

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Technology and Liveability

By NEO Yee Win

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 of the Centre for Liveable Cities, the panel consisted of Ms Audrey Tang, Digital Minister of Taiwan; Mr Liu Feng-Yuan, CEO and co-founder of Basis AI; Professor Ang Peng Hwa, Professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication, Nanyang Technological University; and Dr Woo Jun Jie, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. When opening the session, Dr Cheong said there exists three aspects of “liveability”. The “physical” aspect refers to the “hardware” of cities, such as the transport systems and physical buildings; the “social” aspect encompasses social inclusion, as built by social capital and cohesion; and the “cultural” aspect reflects the values and meanings people attach to their natural environments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, technological innovation has enabled people to remain connected in all facets of life despite the restrictions placed on physical mobility. However, there is an increasing need to address the flipside of technological innovation, such as the generation of e-waste and the widening digital divide. Having set the context for discussion, Dr Cheong tasked the panel to share their future aspirations for technology.

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Caption for photo: Dr Cheong Koon Hean opening the fifth panel on Technology and Liveability.

Opening Remarks by Minister Audrey Tang

Ms Audrey Tang, Digital Minister of Taiwan, kicked off the presentations by sharing how technology has already improved living standards in Taiwan, in particular, the national response to the pandemic. Their response was scaffolded by three pillars: fast, fair and fun.

The first pillar — fast — refers to the rapid exchange of data and intelligence between the government and the citizen's collective. On 31 December 2019, the warnings of an impending SARS-like outbreak in Wuhan were circulated on PTT, a not-for-profit Reddit-like forum created by Taiwanese university students. This allowed the government to swiftly set up temperature checks and even a call centre to handle citizens' queries, amongst other measures.

The second pillar — fair — refers to the government's assurance of equal access to healthcare, facilitated by data crowdsourcing on health services. Due to the shortage of masks at the beginning of the pandemic, the government rationed the distribution of masks while directing efforts towards mask production. To facilitate orderliness in the queues outside retail stores, the government and the civic sector jointly collaborated to publicise the availability of masks online in real time. Updated every 30 seconds by citizens themselves, the portal was an example of participatory accountability by both government and its citizens — the former on ensuring a continuous supply of masks and the latter for ensuring the credibility of mask data.

The last pillar — fun — refers to the government response to online misinformation, or in Ms Tang's words, "humour over rumour". To curb online misinformation, the government incorporated humorous elements into their official broadcasts that would resonate with the public and go viral. For example, official public announcements about social-distancing measures and hand-washing basics were accompanied by pictures of an adorable shiba inu dog. The strategy turned out to be a huge success, with government messages also becoming viral enough to debunk online falsehoods.

Opening Remarks by Mr Liu Feng-Yuan

Mr Liu Feng-Yuan, 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 Singapore's Land Transport Authority, Mr Liu said data was used to re-think physical spaces. Data allowed people to forecast crowding situations on train and bus lines, which in turn informed decisions about public transport routes and frequencies. Similarly, data collected by Grab allowed the company to optimise what would be a long commute on public transport. In fact, it was the likes of transport apps like Grab that prompted Mr Liu to toy with the idea of "un-fixing" roads and public transport routes, as a way of adapting physical space to data. He believed that data was the key to enhance liveability by way of allowing us to think of physical space as malleable rather than fixed.

To understand the relationship between digital technology and governance, Mr Liu said it was necessary to first understand the two purposes of governance. First, the government must provide for the public. Second, the government must build trust between itself and the people it serves. Thus far, technology has certainly proven successful in enhancing the liveability of people, such as through the streamlining of bureaucratic processes like tax filings. However,

the same technology has also facilitated the development of online polarisation and echo chambers. The key to building genuine connections, according to Mr Liu, may perhaps lie in the integration of the physical and digital world, such as the adoption of a Facebook group among neighbours in the same apartment block. Simply relying on technology as a tool for connection is not enough.

Discussion and Q&A

Picking up on the presentations were Professor Ang Peng Hwa, from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University, and Dr Woo Jun Jie, Senior Research Fellow at IPS. While Professor Ang sought Ms Tang's views 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.

Mutual trust between government and citizens key to democratic participation

During the panel discussion, Dr Cheong remarked on the differences between Singapore's and Taiwan's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with Taiwan's response being more ground-up and citizen-led than Singapore's top-down, government-led approach. In response to Dr Cheong's observation, Ms Tang reaffirmed the agency of Taiwanese citizens in public deliberation. Having experienced the horrors of martial law during the SARS crisis, people were more eager to explore other alternatives. The government capitalised on this opportunity to channel online anti-social sentiments into pro-social behaviours, such as the translation of official messages to over 20 national languages for digital chatbots. Ms Tang also demonstrated the use of POLIS, a platform designed to identify consensus between different opinions towards the same political question posed by the government. Linking the two successful deployments of technology is the mutual trust between the government and citizens, that along with democratic participation had not been suspended even during a crisis.

Technology for "right use"

Both Mr Liu and Dr Cheong raised the need to use technology for "right use", notably, in addressing citizens' needs and demands. Mr Liu said that while it was easy to be enamoured by technology, it would not bring about tangible improvements to people's lives if the purpose of technology is unclear. Dr Cheong agreed, saying that technology should be seen as an "enabler", and not simply a panacea to all technical problems.

"Vaccine for the mind"

A member of the public sought elaboration from Ms Tang on her earlier mention of a "vaccine for the mind" and its potential in curbing an infodemic. For Ms Tang, the "vaccine for the mind" would include the right to digital access (broadband is treated as a basic human right in Taiwan) and public education about media. Examples of media curriculum would include fact-checking, journalistic standards, media literacy, as well as participation in data governance coalitions.

Tradeoff or ethical dilemma — privacy and liveability

Lastly, the panel discussed whether privacy and liveability are mutually exclusive. Dr Woo pointed out that awareness of privacy issues had not deterred social media consumption.

Continuing in the same vein, Professor Ang said that users' recent move to Signal and Telegram after WhatsApp's privacy policy update reflected a lack of understanding on Singapore's laws on personal data protection. He suggested that perhaps it was not so much a "tradeoff", but an ethical dilemma, between the right to protect one's privacy and the right to use data for crime control and liveability. Meanwhile, Mr Liu suggested educating oneself on technology and privacy such that discussions could move beyond broad discussions of privacy to specific solutions.

Here, Ms Tang reiterated the need for mutual trust between the government and its citizens; while the government should keep additional data collection during a crisis to a minimum, they should also grant the citizens time to develop creative solutions of their own. For example, nightlife operators in Taiwan managed to come up with a contact-tracing method involving the use of a throwaway SIM card, which would allow their customers to be traced without expense of their privacy. On this, Dr Cheong said the Singapore government would be more likely to swiftly take matters into their own hands, even if it causes unhappiness.

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