

Making Singapore a digital village

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A digital village formed bottom up can connect stakeholders such as recipients of care, caregivers and medical institutions via an open technological platform. TODAY FILE PHOTO

Of late, the “kampung spirit” has been summoned by policymakers and community leaders to remind citizens to be socially cohesive. Technology can be harnessed to create a “digital village”, where people collectively identify problems, create solutions and better their lives.

Despite threats of technology displacing human connections, innovations such as crowd-sourcing, the sharing economy and community-based portals provide a beacon of hope as they exhibit signs of “villages at work”. Wikipedia, Kickstarter, Airbnb and, in Singapore, Rent Tycoons as well as BlockPooling.sg are microcosms of a digital village.

As in traditional villages, these initiatives are driven by social, economic and environmental imperatives. Drought and warfare used to inspire teamwork to overcome a harsh environment. In today’s fast-changing world, people are motivated to use technology as a leverage to organise themselves, exchange resources and overcome challenges they face in their daily lives.

One would say such collaboration towards common goals can encourage the spirit of “gotong royong” — communal self-help for the benefit of those living in the same community.

What's in Singapore's digital village?

Singapore as a digital village may seem like a far-fetched proposition to some and it begets the question of how a digital village may look like.

Other than problem-solving being the basic organising principle, everyone will have a chance to contribute in a digital village. In a traditional village, every villager has a part to play — the young help with the chores, the adults the production engines of a village and the old, as sages, are sought for their wisdom.

The increasing user-centredness of technology will lower barriers to participation and bridge everyone from the young to the old, and all will have the opportunity to contribute their skills, expertise and know-how.

How then is a digital village different from an online community or portal that brings together like-minded people? A key difference is that of scale. While an online community caters to people who share the same interest (consider members of various Google groups), Singapore as a digital village will involve all citizens regardless of their backgrounds. This is because the issue which underpins the formation of a digital village is one that is or will be of concern to everyone.

Second, while members' involvement in an online community may wax and wane depending on their interest levels, a digital village sees "permanent membership", with people's contribution levels correlating with the stage of life they are at.

Third, there will be much or near total transparency in a digital village. Akin to a traditional village, people's needs and contributions will be visible to others so others can pitch in where there are gaps.

The above can be illustrated through a thought experiment in addressing the need for caregiving in the healthcare sector. Singapore has been identified as a "super-ageing" nation and the healthcare system will be increasingly stretched to meet the needs of the aged, sick and those in need of palliative care.

To help deliver healthcare services to seniors and their caregivers effectively, the Agency for Integrated Care provides useful informational resources for patients, caregivers as well as healthcare professionals and providers on its website. While this state-initiated endeavour is an important one, a digital village formed bottom up to solve the same problem adopts a different approach.

It will connect different stakeholders such as recipients of care, the caregivers (both formal and informal, but trained), relevant voluntary and non-profit organisations, and medical institutions via an open technological platform. The exchange of resources, such as information and advice, and the coordination of the who, what, when and where of care provision will be conducted in real time. Members of the digital village play an active part in bridging those in need with those who can meet the need because of transparency in the village.

A possible concern regarding the digital village is the abuse of information due to the openness of the system. However, like in a traditional village, members will watch out for one another as there will be recognition that one's well-being is inextricably tied to that of the group. Intervention from "the top" — comprising moderators who mediate conflicts, a role performed by elders or council members in a traditional village — comes only when there is a crisis that members cannot resolve.

Fiction or reality?

Besides industrialisation and urbanisation, the Internet has been touted as the next major threat to community life. However, this discounts the role that technology can play in fostering teamwork on a large scale.

A vision for Singapore to become a smart nation was unveiled in recent initiatives announced by the Government. They include the setting up of a steering committee tasked with developing an Infocomm Media Masterplan and the Digital Inclusion Fund to help close the gap between the technology haves and have-nots.

As policymakers play the role of an enabler by developing the backbone for nationwide connection, individuals should not underestimate their capacity in contributing to problem-solving and improving different spheres of their lives. Every idea and action counts.

This is not to say that a digital village would be a bed of roses. Just like in a traditional village, there may be intrusions of privacy, pressure to conform and abuse for selfish gains. However, to discount the potential of a digital village because of these drawbacks would be myopic, to say the least.

The idea of Singapore as a digital village is not surreal science fiction, but a plausible reality, especially for a well-connected country like ours. It would be a matter of time only before everyone, every place and everything will be linked up.

Everyone, including policymakers, should rethink not only technology's role but, more importantly, also individuals' capacity to organise themselves and solve problems on a nationwide scale.