

TECHNOLOGY POLICY AND THE FUTURE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS



by Benjamin Ang and Ben Chua

Public policy making has never been easy, and the rapid development of technology has only made it harder. On one hand, the fast pace of technological change makes multi-stakeholder engagement and public-private partnership essential in helping to identify potential impacts, building public legitimacy, balancing interests and ensuring the feasibility and relevance of technology policies. On the other hand, when states and stakeholders are polarised, dramatic deadlocks between them are triggered. Memorable and awkward examples in the past year include the standoff between Meta (parent of Facebook) and Canada,¹ the US Senate hearing on Big Tech firms,² and US lawmakers seeking to ban TikTok.³

Such a confrontational dynamic brings states and stakeholders no closer to solving the issues at hand, which can include mental health risks, child safety, freedom of expression, hate speech, hostile information campaigns, stifling of innovation, economic progress, threats to democracy, and national security. Instead of constructive collaboration, parties seem locked in a prisoner's dilemma, prioritising their individual short-term interests at the expense of long-term benefit and security for all.

The Role of Stakeholders in a Secure Digital Future

This situation is especially stark in information and communications technology, where hyperscalers like Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, Google, Meta, Apple and

Alibaba have more specialised expertise, resources and influence than many small states. As technology changes the playing field, meaningful stakeholder engagement is even more important.

Stakeholders like academic institutions and researchers can help policymakers understand the implications of new technologies and provide evidence-based recommendations. Civil society and NGOs can surface public concerns on issues like privacy, rights and ethics. Individual experts can provide technically relevant inputs that balance those from technology industry leaders. Investors and financial institutions can help assess the economic impact of technology policies.

While technology has disrupted the traditional stakeholder relationship, it can also be a powerful tool to reinvent that relationship. One such example is vTaiwan, initially a ground-up initiative, now a government-supported digital platform that crowdsources laws and policies in Taiwan.⁴ It enables every willing citizen to participate, then consolidates ideas and inputs from participants to depict levels of consensus, which encourage stakeholders with differing perspectives to continually rework solutions until general agreement is achieved.⁵ Policies are refined through this iterative process as the views of citizens, civil society, government, experts and elected representatives are considered with equal weight. Since its inception, 80% of the 28 cases discussed through the vTaiwan process have resulted in decisive government action and effective legislation.⁶

¹ Blayne Haggart, "Meta's Tussle with Canada Isn't Over Principle, or Even Profit: It's About Control", Centre for International Governance Innovation, 6 September 2023, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/metas-tussle-with-canada-isnt-over-principle-or-even-profit-its-about-control/>.

² US Senate Committee on the Judiciary, "Recap", Senate Judiciary Committee, 1 February 2024, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/press/releases/recap-senate-judiciary-committee-presses-big-tech-ceos-on-failures-to-protect-kids-online-during-landmark-hearing>.

³ Liv McMahon, "US TikTok Ban: When and Why Could the App Be Outlawed?", BBC, 16 September 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53476117>.

⁴ vTaiwan, "About", vTaiwan, n.d. Accessed 7 October 2024, <https://info.vtaiwan.tw/>.

⁵ Chris Horton, "The Simple but Ingenious System Taiwan Uses to Crowdfund Its Laws." MIT Technology Review, 21 August 2018, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/08/21/240284/the-simple-but-ingenious-system-taiwan-uses-to-crowdfund-its-laws/>.

⁶ vTaiwan, "A Few Accomplishments", vTaiwan, n.d., Accessed 7 October 2024, <https://info.vtaiwan.tw/#two>.

Stakeholder engagement is also a hallmark of policymaking in Singapore, from public⁷ and expert consultations to focus group discussions and public opinion polls, as seen in the Public Consultations on the Cybersecurity Act, Operational Technology Cybersecurity Masterplan, and the Securing AI Systems guidelines. In addition to the private sector, civil society and academia, these engagements now include the youth of Singapore. The Youth Panels, launched in 2023 by the National Youth Council, provide opportunities for young Singaporeans and the government to collaborate on policies⁸ across four broad policy areas: financial security, careers, digital well-being, and sustainability.⁹

The Role of Youth Stakeholders in Singapore's Digital Future

We propose that in the formulation of technology policy, it is especially important that there is the political will to recognise youths as a distinct and essential stakeholder group. Young people tend to be digital natives, interacting continuously with digital tools and platforms, so they can provide relevant and practical inputs. They may have fresh ideas attuned to the latest technological developments. Youths will also be the most affected by today's technology policies, so they will seek policies that are forward-looking and consider long-term implications.

Nevertheless, engaging youths comes with its own set of challenges and potential pitfalls. Youths today face a different global dynamic than do policymakers and other stakeholders, who generally tend to be older. Their lived experiences can be informative on current issues and threats, but their lack of experience could mean their suggestions are not practicable. The generation gap between youths and other stakeholders, which often manifests in miscommunication and misinterpretation, can inhibit constructive collaboration. Common exclamations

like “you don't understand what it's like nowadays” or “back when I was your age ...” are not helpful.

These challenges can be overcome. Capacity building can help both youths and policymakers to learn to engage one another collaboratively and constructively. This can be provided by facilitators and interlocutors from civil society and academia who have experience working with both youths and policymakers and can help bridge communication gaps.

Technology can also be used to enhance the engagement of youth stakeholders because digital platforms can reach more digital natives. Systems that consolidate ideas and inputs from participants to build consensus, like the vTaiwan platform, can encourage cross-generational dialogue between youths, policymakers and other older stakeholders.

The creation of the Youth Panels has set a precedent in Singapore's approach to incorporating alternative voices into the shaping of public policy. Established research organisations and civil society groups are well placed to support the landscape by facilitating meaningful engagements between policymakers and youths, including harnessing the cyber world.

A multi-stakeholder search for solutions is vital to actively address the threats and risks we face today.¹⁰ As we look forward, important upcoming policy issues will include the future of education, digital literacy, cybersecurity, privacy and data security, digital inclusion, environmental sustainability, clean energy, security of space, biotechnology and the responsible use of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and quantum technology. It is vital to engage the youth stakeholders who can make meaningful contributions to discussions around policy formation because the policies of today will shape their lives tomorrow.

Benjamin Ang is Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) and of the Future Issues and Technology (FIT) cluster and Digital Impact Research (DIR) at RSIS. Ben Chua is the Chief Executive of Cyber Youth Singapore.

⁷ Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, “Public Consultation on Securing AI Systems”, 31 July 2024, <https://www.csa.gov.sg/News-Events/public-consultations/public-consultation-on-securing-ai-systems>.

⁸ Tang See Kit, “New Youth Panels to Develop Policy Recommendations with the Government to Be Launched This Year”, Channel News Asia, 21 April 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/new-youth-panels-develop-policy-recommendations-government-3434586>.

⁹ Janella Ching, “4 Youth Panels Formed for Inaugural Run of Initiative; Members to Look at Financial Security, Careers, Digital Well-Being, Sustainability”, *Youthopia*, 25 November 2023, <https://www.nyc.gov.sg/youthopia/4-youth-panels-formed-for-inaugural-run-of-initiative>

¹⁰ Benjamin Ang and Karryl S. Trajano, “Emerging Technologies and National Security”, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Annual Review of 2023, 15 January 2024, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Benjamin-Ang-and-Karryl-Sagun-Trajano-Essay.pdf>.