

CRITICAL THINKING ABILITY AT RISK IN RUSH TO BECOME 'NETWORK SOCIETY'

As Smart Nation drive speeds up, anxieties arise

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At a technology summit in February, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong lamented that Singapore was moving too slowly to realise its Smart Nation ambition.

There is a sense of irony in this, given that a hallmark of Smart Nation is speed: Speed in the delivery of public services, of business transactions, and even social interactions.

According to its website, Smart Nation empowers “through harnessing the power of networks, data and info-comm technologies” to improve lives, create business opportunities, and to build a close community.

The Land Transport Authority’s announcement last week that the public transport system will go cashless by 2020, in keeping with Singapore’s Smart Nation push, should give us cause to pause.

While the move is in the name of convenience, we might well ask: For



Singapore’s public transport system aims to go cashless by 2020 as part of the Smart Nation push, but some people are at risk of being left behind amid the fast pace of change. TODAY FILE PHOTO

whom? The implicit assumption is that digital non-natives, with relative ease, transform into tech-savvy citizens who will be completely at home with whatever technological disruptions come their way.

That is a worrying and naive assumption. The pace of technology development is uneven; so too is the pattern of technology acceptance and adoption.

Every generation produces a segment of people at risk of being left behind amidst the rapidity of change.

There is also a price to pay: A consequence of living under the imperative of speed is that most of us are continually pressured into speeding up our lives in order to get more done at both work and play.

Often, this occurs without us being even aware of the cost of meeting goals and targets in the quickest possible manner.

In many ways, therefore, Singapore’s Smart Nation is a particular manifestation of the concept of the “network society”, as theorised by the sociologist Manuel Castells.

Writing in the mid-1990s, Castells defined a network society as one in which key social structures and activities are organised around technology-driven information networks.

This acceleration and connectivity of 21st century life was also predicted by Karl Marx, who wrote about how advancements in technology would shrink the world and speed life up through the “annihilation of space by time”.

The ability to generate speed — from the physical speed of the locomotive to the virtual speed of cyberspace — has been the basis of great improvements to human civilisation.

Speed is the very essence of the network society. Instantaneity is a fundamental principle not only of the network society, but of our everyday lives: Instant noodles, instant coffee, instant information and instant gratification. Even the name of the social media app Instagram says it all.

But beyond a certain point, the promise of speed proves to be a treacherous one.

In fluid dynamics, the greater the speed, the greater the turbulence. So too with society. And as the philosopher Paul Virilio further argues, an increase in speed also creates the potential for gridlock. He cites the example of airports and train stations as points from which we are sped through space, but which are also characterised by delays and jams.

The combination of accelerating speed, perpetual motion and continuous disruption has resulted in a state of anxiety.

In fact, our growing fears of job obsolescence stem precisely from worries about not being able to learn new skills quickly enough to keep pace with disruptions. This creates a sense of disorientation and a feeling of being permanently on edge.

The quickening pace of life in turn increases the power of the network society to control our lives even more, in ever more pervasive ways. Speed has become the metaphorical drug of modern life, where the faster we go, the more we need to go even faster.

More importantly, speed exacerbates our propensity to take cognitive short-cuts and to think in a truncated and superficial manner.

The paradox of a network society is that, despite the amount of information that is at our disposal, living life at breakneck speed without stopping for

reflection actually impairs our understanding of the world and our ability to act with real consideration.

If we do not check our fetish for speed, then a major casualty will be our critical thinking ability.

Critical thinking requires time in order to ask and engage with fundamental questions to which there are no easy answers.

By contrast, under the pressure of speed, we veer towards goal-directed problem-solving thinking which, although useful and important, is nevertheless unreflective.

In fact, problem-solving thinking becomes *de rigueur* in the fast-paced network society precisely because it is concerned with getting straight to the problem and producing a (typically technological) solution as quickly and efficiently as possible. In our haste to achieve results, what remains unasked is: Are these even the right questions and are we solving the right problems?

And it is not that critical thinking is devalued; rather it is simply that there is no time for it.

As the saying goes these days, there is no bandwidth.

In her speech to graduates of the Nanyang Technological University’s School of Humanities and Social Sciences in July, Member of Parliament Sun Xueling highlighted the important role that the humanities and social sciences can, and must, play amidst the unrelenting advance of technology: “To effectively solve problems and satisfy needs, (technological development) requires an understanding of the human condition. And that is where social science students have an important role to play.”

Ms Sun’s words are timely. To mitigate the risk that, in our drive towards a Smart Nation future, we lose our humanity and empathy for our fellow beings, we must ask, and constantly re-ask, the following questions: For whom is it “smart”? What happens to those who are not “smart enough”? And how do we, as a society, acknowledge and deal with the resulting anxieties and psychoses?

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