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New Media Society 2006; 8; 707

DOI: 10.1177/1461444806065661

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<http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/8/5/707>

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E-government in a corporatist, communitarian society: the case of Singapore

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Abstract

Singapore was one of the early adopters of e-government initiatives in keeping with its status as one of the few developed Asian countries and has continued to be at the forefront of developing e-government structures. While crediting the city-state for the speed of its development, observers have critiqued that the republic limits pluralism, which directly affects e-governance initiatives. This article draws on two recent government initiatives, the notions of corporatism and communitarianism and the concept of symmetry and asymmetry in communication to present the e-government and e-governance structures in Singapore. Four factors are presented as critical for the creation of a successful e-government infrastructure: an educated citizenry; adequate technical infrastructures; offering e-services that citizens need; and commitment from top government officials to support the necessary changes with financial resources and leadership. However, to have meaningful e-governance there has to be political pluralism, which occurs only when permitted by the state.

Key words

asymmetrical communication • communitarianism • corporatism • e-governance • e-government • public consultation • reinventing Singapore • Singapore 21 • symmetrical communication • transparency

INTRODUCTION

Although it is a **parliamentary democracy**, Singapore is criticized often for lacking political pluralism (e.g. Chua, 1995; Ho, 2000; Yuen, 1999). However, this small city-state is also praised for being a model of rapid economic development (Yuen, 1999). When it seceded from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore faced many financial and social problems, but in less than two decades it had become a developed nation. But, as Chua (1995) succinctly points out, this economic development was accompanied by higher levels of social control by the government.

This article seeks to assess the development and current structure of e-government in Singapore. In conducting this analysis, we will focus on other government initiatives that have contributed significantly to the establishment and growth of e-government in the country. The first, the Singapore 21 program, began in 1999 with the primary aim of promoting several core values that would help to maintain the city-state's prosperity and global competitiveness. The second, Reinventing Singapore, which was introduced in February 2002, has sought among other things to promote a more active citizenry, an indication that the government recognizes a need for greater pluralism. It is in light of these programs that we conduct our analysis of Singapore's e-government and e-governance initiatives. In so doing, we link these initiatives with two theoretical concepts – corporatism and communitarianism. Further, we borrow the concepts of symmetrical and asymmetrical communication from communication management literature to critique these initiatives.

SINGAPORE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Singapore is a cosmopolitan multi-ethnic society located just 137km north of the Equator. Its population of 4.16 million comprises 77 percent Chinese, 14 percent Malays, 8 percent Indians and 1 percent belonging to other nationalities including Caucasians, thus accounting for wide variety in culture, language, cuisine, etc. English is the *lingua franca* with Malay, Chinese and Tamil as the other three official languages. The major religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000).

Since becoming an independent republic in 1965, the city-state has been ruled by a single party, the People's Action Party. During its 38 years of independence, the republic has witnessed high economic growth,

development of a robust infrastructure, low corruption in governance and strong foreign investment, all of which have propelled Singapore from a developing country to a developed one in about two decades. Singapore is currently the 12th largest trading partner of the United States and the second largest Asian investor in the US, ranking among the most competitive economies in the world. The city-state entered into a free trade agreement with the US in January 2004, which not only heralds increased economic opportunities between the two countries, but also signals a long-term US economic commitment towards Singapore. As a result, a new wave of multinational corporations is expected to enter the local market just as Singaporean companies begin their foray into the US market in increasing numbers (US Chamber of Commerce, 2003). It is in this context that we have conducted this analysis of e-government initiatives in Singapore.

E-GOVERNANCE AND E-GOVERNMENT

The concepts of e-governance and e-government have been defined in a variety of ways. This article relies on Kettl's (2002) definition of e-governance as the resulting interaction of government, public service and citizens throughout the political process, policy development, program design and service delivery. In other words, it is the extent to which citizens are actively involved in the political policymaking process and their use of new media to do so.

Three key aspects of e-governance involve citizens' ability to participate in policymaking and decision-making processes and to communicate directly with government officials: e-consultation, e-engagement, and the government's willingness to take citizen input into account, providing feedback on the outcome of specific issues (Kettl, 2002; Riley, 2003; United Nations, 2003). Political pluralism, then, is at the heart of e-governance initiatives.

E-government entails the use of information technologies such as the internet to deliver government services and establish relationships between a government and its constituents. First is the government-to-government relationship, which involves intra- and inter-agency interactions between different arms of the government. Second is the relationship between the government and businesses, which typically aims to use e-services to simplify regulatory processes and government supervision of corporations. The final relationship reflects e-interactions between the government and citizens, aiming to simplify the process of governance and making it more effective and user-friendly.

Improved levels of efficiency and economic development are not the only advantages of an e-government strategy. E-government can advance the democratic process through e-governance initiatives. E-democracy can improve communication between elected representatives and their

constituents. How symmetrical such communication is, depends on the worldviews of government leaders (as will be discussed later in this article). However, we believe that e-government has the potential to encourage greater citizen participation. For governments that wish to be more representative, e-governance can help citizens to learn about potential policy changes before they are enacted, thus providing them with the opportunity of giving input. The *Global Information Technology Report 2002–2003: Readiness for the Networked World* (Dutta et al., 2003) reinforces this point by stating that offering government services online with some degree of interactivity helps to involve citizens in the activities and reforms of the public sector and strengthen the democratic process (Lanvin, 2003).

Singapore has an impressive record in terms of e-government and e-administration. For example, the city-state has been ranked consistently among the world leaders in terms of effective regulation, network readiness and other measures of information and communication technology (ICT) development. In March 2005, Singapore replaced the US as the leader of 104 countries for their readiness to harness ICTs (Schwab, 2005). Established in 2001, this annual ranking assesses countries on three components: the environment for ICT in the country; the readiness of key stakeholders such as individuals and businesses; and usage of ICT by these stakeholders. The *Global Information Technology Report 2002–2003: Readiness for the Networked World* stated that Singapore is 'the shining star of government leadership' due to the government's willingness to promote regulations and policies that facilitate ICT adoption (Lanvin, 2003: 78). But the report also suggested that in order to assume leadership roles, governments should involve civil society as much as possible in the policy decision-making process. In terms of e-governance achievements, Singapore's efforts are still a work in progress (as will be discussed later).

It appears that the government of Singapore has recognized, among other things, that e-governance helps to improve government decision-making and implementation by inviting active citizen participation, and it has shown some willingness to 'consult' with citizens on government policies. We believe that in adopting these new initiatives, Singapore has not lost sight of its corporatist form of government. Later in this article, we discuss the link between corporatism, communitarianism and e-governance initiatives in Singapore.

E-GOVERNMENT IN ASEAN

There is a severe paucity in studies on the use of new media by governments in Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹ Only Holliday (2002) has analysed e-government initiatives in east and south-east Asia. In his study of the websites of 10 ASEAN countries and their east-Asian counterparts, he assessed such factors as internet

visibility, utility and connectivity. He then compared the results with major regional blocs such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), European Union (EU), the Group of Eight (G8) industrialized countries and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). His analysis led him to conclude that among east and south-east Asian nations, only Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan could measure up to other industrialized nations. His study also concluded that Singapore is the only ASEAN nation with high internet activity by the government. He found medium internet activity for the governments of Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. The study ranked the governments of China, Cambodia and Indonesia as having low internet activity.

STRUCTURE OF THE E-GOVERNMENT FRAMEWORK IN SINGAPORE

Singapore is a veteran in adopting e-government initiatives. The first e-government plan was set in motion in 1980, when the government launched its Civil Service Computerization Program, which was part of the National Computerization Plan. Since then, the government has continually adopted new technologies to change the way that it delivers services to the public. In 2000, the government launched an e-government action plan which sought to offer most of its services online. After meeting that objective, the second part of the action plan, which began in 2003, focused on better identifying customers' needs, transcending organizational boundaries (by integrating interagency services) and increasing the number of citizens that use the services. The government plans to use the web to explain the rationale for its public policies. In addition, the new e-government action plan is intended to encourage citizens to provide feedback and contribute to the policy review process through electronic consultations.

Singapore has been hailed as having one of the most advanced systems of e-government, where citizens can log on to a government portal and access information about varied government agencies as well as apply for services and submit information (Holmes, 2001). The E-government Policy Committee coordinates e-government services in Singapore. The secretary (the top civil service official) of each ministry is a member of the committee chaired by the head of the civil service. In addition, there is an e-government advisory panel comprising representatives from the private and public sectors, also chaired by the head of the civil service. The e-government initiative falls within the Ministry of Finance. The Infocomm Development Authority is the country's ICT regulator, providing technical advice as well as defining and recommending ICT policies and standard procedures to the Ministry of Finance. In addition, the Infocomm

Development Authority performs service-wide ICT master planning, and manages the central ICT infrastructure and central ICT initiatives. Further, secretaries of ministries, heads of bodies of state and chief-executives of the statutory boards are responsible for agency-specific ICT infrastructure and services within their own organizations. With the help of the Infocomm Development Authority these public officials align ICT policies, standards, projects, systems and the infrastructure with the vision, business needs and business priorities of the central authority. These officials also ensure that management attention and human and financial resources are allocated to ICT initiatives (see Singapore's e-government website www.gov.sg).

GOVERNMENT-TO-CITIZEN PORTAL

The eCitizen portal (Government of Singapore, 2004a) was launched in 1997 as a single gateway to government services. In 2001, the Singapore government developed the Public Services Infrastructure, whose primary goal was to give unified access to various government agencies and provide one-stop services on demand to Singapore's businesses and citizens through the web and other channels. The portal, which has won numerous international awards, offers convenient e-payment modes such as online payment, cash cards, credit cards and direct debit, as well as authentication modes, including payment using a national ID and PIN.

An e-government customer perception study conducted by AC Nielsen (2003) found that 75 percent of the citizens surveyed reported using electronic means to transact with the government at least once in the past year and 80 per cent of them expressed satisfaction with the quality of e-services. The portal is used widely, averaging about 9 million hits per month. To access the portal, citizens and expatriate professionals temporarily working in Singapore on employment passes can sign up for a personal access password – the 'Sing-Pass' – which authenticates their identity and allows them to access e-government services regardless of with which agency they are dealing.

GOVERNMENT-TO-BUSINESS PORTAL

Businesses also have access to online information and services and can complete many transactions online using the GeBiz portal (Government of Singapore, 2004b). Cutting red tape has been one of the primary objectives of these initiatives. For example, under the current system a new company can be incorporated online in two hours for a flat fee of SGD\$300, whereas when this was done manually, it took two days and cost between SGD\$1200 and \$3500, depending on the size of the company. In addition, businesses can submit building plans online. When done manually, businesses had to bring documents to 12 different agencies. However, now they can

submit the plans online, saving SGD\$450 in fees alone (see: www.gebiz.gov.sg; Singapore's e-government-to-business website).

CHALLENGES FACED BY SINGAPORE IN IMPLEMENTING E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

In order to get the perspective of the planners and managers of the e-government program in Singapore, we sought an interview with the Infocomm Development Authority. When asked what challenges Singapore had faced in instituting the e-government scheme, it identified two key challenges. The first is to persuade different government agencies to collaborate with each other in an effort to deliver integrated services online:

Moving into the next phase of e-government, the challenge is to deliver cross-agency integrated e-services that will really bring greater value and benefits to the customer (citizens and businesses). Agencies need to look beyond their existing organizational boundaries and identify collaborative opportunities for government as a whole to deliver quality and value-added services. (Interview with Mr Tan, Senior Consultant, Infocomm Development Authority, 10 September 2003)

The second challenge the Authority identified may be a result of the city-state's own success as one of the forerunners of e-government initiatives. It stated that striving for 'e-government maturity' when there are so few examples to learn from was a factor that should be considered; 'customers' (citizens and businesses) not only expect but also 'demand' something better all the time. The Authority stated that e-government leaders such as Canada, Singapore and the USA are looking not only at the 'internal agency savings, nor how many service[s] we put online' but also at the 'benefit of use for the e-services delivered'. In other words, the utility of e-government services to citizens and businesses is now a key factor in assessing success.

Although Tan did not mention it, another challenge involves promoting e-services that are accessible to various segments of the population such as the poor, illiterate and elderly (even if affluent). This may not be as big a problem for Singapore given its small population and low level of poverty, but countries with a high population, poverty and illiteracy will have to overcome these additional challenges.

ROLE OF EDUCATION IN ACCEPTANCE OF E-GOVERNANCE BY CITIZENS

Educational and technological infrastructure (literacy levels and the availability and affordability of computers, broadband access, etc.) are core infrastructural ingredients for the success of e-initiatives in any nation. Without a robust basic infrastructure, e-government will be limited to the elites of society, as seen in some other Asian countries such as India, which boasts an internationally successful software industry limited to a few urban

areas. Singapore enjoys a high literacy rate, with about 93 percent of the population above 15 years being literate (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2002). In addition, there has to be a culture of openness between the governor and governed – the essence of good e-governance. Without it, the interactivity brought by e-government will have limited value.

The Authority indicated that the Singapore government has established several programs that assess 'IT manpower education and development', stating that the country's Infocomm Training Framework consists of five levels of programs to enhance the infocomm skills among the population in such areas as basic computer literacy, workforce training and infocomm manpower capability development – all aimed at enhancing Singaporeans' quality of life as well as their employability. Another initiative is the Authority-initiated e-Celebrations (Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, 2004a), whose aim is to communicate the benefits of e-initiatives to businesses and busy working executives. The campaign focuses on four specific topics to be highlighted in four 'thematic months': security and trust, telecommuting, 'Q-busting' (the government's campaign to promote e-government and prevent queuing) and digital fun. Under the auspices of the campaign, activities and events have been organized each month to give hands-on experience of these topics to the populace (Infocomm Development Authority, 2004a). Finally, the Authority has used a myriad of channels such as mass media and marketing or promotional campaigns to educate the masses about e-government initiatives.

PRIVACY AND E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

We asked the Authority to provide us with the government's privacy policies and whether it thought the average user knew about those policies, especially since the 2003–2006 E-Government Initiative II expressly stated: 'A government-wide policy on data protection ensures the privacy rights of users' (Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, 2004b). To this, the Authority replied that the government has a set of internal guidelines of data protection based on the Model Data Protection Code developed for the Singapore private sector in December 2002.² It added that all government websites list the government's Privacy Statement and that:

The guidelines apply to managing personal data in the public sector, with specific carve-outs for data required by law, security and national interests. These carve-outs are common in jurisdictions worldwide and Singapore's are consistent with international practice. They ensure that public sector agencies are able to carry out all their statutory and regulatory duties. (Interview with Mr Tan, Senior Consultant, Infocomm Development Authority, 10 September 2003)³

E-GOVERNMENT AND ACTIVE CITIZENRY

The most significant aspect of Singapore's e-government efforts is that officials have begun to use the e-government platform to promote greater civic participation, which we interpret as an effort at increasing e-governance. For example, in addition to the general e-citizen portal, there are two sites soliciting suggestions on how to cut waste of resources and red tape. In the case of the 'how to cut red tape' site, businesses, citizens and government employees are encouraged to provide constructive feedback with the promise that their suggestions will be kept confidential and will be referred to the appropriate ministry, should they be considered worthy of implementation (Ministry of Finance, nd). Citizens have the choice of writing directly to a ministry or simply providing feedback to the general site, which in turn forwards the comments or recommendations to the appropriate governmental entity. Finally, there is a feedback portal where citizens can ask questions about issues of concern. The site features both the questions (without disclosing the identity of the citizen) and responses from the appropriate agency.

To encourage feedback from citizens, the government has instituted 'feedback units' where groups of ordinary citizens interested in a particular issue can come together and discuss the issue, providing feedback to the government. Further, it is mandated that members of parliament set aside a time slot each week to meet with members of their constituencies. A web portal (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, 2004) invites citizens to offer feedback on government activities and initiatives. A quarterly newsletter (*Feedback News*) provides Singaporeans with information on the activities of the feedback units. In one of the recent issues of the newsletter, Minister of State Raymond Lim exhorted citizens to provide feedback by stating:

Citizenship is not a reality TV show. You cannot just watch [government activities] from the comfort of your home. You need to participate . . . [and] reaffirm our membership and allegiance to our fellow citizens, our community and our country. (Lim, 2004: 3)

E-GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPARENCY IN POLICYMAKING

Singapore has attempted to increase transparency in the policymaking process. In a case study on effective telecommunication regulatory practices, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)⁴ discussed Singapore's efforts to become more transparent in its policymaking in the telecommunications sector (see ITU, 2001). The ITU has consistently heralded the importance of transparency because it leads to more fairness in the regulatory process. While the context or focus of the ITU case study was the telecommunications sector, the organization argued that

transparency not only helps the public and the regulated industry, it can help regulators as well. Transparency allows regulators to gain information and consult all stakeholders, thus building some political consensus for their decision. It allows regulators to justify their actions by citing the facts provided to them and by making cogent arguments that those actions will serve the public interest (ITU, 2002).

The SARS epidemic that affected many Asian countries in 2003 was an example of how transparency worked to the benefit of the country. While China's lack of transparency and candour was debated and criticized, Singapore opted to follow the route of openness and was applauded for it. According to Goh (2002), Attorney and former Deputy Director of the Infocomm Development Authority's Policy Division:

We need to be aware of the level of transparency of governments in developed countries and how their actions and decisions are open for scrutiny by the public and the media. Singapore's current standard of transparency and openness, albeit high compared to many countries in Asia, is still some distance from the developed countries' standard Our fundamental challenge is in finding and articulating a new balance between Singapore's economic aspirations versus our philosophy and values as a society. The globalised nature of the economy and external forces that are upon Singapore suggest that inevitably, the current point of balance needs to move towards an even more open and liberal mindset. (Goh, 2002: 25–6)

Transparency lends legitimacy to governmental actions (ITU, 2002). At a time when some governments are going through challenging economic times and have to make difficult and often unpopular decisions, allowing the decision-making process to be more open and transparent can lead to a public that is better informed about the rationale for those tough government actions. In addition, transparency promotes confidence among foreign investors. The ITU concluded that transparency is growing in Singapore. The organization found that in the telecommunications sector, the Infocomm Development Authority has begun to recognize the value of transparency, especially with regard to public consultation, although the organization recognized that there was room for improvement (ITU, 2001). Other government bodies request public comments and provide some opportunity for public consultation such as the Ministry of Finance, which has had a public consultation link in its website on income tax reform. However, the number of citizens who are aware of these public consultations may be small. For example, on the consultation related to tax reform, there were only 28 comments – 15 from individuals, five from professional or business associations, four from accounting firms and four from companies (Ministry of Finance, 2004).

Thus, while some agencies seem to be willing to seek public comment, there is no formal public consultation process requirement. In addition,

there are no clear guidelines to promote awareness that such consultations are taking place. More importantly, it is not very clear what effect the consultation is having on policymaking.

DISCUSSION

The above description of the e-government program in Singapore helps us to discuss its efficacy. To do so, we believe it is important to discuss the environment within which this program has been instituted, especially since other countries such as Jordan and Vietnam have sought Singapore's help in setting up their own e-government programs. The question we seek to address here is: what can other countries, especially those in Asia, learn from the Singaporean experience? In response, we focus on two government initiatives (the Singapore 21 Program and Reinventing Singapore) that have tried to promote a more active citizenry, one of the foundations of e-governance that Caldwell (2002) has discussed. We also discuss the impact of corporatism and communitarianism on the e-government program in Singapore to highlight the uniqueness of Singapore as an environment for e-government initiatives.

The Singapore 21 initiative

One of the seven 'leadership milestones' that Caldwell (2002) proposed was that e-government initiatives should help advance the democratic process of a country by increasing interactive communication between the rulers and the ruled, thereby promoting a higher level of public participation in policymaking. Although logical, it is important to recognize that other factors such as the culture (societal and political) of a country influence the extent to which citizens participate in policymaking. For example, despite the high rate of literacy, Singaporeans are notorious for their apathy when it comes to government matters and are content to offer as little as possible feedback on issues of governance (Veloo, 2002). Some of this has been attributed to the communitarian ideology that Singapore's government has instilled in the nation (Chua, 1995).

Stating that there was a need to increase the cohesiveness of society and increase public participation in policymaking, Singapore's prime minister set up a committee in August 1997 to find ways to 'strengthen the intangibles of society like social cohesion, political stability and the collective will, values and attitudes of Singaporeans' (Singapore 21 Committee, 2004). The Singapore 21 Committee held 80 public forums, several surveys and designed a website to help citizens provide feedback on this issue. Approximately 6000 members of the society (out of a population of approximately 4 million) responded, helping the Committee to identify the five core elements of the Singapore 21 vision that helped the government to launch the program in 1999.

The first four elements identified by the Committee dealt with social matters: every Singaporean matters; opportunities for all; strong families and the 'Singapore heartbeat'. We believe that the fifth, 'active citizens', is directly relevant to the issues discussed in this article. Under this initiative, Singaporeans are exhorted not to leave governance solely in the hands of the government but to 'become participants, not mere observers, in building the Singapore . . . [of] the future' (Singapore 21 Committee, 2004). We believe that this is an invitation by the government to citizens to participate in public policymaking. We choose to focus on this element because, as mentioned at the outset of this article, Singapore has been criticized by observers for seeking economic success while sacrificing political pluralism. Thus, efforts at soliciting feedback can be viewed as a welcome first step toward pluralism. The next step would be for such feedback to be factored into policymaking. Two obvious questions arise in this context. First, will a majority of the citizens respond to this invitation by the government and provide honest feedback? Second, how receptive is the government to such feedback, especially if it is divergent with its own views?

As mentioned previously, all the available indications suggest that most Singaporeans continue to be content to leave public policymaking in the hands of the government.⁵ Further, the government does appear to have its own boundaries for active citizenry, as evidenced in an exchange in 2000 between a newspaper columnist and a minister on the issue of high ministerial salaries. In 1994, the government introduced the system of remuneration where top government officials were paid salaries comparable to top executives in the private sector because, 'like all organizations, governments get the executives they pay for, Singaporeans were told' (George, 2000: 75). Widely recognized as the architect of modern Singapore, senior minister Lee Kuan Yew took the lead in persuading Singaporeans to accept this reality, stating that whereas his generation of leaders had deep convictions of national service and therefore sought minimal material returns, in the current era where fortunes were being made by the enterprising in a changed 'social climate', it was unrealistic to expect public servants to sacrifice economic rewards. Columnist Catherine Lim (1994) felt that the populace preferred ministers who choose servitude over material gain when they enter public service. In a column, she argued that the government typically calls for robust public debate on issues but then ignores public sentiment when it comes to making policy decisions on the issue. The then Minister of State for Defence and Information and the Arts, David Lim, responded to the journalist's commentary:

The Government is open and transparent about its policy on ministers' pay. This is in the spirit of Singapore 21 There is no contradiction between receiving a fair wage and being committed to serve the public and work for the well-being of the country. (Lim, 2000)

This exchange is part of the government's website on the Singapore 21 initiative and the minister's response to the columnist's comments appears to have ended the debate on this issue. But for many critics, the incident was a perfect example of the 'don't dare criticize the government' climate that existed in Singapore (Frank, 2001).

Worldviews and e-governance

To dissect this debate further, we borrow from the literature on public relations and communication management to discuss the notion of symmetry, because it has direct relevance to robust e-governance. As a foundation, we focus on the notion of 'paradigm' that Kuhn (1970) described, which 'stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community' (1970: 175). In other words, these beliefs, values, etc. are the worldviews shared by members of a community. Extending this concept to the communication of organizations (including governments), Grunig and White (1992) identified two worldviews that typify the nature of communication between organizations (including governments) and their constituencies (including citizens). On the one hand, organizations that operate with an asymmetrical worldview tend to be conservative (shunning change), have centralized authority (concentration of power in the hands of a few top managers), give subordinates little autonomy, promote elitism (leaders of organizations know what is best for their constituents) and generally operate as closed systems (not importing communication or inputs from external sources). On the other, organizations that have symmetrical worldviews have a decentralized management style, resolve conflict through negotiation, give constituents greater autonomy and operate as open systems inviting feedback from constituents, staying open to use such feedback to change their own world views.

Grunig and White (1992) extended these two worldviews to organizational communication patterns. They introduced the two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical communication models as two strategies that organizations use in order to communicate with their constituents. The former uses the two-way flow of communication to achieve symmetry in understanding (mutually negotiated understanding) between the organization and its constituents. The latter model also describes the use of a two-way flow of communication by organizations but the information gathered through feedback channels is used primarily for persuading its constituents, rather than changing the organization's own operations and activities in line with the wishes of its constituents. In other words, organizations that practise two-way asymmetry give the illusion of being open to external views and opinions.

Extending this to e-governance issues, we believe that unless a government truly believes in engaging in symmetrical communication with its constituents – it is willing to persuade and be persuaded – e-governance initiatives will give only the appearance of actively engaging a citizenry in policymaking without really ceding any power to them. We believe that the word ‘consultation’ is often a euphemism for two-way asymmetry if, as a result of the consultation, the more powerful constituent (the organization) is unwilling to be persuaded at least some of the time. Therefore, as the holder of power in most societies, the worldviews of the government are critical to the development of meaningful e-democracy and e-governance.

The Remaking Singapore initiative

The government launched the ‘Remaking Singapore’ initiative in February 2002 in an effort to evaluate the challenges that it faces in a global and increasingly competitive environment. Over 12 months, the Remaking Singapore Committee engaged in 65 sessions, consulting with more than 10,000 people including local residents, students, religious and ethnic groups, grass roots organizations, young professionals, members of the business community, arts groups, youth groups and Singaporeans living overseas (Remaking Singapore Committee, 2003).

In the report based on the inquiry, the Committee recognized that a more educated and mobile population expects active involvement in the country’s affairs. As a result, the report indicated that the government would introduce legislation to allow Singaporeans living overseas an opportunity to vote (Remaking Singapore Committee, 2003). It also acknowledged that the government has to adopt ‘a less prescriptive role and play a more facilitatory role’ (2003: 20).

For the purpose of this study and its focus on e-governance, the most relevant recommendations of the report are those involving citizen participation, freedom of expression and transparency in governmental decision-making (Remaking Singapore Committee, 2003). Many observers expected that these recommendations would lead to a more participatory society. But to the dismay of some (and the surprise of few), the recommendations were fairly conservative. The report stated that ‘Singapore suffers from a *perception* of being tightly regulated’ (2003: 42; emphasis added) and that these regulations on free speech ‘are necessary in Singapore’s multi-racial and multi-religious society to limit the risk to public and social order’. According to the report, the government would try to find ‘a new balance that maintains law and order and yet does not stifle the creativity of our people’ (2003: 2). However, any relaxation of the rules must be accompanied by ‘corresponding increases in accountability’ on the people wishing to express themselves (2003: 42).

The Committee report also discussed potential ways to promote 'artistic' (as opposed to political) expression. Because those who wish to engage in a public discussion (artistic or political) must obtain an entertainment licence, the report suggested streamlining the registration process and providing clearer explanations of the kind of content that would be considered unacceptable – especially content that could cause 'racial/religious enmity' (2003: 43). The report also mentioned the fact that Singapore already has 'designated spaces' where people can engage in expressive activities – referring to the so-called 'speaker's corner' established at Hong Lim Park in 2000 (2003: 45), similar to the famous site in London's Hyde Park for members of the public to voice their opinions.

To promote a more active citizenry, the report recommended that the government should institutionalize a process by which 'government agencies clearly indicate, as part of any announcement on policy changes, which groups have been consulted, what views were expressed, which suggestions have been adopted and the reasons why some suggestions have not been adopted' (2003: 48). In addition, it recommended that the government should draft a code of consultation 'providing guidelines and minimum standards on when and how the public should be consulted (2003: 50).

Some critics were disappointed with the report. For example, among the recommendations that did not achieve a majority of votes within the Committee were those involving a change in the country's defamation laws (Remaking Singapore Committee, 2003), which government critics claim are used to bankrupt anyone who dares criticize incumbent government officials (Agence France Presse, 2003). Another rejected proposal involved enacting a Freedom of Information Act to enable journalists to request and receive information from ministries and government agencies (Remaking Singapore Committee, 2003). Finally, recommendations to liberalize the local media, which is owned partly by the government, were also rejected (Remaking Singapore Committee, 2003).

The Think Centre, a local political non-governmental organization,⁶ criticized the report as a ploy, while some Singaporeans living overseas decried the lack of civic participation and interest in free speech among their compatriots living in the city-state (Veloo, 2002). The letters to the editor columns in local dailies and the speaker's corner are the only legal and public ways for citizens to criticize the government. But harsh criticism of specific policy initiatives or the actions of government officials seldom appears in newspapers which, while owned by publicly-traded companies, are perceived by most observers and Singaporeans as being very government-friendly.

However, participation in the Hong Lim speaker's corner has been limited, mostly because individuals who wish to speak there are required to register with the police and their speeches have to avoid any issues inciting

racial or religious hostilities, or compromising sovereignty and national security – the so-called ‘OB (out of bounds) markers’.⁷ In addition, speakers are subject to Singapore’s strict defamation laws which, according to some media reports, ‘have bankrupted opposition politicians and other government critics’ (Agence France Presse, 2003).

Less than two weeks after taking over as Prime Minister on 12 August 2004, Lee Hsien Loong delivered the National Day rally speech on 21 August (equivalent to the US State of the Union address), noting the need for more pluralism. Specifically, he said that the government needed to ‘encourage participation and debate’. While he recognized that the degree of debate in Singapore had increased over the years, he stated: ‘We can go further’. He suggested eliminating the requirement for licensing for indoor talks and enhancing people’s ability to participate in the speaker’s corner. But he cautioned that free expression would be allowed so long as citizens did not talk about ‘race’ and religion or incited a riot (Lee, 2004).

However, about three weeks after this speech, a letter to the Editor of the *Straits Times* (Lok and Seow, 2004) lamented that these ‘liberalization measures disappointed many when the ‘fine print’ was revealed’. The letter noted that ‘the exercise of freedom of speech [at the speaker’s corner] must be done between 7am and 7pm, only after registration with the police, without the aid of microphones and without assembly’. This appeared to be the lone public dissenting voice.

It is yet to be seen how the government responds to criticisms and how this debate will end. At the moment, it appears that there is more evidence of two-way asymmetrical communication than two-way symmetrical communication on this issue. Perhaps the communitarian philosophy (to be discussed presently) that is so ingrained into the culture and psyche of most Singaporeans is responsible, for there is hesitation even among some citizens towards two-way symmetry, as evidenced in the above two responses.

Singapore and corporatism

As a political theory, corporatism has a long history originating in the medieval tradition of divine authority that was later associated with Catholic political and social theory. In addition to highlighting the malleability and therefore the lack of a universally accepted definition for the term, scholars such as Therborn (1992: 24) have tried to define it with references to God, stating: ‘Corporatism has become a bit like God . . . Nobody really knows what it looks like, so disagreement persists . . . about what it is and what it does’. Such references are not surprising given the alignment of this term to Catholicism. Teulings and Hartog (1998: 27) traced the origins of corporatist ideology to ‘nineteenth-century Roman Catholic thought as a type of social organization that is intermediary between capitalism and socialism’.

Corporatism involves giving groups representing different interests access to legislative decision-making. According to Teulings and Hartog (1998: 7), the principal elements of corporatism involve 'large, almost monopolistic organized interest groups; overt explicit interaction with the government; [and] coordination of actions within the organized interest groups across large segments of the economy'. Pekkarinen et al. (1992) identified two dimensions of social corporatism: centralized wage bargaining (involving the government, labour unions and employers); and a level of egalitarianism where economic assets and liabilities are shared equally, based on a philosophy of solidarity.

Alegret (1998) identified four dimensions of corporativism: the ancient guilds' corporatism; traditional or anti-revolutionary corporatism; state-controlled fascist-oriented corporatism; and technocratic or neo-corporatism. We believe that Singapore is most representative of technocratic or neo-corporatism where, according to Alegret (1998: 6), societal decision-making is almost exclusively in the hands of technocrats so as to reduce or avoid 'open and violent conflict between the different groups of interests . . . while the State reserves for itself the roles not only of judge, but also that of interested party'.

Singapore's e-citizen portal – a one-stop service site – is indicative of the city-state's approach to e-government as a business model, in keeping with the corporatist leanings of the country. Often, Singapore has been referred to as 'Singapore Inc.' by observers, and with good reason. Hamlin (2002) reported in the *Institutional Investor* that six of Singapore's top 10 listed companies are wholly or largely owned by the government. As a result, government enterprises account for 12.9 percent of Singapore's gross domestic product. The government has even given 'shares' to citizens that they can exchange whenever they want for cash, as with other publicly-traded stocks.

Further, one could argue that Singapore's version of corporatism has helped to elevate it from a developing to a developed nation within two generations, while keeping it a cohesive country despite differences in ethnicity. One has to balance this pro with the con that this philosophy has instilled in the minds of the typical Singaporean a sense of dependency on the government for solutions to every problem. In addition, a Singaporean cultural trait known as *kiasu* encourages citizens to conform with the majority because as individuals they are afraid to 'lose out'. However, entrepreneurs are often risk takers and are not afraid to lose. Recently the government has tried overtly to encourage an entrepreneurial spirit among Singaporeans, even enlisting help from the mass media, which has showcased success stories of high-school dropouts who have taken risks and become millionaires. But currently there is little evidence that the typical Singaporean is buying into this philosophy of risk-taking. However, in terms

of generalizing this experience, we wonder whether Singapore's model of corporatism would work very well in other Asian societies, all of whom have a significantly larger population or are subject to other constraints such as poverty, illiteracy and lack of technical infrastructure. Thus, given this political and cultural environment in Singapore, true public participation in governance, whether through e-governance or more traditional means, does not appear to be here yet.

Singapore and communitarianism

As mentioned at the outset of this article, communitarianism also seems to fit the Singaporean model of governance in general and e-governance in particular. As Chua (1995) points out, in an effort to counter any demands for individual freedoms by an increasingly educated and affluent populace, the People's Action Party government has 'moved to denounce [liberalism] as 'corrupting' influences of the West'. In addition, the government has offered its own model for structuring Singapore's society 'supposedly 'distilled' from 'Asian' traditions'. Chua refers to this as an example of communitarianism.

Communitarianism originated in the Anglo-American response by critics of Rawls's (1971) liberal assertion that the primary task of governments is to provide for a fair distribution of the liberties and economic resources that citizens need to lead life the way they choose to live. According to Garfinkle (nd): 'Communitarians recognize that a healthy society must have a correct balance between individual autonomy and social cohesion.' Along the same lines, the responsive communitarian platform stated:

The best place to start is where each new generation acquires its moral anchoring: at home, in the family. We must insist once again that bringing children into the world entails a moral responsibility to provide, not only material necessities, but also moral education and character formation. (The Communitarian Network, nd)

This is consonant with the 'strong families' value of the Singapore 21 initiative and is summed up aptly by the Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies:

Communitarianism is essentially an optimistic approach to issues of public policy. While mindful of human tendencies to act in self-interested ways, Communitarians believe that it is possible to build a good society based on the desire of human beings to cooperate to achieve community goals that are based on positive values. (Garfinkle, nd)

Singapore has been trying for decades to stress community goals over individual ones, as already highlighted in this article. However, the government's campaign to build a strong and cohesive community probably has been so successful that personal entrepreneurship has suffered as a side-

effect. Now, Singapore is trying to stress individual risk-taking and entrepreneurship as a good value for citizens to imbibe so that the society as a whole remains competitive in the 21st century in the midst of globalization. Whether and to what extent Singaporeans will adopt this new ideology remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although observers agree that freedom of speech is restricted in Singapore relative to western liberal democratic standards and that Singaporeans engage in self-censorship, there is no doubt that currently, Singapore is embarking on a self-examination process that will bring about changes in its society. Setting up an efficient e-government infrastructure that seeks to promote a more involved citizenry is an important step in this direction. But if citizens are encouraged (and indeed expected) to participate more actively in policymaking and become individualistic entrepreneurs, there needs to be the political will to engage in genuine two-way symmetrical communication beyond public consultation on ministry websites.

Whereas Singapore ranks at, or near, the top in surveys that measure network readiness, web presence, etc., it ranks relatively low in aspects of e-governance. For example, in the UN 'e-participation' ranking (United Nations, 2003), which assessed the extent to which e-government initiatives enhanced 'people's ability to engage in dialogue with their government as consumers of public services and to participate in the political process as citizens' (United Nations, 2003: 19), Singapore had a lower rank.

E-participation involves e-information, e-consultation and e-decision making. E-information requires that the government provides tools for dissemination of information so that citizens can have timely access to, and use of, public information, including web forums, email lists, news groups and chatrooms. E-consultation requires that government websites explain e-consultation mechanisms and tools and offer a choice of public policy topics for online discussion. In addition, real time and archived access to audios and videos of public meetings should be provided. E-decision-making requires that governments use citizen input in decision-making. The government of Singapore does engage in e-consultation but as mentioned previously, it is not clear to what extent this feedback actually influences policymaking. If such consultations do end up influencing policy, that would be a sign of symmetrical communication, as opposed to asymmetrical communication. In the e-participation index (United Nations, 2003), Singapore tied with Italy at number 13 with a ranking of .483. Two Asian nations – the Philippines (.672) and South Korea (.483) – ranked higher than Singapore in e-governance. The UN report concluded that:

Across the board, with very few exceptions, the willingness of governments to use ICT for e-participation is lower – and in some cases much lower – than

their otherwise demonstrated web presence capacity . . . Only 13 countries, or 8 percent of those that have a presence on the web, had a clear policy statement on their website encouraging citizens to participate in the process of decision-making. And even in such cases, the degree to which backroom support matches the web site rhetoric would have to be further tested. (United Nations, 2003: 20)

In addition to the web, we believe the government can use traditional mass media to promote regular public consultation initiatives. For example, the government could publish in local newspapers a list of open public consultations with website addresses where citizens can seek more information every week. Over time, citizens will come to expect such regular columns. In addition, the government should set up a formal process that requires all ministries and other government bodies to follow established procedures vis-a-vis public consultation. If there are concerns about efficiency, the time period for submitting comments need not be overly lengthy. What is important is that citizens have adequate opportunities to participate. For those opportunities to exist there needs to be a mechanism that promotes public consultation initiatives and a reduction in the perception that 'Big Brother' is watching, in order to elicit more candid comments and suggestions.

Mechanisms such as feedback websites and public consultations by ministries are clear indicators that the government is attempting to get the citizenry involved in decision-making. However, it is not clear to what extent this apparent symmetry is real, not only in the process of communication but also in the motive behind the communication. E-governance can be a vehicle that promotes citizen participation and more symmetrical communication if the political system supports a greater level of public influence in governance.

Based on our analysis, we believe that at least four factors are critical for the creation of a successful e-government infrastructure: an educated citizenry; an adequate technical infrastructure; the offering of e-services that citizens need; and commitment from top government officials to support the necessary changes with financial resources and leadership. To have meaningful e-governance there has to be political pluralism, which occurs only when a state permits it.

Singapore is currently in a process of self-examination and evolution. While some critics may argue that the government is unlikely to change, we believe that change *is* taking place, albeit at a much slower pace than many would like. Nonetheless, as the government encourages citizens to become more involved and provide input on governance, it is possible that a culture of civic participation may emerge in Singapore eventually, especially if communication between the government and citizens becomes more symmetrical and government policies reflect citizens' inputs and concerns.

Future studies can assess such areas as the growth in civic participation by citizens, the changes to the culture of the society and its ability to take risks and the increase in the level of symmetry in e-government communications. Further, Pan-Asian studies could assess which of the models used in Singapore are transferable to other ASEAN and Asian countries.

Notes

- 1 Ke and Wei (2004) published a brief case study of Singapore's e-government initiatives, focusing on the stages of implementation.
- 2 The Code is available at: <http://www.trustsg.org.sg/mdpc.htm> (consulted 22 October 2003).
- 3 The government of Singapore privacy statement is available at: <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/privacy.htm> (consulted 22 October 2003).
- 4 The ITU is an organization that coordinates the actions of member states with the private sector in terms of telecommunication networks and services.
- 5 It is not the focus of this article to delve into the reasons for this phenomenon.
- 6 The Think Centre is an

independent, multi-partisan political non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Singapore. The Centre aims to critically examine issues related to political development, democracy, rule of law, human rights and civil society. Think Centre's activities include research, publishing, organizing events and networking.

See: <http://www.thinkcentre.org/aboutus/index.cfm> (consulted 5 September 2003).

- 7 'Out of bound' markers are topics that drift into a 'danger zone' prescribed by the government because of the potential for causing racial or religious disharmony or threatening national security and stability.

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