IPS Institute of Policy Studies

Report on the IPS Digital Frontiers Seminar "Upscaling Online Collaboration for Offline Good — Making It Work"

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The third instalment of the IPS Digital Frontiers Seminar Series, "Upscaling Online Collaboration for Offline Good — Making it Work", was held on 28 October 2016. About 40 participants from ministries, agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), researchers from the academic community and representatives from the digital innovation space attended the seminar.

The first part of the seminar focused on presentations by Dr Carol Soon, IPS Senior Research Fellow of the Arts, Media and Culture research cluster; and Dr Justin Lee, IPS Research Fellow of the Society and Identity research cluster This was followed by a question-and-answer session.

Reports from the first two seminars in the series can be found here and here.

Opening remarks by Dr Carol Soon

Dr Soon introduced the IPS Digital Frontiers seminar series, her research on Singapore as a digital village, and Dr Lee's research on creating knowledge bases. She said that their studies share a common goal — to understand how technology could promote collaboration and partnership among relevant stakeholders, and benefit different communities.

The objectives of the seminar were:

1. To provoke a new way of thinking about how technology could be used to promote offline good
2. To seek insights and thoughts on the ideas presented from the participants — if and how are the ideas relevant to their work? What needs to be done to bring some of these ideas to actualisation?
3. To facilitate opportunities for collaboration not only between IPS and the participants, but also among the participants themselves.

Presentation by Dr Carol Soon, "Digital Village Applied: Practices, Principles and People"

Dr Soon said that it was possible to envision Singapore as a digital village of 6.9 million people because of our dense population and the widespread use of technology. For the purpose of the presentation, she focused on three characteristics of a digital village: problem-solving as a basic organisational principle; ground-up participation; and being self-sustaining and self-correcting.

The viability of a digital village, however, was also dependent on people's willingness or ability to give and contribute. Studies by the World Giving Index and the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) showed that Singaporeans have the propensity to give. Yet, they find it hard to volunteer. The big question was how to make it easier for individuals to give more and to give in other ways?

Dr Soon introduced the 3Ps: Participation, Principles and People as a way to address the question.

On the first "P" (Participation), Dr Soon presented three existing models: crowdsourcing, crowdfunding and civic crowdfunding.

She explained that crowdsourcing taps the collective intelligence of a large group of people to produce productive outcomes. On the other hand, crowdfunding relies on the contributions of many to fund businesses, charities or social projects. Civic crowdfunding also relies on the contributions of many, but in the interest of producing services and goods enjoyed by all members of the community, regardless of their contribution. Examples of the three models were InnoCentive, Kickstarter and Ioby, respectively.

Dr Soon identified several benefits of large-scale collaboration, such as reduced demand risk; better civic decision-making; the opportunity to tap participants' local knowledge, promoting employment and creating new ways of inclusion; and increased political will.

On the second "P" (Principles), Dr Soon said that there were certain principles at the individual, collective and application levels that would ensure a successful large-scale online collaboration.

At the individual level, organisers must know how to attract the emotional interest of potential contributors. Thus the project would have to be tailored and framed in a way that speaks to the contributor, and the role they play. Organisers would also have to tap people's place-based loyalties and attachment to a community. Citing existing research, Dr Soon said that the stronger the attachment people felt towards the community, the more likely the project would succeed.

At the collective level, aside from shared vision or shared goals, there should be clear steps on what has to be done. Organisers should also consider exploiting social and community networks. For example, how could organisers mobilise local networks such as the networks of project leaders or residents of communities, and

regional networks, such as regional groups that serve different communities and would act as bridge to bring people together?

In terms of the platform used, organisers should consider how to maximise user experience, and how to appropriately deliver information. There would also have to be transparency in the collaboration process, so participants would know the progress of various projects and the gaps that needed to be filled.

For the last "P" (People), Dr Soon gave the example of the Bologna Collaborative City, where citizens come together, propose ideas and implement them as long as they do not place any burden on the administrators and government officials. This project was targeted at five groups of people: social innovators, public authorities, businesses, civil society organisations and knowledge institutions.

To demonstrate how such a model might apply in Singapore's context, Dr Soon brought the participants through a visioning exercise. This exercise demonstrated how an online collaboration platform could help solve the problem of caregiving for the elderly in Singapore:

1. There would be a range of information to be shared among different parties.
2. There would be a crowdsourcing and/or crowdfunding element, where different members of the community could contribute ideas, and have the mechanism to recruit volunteers or to obtain funds for their project.
3. The project would involve a wide range of individuals, from participants' family members, to social enterprises from the business sector, such as ProAge, and Silver Spring, as they would be engaged with the community and in tuned to the needs of the elderly.
4. Finally, research institutions and knowledge institutions would also be in a prime position to contribute, as they would not only be doing research relevant and relating to elderly in Singapore, but also involved in collaboration with the non-profit sector.

Through upscaling online collaboration, Dr Soon said that society as a whole will acquire greater knowledge, skills and empowerment.

Presentation by Dr Justin Lee, "Open Collaboration to Understand Social Needs"

Dr Lee's presentation focused on his experience in starting an open collaboration platform to help understand the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in Singapore. An online wiki platform would allow the larger community to participate in needs assessment — a process typically done by academics, policymakers or voluntary organisations, thus democratising the research process. In this way, he said that serious, complex work could be achieved without formal, institutional direction.

A [call to action](#) was made in July 2016 for contributors, and the terms of collaboration was made in the spirit of open collaboration communities; contributors could be in one team or as many teams — they could be involved as much or as little as they wanted, they could quit at any time and they could join any team they wanted, provided that there was a matching of skills and interest. From this call, several issues or causes were identified, including migrant workers, disability and locality-based needs assessment. Contributors intend to meet at the end of every year to do collective sense-making, and produce a needs and gaps report.

Dr Lee said that current contributors included representatives from the Lien Centre for Social Innovation, NVPC and individuals working in their own personal capacities. He added that what drove these individuals was an underlying value, as the work was unremunerated and not part of anyone's key performance indicators (KPI).

They work based on a network structure instead of top-down governance. In the interest of transparency, an action plan that documented all previous thinking and decisions was made available to the public on the wiki site. There were also several backbone teams providing support to each of the "social cause teams", in areas such as marketing and communications, knowledge management and information and communications technology (ICT).

Dr Lee said that there were several challenges in starting the project, such as thinking through the analytic framework, finding the right online platform, knowledge management and sustaining energy and commitment. The hardest challenge,

however, was social participation. He said that though several issues or causes were identified, it was hard to get buy-in and commitment from the different community groups to contribute. He did not want to end up with a "dead site", where no one contributed and information was sparse. The site would also be vulnerable to vandalism as well as self-serving marketing.

Yet, there were the benefits. For example, the coherent accumulation of knowledge that was "live" and always updated by the community partners involved. If the larger community participated, there could be an exponential growth in the knowledge base, instead of incremental growth due to the efforts of single agencies. There was also the democratisation of knowledge, as anyone could access the information, and did not have to be an expert in the field to contribute. It also defeated the purpose of "turf wars" between competing government agencies or voluntary organisations laying claim to be the authority of specific subject matters. Anyone could participate, and the project welcomed specialists with deep expertise, but also members of the public who had something to contribute. Dr Lee also saw the project as an experiment in new forms of governance. Centrally-led projects require top-down decision-making and approvals, but a network structure allows distributed collaborations that intelligently coordinate the work of a lot of different diverse partners.

There could be broader possibilities for open collaborations that extend to service delivery and collective impact. For example, Dr Lee said that there could be a platform for individuals who have the means and want to do good, to come together to address a problem that an individual or community could not solve on its own.

It could also be helpful for charity analysis. He said that understanding the performance of charities is typically a centralised function run by organisations set up to collect and make sense of performance information. If done via open collaboration, there would be a platform where NGOs could input their own data so that they could compare organisational information and performance data with others.

Question-and-answer session

Dr Lee moderated the question and answer session. The following issues were raised:

Sustaining community efforts and increasing ways to contribute information

Participants had several ideas on how to encourage individuals to participate and contribute to the online collaboration project on needs assessment.

One participant asked if it was possible for contributors to input information on-the-go. The participant also suggested that gamification would encourage individuals to contribute. For example, the use of a leader board could promote healthy competition between contributors.

Similarly, another participant also suggested some form of recognition or ground-up leadership to encourage participation. The participant cited the example of forums, where contributors are recognised based on their participation and public recognition. On sites such as Wikipedia and Quora, people would contribute in order to establish themselves as thought leaders. On the opposite end, a participant asked if the team had considered anonymity.

Another participant suggested that the project should not seek public agencies' involvement, and instead seek individual commitment in order to circumvent bureaucracy.

Dr Lee replied that the knowledge management architecture was a work-in-progress. The process of developing it was non-linear, and he would appreciate if the participants could attempt inputting information to the current online platform and provide feedback. And while there were no plans for gamification, he had utilised its principles in a separate project.

Dr Lee also acknowledged that involvement in the project depended on leaders of the organisation. For example, some of the voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) on board the project were headed by Executive Directors who were committed to driving the project forward. Public agencies on the other hand, would have to go through the process of seeking approval from their superiors.

As for giving recognition, Dr Lee did not know if it was technically possible to do so on the current platform. On anonymity, he felt that its value lies in people recognising

the value of an idea or opinion, rather than the contributor's position. However, a participant said that anonymity would embolden individuals to say "nasty things". Another participant said that there could possibly be a combination of both anonymity and identification on a platform. He suggested looking at Stack Overflow, which utilises both anonymity and recognition.

Participants also shared their insights on why there was a lack of contribution for the knowledge base project.

One participant said that it could possibly be due to individual organisational objectives and performance indicators. Often, staff would only be motivated to achieve their KPIs.

On the other hand, Dr Soon said that participation should ideally be a bottom-up approach. If individuals were concerned enough about an issue, they would want to mobilise the resources to solve it. She felt that the point of entry should be using technology to connect communities with needs to individuals who would be able to help them, instead of incentivising individuals to participate.

Dr Lee said that he had an "unwarranted optimism" for his project. He felt that it was not too difficult to input information. He acknowledged that people would have different motivations, but also said that for the project to succeed, all it needed was perhaps 10 per cent of the community to have a vested interest to contribute.

Dr Soon added that the organisers could also use social media to reach out to more people. Online initiatives that have done well are also supported by resources from the private sector and foundations. These resources would be crucial to keep the project alive, in addition to publicity and outreach.

Citing existing research, Dr Soon said that another way to sustain community efforts would be to include participants at the early stages of the project. This way, there would also be emotional and psychological buy in. It would also be crucial to allow people to decide what they want to do.

Managing different personalities

A participant said that in any collaboration, there would be a need to deal with egos. The participant then asked how decisions could be made in online collaborations.

Dr Soon replied that it was important to understand how to make the project personal to people. In other worlds, why should people care? Research has shown that projects that succeed were those that allowed individuals to start what they were interested in, and gave them the room to advocate.

Dr Lee added that it was also a matter of framing, for example, not to mandate but to suggest that that they could possibly do something. He added that despite the project not having Executive Directors, boards and formal organisation, the contributors were still able to accomplish the work. The goal was to strive for a rules-based, transparent governance system, rather than having one individual who called the shots.

Dr Soon then said that in Singapore, the government could ease the process by playing the role of an enabler. For instance, the South Korean government has shown their support for such initiatives in several ways. They have advocated models for sharing economies and have delineated spaces for citizens to use creatively.

Using technology to further enhance the work

Dr Soon asked participants how they thought technology could be used to further enhance the work with various communities. She also asked if they thought that the concepts presented at the seminar were practical for their work.

A participant responded that this seemed to be a journey with a lot of scepticism, but also felt that such platforms were necessary. The participant added that when a project focuses about outcomes, people see the value of participating.

Community platform vs IPS wiki-platform

Dr Lee asked the participants if the online collaboration project should remain as a community platform or evolve into an IPS wiki-platform. The latter would provide the project with institutional resources to make it successful, but it would also alter the dynamics. Personally, he said that he was more inclined to keep the project outside of IPS.

Several participants agreed that at the early stage of the project, it would be necessary for an organisation to take the lead. However, the organisation would have to understand that they would still be a participant, and not the owner of the project. The organisation would also have to "give" the project back to the community.

Another participant felt that given the nature of the topics, users would look for authority in the information. The participant also said that if information was unclear and if belonged to everyone, there would be doubts on the authenticity of the data. As such, some sort of endorsement of the information, or fact checking of the information would be required. For example, Wikipedia gained credibility as they showed that they were similar to formal encyclopaedias like *Britannica*. However, a participant also said that users were "very savvy" and would have some level of "buyers-awareness". Thus, they would be able to judge the credibility of the source.

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Participants also discussed the idea of compartmentalising the information on the platform. For example, there could be "official" information, and a community forum,

where users could share information. Such a divide could also ensure intellectual property rights, where organisations could be credited for the content they developed.

Suggestions to move the project forward

A participant suggested that Dr Lee consider viewing the platform as a social-technical infrastructure that reflects the organisational structure. An example of such a structure would be Wikipedia, where there is an organisation and communities behind the site, and contributors have roles to play.

Another participant suggested that the project should have clearly delineated roles between editors and experts. Editors would play very specific roles such as flagging sections without sufficient information; experts would want to include accurate information. However, there were pros and cons on moderating information. If there was too much moderation, ideas would be suppressed.

As for sustaining community efforts, a participant said that it was important to revisit the purpose of the project: If one thinks it would be useful, then one should give it a try. The participant also said that online collaboration would be a move away from a "nanny-state" and would help people to "learn to keep learning".

Dr Soon concluded that Singapore, with its small geographical area, high population density, strong government will to keep society well-connected and a renewed focus on societal inclusion, was well-poised to achieve a large-scale online collaboration.

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