Running cyburbia:
Internet and local governance in Subang Jaya

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Not long ago I became involved in a debate about the governance of a web portal in Subang Jaya, the Kuala Lumpur suburb where I carried out fieldwork in 2003-2004. The portal, named USJ.com.my, has had a brief but eventful history. Founded in 1999, its main community forum boasts close to 3,500 discussion threads and some 30,000 posts within those threads, virtually all in Malaysian English, or 'Manglish'. It is arguably the busiest and most influential forum of its kind in Malaysia. To me as an anthropologist –and to any other computer user with web access and knowledge of Manglish – the lively forum and its archive are a treasure trove of local knowledge and activism. From traffic woes to classic jokes, from governance to gossip, from eating out to campaigning for Chinese schools, there is no dearth of topics at USJ.com.my.

The governance debate was brief and took part largely outside the forum. It centred on whether to introduce rules that would make the forum more 'mature', less tolerant of rude and inappropriate behaviour (name-calling, lewd jokes, spamming, private revelations, etc). While some participants saw the proposed rules as a threat to the free flow of ideas and information, others considered them long overdue. My difficulty as a researcher resided in how to remain a participant observer without being seen to take sides. Over a nourishing *mamak*[1] meal in Taipan, a commercial district in the

suburb, I shared my worries with one of the key participants in the debate. I was pondering whether to take my musings to the forum, or steer clear of the fray. He advised me not to become involved. He explained that Malaysia, unlike countries in the developed West, was a developing nation where democracy was still in its infancy. Tongue in cheek, he reminded me of the first commandment of Hollywood time travel: 'Thou shalt not change anything'. I was not to tamper, therefore, with local efforts to create a citizens' forum where maturity and fair play would one day be the norm.

I felt flattered to be considered a time traveller from a future world of seamless online democracy. After all, one of my two countries of origin, Spain, has only recently embraced democracy, let alone e-democracy. My own experience of online engagement with local authorities in Spain, Britain and other supposedly 'advanced' countries is minimal. Moreover, having reviewed the literature on e-democracy around the globe (see below), it does not appear as if the West had much to teach Subang Jaya. Western local authorities and cyberactivists may, in fact, wish to learn from this thriving suburb[2].

This chapter is part of a three-year anthropological study of the Internet, local governance and ethnicity in Subang Jaya[3]. The aim here is to present two of my initial findings. To do so, I first review the international literature on new media and governance. This is followed by a brief historical introduction to Subang Jaya and by the two, seemingly paradoxical, findings:

1. An ambitious 'smart community' e-governance project known as SJ2005 disintegrated soon after its official launching in 2000.
2. Nonetheless, in only five years Subang Jaya has become a world class local e-community hub. In this respect, SJ2005 can be considered a success, for it served as a catalyst for a range of grassroots initiatives.

Finally I discuss the role of two categories of key mediators in this field – journalists and politicians – as well as the ethnic and class dimensions of the emergent e-community field in Subang Jaya, to conclude with a brief reflection on these findings.

Local e-governance

In some contexts, the term 'governance' stands for government, i.e. 'the act of governing'. Yet since the 1980s, starting in the Anglo-Saxon world, there has been a growing sense of power diffusing from governments to the private and non-governmental sectors. The notion of governance is nowadays tied to this perception, embodying an ideal of responsible self-regulation both within and beyond government organisations. It was this ideal, I believe, that shaped much of the crisis at USJ.com.my. Governance is both an analytic concept and a normative goal. As an analytic concept, it is commonly used to study post-1980s political and administrative changes (Wade 2003). As a normative goal, on the other hand, if is found around the globe in phrases such as 'towards better governance'. One author takes it to be

> a broader term than 'government'. It refers, in its widest sense, to the various ways through which social life is coordinated. Government can therefore be seen as one of the organisations involved in governance; it is possible, in other words, to have 'governance without government' (Heywood 2000: 19, quoted in Wade 2003).

In this chapter I use the term 'local e-governance' to signify the use of the Internet and other digital technologies to broaden the space of governance so as to encompass local authorities, residents and the private sector. By the same token, while e-government refers to the use of ICTs 'to promote more efficient government by allowing better delivery of public services, improved access to information, and increased accountability of government to its citizens' (UNDP 2004) e-governance *includes* e-government but covers a broader inter-organisational space. In addition to the operation of the local authorities, the phrase 'local e-governance' directs our attention to new digital media across all local sectors.

Despite all good intentions, e-governance has yet to make much headway at any administrative level, from the micro-level of local authorities to the global level of the United Nations. For instance, by December 2002 only 11% of the British population had ever used online government services. The figure was 18% for France and 40% for Canada[4]. A recent survey in France reported that one third of websites of regional

and local authorities displayed outdated and static information. A mere 5% of such websites were 'real services portals with advanced transactional capabilities' [5]. Very similar results were obtained in the Canadian province of Quebec. A survey of 304 local government websites found that very few local authorities provided any information on bylaws or council meetings. Most did not even offer the email addresses of councillors or staff (Fortin and Sanderson 2003). To its credit, the Subang Jaya Municipal Council does provide such addresses[6] but no information on meetings or bylaws[7].

The Malaysian case

One possible genealogical line of e-governance in Malaysia can be traced to the early 1990s when the Public Services Network (PSN) transformed the country's post offices into one-stop centres for service delivery. For the first time, outside agencies such as the Post Office or Permodalan Nasional Bhd (PNB) gained access to government-owned databases in order to reach businesses and citizens. This was as an early example of lowered barriers within the public sector and beyond (Karim and Khalid 2003: 16-17).

From the mid-1990s, the Malaysian government called for a move towards a knowledge-based economy (KBE) as the country faced growing competition from Vietnam, China and other low-cost production economies. In 1996 a 'cyber-region' known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) was launched. Designed as a global centre for multimedia technologies and contents, its aim was to 'leapfrog' Malaysia from the Industrial Era to the Information Era. The MSC was in line with Dr Mahathir's Vision 2020, the dream of a fully developed, knowledge-driven Malaysia by 2020 (Yong 2003, cf Nain 2004). One the MSC's seven 'flagship applications' is e-government. Led by the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (MAMPU), the aim of this flagship is to 'improve the convenience, accessibility and quality of interactions with citizens and businesses; simultaneously, it aims to improve information flows and processes within government to enhance the speed and quality of policy development, coordination and enforcement' (Yong 2003: 189). The vision is 'for government, businesses and citizens to work together for the benefit of the country and all its citizens' (2003: 190). Part of this vision is the

attainment of 'greater transparency' and accountability (ITU 2002); in other words, better governance. Among the promised technical innovations are the ability to settle utility bills and renew driving licenses online through 'cashless transactions', initially in the Klang Valley – the economic heartland of Malaysia, where Subang Jaya is located – but eventually across the country (Begum 2000).

While MAMPU's core business is the modernisation of Malaysia's public sector, the government body directly concerned with local e-communities is the National IT Council (NITC), launched in 1996. The NITC is a think tank that advises government on matters of ICT policy and implementation. Its five key areas of activity are e-community, e-Public Services, e-learning, e-economy and e-sovereignty (Nain 2004: 105). Until recently, the NITC Secretariat was based at MIMOS Bhd, the corporatised government agency behind SJ2005. As in the affluent countries reviewed above, however, progress in Malaysia has been slow. E-government officials in Malaysia bemoan projects that are often too large and unwieldy, a lack of inter-agency integration and common standards, a shortage of skilled workers, resistance to change across the public sector, and other hurdles (Yong 2003: 196). Scholars such as Nain (2004) have pointed out that Malaysia's e-government initiatives suffer from ailments common to government projects since independence in 1957. First and foremost, he singles out very low levels of consultation with the citizenry. For this author, a more specific problem is that ICT policies are seldom linked to poverty eradication irrespective of race. In his view, some lip service is paid to bridging the digital divide, but not much sustained attention.

In 2002, the Malaysian Cabinet directed all local authorities 'to implement e-government services to benefit ratepayers'[8]. Local authorities were encouraged to launch e-community projects that would make them 'more accessible' to the residents[9]. That same year, the NITC's annual Infosoc Conference adopted the theme 'K-initiatives for Improved Local Governance'[10]. These eager calls arise from a troubled history. Over the decades, the Malaysian press has published countless letters of complaint against local authorities. Topics include over-development, traffic congestion, poor planning and maintenance of basic facilities, racial discrimination in the issuing of business licenses, corruption, and the absence of consultation with

residents. NGO activists have linked the 'lack of ownership in governance processes' with episodic outbreaks of unrest and violence (Chandran 2003).

To these activists (but see Goh 2002), who are lobbying for the reinstating of local elections, the fact that local councillors are appointed by the state government rather than elected makes them unresponsive to the ratepayers. Local elections were suspended by the Cabinet in 1965 amidst a strengthened opposition to the Alliance government. A Royal Commission of Enquiry on Local Authorities was set up and its recommendations heard in 1968, including the maintenance of local elections despite their flaws. The government rejected this latter recommendation on the basis that the local authorities' key role in fostering urban development took precedence over their democratising role. It was imperative that local authorities should work in tandem with the federal and state governments for the sake of nation-building. As a result, today each political party within the ruling coalition (BN) is given a share of councillors' posts. Parties use this system to reward loyal individuals and factions. For this reason, it is not in the interest of the BN Establishment, say the critics, to reintroduce local elections, as it would erode an old structure of patronage and political influence (Chandran 2003)[11].

Additionally, 'non-compliance' with local government rules is rife. Observers often point out, however, that it is not only residents who flout the bylaws. Owing to 'excessive regulations, ineffective laws and the laxity in meting out punishment against corrupt officials' (Teophilus 2002) non-compliance is reportedly practised by citizens, civil servants and politicians alike (Goh 2002). In 2003, Mahathir blamed the local councillors' laxity on their desire to remain popular. In such cases, he added, the federal government would have to 'force them' (Bernama 2003). Around that time, his then deputy, Abdullah Badawi, chaired a Cabinet Committee on Good Governance to discuss issues of local government enforcement and efficiency (Ooi 2003). Upon becoming prime minister in October 2003, Badawi has insisted on the critical importance of 'frontline' services, especially those at the local government level.

Local history

The jurisdiction of the Municipal Council of Subang Jaya (MPSJ) extends to five
main areas: Subang Jaya, USJ, Sunway, Seri Kembangan and Puchong. It is a vast
municipality with numerous residential areas, as well as industrial and commercial
zones and remnants of agricultural or plantation settlements. It boasts one of the
highest PC ownership rates in Malaysia at over 80%. The official population in 1998
was 480,000, consisting of some 60% Chinese, 25% Malays, and 15% Indians and
'Others' – mostly immigrant workers from poorer Asian countries[12].

Much of the territory was once a Sime Darby plantation, initially devoted to rubber
and later to cocoa and palm oil[13]. In the 1970s, the close-knit plantation world began
to unravel as Subang Jaya was opened up to housing developments. Covering an area
of 583 hectares, it became the largest township in Southeast Asia developed by a
single private company[14]. Early residents point out that very few people in those days
were willing to move to the area, as it was perceived to be 'out there in the *hutan*
(jungle)'. At the time there was but a single coffee shop and few retail outlets. There
were rumours that aircraft landing at Subang Airport often unloaded their unused fuel
on the houses below. Given this strong reticence, the developers began to offer semi-
furnished houses at very competitive prices[15]. Eventually the market took off, with
USJ[16] opening up in 1988 and developing very rapidly to meet the demands of largely
middle-class families, most of them ethnic Chinese. By 1999 Subang Jaya had 12,000
residential units, where USJ had 37,000 units spread over 728 hectares and was still
expanding but was reaching saturation point[17]. For reasons that I explore below, most
of the local Internet activism found in the municipality of Subang Jaya is concentrated
in USJ.

As the suburb bourgeoned, the estate workers were made redundant and offered
subsidised flats from which they had to find new forms of employment. When the
available land grew scarce, several Hindu temples were bulldozed to give way to
housing estates. Protests by local Hindus, although amply covered in the Tamil press
and USJ.com.my, were ineffectual[18].
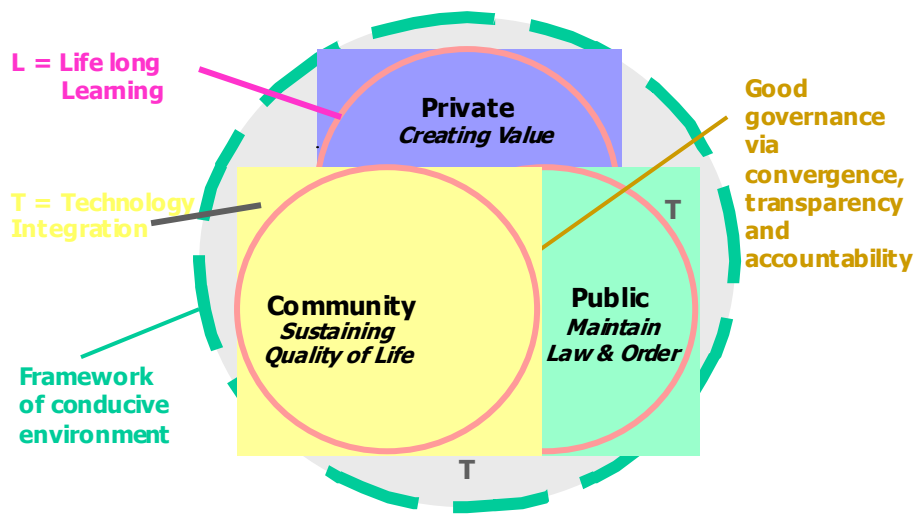
Separate ways

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for SJ2005 smart township/community. Notice the 'good governance' component. Source: Agnes Ng (2002: 15), MIMOS.

Having set the scene, we can now turn to the first main finding, namely the swift disintegration of SJ2005, an ICT project aimed at transforming Subang Jaya into a 'smart township' by 2005. SJ2005 was born in 1999, the brainchild of MIMOS, the corporatised government agency then in charge of Malaysia's ICT policy making. This was the year before the 'dotcom crash', a time when there was a strong faith across Southeast Asia in the imminent coming of the Information Age in tandem with democratic reform. Indeed *reformasi* was often seen as an almost inevitable by-product of the ICT revolution (Abbott 2004). SJ2005 was chaired by the then Deputy prime minister, Abdullah Badawi. It drew its inspiration both from Vision 2020 and from NITA, the National IT Agenda (John 2002). In addition to NITC and MIMOS, the partners were MPSJ, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT) and 'The Stakeholders', i.e. local residents and businesses. Although there was some talk of introducing participatory budgeting and local e-elections, these 'democratic' ideas were soon rejected by the SJ2005 committee and partners[19].

The first steering committee meeting was held in April 2000 (Ng 2002: 5). SJ2005's promoters envisioned transforming Subang Jaya into a 'smart', 'knowledge-based

community' that would improve the residents' quality of life in a sustainable manner. Its objectives included increasing ICT awareness, easing Internet access, improving Internet and other ICT skills, creating a socially cohesive community, and evolving a 'good, effective, accountable, transparent, caring governance framework' (Ng 2002: 11). The ambitious 2005 deliverables were:

- A high bandwidth telecommunication infrastructure that connects all users
- 100 % affordable household [sic] are connected and use Internet[20]
- An e-Community programme in each precinct
- Public services on-line
- A computing environment in all schools, educational institutions and where community learning is encouraged (formal and non-formal)
- Local business services over the internet
- A Subang Jaya portal (www.sj2005.net.my) as a gateway to all e-Public Services, e-Business and e-Community products and services
- Impact evaluation of SJ2005 program[me]   (Ng 2002: 12-13)

Five years on, when talking to the SJ2005 pioneers about the early days, one is struck by a sense of great excitement. Participants from across the governmental divide truly believed that they could build a trisectoral partnership that would become a role-model for the rest of Malaysia[21]. We find a further illustration of this hopeful zeitgeist in the USJ.com.my archives: a portrait showing a relaxed group of e-community activists with a smiling Datuk Ahmad Fuad (see Plate 1) who was at the time the council president (equivalent in some countries to a mayor).

Alas the excitement was to be short-lived, as SJ2005 was soon to disintegrate[22]. Perhaps the decisive factor was the uneven allocation of federal funds. Both MPSJ and USJ.com.my had applied for funds from DAGS (Demonstrator Application Grant Schemes), an NITC-related federal body entrusted with providing one-year seed funds for ICT projects. When neither organisation secured funding, they blamed the decision on MIMOS. In their defence, MIMOS countered that DAGS is an entirely separate entity and that all DAGS applications are subject to stringent, independent selection processes. It does appear, however, that MIMOS can indeed influence the DAGS decision-making process. It is said that MIMOS had 'blacklisted' USJ.com.my

owing to the abrasive style and political independence of its leader, Jeff Ooi. Matters were made worse by the granting of DAGS funds to Raymond Tan's Neighbourhood Watch (nwatch.net.my), based at the USJ18 neighbourhood.

Plate 1. 27 July 1999. The USJ.com.my core committee paying a courtesy visit to YDP Datuk Ahmad Fuad, the then president of the Subang Jaya Municipal Council (MPSJ). On the far left is Raymond Tan, who is also the founder of Nwatch. Third from left is Fuad. In the centre is Jeff Ooi, the founding father of USJ.com.my and today a renowned 'blogger'. Source: USJ.com.my/aboutus.php3

The then council president, Fuad, protested that ample federal funds (RM 1.24 million) were being allocated to a small neighbourhood project in preference to the local authorities, but to no avail[23].

The funding of Nwatch also strained relationships between this e-community and USJ.com.my, although these appear to have improved in recent years. The two e-communities are often seen as complementing each other, with Nwatch specialising in crime issues and USJ.com.my dealing with broader matters of local governance and quality of life. Indeed, several of USJ's more active residents regularly contribute to both community forums. It is important to note, however, that USJ.com.my has

retained its autonomy from government, whereas Nwatch has always worked closely with MPSJ, the police and the state assemblyman[24].

Other factors contributing to the demise of SJ2005 may have included clashing personalities, rivalry over project ownership and recognition, and low levels of trust across organisations. One well-placed informant told me about a 'gap in expectations' between the various partners, in particular MPSJ, the state assemblyman and the communities vis-à-vis MIMOS and NITC. This person also pointed at the low levels of funding, the limitations of volunteerism, an opaque authority structure, excessive politicking, institutional hurdles, and a lack of clear rewards. In addition to these factors, I wish to suggest that there was a deeper structural incompatibility at work, that between top-down, teleological bureaucracies and 'organic' e-communities such as USJ.com.my and Nwatch. In the current global parlance on governance, one of the mantras for the revival of local politics is the need for public participation and 'joining up government'. On the basis of their comparative study of community projects in Norway and Scotland, the anthropologists Abram and Cowell (2002: 1) have suggested that

> integration and participation are two […] non-coherent principles that are merely presented together rather than analytically interwoven. As a result, producing holistic, comprehensive plans that involve direct participation of a broad range of community representatives presents innumerable, often insurmountable difficulties for authorities with large, diverse populations.

Analogously, I am suggesting that in the case of SJ2005 there was a clash between the two principles of integration and participation. On the one hand, a seamless integration of e-government operations was presented as an unproblematic goal. In reality, when MPSJ was created in 1997 it followed the practice of the day and allowed its various departments to purchase and run their own ICT applications in accordance to their particular needs. Seven years later, under a new mayor, MPSJ hired a team of consultants to seek ways to integrate all applications onto a common platform – a process that will require long years of investment in labour, staff training and equipment.

MPSJ is not alone in the lack of interoperability of its applications. Over the last three decades, the Malaysian government has invested more than RM 3 billion on computerisation. Yet the result has been 'pockets of automation' lacking common standards that would allow information and system sharing across agencies (Karim and Khalid 2003: 36-7). The pace of overall change was so uneven that the federal government allowed each agency and department to adopt ICTs at its own pace. Today the government is questioning the wisdom of such a strategy and has created the Government Integrated Telecommunications Network (GITN). Officials have frequently reported a resistance to integration throughout the Malaysian public sector (2003: 81-87) – as have indeed researchers working on e-government projects in Europe (Kubicek *et al.* 2003).

Participation was the other side of the SJ2005 coin. 'The community' was conceived of as a coherent entity potentially led by community 'champions'. These champions had to first 'buy into' a vision emanating from above, that is from NITC. It soon became clear, however, that 'the community' was as fractured and diverse as the various governmental partners recruited for SJ2005[25].

In spite of this initial setback, the council has continued to promote the SJ2005 ideal, albeit in undeclared competition with MIMOS. A number of ambitious e-community initiatives have been launched over the years under the leadership of Arpah Bt. Abdul Razak, who was the deputy president of MPSJ until May 2005. These include a cyberschool, a cybermosque, three hypermedia libraries, three community ICT centres, a broadband network for middle- and low-income families, and a residents' committee portal (e-JKP). For 2004, MPSJ was awarded RM 2 million from the state government towards ICT projects. One million was to be spent on new broadband facilities (both for e-public services and e-community projects), and another million on initiatives aimed at bridging the so-called digital divide through more ICT centres[26].

Worthy of special attention are the residents' committees (Jawatankuasa Penduduk, JKP) created by the council in 2001. These committees were set up in line with new community-orientated policies at Selangor State level, as well as being a response to USJ.com.my and other independent initiatives from the residents. When I first heard

about the JKP system, I assumed it was either a public relations exercise or a novel form of indirect rule. On the basis of subsequent research, this first impression has proven unfounded. In actual practice, JKP members are using the system to engage in complex two-way flows of information, consultation and influence. Although committee members – most of them political appointees – are often frustrated with MPSJ's lack of action on issues ranging from clogged drains and traffic jams to snatch thefts, the system does provide residents with more clout than the pre-existing residents' associations (RAs).

The autonomy and potential of the JKP system was patently demonstrated in September 2004, when an alliance of residents' groups comprising USJ.com.my, Nwatch and the JKPs was formed to stop the building of a food court on land reserved for a police station. These groups were directly confronting the council who had discreetly approved the plan. Using a range of media technologies (private email, mailing lists, online forums, blogging, SMS, etc) the residents swiftly mounted a demonstration that was covered by the mainstream press and several national television stations. This led to the intervention of the state government who halted the construction of the food court and promised to allocate funds for a police station under the forthcoming 9th Malaysian Plan[27].

Unlike the JKP system as a whole, the e-JKP portal (jkpsj.org.my) has failed to generate any interest to date. The contents are largely provided by MPSJ staff and few residents appear to make use of them. This can be partly attributed to local leaders' reluctance to open up a public discussion space in which they feel the terms would be set by the council rather than the residents[28].

To recapitulate this section, SJ2005 was a short-lived site of inter-sectoral conflict rather than a platform for trisectoral integration and citizens' participation, as originally envisaged by the federal policy-makers.

An e-community hub

The second main finding, as stated earlier, is that in a mere five years Subang Jaya has become a world class e-community site, SJ2005 acting as a catalyst for a range of grassroots initiatives. Besides USJ.com.my, Nwatch and the still dormant e-JKP, there

have been other local Internet initiatives that have met with varying degrees of success. It is against the backdrop of a booming, largely middle-class suburb that we have to set the emergence in 1999-2000 of these social experiments. In 1999, the two-year old municipal council, MPSJ, raised the housing assessment rates by 240 %. This provoked an outcry amongst the residents. Jeff Ooi, the founder of USJ.com.my, recalls it in these terms:

> We were furious. But before we could take up the matter with the council, we needed to gather and compile supporting evidence. Using the Internet, we set up a residential database to compile data according to the type of houses, the assessment rates residents were paying, their contact numbers and so forth. Within two weeks, 50% of the community responded. The collective effort yielded a 20% reduction across the board. That was one of the milestones that proved how effective the Internet was (Jeff Ooi, quoted in Hooi n.d.)

Over the years, this online 'community hall' has developed three main strands of activity. First, a continued preoccupation with 'mundane' issues such as traffic congestion, water quality and blocked drains. Second, a more intermittent attention to questions of local governance, particularly through Jeff Ooi's 'community journalism'[29]. Finally, light-hearted chatting and banter on a great variety of leisurely pursuits. In recognition of its influence with the municipal council, Steven Clift, an international authority on e-democracy, has singled out USJ.com.my as one of the world's very few 'city-wide online community discussion spaces with agenda-setting power' (quoted in Cashel 2003).

Another Subang Jaya success story is Family Place (familyplace.com.my) whose motto is 'Bridging Families, Building Communities'. This website and yahoogroup was founded by KV Soon – a USJ.com.my pioneer – and his wife, Chong Wai Leng[30]. KV had previously been involved in a number of IT start-ups, 'from zero up to 50 million US'. They started in 1997 with a website on baby and toddler care. In those days websites were not popular, and most of their contents spread by word of mouth and email. Chong and Soon also organised regular face-to-face gatherings on parenting. As their children and those of other network participants grew older, priorities shifted 'from babies and diapers to education'. Among Chinese parents one main area of concern is whether or not to send their children to Mandarin-medium

schools. Although most Family Place parents are English-educated, many now feel a Mandarin education is important. Another option is home schooling, which Soon and Chong themselves practise, as do a number of parents within the network. They find that the Malaysian school system does not provide adequate educational or emotional development. To them, Malaysian kindergartens are replicas of primary schools. 'They're very stressful, something's not right'. There should be, in their view, more play and less writing[31]. Yet Family Place, they insist, does not advocate home schooling for all. 'We advocate a more democratised system, more choices for education'.

In 1999 Family Place was the recipient of DAGS funding. 'It allowed us to go public, as there was a fantastic amount of publicity'. With the new funds, they could afford to hire website specialists, researchers, writers and even a PR. They also attended SJ2005 working committee meetings on e-community but found them top-down and not sufficiently community-minded. Today Family Place sustains itself through a range of educational programmes for parents and children[32].

Two members of the Family Place network are Adelyn and Calwinn, who run an organic retail company named Good4u (good4u.com.my). Although they have a website and receive email orders daily, the one indispensable technology in their business is the mobile phone. From their USJ home and Calwinn's mother's in Petaling Jaya, they serve the entire Klang Valley. Adelyn used to run an accountancy software firm. Calwinn sold audiovisual equipment, but after the late 1990s recession collecting money 'became terrible'. 'We didn't get to see much of the family. After the crisis we did a lot of rethinking'. They wanted to raise a healthy family but felt new hypermarkets such as Giant were not up to their standards. Searching for alternatives, they found a free range chicken supplier in the Bentong area.

> A bit pricey but we were happy. Then we thought, 'Why don't we distribute the chicken?', as we had been passing it onto friends and family already. Chicken is very common, everybody eats it. We were searching for wholesome food.

Since they had committed themselves to home schooling, their new business had to be compatible with it. They use their home to process orders and Calwinn's mother's as

the distribution centre, with stocks kept in both. When my family and I[33] became their customers in November 2003, they had a 'slow' website in the process of being upgraded to keep up with a growing customer base. The web-based software was developed by a friend. In the evenings they would do database-keeping to analyse the buying trends.

Another e-community initiative, in this case unsuccessful, has been the Blood Donors' List (yahoo.com/group/usj_subangjaya). Started by Satish Janardanan[34], jocosely known as Mr Dracula, it achieved a list of 70 names but has remained inactive since mid-2002. Satish, who is of North Indian descent, belongs to the regionally rare 'O' negative blood group, shared by only 12,000 people in Malaysia (USJ.com.my 2000). Given the lack of public cooperation, the list died, says Satish, 'a natural death'.

In stark contrast to the Blood Bank, the Subang Jaya Community Youth Football League is very much alive and kicking. It was started in 2000 by an American resident of USJ, Douglas Ladner, in collaboration with a multiethnic group of Malaysians[35]. The driving principle, imported from the United States, is captured in the motto 'A league for kids where everyone plays and no one is paid'.

> As the motto suggests, the heart of the league is a spirit of volunteerism in the pursuit of positive family values. Football is not simply an end in itself, but a means to much higher social and personal goals (Douglas Ladner, 4 August 2004 email).

This core vision has been adapted to Malaysia's political ideology, with a stress on family, community service and interracial harmony. As a basic rule, at least one parent must become involved in coaching and supporting their children. Indeed some single parents have joined the League. Judging by a field visit in February 2004, the various ethnic groups are well represented, not a mean achievement in a country where sporting preferences are closely bound up with ethnicity. The League does however seem to be largely a middle- and upper-middle class affair. For instance, recently League members carried out a charity drive resulting in the donation of food hampers to poor families.

The League covers the entire MPSJ area, but some families from other areas also take part, having learned about it through its well-designed website (sjcyfl.com). The website has a handful of dedicated content producers, and the League is also supported by a regular emailing list. The volunteers who man the organisation hope it will become a model to be replicated across the country[36]. The Ministry of Sport have already indicated their friendly wish to 'hijack' the League, although the League has so far remained resolutely independent. While welcoming the MPSJ logo and logistical support, the League is fully self-governing. League members describe it as a 'close-knit community' where one befriends people who would otherwise remain suburban strangers. To foster this process of community-building, parties, outings and other social events are regularly held.

As we have seen, USJ's 'community' experiments range from the highly active to the inactive, from the official to the independent, from the e-driven to the e-supported. In at least one case, the lines between e-community and e-business are blurred – witness the overlap between Family Place and Good4u in their 'wholesome', family-centred values and aspirations. They all have in common an early engagement with issues directly affecting the welfare and prospects of their own families, whether they be taxation, traffic, crime, parenting, education, or health. From that direct experience in an underserviced suburbia, and except for the now defunct Blood Bank, they all grew by word of mouth and email, supported by mailing lists, websites and/or portals.

Mediators

This account of local e-governance and e-communities in Subang Jaya would be incomplete without a brief reference to two key mediators: the press and local politicians (see Figure 2). The online press, and in particular The Star Online, has aided the diffusion and strengthening of governance across Subang Jaya. Traditionally in Malaysia, the press has allowed citizens a rare avenue for political expression on matters of local governance, which the ruling coalition deem less threatening than state or federal matters (cf. Anttiroiko 2004). Although sceptics argue that this outlet is routinely abused by politicians to attack their rivals, it is also used by civic-minded residents through letters or emails to editors. The paradigmatic example of this latter contributor is Lau Bing, a Subang Jaya resident and former JKP member who has

published dozens of letters on local matters in the English-language press (see Bing 2001). These letters on 'mundane' issues must be contrasted to the more highbrow contributions on local governance by Citizen Nades and Goh Ban Lee, regularly found in The Sun, a free newspaper lacking an online version.
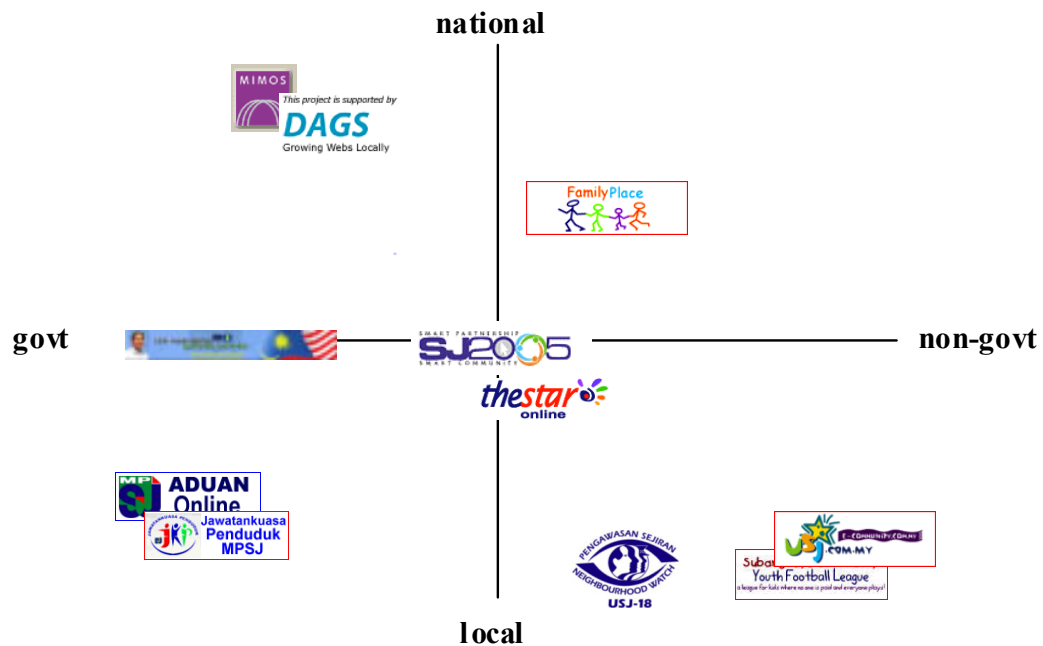

 Figure 2. Some of the key agents in the e-governance field of USJ-Subang Jaya, as of mid-2005. The horizontal axis represents the degree of proximity to government. The vertical axis stands for the geographical range of action, from the neighbourhood level to the national level. Anti-clockwise, from the top left-hand corner: MIMOS/DAGS, Lee Hwa Beng, MPSJ/JKP, Nwatch, Subang Jaya Youth Football League, USJ.com.my, and Family Place. In the centre: SJ2005 and The Star Online.

The Star has strong ties to Subang Jaya. With its head office in neighbouring Petaling Jaya, many of its journalists live in Subang Jaya. One of them, the late Harpajan Singh, was in fact involved in the foundation of USJ.com.my where he trained the editorial team[37]. Moreover, the various e-communities in USJ frequently make use of contents from The Star directly relevant to their concerns. In some cases, published pieces have originated in the e-community itself, e.g. an email to the editor on a local council action (or inaction).

In a country with declining standards of investigative journalism[38] and a government-controlled press (Gomez 2004), certain media can be counted on to publicise events favourable to government officials. Local politicians cannot take this for granted, though; they must cultivate good relations with journalists. The state assemblyman for Subang Jaya, Dato' Lee Hwa Beng, who emerged from the middle class grassroots, has cultivated such relations and is a regular fixture in the local press, both online and offline, in all three major languages. Lee, an ICT-skilled accountant, has had his own website since 1995 (hwabeng.org.my), the year he took office. On this website he publishes emails from residents and keeps his constituents informed – albeit not always promptly – on the progress of issues of general interest. His indefatigable *turun padang* ('going to the ground'), role as a local governance go-between, and ICT skills make him a respected figure across the e-community scene. In 2004, he was re-elected for a third consecutive term in office.

Connections and disconnections

We have just reviewed some of the new connections amongst Subang Jaya residents enabled or enhanced by the Internet, including residents' forums, community journalism, neighbourhood watch schemes, parental groups, and a politician's website. Yet we should bear in mind that this 'imperative to connect' (Knox *et al.* n.d.) frequently results in *dis*connections as well as connections (Appadurai 1986, Strathern 1996). It is important, then, to ask: Who are the people being connected and disconnected by these various ICT initiatives? Are there any significant ethnic, religious, class, gendered, or age divides at work?

First, let us consider the 'well-connected' in Subang Jaya. The profiles of e-community founders and active members show interesting commonalities. Belying the 1990s folk notion of ICT innovation being led by young asocial 'nerds' (Hine 2000: 14-27), most innovators are now in their 40s and combine ICT expertise with social and political acumen. Most of them live in USJ and are male, ethnic Chinese, university-educated and employed in the private sector. They moved into USJ in the 1990s with young families and middle-class expectations of a good quality of life in a premier township. Instead of realising the Malaysian dream, they encountered,

however, clogged roads and drains, dwindling green spaces, alarming crime statistics and declining educational standards. Having lived through – and often led – ICT innovations in the private sector, they found a municipal council (MPSJ) that was struggling to keep abreast of technological change and seemed unprepared to engage with the residents.

It follows from this collective profile that non-Chinese, women, the elderly, the young, foreign workers, and residents in other districts of Subang Jaya are being 'disconnected' from this surge in local (cyber)activism. Are these segments of the population prospective 'late adopters' of a newly diffused set of technologies (Rogers 1995)? Or is the Internet adding yet another social divide to the suburban order? These questions can only be answered in a future study, but the profiles of the pioneering cyberactivists are likely to have a disproportionately large effect on the long-term evolution of a local public sphere, a phenomenon known in population studies as 'the founders' effect' (see also Giddens 1984).

Conclusion

In terms of its chief objective – a strong trisectoral e-partnership – SJ2005 undoubtedly failed, for reasons outlined earlier. Yet in its five years of existence SJ2005 contributed to USJ's 728 hectares becoming a world class e-community node (Cashel 2003). This MIMOS initiative captured the imagination of local residents and helped to channel ICT funding to the township. During that time participants learnt that sustaining e-groups, whichever their purpose, is a painstaking, labour-intensive, lengthy process – a labour of love. The scholarly literature on online communities is clear on this point[39].

The Subang Jaya evidence suggests that the Internet and other new media technologies have strengthened the governance sphere across the suburb, particularly in USJ. At this early stage it would be unwise, though, to speculate on the long-term consequences for local democratisation. Much will depend on wider changes and continuities within Malaysia's overall political system. What we *can* already say is that this sphere of distributed governance connects the public sector with civil society in myriad ways that no single group can control. Funding from bodies such as DAGS

and Selangor State certainly facilitates e-community activities, but it does so in complex ways that cannot be anticipated with any precision, let alone controlled. We can also be confident that the field of local (e-) community-building is thoroughly middle class, middle-aged and ethnic Chinese. Subang Jaya is an area where the gap between middle-class expectations and local realities is greater than in most Western suburbs. It is a locality, therefore, where the middle classes have felt a greater need to become involved in local affairs. In the coming years, a global search for comparable suburbs is likely to take us to other developing countries rather than to the North Atlantic or Australia.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

[1] In Malaysia, a colloquial term for Indian Muslims and their businesses.

[2] A group of 'smart city' experts from the Netherlands, Sweden and Canada visited the Subang Jaya Municipal Council (MPSJ) in 2003, though the focus of their Malaysian sojourn was Cyberjaya (see www.ocri.ca/email_broadcasts/smartwire_011603.html).

3 My research was part of Netcultures, a comparative anthropological study with colleagues at the Universities of Bremen, Manchester, and Amsterdam (www.s-hb.de/~netculture). The main research methods were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, online research and library research. In the field, I followed local usage: I spoke English with the middle classes and Malay with the working classes (including non-Malays), a language I had learned in Jakarta, London, and Sarawak.

4 *Guardian Unlimited* 14 December 2002, cf. BBC News (2003).

5 eGovernment News (2004).

6 See www.psj.gov.my/mpsj/direktori.

7 There are, however, some exceptions to this gloomy outlook. One of them is the Community Builder project (www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au) of the state government of New South Wales, in Australia. The aim is to build 'communities of practice' that will involve residents in decision-making processes (Cashel 2003). In Tampere (Finland) an e-community forum known as Mansetori and a number of residential area-based community networks are the result of collaborative projects between the local university and America's MIT Media Lab (Anttiroiko 2004). Germany's Mehr Demokratie (www.mehr-demokratie.de) supports direct democracy, e.g. referenda initiated by citizens, and had already by 1999 met with some success (Macpherson 1999). A fourth exception is Minnesota E-Democracy (www.e-democracy.org) which in 1994 became 'the world's first election-oriented Web site'. In 2000 it organised an online debate with most of Minnesota's candidates to the U.S. Senate. According to Dahlberg (2001), this organisation, led by Steven Clift, extended the local public sphere thanks to its autonomy from state and capital, reciprocal critique, reflexivity, sincerity, and discursive inclusion (cf. Aikens 1996).

8 Victoria Government (2002a).

9 Victoria Government (2002b).

10 Infosoc Malaysia (2002).

11 The former prime minister, Dr Mahathir, has defended the appointment of councillors as a way of avoiding electoral campaigns 'dominated by politics' (Bernama 2003). Critics counter, nonetheless, that the system lacks transparency. For example, local authorities, including MPSJ, are said to be misusing the Official Secrets Act to hoard information from the public.

12 Arpah Bt. Abdul Razak, MPSJ (pers. comm., May 2003).

13 Estnerie s/o Thamotaran, a Malayalee man from USJ2, remembers well those days. He was a field supervisor from 1960 to 1991, when he took early retirement. Life on the estate was pleasantly regulated, a cyclical alternation of fieldwork, office work, religious practice and leisure. In the racially stratified world of the plantation, he mediated between the British (later Malay and Chinese) management and the Tamil workers. He was the chairman of the Hindu

temples, and sent his children to a mission school in Klang. The workers, in contrast, sent theirs to the plantation's Tamil school. Entertainment was provided by itinerant cinema companies that brought to the plantation popular Tamil films. 'The British were very strict', he recalls, 'we had few gangsters' (Interviewed in USJ on 16, 24 and 27 June 2004).

[14] *Sime UEP Annual Report* (2003: 8).

[15] Source: Patrick Tan, interviewed in USJ on 2 July 2004.

[16] USJ is an abbreviation of Sime UEP Subang Jaya.

[17] Ooi (1999), *Sime UEP Annual Report* (2003: 8).

[18] Suthantiram (a member of the demolished temple committee), interviewed in USJ on 27 June 2004. See also www.usj.com.my/usjXpress/details.php3?table=usjXpress&ID=220. The outlying areas of Seri Kembangan, and especially Puchong, are expected to expand dramatically in the coming years. Puchong was originally settled by Orang Asli (aborigines) and Malays, followed in colonial times by Punjabi cattle ranchers, Tamil rubber tappers and Chinese tin miners (Aftar Singh, pers. comm., 14 July 2004). While Subang Jaya and USJ were built by a single developer, Puchong residents face huge challenges as numerous developers – reportedly as many as 30 to 60 – are currently operating in the area. Complaints about lack of adequate planning and coordination are rife, and they are sometimes published in the *Malay Mail* and other local newspapers.

[19] See www.malvu.org for a reaction to this paper that stresses the lack of democratic freedoms in Malaysia in comparison with Thailand, Indonesia or the Philippines.

[20] In grammatically correct English: 'All households that can afford it will be connected to, and use, the internet'. The 'affordable' qualifier was not in the original formulation of the deliverables.

[21] The trisectoral idea was borrowed from Local Agenda 21 (LA21), derived from the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Chandran 2003).

[22] Strictly speaking, and from a MIMOS/Sigma perspective, SJ2005 is still alive through an e-business project (e-BizX) as well as an initiative aimed at modernising the local shoe industry by means of new ICTs. These initiatives are being pursued independently from MPSJ.

[23] Interviewed in Penang on 17 February 2004.

[24] I shall be exploring the wider implications of this important distinction elsewhere.

[25] On the conceptual difficulties and controversies that surround the notion of 'community', see Rapport (1996), Amit (2002) and Amit and Rapport (2002).

[26] Arpah Bt. Abdul Razak, interviewed at MPSJ on 20 May and 6 December 2003. Reportedly the most successful initiative to date has been the hypermedia library, but I have yet to analyse in detail these varied projects.

[27] At the time of writing (early August 2005) this dispute is still far from resolved, though.

[28] In contrast, Ipoh City Council (MBI), in the northern Peninsular state of Perak, hosts a community forum which had yielded a modest, yet significant, output of 118 topics and some 600 posts, both in English and Malay, as of 14 July 2004 (see www.forum.mbi.gov.my). Some of these posts are critical of the local authorities, yet there would seem to be neither censorship nor any other form of moderation. This has made participants feel that they are 'talking to the wall'.

[29] The output here has decreased, though, since Ooi took up 'blogging' (a form of web diary writing) in January 2003 on issues of national interest, an area in which he has gained international renown (see www.usj.com.my/jeffblog.php3).

[30] Interviewed in Subang Jaya (USJ) on 18 October 2003.

[31] According to the Australian psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg, Malaysian pupils spend an average of 3.8 hours a day on homework. In contrast, the figure is 3.5 for Singapore, 2.2 for Canada, 2.1 for the U.S., 2 for Australia and New Zealand, and 1.7 for Japan (Almeida 2004).

[32] See www.unescobkk.org/education/ict/v2/detail.asp?id=1349.

[33] My partner, Sarah Pink, who is also an anthropologist and has contributed many helpful suggestions as well as photographs to this project, and our only child then, Vandon, accompanied me to USJ6, in Subang Jaya, for four months at the end of 2003. Having my own middle-class family in the field improved my access to other local families and gave me a better understanding of their lives and concerns.

[34] Telephone interview on 22 October 2003. Email communication on 10 August 2004. See also http://www.usj.com.my/usjXpress/details.php3?table=usjXpress&ID=112. Satish plans to move the Blood List database to a new message board: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ usjCommunity

[35] Interviewed in Subang Jaya (USJ) on 10 February 2004.

[36] The model has already been adopted in neighbouring Bukit Jelutong, Shah Alam (see www.asianewsnet.net/level3_template1.php?l3sec=6&news_id=26873).

[37] See www.usj.com.my/harpsgdn/harpsgdn.php3

[38] R. Nadeswaran alias Citizen Nades (*The Sun*), interviewed in Petaling Jaya on 1 July 2004.

[39] Even e-community pornographers sacrifice precious time and effort in what can only be described as a labour of *lust*. For instance, IRC (chat room) communities of 'sexpic' traders rely on the selfless voluntarism of a few members to uphold the community netiquette and weed out 'leechers' – immoral traders who 'leech' pornographic pictures from others without giving any in exchange (Slater 1998). Similarly, the renowned e-democracy advocate, Steven Clift, has stressed the centrality of industriousness to e-community development: 'It is too bad that the journalists and academics who hyped e-democracy in the mid-nineties didn't simply

create e-mail list discussions for their hometowns. You can talk about the potential all you want, but the only way we can keep the information age from disconnecting people from democracy is to roll up our sleeves and do the work required' (quoted in Cashel 2003).