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Headline: Will smart cities cause a digital divide?

Will smart cities cause a digital divide?



(L-R) Professor Archan Misra, Mr Amit Midha, Professor Lily Kong, Mr Tan Kok Yam, Ms Julienne Loh

You can have all the innovation and cutting edge technologies but a smart city can't be considered successful until every citizen is able to benefit.

By Siti Bahari on Apr 23, 2021 9:25AM

Change has been the overarching theme for nations and businesses alike as we all move to adapt to the post pandemic landscape through various levels of digital transformation.

This includes the efforts of nations in establishing smart cities to help improve the quality of life for its citizens. However, governments should be mindful of the dangers of creating a divide among the population from digitalisation.

Speaking at a recent Smart City panel at Singapore Management University'(SMU's) first Presidential Distinguished Lecturer Series of 2021 in Singapore, Lily Kong, President at SMU, citing research for her book on 'hawker ' or open-air food centres in the country, said there are vendors who do not want to get on digital platforms as they do not want to lose their (physical) connection to their customers.

"The question is about unintended consequences that come about because of the use of technology, and how can regulatory frameworks anticipate some of those unintended consequences better," she said.

Amit Midha, President, Asia Pacific & Japan and Global Digital Cities at Dell Technologies, said that while his team members are engaging with technology platform to get their work done, they also ensure there are ample collaboration opportunities where people can physically interact, even if they are not going to their offices.

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“One could create more meal situations where people can interact with each other. I think for these things, this is where balance has to come in,” said Midha.

The panel acknowledges that technology may not be easily accessible or utilised by society – especially for the elderly.

Make sure technology is easy to use and benefits the people

Tan Kok Yam, Deputy Secretary, Smart Nation and Digital Government, and Strategy Group at the Prime Minister’s Office, said the responsibility also lies on technology providers to help create digital solutions that are user friendly and intuitive, even for those not familiar with technology.

“Whether it is about using facial recognition to log onto SingPass, or some of the voice recognition technologies and so on – these are things that can be done practically to ensure that adopting these digital tools is not difficult,” said Tan.

Despite the possible negative impact of adopting technology, Tan was quick to raise that there is also the upside.

“So many of these technologies make it convenient by reducing the need for physical travel. For example, for the elderly and for those who find it less convenient to travel,” said Tan.

“This does improve the quality of life of certain vulnerable groups, and we should not lose that in the conversation about digital inclusion.”

Kong echoed this sentiment, mentioning how she learned through her colleagues who track the elderly population that those who were digitally connected, even at a basic level, exhibited higher levels of well-being compared to those who are not – reflecting the potential positive reality of digital inclusion.

Globally, Singapore is an example of a smart nation that has been inclusive in its efforts. The country has set up a SG Digital office and appointed digital ambassadors to enable 100,000 seniors, 18,000 hawkers and 20,000 heartland businesses to go digital. Lower-income families and seniors are also provided with digital devices and access to the internet.

In New York, the government is getting telecom companies to provide 7,500 street lamps with 5G connectivity so that poorer citizens and students who live in public housing and who do not have broadband can have internet access. About 1.5 million New Yorkers or 18% of the population do not have an internet connection.