

Faster broadband network need not stifle creativity

OVERVIEW

THE government announced last month that Singapore would have a new nationwide broadband network to provide even faster Internet connections. The news initially caused prices of the listed telcos to wobble on fears of increased competition but the buzz soon turned to how the faster Internet connections would help Singapore stay competitive, with inevitable comparisons to South Korea.

But on a personal level, what does faster, cheaper Internet access mean? Not everyone is a gamer or works in animation companies producing the next Spielberg blockbuster. Do we want to be so wired up that there is no escape from the office? Does the ability to download data faster have anything to do with the ability to think and be creative? BT asks a panel of experts.

Siow Li Sen: When the government announced a 10-year masterplan to enhance Singapore's competitiveness, it centred on the next generation national broadband network of NII (national infocomm infrastructure) comprising both high speed wired and wireless networks. Is there anything else to the masterplan besides building the NII?

Mike Reynolds: The masterplan on building a national broadband network isn't all about access or speed, it's about delivering value for Singaporeans. For example, one of the value propositions is to attract more international companies that operate in the online/Internet/infocomm industry by positioning Singapore as the best location for their operations.

Sandra Ng: This is one of several possibilities to keep Singapore ahead of its competition. We, unlike Hong Kong for one, do not have access to a large market such as China. While we have been the "platform" for investors to other parts of South-east Asia, these markets are relatively limited in size and potential.

Li Sen: The World Economic Forum's latest Global IT study finds Singapore to be the most network-ready country in the world. It has been said that infocomm has been one of our strategic advantages. If it can be quantified, what is the competitive advantage that Singapore has enjoyed over other countries?

Mike: Singapore has enjoyed several advantages — a well-developed infocomm infrastructure that, more importantly, is constantly evolving so that we continue to maintain our competitive edge amid competition from other countries; a well-educated workforce that is aware of the power of technology and how to use it; a strong educational system that supports the continuous training of that workforce; and an open business operating environment that makes it easy for international companies to set up operations here. The "quadruple play" has enlivened Singapore's reputation and economy, and I expect this will continue strongly for the future.

Steven: Singapore was one of the first countries in the world to invest in creating a network-ready infrastructure linking business, homes, consumers and government through high speed access. Because Singapore was one of the early adopters of a country-wide network infrastructure, its infrastructure has been in place for a long while now (especially with respect to Internet time).

As a result, other countries that waited and then later adopted this type of network infrastructure were able to take advantage of newer technology and better performance/cost capabilities. Now it is time for Singapore to refresh its network infrastructure, and to once again set the world standard for best practice for providing high speed and efficient connectivity across business, homes, consumers and government. Through this upgrade, we can once again retain our worldwide leadership position and fully leverage the advantages of newer technology with better performance/cost characteristics.

Li Sen: The idea behind the masterplan is to enhance Singapore's competitive advantage and improve the quality of life. Can you sketch a scenario where having more Internet access at a faster speed does this? We can't all be game players, or work in animation.

Manoj Menon: Existing business processes can be enhanced and made more efficient through use of collaboration tools. This is one of the examples.

Sandra: An example would be the ability to provide outsourcing services in the medical industry from Singapore using video conferencing/high-speed file transfer technology. Similarly, there will be great potential for Singapore to be one of the largest disaster recovery centres in the region or world.

Li Sen: Does it improve your quality of life if your boss says, with cheap or free wireless access all over the island, you have to be on call 24/7?

Steven: We already live in a world of "we can work anytime, anywhere". We need to learn how to set boundaries, and how to call "time out". I admit I face this challenge in my own life. I check my BlackBerry all the time from home or when I am on the go, and my family resents it.

Ramakrishna Maruvada: Technology changes do bring privacy issues to the forefront. The best way to address these concerns is by pro-

PARTICIPANTS

in the roundtable:

Moderator: Siow Li Sen BT senior correspondent

Panelists:

- ◆ Ramakrishna Maruvada, associate analyst, Macquarie Research
- ◆ Steven Miller, Singapore Management University, Dean, School of Information Systems
- ◆ Manoj Menon, director, Frost & Sullivan
- ◆ Sandra Ng, vice-president, IDC
- ◆ Mike Reynolds, head of commercial, StarHub
- ◆ Hui Weng Cheong, vice-president for consumer products, SingTel

KEY POINTS

- ◆ Having a faster national broadband network will make Singapore more competitive.
- ◆ We have to learn to switch off if we want to reap the benefits of being a wired-up nation.
- ◆ Older people will tap the Internet, it's not only for the young.
- ◆ Creativity does not get stifled with having more and faster information and greater exposure.



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— Hui Weng Cheong



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'South Korea is possibly one of the best examples of innovation driven by companies.'

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— Mike Reynolds

professionals. The easier it is for the mothers and fathers of these visitors to Singapore (and hopefully future residents or citizens) to communicate with children, the more likely it is that these people can move here.

Also, more and more Singaporeans are going to find their futures and fortunes in the region. These people will then be the ones overseas, dependent on the infocomm infrastructure for keeping them connected to family and friends back home.

Ramakrishna: Elderly folks could benefit from certain applications, particularly in the healthcare sector. For example, doctors can monitor the condition of their patients via video-conferencing.

Mike: Since I have a lot of grey hair myself, I'm biased on this topic. I don't believe that age has anything to do with the value one can realise through technology. Having access to information and content is just as valuable, in my opinion, to senior citizens as it is to youths. Not only does it provide a source of entertainment and information, but it can be a medium for greater interaction within and between the generations.

For example, my 77-year-old mother spends time every day online communicating with relatives and friends, exchanging photos, viewing newspapers and information from places she's lived and visited. We shouldn't assume that because someone is getting on in years that they have no interest in the value that NII can bring to their lives. But it is also necessary for those of us who provide the services to make it easy to use. We cannot expect everyone to be IT experts if we want mass market adoption.

Li Sen: It has been said that in order for Singapore to stay one step ahead it has to develop more creativity, a thinking people. How does having the ability to download information/data/movies faster help people to think?

Ramakrishna: Infocomm can foster creativity by one, freeing up people from distractions of daily chores and two, providing opportunities for people to explore new frontiers in technology. The increasing popularity of online bill payments, as opposed to paying bills at physical shops, suggests that the population at large would have more time to attend to "creative matters" now than before.

Steven: Well, downloading faster is not going to help us think faster.

Sandra: We can't train thinking and creativity. This has to be part of one's upbringing. The more exposure one is given, the greater the likelihood that one will be broad-minded, with the ability to think laterally.

Mike: There is a quote about creativity that says that "the best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas". Creative ideas are normally inspired by something you see, read or hear, so the more information and resources you have access to, the more likely it is that something will inspire an idea or concept. Having access to this marketplace of ideas will inevitably encourage us to be more creative, more innovative.

Li Sen: What is the implication of these national objectives on the listed telcos — SingTel, StarHub and MobileOne? The funding is still uncertain, the type of infrastructure needed is unclear, the technology it will ride on is unclear. Should investors worry?

Hui Weng Cheong: SingTel has the most extensive and advanced fibre optic network in Singapore. We are committed to evolving and enhancing our network infrastructure to enable the delivery of new and innovative services that meet market demand.

In the near term, we are looking at possibly increasing broadband speeds to up to 100 Mbps. Our long experience with customers shows that, at the end of the day, it is not just about higher data speeds. It is more important to have content and applications available that customers actually want and value. There is a need for a holistic approach and for issues to be addressed, such as content exclusivity.

Manoj: Given that the government has said it will be an equal access policy, it will be an extremely competitive environment. This competitive environment will spur innovation. This will attract several companies to invest in developing and testing their applications in the Singapore market. Success here can then be exported to global markets. South Korea is possibly one of the best examples of innovation driven by companies given the development of a very strong infocomm infrastructure.

Ramakrishna: Technology migration is not new in the telecom industry and the economics are often healthy as long as the market structure is not significantly affected. For example, 3G hasn't created a significant competitive differentiation in Singapore unlike other markets like UK, Italy or Taiwan. All three operators here are successfully migrating their user base from 2G to 3G.

Of the three operators, MobileOne is least affected as it doesn't have any existing broadband business.

In the case of StarHub and SingTel, we have to analyse if the rollout would lead to entry of new players in the broadband market and the impact of NII on their capital expenditure plans. It is too early to assess this, given the lack of details at the moment.

viding guidelines on appropriate use of technology — especially when the benefits to the economy are significant.

Mike: And of course, every device does have an on/off switch.

Li Sen: I was in Japan more than a year ago and noticed people in restaurants and on the subway trains almost totally silent. Nobody talked. Then it hit me that people were SMSing their friends who are sitting next to them and replying via SMS. This was mainly the behaviour of younger people. I feel the infocomm advances are mainly enjoyed by younger people, is this correct?

Mike: I disagree. However, speaking as a 52-year-old man who spent much of his adult life with no computers, and equipped with mobile phones shaped like bricks, I can understand that assumption.

The younger generation are much quicker in their acceptance of technology and more flexible in incorporating the technology that's available into their own lives, but that doesn't

mean they enjoy it more or achieve more value.

It may take us a little longer, and my thumbs are a little clumsier on the handset keypad, but I probably send more messages per day than most youths! Youths will always be the first adopters but they don't necessarily realise more value than the older generation over time.

Ramakrishna: Young people tend to be more open to learning and experimentation. As such, infocomm advances are enjoyed by the youth first though even the older generation benefit from it eventually.

Steven: There are two issues here. The first is why do people stand in crowded public areas and not interact with one another, yet interact with their mobile devices (and ostensibly with other human beings in remote locations through these devices)?

Ultimately, networking is to connect things in order that people can connect with other people. And it is indeed ironic that in some instances, our total preoccupation with commu-

nicating via the network can lead us to ignore or impolitely disregard the human beings closest to us (be it emotionally or spatially).

You question if infocomm mostly benefits younger people. Let me give you the example of my uncle Stanley, who lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Stanley is over 75 years old. He has children and grandchildren living all over the United States, and his only nephew (yours truly) lives in Singapore. Fortunately, Stanley learned how to use e-mail several years ago. He brings the skills of a classical letter writer to the world of e-mail. Before my mother passed away, she would always write us e-mails.

Li Sen: How does having the next generation NII benefit, say, our parents? And ourselves? Bear in mind Singapore is a greying population with one of the world's lowest birthrates.

Steven: In my view, Singapore cannot survive without the ability for people to connect to one another over long distances via networks. We are trying to attract high skilled foreign talent to Singapore, either as students or as working