tools and social media platforms to create an online public space. The machine would draw on gamification principles, where citizens accumulate points based on their level of participation — those who participate more would move up a level and unlock new activities. He said that such a platform should be spearheaded by the government, but hosted by a non-governmental organisation, rather than within a public agency. Having the government and non-profits take the lead on this would hopefully allow researchers to have access to the data, as discussions would become quasi-public records.

Professor Gastil also outlined the process of the "democracy machine." (A detailed description can be found online in a [white paper](#) and a [scholarly article](#).) It would involve conducting simple surveys to understand the nature of choices citizens face on a given issue, engaging them to think of the issue, and then inviting them to deliberate on the issue in small groups. The process would also involve public officers, who will have to respond to the ideas generated by citizens. However, the "democracy machine" will face many challenges in its design and implementation. For example, the discussions may not be representative of the larger population. There could also be a failure to deliberate, as participants could either undermine the discussion or choose not to engage with views that differ from theirs.

## Discussion

A key issue that was discussed was how Singapore's political culture and dynamics impact public engagement and deliberation. While there is a strong signal from the top to move towards deeper engagement with citizens, approaches differ across public agencies. Ms Tan acknowledged that more could be done to widen the spectrum of engagement approaches that public agencies take with citizens. Public officers and civil society would also need to build capacities to participate in constructive responsive dialogues.

Professor Gastil suggested appealing to citizens' shared identity and experiences as Singaporeans, instead of focusing on individual identities. Ms Tan said that the turnout during engagements such as OSC was a good indicator that Singaporeans increasingly wanted to participate and give their views. She added that she would like to see a move from a purely consultation process to a partnership model.



A participant asked why some public officials might not see the need for deliberation. Professor Gastil said it could be because they did not want to leave decision-making to the citizens, or they saw it as a threat to their power. On the other hand, even if officials did believe in deliberation, it might be for the wrong reasons, such as not wanting to be responsible for policy-related decisions.

There was also a discussion on how to evaluate deliberation. Professor Gastil suggested conducting content analysis of the discussions to find out if, for example, the issue was vigorously debated and if it made participants more knowledgeable about the issue they discussed.

Participants also asked how the “democracy machine” could be integrated smoothly into existing government structures and how it would contain the spread of fake news. For the former, Professor Gastil said that the government could authorise the process, but not control it. For the latter, he said that a way to stem fake news would be by deducting points from participants who spread it and by giving incentives to learn accurate information, such as through prediction markets.

Other issues that were discussed included the role of civil society and academics to create a more informed society. Professor Gastil said that academics play a very important role in conducting research and analysing data, and they could engage in more partnerships with

government to develop new democratic institutions. Dr Soon added that academics could do better in communicating their research to the public.

In closing, Professor Gastil said that studies have shown that citizens who have engaged in deliberation are more likely to think about issues in relation to the bigger picture. They would also have a more positive view about the government, and of themselves as active citizens. Ms Tan added that engagement was a learning process that takes place over a period of time. The shift towards a more citizen-centric approach would happen as both citizens and public officers learn how to engage more constructively with one another and build trust through ongoing dialogue.

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