

Singapore Perspectives 2021: Reset

Forum 5: Technology and Liveability

Held on 14 January 2021, the fifth forum of Singapore Perspectives covered issues relating to technology and liveability. Moderated by Dr Cheong Koon Hean, Chairman for the Centre for Liveable Cities, Singapore, the panel consisted of Ms Audrey Tang, Mr Liu Feng-Yuan, Professor Ang Peng Hwa and Dr Woo Jun Jie.

In her opening remarks, Dr Cheong said there exists three aspects of “liveability” – physical, societal and cultural. While the physical characteristics of liveability refer to the ‘hardware’ of cities, such as the transport systems and physical buildings, the societal and cultural aspects are more intangible; the former is about social capital and inclusion, while the latter is about the values and meaning people attach to their natural environments. With the Covid-19 pandemic accelerating technological innovation in all facets of life, Dr Cheong tasked the panel to debate about the potential of technology in improving living standards.

In response, Ms Audrey Tang, Digital Minister of Taiwan, shared how technology has aided Taiwan’s response to the pandemic. She attributed Taiwan’s success to three pillars: fast, fair and fun. The first pillar – fast – referred to the rapid exchange of data and intelligence between the government and the citizen’s collective data. The second pillar – fair – referred to the government’s assurance of equal access to healthcare, facilitated by data crowdsourcing on health services. The last pillar – fun – referred to the humorous government broadcasts, designed for virality so as to counter online misinformation. All in all, the successful deployment of data and technology depended on the mutual trust established between the public and private sectors.

Mr Liu Feng-Yuan, the CEO and co-founder of Basis AI, raised two broad questions. How does data affect the physical design of cities, and how does digital technology affect governance? Drawing from his past experience at the Land Transport Authority, Mr Liu said that data was a tool used to re-think physical spaces. Data allowed people to forecast crowding situations on train and bus lines, which would in turn inform decisions about public transport routes and frequencies. On the flipside, even if digital technology streamlines bureaucratic processes and facilitates participatory democracy on social media, it leads to the creation of echo chambers and polarisation online.

Picking up on the presentations were Professor Ang Peng Hwa and Dr Woo Jun Jie, hailing from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University and Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore respectively, While Prof Ang probed Ms Tang on the factors of data sharing and mutual

trust in Taiwan, Dr Woo raised several questions on issues of privacy and digital inclusion in the use of technology in cities. These examples, in his opinion, reinforced the fact that technology use did not always translate into enhanced liveability. Here, both Ms Tang and Mr Liu raised the need to use technology for 'right use', notably, in addressing citizens' needs and demands. In the case of Taiwan, the government was constantly aware of the need to channel citizens' worries into pro-social behaviour, rather than anti-social ones.

Similarly, questions of the public revolved around the seemingly inevitable trade-off between privacy and security, as well as matters of digital inclusion. In response, both Mr Liu and Ms Tang agreed on the need for public media education, such that individuals can weigh and discuss ethical dilemmas and inequality issues more constructively.