Identity, Privacy and Technology in Singapore

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Abstract: The Singaporean government, while democratic, is highly authoritarian. This paper examines the relationship, in the context of ICT and e-government, between the government and the individual in Singapore, using the examples of online tax return filing, and public health control, and argues that the People's Action Party government's pragmatic ideology is a key variable in explaining this relationship. For an effective interaction between individual and government, the government insists on the use of an identity constructed along well-understood lines, and marginalises those who attempt to communicate in other ways (e.g. using blogs). This is consistent with PAP government practice with respect to its offline relations.

Key words: Singapore, e-government, privacy, identity, trust, ideology, pragmatism, democracy, authoritarianism, communitarianism

Introduction

In his classic work on the information age and network societies, Manuel Castells is intriguingly candid about Singapore, which "baffles me, as everybody else" (Castells

2000, 305). Castells, writing comparatively about East Asian 'tigers' including Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea, had great difficulty fitting Singapore into his framework. Civil society appeared not to have developed (though some have disputed this claim – Mauzy & Milne 2002, 157-168), and the state remained active and powerful. Governmental control of information was strong, many aspects of life and society meticulously planned centrally, with remarkably little litter, graffiti or drug or alcohol abuse. Yet corruption is extremely low, and tension well within acceptable bounds despite a racially diverse society. The biggest paradox of all is that Singapore is a functioning democracy, with regular free and fair elections, and a one-party state.

As an authoritarian democracy, Singapore is possibly unique in the world. The nature of its governing ideology is disputed, with some detecting an underlying Confucianism (Mauzy & Milne 2002, 57-8) while its leaders have tried at various times to spread 'Asian values' as a culturally-embedded alternative to Western liberalism (Mahbubani 2002, 2008). However, ultimately the content of the ideology of Singapore's governing party is a deep pragmatism, whereby the party legitimates its rule by providing economic growth and development (Chua 1995). Technology, especially in recent years information technology, has been a key mechanism for maintaining the hegemony of the ruling party (Johal 2004, O'Hara & Stevens 2006, Rodan 1998, Sriramesh & Rivera-Sánchez 2006).

In this paper, I wish to examine the position of the individual citizen of Singapore, in the context of the complex matrix of ideology and technology. Ideology is a key variable in understanding Singaporean politics and governance, and I shall consider the privacy of the individual through an ideological prism. The resulting society is, as I have argued elsewhere, in many ways ideal for the implementation of technological

developments particularly in governments (O'Hara & Stevens 2006). The next section will set out some key factors in Singaporean ideology, and show how they impact on government and e-government with some practical examples. The following section will look more deeply at privacy-related issues. Next, I shall consider some structural factors which support the government's relatively powerful position with respect to the citizen. Finally, I shall end with a discussion which will attempt to draw some lessons, where possible, for the wider world.

Ideology and e-government

The pragmatic ideology of the People's Action Party (PAP), the party of government in Singapore, was developed under its first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Lee was a key political figure during the struggle for independence, and its ruler from independence in 1965 to 1990 (Lee 2000). He retains a great deal of influence at the time of writing (2008); his son is currently Prime Minister, who has appointed his father *Minister Mentor*, a unique position in world politics, which though an advisory role is a cabinet position.

Singapore's place in the world

The nature of the pragmatic Singaporean ideology follows from a number of factors in Singapore's unique history and geography, which we shall briefly discuss in this subsection. The factors can be described as: geographical, historical, ideological, political, institutional and technological.

Geographical factors

Perhaps the most obvious thing about Singapore is its tiny size. At 704km^2, Singapore is the 188th largest country in the world out of 219 (all demographic statistics are from Sparks 2008). Its population, at 4.5m, is close to the international median figure for countries (only Macau and Monaco have higher population densities). It is a city state made up of 63 islands. It is sandwiched between two much larger countries: Malaysia and Indonesia. It has few natural resources, but its presence on an important shipping lane makes trade an obvious source of income.

The population is ethnically diverse, 74.8% Chinese, 13.5% Malay and 9.0% Indian, largely Tamil. There is a good deal of heterogeneity within these ethnic groups as well. Lee Kuan Yew has always been sensitive to the possibility of racial strife, and the management of race relations is a high priority.

Singapore being a city state has meant that government control and communication is effective. There has been no landowning class to resist reform. People are closely grouped, and technologies such as ICT or WiFi can be rolled out to large numbers of people very quickly. Compulsion to adopt technology is hard to resist given such a geographical concentration.

Historical factors

Singapore suffered birth pangs. A merger with Malaysia, in 1963, led to friction between the assertive Singaporean government and the federal Malaysian structure, and in 1965 it split from the federation and declared independence unilaterally, leaving bad feeling between the two governments. Singapore found itself sandwiched

between two hostile and much larger nations, Malaysia and Indonesia. The new government of Singapore perceived itself to be extremely threatened.

The legacy of British rule has been helpful in many respects for Singapore, perhaps particularly with the mainstream use of the English language, which has been adopted as a compulsory language in schools, and provides a neutral medium between the three ethnic groups.

Ideological factors

Originally, the PAP was a 'leftist' party, but in a bad-tempered purge its pro-Communist wing and trade unionists expelled. During the Cold War, the PAP government made anti-Communism one of its mainstays. This helped develop good relations between Singapore and the USA. However, since the collapse of the Soviet system, the key ideological problem in the world, as the Singaporean government sees it, is the American project to export liberalism. Singapore, in common with many authoritarian Asian states, has resisted this strongly, but has imported some aspects of the liberal agenda, such as transparency, to help improve the operation of trading and financial markets. But the transparency envisaged does not constitute genuine democratic oversight, but rather the placing of technocratic systems of regulation and oversight whose terms of reference are fixed by government. For example, technocratic systems have been put in place to secure increased and sustainable capital mobility, but there is no forum for democratic debate on whether capital mobility is a social benefit. Transparency can even reinforce authoritarianism: the PAP has placed a limit of the amount of money that can be donated anonymously to a

political party. This has had the effect of dramatically reducing the amount of money given to opposition parties (Rodan 2004).

Political factors

Politically, Singapore was always a democracy. Since independence it has held 10 General Elections, each one won by the PAP with an enormous majority (the latest, in 2006, returned the PAP with 66.6% of the vote, and 82 of 84 directly elected seats; this was a 10% swing *away* from the PAP from the previous election in 2001, although it won the same number of seats). The PAP has been massively over-represented in Parliament since independence, and has never had serious opposition in that time.

Institutional factors

As a result of its colonial history, Singapore has adopted a number of institutions on the British model. In particular, the Singaporean constitution is based on the British system, and so contains no explicit right to privacy. Another key borrowing is the idea of a neutral, technocratic civil service; the Singaporean civil service is very effective and technically 'above' politics, but in a one-party state that is extremely hard to achieve. Hence, although it provides neutral and generally high-quality advice, and although it is institutionally separate from the government, individual civil servants are of course fully aware that there is no chance of the PAP government being thrown out of office any time soon, and individual civil servants, at all levels, are likely to have connections with government, Parliament or the PAP.

Technological factors

As a small city-state, Singapore can boast remarkable facilities for information technology. ICT has been an important part of the education system for many years, and it has one of the highest penetrations of mobile phones, PCs, Internet use and broadband. The first national ICT programme, the National Computerisation Plan, began in 1980 (there have been several such plans since), and planned ICT roll-out has continued, making Singapore one of the most wired nations. The Civil Service Computerisation Programme began in 1982. The three consistent aims of the Singaporean government are (i) to adopt ICT in government, (ii) to develop the ICT industry, and (iii) to enhance citizens' ICT skills (Tan & Yong 2003).

Ideology

The Singaporean ideology has been shaped by all these factors. The basic proposition upon which the ideology sits is that Singaporean society is under threat – from without, by much larger neighbours which have been hostile on a number of occasions in the past, and from within, by the possibility of ethnic strife. The aim of the government is to generate growth and development, which will address each of these threats. Money generated by growth can be used for defence, to address the external threat, and will alleviate poverty and inequality (as well as reduce the incentives for corruption), addressing the internal threat.

In order to generate growth, the PAP government has taken an extremely hands-on line with the economy.

1. It provides generous social services.

2. Through the Housing and Development Board it provides about 86% of the nation's housing.

3. It provides generous pension coverage.

4. It is keen to attract multinational companies.

5. It invests a lot of money itself through Government-Linked Companies, nominally private companies owned largely by the government.

6. It has a highly corporatist bias, where the state organises labour and capital, controlling or sponsoring favoured representative groups (cold-shouldering those it does not favour), and directing capital where it believes investment will most usefully be deployed.

7. In recent years it has pushed knowledge-based industries, and sees itself as a Knowledge-Based Economy.

It is an elitist government, keen on technocrats and effectively ruled by a small group of people at the top. Talented people are encouraged to take on two or three jobs. Government is for the people, but not by the people. However, the elite is expected to rule in the public interest,; the legitimacy of the government rests on the delivery of benefits for the population as a whole. Government is meritocratic, so talented people should always be able to move up. Job performance and educational qualifications are important for objective determination of merit. Multiracialism is an important

'founding myth' of the Singaporean state; tolerance is promoted, and all ethnic groups are equal under the law.

The wider population not involved with government is expected to be responsible and pliable. Socialisation is an important aim of government, and the state thinks very little of 'social engineering', trying to produce attitudes that promote social harmony within the population, and reducing counter-cultural expression (Mauzy & Milne 2002, 58-59). Debate is not encouraged, and the gerrymanders the constituencies in the first-past-the-post electoral system, although it also appoints one or two unelected opposition MPs to Parliament!

Elections are fair and free, but the risk of defeat is minimised by some roughhouse tactics – the electoral system makes it almost impossibly hard for opposition parties to make a breakthrough, the media is kept very friendly to the government, and criticisms of government are often met with ruinous defamation suits which have often bankrupted prominent opposition politicians (Mutalib 2004). But as well as these unsavoury aspects, the PAP has tried to establish its own ideology as a consensus position of national identity, where dissent is seen as irrational. The result is often a depoliticisation of the political space, and a perception of many social problems as being amenable to technocratic solution (Chua 1995). It is predictable that the PAP would be very interested in the efficiency savings promised by e-government, to which I will now turn.

E-government

Singapore has rolled out a number of e-government action plans, to develop positive benefits across a range of vectors. There is a dedicated infocomm team to identify opportunities for inter-agency collaboration and delivery of service. Regular targets are set (e.g. for numbers of inter-agency integrated e-services, or for uptake of services) and Singapore closely monitors its position in international e-government rankings. By 2006, 95% of services which could be delivered electronically were online, and some services (such as registering a business) can only be performed online with no paper process back end.

SINGOV (http://www.gov.sg/) is a first-stop portal for public e-services launched in 1999. The Singaporean citizen interacts with government through the eCitizen site (http://www.ecitizen.gov.sg/), which provides G2C information and services (Figure 1). One can register for a personalised portal (My.eCitizen), and one can be provided with a single point of entry into the system, a SingPass (Singapore Personal Access), launched in 2003, which is basically a common online password for users to access government e-services. In 2007, 3m Singaporeans were registered, while 370 e-services were open to SingPass. Since 2006, the administration of SingPass has been managed by a company in the private sector, appointed through open tender.
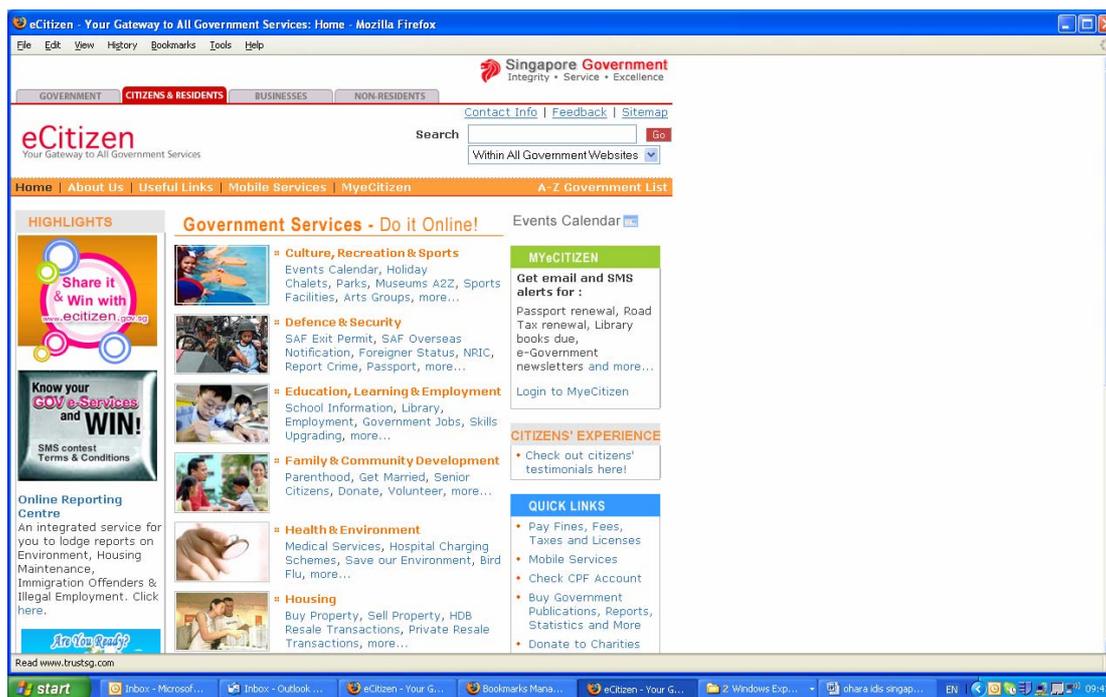
Figure 1: The eCitizen Portal

There are other centralised monitoring systems, such as the Electronic Road Pricing system (ERP), dating from 1998. This collects information about a vehicle's movements via smart cards plugged into transmitters in every car and video surveillance cameras. The claim is that data is kept for 24 hours, and there is no central accounting system. The similar Electronic Parking System is also being adopted in parking garages across Singapore (Privacy International 2007).

The rhetoric of Singaporean government often cites the difficulties of centralised policy-making. Top-down government, it claims, is no longer possible; provision of leadership is not only harder, but also it takes more resources than consultation. However, persuading people to talk openly is a hard task given Singaporean history (see next section) and top-down fostering of an active citizenry is seen as important to maintain and improve the quality of governance.

In most Western democracies, feedback to government is supplied by a non-compliant media, lobby groups and the real chance of the political opposition becoming the government. In Singapore, none of these institutions obtains, and instead negative feedback is modulated through a government agency, the Feedback Unit (Feedback Unit 2004). The Singaporean government is well-known for its love of acronyms, but a number of citizens have commented on the irony of the acronym for 'Feedback Unit'. In 2006, the Feedback Unit launched Reach (http://app.reach.gov.sg/reach/default.aspx, Figure 2), a site which allows a number of functions including citizen blogging, but there have been comments in the blogosphere about the privacy invasion even of the registration process, which includes ethnicity, marital status, highest educational qualification and income as mandatory fields. User names are neither assigned randomly nor chosen by the citizen – they are instead fixed as one's Identity Card number. A number of commentators have worried about the privacy issues involved, as well as wondering why the government hosts citizen blogs rather than simply following conversations about its function in the blogosphere.
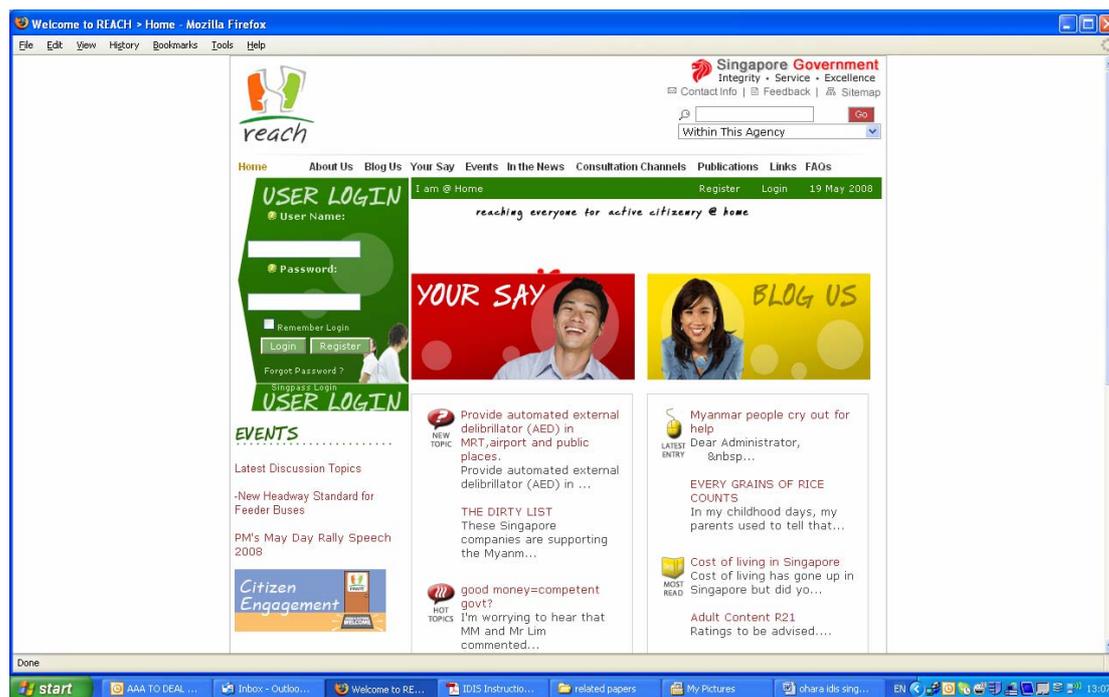
Figure 2: The Reach homepage

The government's data privacy protection code controls its processing, use and sharing of information, and also applies to any private company using government information; the 2003-6 E-Government Initiative II states this explicitly (Sriramesh & Rivera-Sánchez 2006). There is a restriction that information can only be shared between agencies for the purpose for which it was gathered, and cannot be disclosed to the private sector without permission. However, the government has not yet determined what the penalties would be for such breaches (Privacy International 2007).

Privacy, identity and trust

The difficulties of getting government feedback in a democracy are perhaps surprising. In this section we will delve a little deeper into this conundrum. In general, the private space has been somewhat smaller in Singapore than in Western

democracies. The overwhelming vote that the PAP always receives is interpreted narrowly as a mandate to govern in the 'national interest', defined, basically, as security and material prosperity. On this interpretation, it is mandated to take 'tough but unpopular' decisions, implying that consultation is likely to result in a populism that will be destructive in the long term (to be fair, there are countless examples of this from Western democracies). The government is adept at demonising or trivialising opposing views with slogans such as 'principles don't satisfy an empty stomach'. The result, as Chua explains, is that:

> Formally, a citizen's rights and preferences are … preserved but in substance one's private sphere is a shrinking realm thoroughly encroached by administrative interventions. This maintenance of the 'form' of rights enables the PAP government to counter suggestions of being anti-democratic in principle while simultaneously exercising inegalitarian administrative options. (Chua 1995, 73)

Privacy is certainly valued in Singapore, but empirical work has shown that in the online context, Singaporeans are willing under at least some conditions to trade privacy for convenience or financial reward (Hann et al 2002, Hui et al 2007), and become increasingly unhappy as more information is demanded by websites (Hui et al 2007).

This brief survey will look at privacy law, and then examine a couple of examples to show the Singaporean government in action.

The law and constitution

As noted above, Singapore's British-style constitutional arrangements have resulted in no explicit right to privacy, and as of 2007 there was no data protection or privacy law (the possibility has been 'under review' for several years), although the High Court has ruled that personal information may be protected under a duty of confidences. Though it has enshrined the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into its constitution, it has not yet ratified the two primary UN human rights covenants. Freedom of speech is officially protected, but restrictions have been enacted and the government has been known to use unofficial pressure, including the threat of defamation suits, to encourage self-censorship. Media content, including Internet content, is regulated by the Media Development Authority (MDA), which requires all Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and those providing religious or political content to register; the MDA bans material in a number of categories, including pornography, material that advocates homosexuality, or race hate. Political content is regulated more strongly during election time. The government has extensive surveillance capabilities, and court warrants are not required for monitoring (Privacy International 2007).

To obtain an Internet account, a Singaporean citizen must use his or her ID card number, and it has been reported that information about Singaporeans' Internet usage is routinely shared with government by ISPs, despite the dubious legality of this practice (Privacy International 2007). In an early incident, one ISP (Technet) scanned its members' emails looking for pornography (supposedly without opening emails or files). Monitoring email, chatrooms or downloads does not happen in theory, but the government has been unconvincing in its denials. However, it may be that the

uncertainty involved in whether one is under surveillance or not helps promote self-censorship (Rodan 1998).

Internet censorship is of course extremely difficult, especially for a small country which is open to information flow. Hence it has evolved a tripartite strategy of control of access, fostering of uncertainty about surveillance and use of legislation to regulate Internet usage. Legislation uses deliberately vague terms ("objectionable on the grounds of public interest, public morality, public order, public security, national harmony" is one phrase in the MDA code of practice) which usually go alongside a common law method of adjudication; however, Singapore does not use such a method of adjudication in the case of Internet regulation, which renders the user uncertain about where the line will be drawn (Johal 2004).

Trust in government: IRAS

Given the asymmetrical relationship between government and citizen, it would seem on the face of it unlikely that there would be a large take-up of e-government services, but actually the reverse is true. As an example, the electronic tax-filing system developed by the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (IRAS) has been extremely successful.

In the 1980s the government became notably more consultative, and one of the situations it needed to remedy was the escalating quantity of unprocessed tax returns. IRAS was set up in 1992 to take on the function of tax administration, and to improve the system. It had already made some progress when it set up the e-filing system in 1998 in order to allow taxpayers to enter data direct into the central IRAS database.

80% of electronic tax returns are processed automatically, with the remainder receiving manual validation. The e-filing system has been a conspicuous success for e-government, with 80% of taxpayers filing online in 2007, and 87% in 2008.

This remarkable level of trust was established in a number of ways, helped by the extremely poor *status quo ante*, where apparently pointless bureaucratic procedures and poor customer relations angered taxpayers. E-filing was designed as a convenient and responsive alternative to manual filing, and indeed given Singapore's desire to place as many functions online as possible, there were incentives (a) to create a very good online system, and (b) not to spend too much effort upgrading the paper version. The online version keeps a complete transactional history of each taxpayer, which of course is somewhat intrusive but equally means that because the history is always to hand there are fewer delays in addressing taxpayer complaints, and help-centres provide a high level of support (Tan et al 2005).

Mutual suspicion between tax collectors and payers was addressed by restricting manual checks to 20% of returns. Taxpayers feel more trusted by the system, and this seems (as Durkheim might have predicted!) to have resulted in their trusting the system more. User-friendly two-way communication techniques have also reduced friction (Tan et al 2005). A Taxpayer Feedback Panel (TFP) was introduced in 1999, and focus groups and forums were included in the design process (Tan & Pan 2003).

One leap of faith is required from taxpayers who use the auto-inclusion system, where employers transmit relevant tax information directly to IRAS, without the taxpayer being involved. This obviously simplifies the procedure for taxpayer and collector alike, but, as Tan et al argue, taxpayers really do need to trust the system because they

cannot verify the accuracy of the figures because of security considerations (2005). However, it seems that trust in IRAS goes alongside trust in employers, and auto-inclusion has become a popular method of paying tax.

The system was built with the issue of trust in mind, and a combination of ICT and social systems was always seen as key. Conceptual design models of the system always transcended the organisation itself. Hence trust in the system has come about through communication between tax collector and payer, the familiarity of the system, improvement of service and efficiency of service. The result is an n-way communication system, a network, rather than a straightforward extraction of information from taxpayers (Tan & Pan 2003). Privacy and security are concerns of taxpayers – much survey evidence shows that (Privacy International 2007) – but this is one of the cases where taxpayers are inclined to sacrifice privacy and transparency to convenience. The PAP government makes ideological play with this type of trade-off, which is the foundation of its pragmatism.

Privacy from government: SARS

Given the widespread trust in e-government, it is perhaps unsurprising that the government is able to go to remarkable lengths to secure information about, or even physical control over, its citizens. For instance, the government's successful and proactive response to the SARS crisis in 2003 would seem to be extremely hard to translate into other polities.

The rapid spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) through Southeast Asia, demanded an effective and speedy response. In Singapore anyone showing

symptoms of the virus was immediately quarantined. *But anyone in contact with anyone else who had been in contact was also quarantined.* Quarantine was compulsory, for ten days. Contact-tracing was done by interviews, but other detection measures included thermal-imaging to detect abnormal body temperatures in public places. Once someone was quarantined, CCTV cameras could be installed in his or her home, and they would be required to appear before the cameras at set times. Random phone calls would also be made to the subject's home, and telephone companies were required to block attempts at call-forwarding (Privacy International 2007). Even given the havoc that contagious disease could wreak given the dense population and tropical climate of Singapore, the level of intrusion is surprising. There was no attempt to cover up the spread of the disease, or to falsify results to meet government targets; the lack of transparency that derailed attempts to track SARS in China were not replicated in Singapore. SARS was contained and eradicated in Singapore within a matter of weeks.

Structural factors

Surveillance on this scale would be extremely hard to replicate in other democratic polities for a number of reasons. Firstly, of course, other democratic parties have had great difficulty in achieving the level of ideological hegemony that the PAP has (Chua 1995). But secondly, the sheer amount of information would also be a severe test in other democratic systems. In the case of SARS, the combinatorial explosion overwhelmed the existing systems of the Ministry of Health (MOH). Contact tracing and quarantine required a level of information processing that could not be carried out by those originally charged to undertake them, the hospital staff (who of course had increasingly many other duties as the number of infections rose).

43 days after the WHO's initial global alert MOH had contacted the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) about setting up a system for monitoring the crisis. The Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA), a specialist agency within MINDEF for delivering IT solutions for command and control problems, set up an initial infrastructure within hours which encompassed a wide range of relevant government services and functions (Devadoss et al 2005).

The DSTA pointed out that MOH's information processing operations wouldn't scale up even with the technology injection; much of the information was in hard copy or unstructured. In the event, the DSTA built a case management system in two weeks, with a complex architecture covering contact tracing, epidemiology, disease control, frontline operations, and even the provision of leave of absence from work for those in quarantine. Nearly 200 different data formats needed to be resolved to do this (Devadoss et al 2005). What is extraordinary is that MOH cooperated fully with the DSTA's re-engineering of its information management; surely the experience that one would expect in most ministries in most countries would be inertial resistance to "outside interference" from "people who think they know better" (cf. Lencioni 2006). The structural properties of the Singaporean civil service are a crucial variable for explaining this lack of territorial behaviour; the internal ethos of, in this case, the MOH is quite sacrificeable in this context to the 'national' requirement of combating SARS.

This is due to the nature of Singaporean one-party rule. The standard career path for someone of perceived merit and qualifications is unlikely to be in a single organisation. Such a person may find him- or herself working successively for a government-linked company, for the PAP, in a government department such as MOH,

as an MP in the legislature, as a member of the executive, or for a government agency such as the MDA or the Feedback Unit. Each of these institutions plays an important part in Singaporean governance, but they are prevented from developing their own ethos in competition with that of the PAP by this lack of career structure. Territorial loyalties tend not to happen in Singapore, and people will subordinate the interests of their employer to that of their government (another way in which the private space of the individual is shrunk). It is very hard to imagine a situation in a Western democracy where an agency of the Ministry of Defence could force several rival government departments to tear up their information-handling methods completely and allow another to be foisted upon them (O'Hara & Stevens 2006).

Discussion

The Singaporean system is authoritarian and corporatist, and its own narrative, widely shared, is that its legitimacy depends on its maintaining economic growth and security for a small city-state perceived to be under great potential threat (cf. Castells 2000, 279-80). The two demands are of course linked: in an age of escalating defence costs, security depends on economic growth, while the stability that investment decisions require depend on predictable security.

As we have seen, the Singaporean government is efficient and effective, and – unlike most other one-party states – self-critical, and more inclined to punish itself for failure than cover up. The example above of the IRAS e-filing system shows how acceptable to Singaporeans e-government is, while the example of the response to the SARS outbreak shows how adaptable the administrative machinery is, and how intrusive, when national emergency is the pretext, government can be.

The government interacts frequently with most citizens online, and its e-government programme is popular. The citizen's ID card number is linked directly to his or her SingPass identity, and this is required for a number of services, even those not nominally connected with government, such as accessing the Internet. Its privacy policies are somewhat opaque, although there is a data protection code of practice.

The issue arises – one of the conundrums that "baffled" Castells – as to why the interaction between government and citizen is so rich, given that the government is not adverse to playing hardball with dissidents (although to be clear, Singapore has generally shied away from severe measures of repression, at least since the dismantling of independent trade unions in the 1960s – cf. Chua 1995, 16-20). PAP and government officials often use the tactic of ruinous defamation suits against outspoken opposition spokespeople. On a smaller scale, the government is responsible for a large percentage of housing, and blocks that vote against the PAP tend to find themselves at the back of the list for repairs or upgrades to accommodation.

A key factor is the government's seeking feedback through mechanisms, usually online, such as the Feedback Unit, Reach and the TFP. These are explicitly designed to broaden participation in policymaking in order to improve it. There is some cynicism about how serious the government is about accepting and using feedback in a genuinely consultative way. A Speaker's Corner, modelled on that in Hyde Park, London, was set up in Hong Lim Park where anyone can voice his opinion – as long as he is registered with the police, avoids religious or racial themes, doesn't compromise sovereignty or national security, speaks between 7am and 7pm, does not use a microphone and does not bring a crowd along with him (Sriramesh & Rivera-Sánchez 2006).

There is an irony here, in that some measure of exhortation was thought necessary by the government to secure citizen's participation. There is therefore a question of whether the civil society mechanisms that the government claims it wants to foster have actually taken hold in any authentic way. For example, a consultation relating to tax reform in 2004 secured just 28 comments (Sriramesh & Rivera-Sánchez 2006).

Communitarian societies seek to strike a balance between the autonomy of the individual and social cohesion. This is a difficult balance to strike online, where the governing assumptions of the World Wide Web for example are impeccably liberal ones of promoting dialogue and conversation, and allowing the free flow of information (cf. Berners-Lee et al 2006). Equally, it is arguable that the balance between the individual and the collective in Singapore has gone away from the communitarian tradition as set out by philosophers such as Etzioni, although no doubt the PAP would agree with Etzioni's comment that "the best way to curtail the need for governmental control and intrusion is to have somewhat less privacy" (Etzioni 1999, 213). But some have argued that so successful have the PAP's communitarian goals been that individual entrepreneurship has suffered (Sriramesh & Rivera-Sánchez 2006).

If the individual Singaporean is to play a role in civil society, PAP policy and institutions determine that online dialogue must be an essential part of it; the growth of e-government and the popularity of online interaction with the people has led to that. But although no-one doubts that the Singaporean government does monitor Internet traffic, blogs about Singapore, and the web presence of opposition parties, media outlets and independent think tanks such as the Think Centre (http://www.thinkcentre.org/), so ingrained is the its habit of marginalising

"unofficial" statements as either "ethnocentric" if they come from foreign critics or afflicted by Western liberalism is they are internal (Chua 1995, 73, and see Mahbubani 2002, 2008 for concrete examples) that in order for feedback to be effective at all, the citizen needs an "official" presence online, which means his or her centrally constructed identity based around the ID card number. Even unstructured encounters, such as citizen blogs, have to be hosted by the government for them to appear on the radar.

Opposition, then, seems to be regarded in two ways. 'Constructive' opposition uses official media, and is based around an identity created by government; this opposition can be engaged with. The other sort of opposition, which is generated by people using uncontrolled identities and placed in unofficial media, is counted as anti-social or inharmonious and is therefore to be countered.

Singapore, as Castells argues, is unique. But there are lessons that can be applied elsewhere. The success of Singaporean e-government is a function of its pragmatic ideology, compact geography, confidence in the hegemony of the PAP, relatively compliant population, and lack of tribal territorialism in its civil service. Other Western democracies do not share these characteristics.

For instance, the United Kingdom government is currently undergoing an overhaul under the banner of "Transformational Government" (UK Cabinet Office 2005). The strategy of making governance more amenable to ICT is obviously a sensible idea, but the ambition may outreach the achievement. In particular, it is much harder to see British government departments and agencies adopting new information systems to order, as has happened in Singapore. New Labour certainly achieved a degree of

ideological hegemony for a short period, but most commentators are now agreed that UK politics is once more competitive, which changes the calculations to be made by civil servants and information users. And although the British people are relatively sanguine about surveillance (O'Hara & Shadbolt 2008, 213-215), practices such as behind-the-scenes data sharing (about which the UK government is surprisingly more enthusiastic in public than the Singaporean – The Economist 2007) or the creation of unitary monolithic IDs (see O'Hara & Shadbolt 2008, 40-46 for some wider thoughts on this topic) are unlikely to be agreed without a struggle. It is not within the gift of the UK government to ignore feedback, however unconstructive, from unofficial sources.

To conclude, the management of personal identity in Singapore is all of a piece with the rest of its governance. Whereas a liberal position would assume that one should manage one's own identity or identities, the PAP ideology emphasises the social aspects of identity management, and indeed is choosy about which identities it will engage with. Moving beyond these bounds is deliberately made tiresome, and one is rendered politically impotent if one does. Furthermore, the PAP government structures debate to imply that security, racial harmony and prosperity would be threatened if things were different. Given that the government tends to deliver these promises, it is unsurprising that many are accepting of this level of control.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

CCTV: Closed Circuit Television

DSTA: Defence Science and Technology Agency

ERP: Electronic Road Pricing

G2C: Government to Citizen

ICT: Information and Communication Technology

IRAS: Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore

ISP: Internet Service Provider

MDA: Media Development Authority

MINDEF: Ministry of Defence

MOH: Ministry of Health

PAP: People's Action Party

SARS: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

SINGOV: The Singaporean Government e-services portal

SingPass: Singapore Personal Access (password for e-services)

TFP: Taxpayer Feedback Panel

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