

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Title	Running suburbia: New media and local governance in Subang Jaya
Source	http://phuakl.tripod.com/pssm/conference/day39.doc
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Author 3	NA
Publication/Conference	4th International Malaysian Studies Conference; 3-5 August 2004, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi
Edition	NA
Document Type	Article
CPI Primary Subject	Governance and Public Admin
CPI Secondary Subject	Local Government; Media ; Ethnicity;
Geographic Terms	Selangor;
Abstract	This paper is part of a three-year anthropological study of new media, local governance and ethnicity in Subang Jaya

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**Running suburbia:
new media and local governance in Subang Jaya**

Draft 3, 24 August 2004

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**Paper to the 4th International Malaysian Studies Conference (MSC4)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)
Bangi, 3-5 August 2004**

I recently got involved in a debate about the governance of a web portal in USJ-Subang Jaya, the Kuala Lumpur suburb where I currently live and research. The portal, named USJ.com.my, has had a brief but eventful history. Founded in 1999, its main community forum boasts close to 3500 threads (topics) and over 26,000 posts, virtually all in English or Manglish (Malaysian English). It is arguably the busiest local e-community forum in Malaysia. To me as an anthropologist –and to any other resident with web access and knowledge of English and Manglish – the forum’s archive is a treasure trove of local knowledge. From traffic woes to classic jokes, from governance to gossip, from *cari makan* (eating out¹) to Chinese schools, there is no dearth of topics.

The governance debate was brief and took part largely outside the forum. It centred on whether or not 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 problem as a *gwailo*² (white) anthropologist was how to remain a participant observer without being seen to take sides. Over a *mamak*³ meal, I shared my worries with one of the participants in the debate. I was pondering whether to take my musings to the forum, or steer clear of the fray. He advised not to become involved. Tongue in cheek, he reminded me of the first commandment of Hollywood time travel: ‘Thou shalt not change anything’.

I must admit I felt flattered to be considered an alien time traveller from a future world of seamless e-democracy. After all my country of origin, Spain, has only recently (in 1975) embraced democracy, let alone e-democracy. My own experience of online engagement with local authorities in Spain and other ‘advanced’ countries is minimal. Moreover, having reviewed the literature on e-democracy around the globe, it does not appear as if the West had much to teach suburban Malaysia. As I suggest below, Western local authorities and cyberactivists may in fact wish to learn from Subang Jaya⁴.

This paper is part of a three-year anthropological study of new media, local governance and ethnicity in Subang Jaya⁵. My main research methods are participant observation, informal interviews, online research and library research. The fieldwork languages follow local usage: English with the middle classes, Malay with the working classes. The aim of this paper is to present my initial findings after fourteen months studying this locality, both online and offline. I first review the international literature on new media and governance. Then I provide a brief historical introduction to Subang Jaya and present two of my key, seemingly paradoxical, findings:

1. An ambitious ‘smart township’ project known as SJ2005 disintegrated soon after its official launching in 2000.
2. Nonetheless, in five years USJ has become a world class e-community hub. In this respect, SJ2005 can be considered a success.

Finally I discuss the role of two groups of mediators – journalists and politicians –and conclude with a brief reflection on these findings.

Local governance, new media

The term governance often stands for government, 'the act of governing'. Yet it is

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, in Wade 2003)

Since the 1980s, particularly in the West, there has been a growing sense of power diffusing from governments to the private and non-governmental sectors. The notion of governance is tied to this perception. It also embodies an ideal of self-regulation both within and beyond government organisations. Governance is both an analytic concept and a normative goal. As an analytic concept, it is used to study post-1980s political and administrative changes (Wade 2003). I shall be using it in this sense.

As a normative goal, governance promises solutions to perceived malaises such as impoverished states, bureaucratic red tape, social unrest, etc. This normative view, however, has been more firmly held by successive American and British governments than by their more sceptical counterparts in Continental Europe (Wade 2003). It has also been strongly promoted worldwide by the World Bank, United Nations (UN) and other organisations which have linked governance to the attainment of sustainable development. It is common in formulations such as 'good governance' and applied as much to governments as to corporations ('corporate governance'). In Latin America, for example, it has been translated into Spanish as *gobernanza*. In Southeast Asia, international observers blamed the 1997 financial crisis on poor state and corporate 'governance'. Governments and companies in the region have had to pay close scrutiny to these areas to attract further foreign investment, a market which now appears to be slowly recovering (Kurlantzick 2004).

Although the term e-governance is less commonly used than e-government, the two are closely linked (Kamarck and Nie 2002). In this paper I use the term 'local e-governance' to signify the use of new digital media to broaden the space of governance so as to encompass local authorities, residents and the private sector. According to the UN, 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). Therefore e-governance *includes* e-government but covers a broader inter-organisational space. In addition to the operation of government, it directs our attention to new media in relation to accountability, decision-making and democracy in society at large. The UN plays a central role in the benchmarking of e-government progress worldwide (UNPAN 2003). For the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the normative goals of e-government are:

1. Customers online -- not in line
2. Strengthening *good governance*
3. Broadening public participation
4. Improving productivity and efficiency of the bureaucracy
5. Promoting economic growth (UNDP 2004, my emphasis).

One perceived example of good governance is the introduction of 'internal markets' within public administrations aimed at improving their efficiency and service delivery in partnership with the private sector (Heywood 2000: 20-21, in Wade 2003). This trend can also be observed in e-government initiatives. For instance, the British government is encouraging local authorities to engage in e-commerce. It is hoping to enhance the 'e-procurement marketplace' across the country and create a 'mixed economy' in e-government service delivery by involving private firms and NGOs (eGovernment News 2004a, 2004b). Similarly, Andersen Consulting has defined e-government as 'applying eCommerce tools and techniques to the business of governing to benefit government stakeholders, including individuals, businesses and the government itself' (*Utusan Malaysia Online* 7 July 2000).

Despite these good intentions, e-government has yet to make much headway. 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 (*Guardian Unlimited* 14 December 2002, cf. BBC News 2003). 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' (eGovernment News 2004c). 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 offers such addresses (psj.gov.my/mpsj/direktori) but no information on meetings or bylaws. In Italy the government is meanwhile considering local e-democracy initiatives but these plans are still at a preparatory stage (eGovernment News 2004d).

There are, however, some exceptions to this gloomy outlook. One of them is the Community Builder project (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 (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 (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). A further example given by Clift himself is none other than USJ.com.my, the USJ-Subang Jaya portal mentioned in the opening. Clift considers it to be a rarity, one of the world's very few 'city-wide online community discussion spaces with agenda-setting power' (quoted in Cashel 2003).

The Malaysian case

The prehistory 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 is hailed today 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 is to 'leapfrog' Malaysia from the Industrial Era to the Information Era. The MSC is 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 (see below).

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, notably very low levels of consultation with the citizenry. To Nain, 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' (Victorian Government 2002a). Local authorities were encouraged to launch e-community projects that would make them 'more accessible' to the residents (Victorian Government 2002b). That same year, the NITC's annual Infosoc Conference adopted the theme 'K-initiatives for Improved

Local Governance’ (Infosoc Malaysia 2002). 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 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).

The former Prime Minister, Mahathir, has nonetheless defended the appointment of councillors as a way of avoiding electoral campaigns ‘dominated by politics’ (Bernama 2003). Critics counter 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.

There is also the nagging problem of ‘non-compliance’ with local government rules. Observers often point out 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 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 areas 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 countries⁶.

Much of the territory was once a Sime Darby plantation, initially devoted to rubber and from the 1970s onwards to cocoa and palm oil. Estnerie s/o Thamotaran, a Malayalee man from USJ2, remembers well those days⁷. 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 sent their children 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'.

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 (*Sime UEP Annual Report* 2003: 8). 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 prices⁸. Eventually the market took off, with USJ⁹ 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 (Ooi 1999, *Sime UEP Annual Report* 2003: 8). The estate workers were made redundant and offered subsidised flats from which they had to find new forms of employment. As 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 ineffectual¹⁰.

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 miners¹¹. 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.

Separate ways

It is against the backdrop of a booming, largely middle-class suburb that we have to set the emergence in 1999-2000 of a number of e-community experiments in USJ. When in 1999, the two-year old municipal council, MPSJ, raised the housing assessment rates by 240 %, there was an outcry among the residents. Jeff Ooi, the founder of USJ.com.my, describes the atmosphere:

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 moved away from issues that Ooi considers 'mundane', such as traffic congestion and blocked drains, to more highbrow questions of governance. Its early combative spirit, with frequent criticisms of MPSJ, has somewhat waned. This has been especially so since 2002, when Ooi took up the time-consuming genre of political blogging -- a form of web diary writing -- to great nationwide acclaim (see usj.com.my/jeffbblog.php3). Another recent trend is role-playing, with forum participants -- many of whom are middle-aged -- developing chain narratives in which the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred. To Ooi, this collective creativity is 'a reflection of the Knowledge Society we want to help bring about'¹².

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR A SMART COMMUNITY

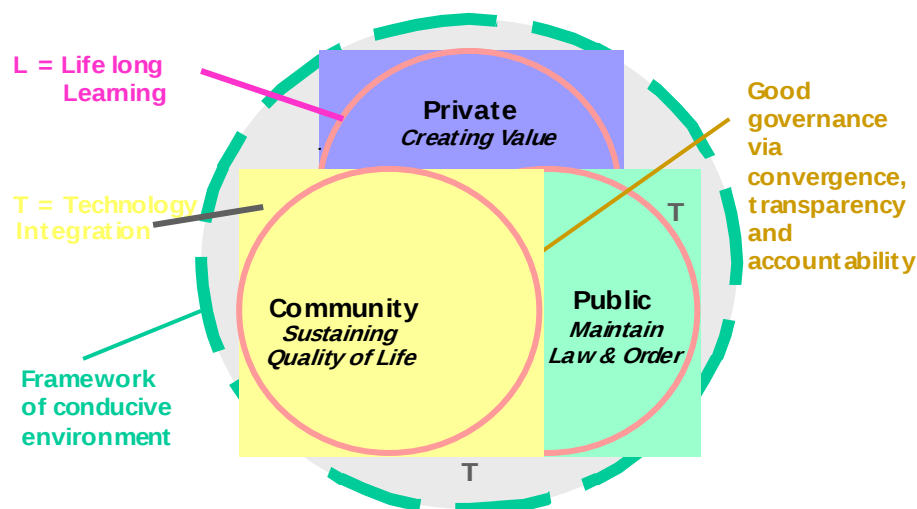


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for SJ2005 smart township/community. Notice the 'good governance' component. Source: Agnes Ng (2002: 15), MIMOS.

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, a 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 in the imminent coming of the Information Age in tandem with, in Southeast Asia, 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 (see 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, KPKT and MPSJ¹³.

The first steering committee meeting was held in April 2000 'to kick start SJ2005' (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 Internet¹⁴
- 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. 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). We find a further illustration of the 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 MPSJ's YDP or Council President (equivalent to a Mayor).

Alas the excitement was to be short-lived. Although I am yet to carry out a full autopsy on SJ2005, the main contributing factors to its disintegration are already clear¹⁵. 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. In the case of USJ.com.my, it is said that MIMOS had 'blacklisted' it 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 in



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, wearing a golden tie, is Fuad. In the centre is Jeff Ooi, the founding father of USJ.com.my. Source: USJ.com.my/aboutus.php3

USJ18. The then Council President, Fuad, protested that ample federal funds (RM 1.24 million) were being allocated to a small neighbourhood project instead of the local authorities. ‘DAGS didn’t even give us money for the e-JKP or the cybermosque’ (see below), laments Fuad¹⁶.

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. As a matter of fact, 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 Assemblyman¹⁷.

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 voluntarism, 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 (MIMOS, KPKT, MPSJ) 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 has recently 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 public sector (2003: 81-87).

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. It would be unfair, though, to single out MIMOS for its sociological naivety. The idea of participation as the panacea of good local governance is shared even by international scholars, e.g.:

The Information Society lacked a sense of content and engagement, and, as a result, it was replaced by theories that incorporated networks, knowledge, and creativity into their understanding. The emphasis thus changed from information to knowledge; bits to ideas. e-governance, in this terrain, involves more than Internet voting technologies – it becomes a matter of creative *participation* (Hartley and Rennie 2004, my emphasis).

In spite of this initial setback, MPSJ 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, the Deputy President of MPSJ. 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 has been awarded RM 2 million from the state government towards ICT projects. One million is 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 centres¹⁸. Reportedly the most successful initiative to date has been the hypermedia library, but I have yet to gather sufficient firsthand data on these varied projects.

Worthy of special attention are the Residents' Committees (Jawatankuasa Penduduk, JKP) created by Fuad in 2001. These committees were set up in line with new community-orientated policies at Selangor State level. When I first heard about the JKP system, I assumed it was either a PR exercise or a novel form of indirect rule. Having attended a number of JKP meetings in Subang Jaya and USJ, however, 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 better access to MPSJ than the pre-existing Residents' Associations (RAs).

Unlike the JKP system as a whole, the e-JKP portal (jkpsj.org.my) has failed to generate any community interest to date. The contents are largely provided by MPSJ staff and few residents appear to make use of them. In contrast, Ipoh City Council (MBI) has a community forum which had yielded as of 14 July 2004 a modest yet significant output of 118 topics and some 600 posts, both in English and Malay (see 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'. Thus when 'admin' recently announced the introduction of a file attachment option with every post, an irate resident responded:

Anonymous Re: Pengumuman / Announcement

Get real! For heaven's sake! What kind of silly joke is this? There's never a reply for any questions posted for MBI and you call yourself admin for MBI? Put the forum aside, it's just like talking to the wall.

29.05.2004 at
09:15

In 2003, while SJ2005 withered, MIMOS embarked on an alternative project known as Smart Local Government-Governance Agenda (SLGGA). It was hoped that the project, to be implemented by all 144 local authorities in partnership with the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and MAMPU, would allow residents to pay their assessment rates, renew licences and make complaints online by 2005 (*New Straits Times* 23 July 2003). According to the Minister, SLGGA would 'help to strengthen the elements of transparency, accountability and effectiveness' and bridge the reported digital divide between more and less 'progressive' local authorities (*Daily Express News* 24 July 2003). Yet by mid-2004 the deadline had been set back to 2007 and participant local authorities were growing impatient with the lack of clear direction and uncertain funding surrounding the programme.

The former ICT policy section of MIMOS, now renamed Sigma, is currently engaged in two other DAGS-funded e-governance projects: an Ipoh pilot project aimed at increasing citizens' participation in local decision-making processes (see idemnos.com.my), and a Penang pilot seeking to enhance transparency through a backend application (Sean Ang, pers. comm., 3 March 2004).

To recapitulate, SJ2005 soon became a site of political struggles rather than a platform for integration and public participation. Early hopes of a cohesive, united effort that would become a Malaysian showcase were soon dashed.

An e-community hub

The second main finding, as I said earlier, is that despite its SJ2005 woes USJ has become a thriving e-community hub in a mere five years. Besides USJ.com.my, Nwatch and the still dormant e-JKP, there have been other initiatives with varying degrees of success. Together, they form an intricate local web of social relations and exchanges, both online and offline. As a caveat, I should add that I am using the notion of e-community very liberally, to cover a wide spectrum of initiatives, from the e-driven USJ.com.my to the e-supported Youth Football League (below).

One of the success stories 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 Leng¹⁹. KV had been involved in a number of IT start-ups, 'from zero up to 50 million US' and was well aware of 'how much or how little money you need to sustain an IT project'. 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 face-to-face gatherings on parenting every other month. These were opportunities for parents to meet other parents. As their children and those of their network 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 parents are English-educated, 'they now feel [a Mandarin education is] important'. Another option is home schooling, which the Soons 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 writing²⁰. 'We're very unconventional and non-conformist'. Yet Family Place, they insist, does not advocate home schooling. '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 its educational programmes for parents and a range of children's programmes²¹.

Another e-community initiative, in this case unsuccessful, has been the Blood Donors' List (yahoo.com/group/usj_subangjaya). Started by Satish Janardanan²², 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 Malaysians²³. 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 (Ladner pers. comm., 4 August 2004).

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 country²⁴. 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. Having met League members both on and off the football pitch, I can vouch for this strong sense of connectedness.

Finally, two USJ-based e-commerce initiatives deserve our attention even though they do not fall strictly under the rubric of e-community. They both concern the online sale of foodstuffs. Ray Cheng²⁵, 48, never completed his secondary education. He comes from a background in the transport business and an interest in computers as a hobby. During the 1997-98 recession he lost his business and decided to enter retailing. In 1998 he set up a family greengrocers' in USJ and added a website in 2000. Cheng intended to become Malaysia's first family 'e-grocer'. Despite the intense media attention, his business suffered after the dotcom crash of 2000. He was also disappointed by the poor response to his website's transactional features. He

discovered that Malaysians are still reluctant to transact online, certainly when it comes to buying food. As one informant put it, 'Malaysians love window shopping; they like to touch, feel, and smell what they're buying'. Today, most of Cheng's sales come from walk-in customers, followed by those who use the telephone, faxes and email. Rather than use his online shopping form, customers prefer to email him Excel sheets with their orders. Is he, then, really engaging in e-commerce?

It depends on how you define e-commerce. If you mean online transactions, then there's no scope, but if you include Excel attachments then I am doing e-commerce. Technology is just one of my channels. I try not to be judgmental and see how customers react. Malaysians prefer the shopping experience, they want to be excited.

Adelyn and Calwinn run an organic retail company called Good4u (good4u.com.my). Although they have a website and receive email orders daily, they find that 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 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 from 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 family²⁶ 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.

As we have seen, USJ's e-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 underserved suburbia, and except for the now defunct Blood Bank, they all grew by word of mouth and email, supported by well-designed websites and/or portals.

The profiles of e-community founders and leaders show interesting commonalities as well. Belying the folk notion of ICT innovation being led by young unsocial 'nerds', most USJ innovators are now in their 40s and combine ICT expertise with social and political acumen. Most moved into USJ in the 1990s with young families and middle-class expectations of a good quality of life in a premier township. Instead they encountered clogged roads and drains, precious few green spaces, alarming crime

statistics, and declining educational standards. Having lived through – and often led – ICT innovations in the private sector, they found a local council that was struggling to keep abreast of technological change and seemed unprepared to engage with the residents. A common refrain one hears from e-community leaders is: ‘MPSJ are not quite ready for us yet’, a view shared by MPSJ officials themselves! Citizens and local authorities alike live under the shadow of Maybank – Malaysia’s largest high street bank whose electronic facilities are superb. Having grown accustomed to smooth online bank transactions, USJ’s middle classes expect the same standards from MPSJ. We could call it ‘the Maybank effect’.

Mediators

This account of local e-governance in USJ-Subang Jaya would be incomplete without a brief reference to two key mediators: the press and politicians. 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 have allowed citizens a rare avenue for political expression on matters of local governance, which the ruling BN 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.

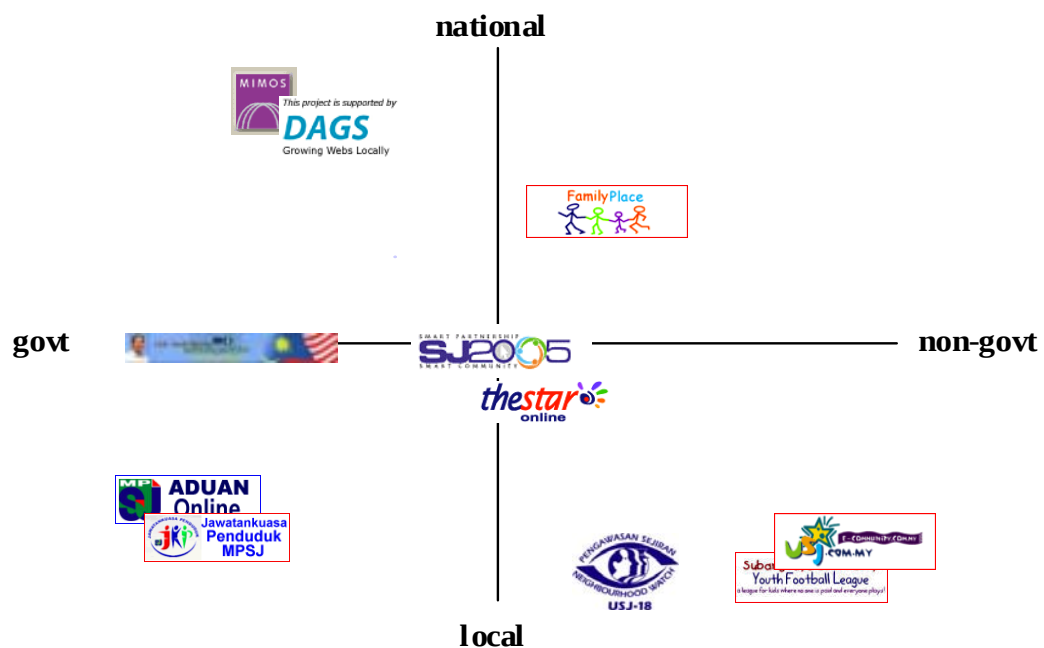


Figure 2. Some of the key players in the e-governance public sphere of USJ-Subang Jaya,

2004. The horizontal axis represents the degree of proximity to government. The vertical axis stands for the geographical range of action.

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 team²⁷. 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). Sending an email rather than a letter saves the writer time and speeds up publication.

In a country with declining standards of investigative journalism²⁸ 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. Famous for his indefatigable *turun padang* ('going to the ground') and role as a local governance mediator, his online presence makes him respected across the e-community scene. On his website he publishes emails from residents and keeps his electorate informed – albeit not always promptly – on the progress of a number of issues of general interest. In Figure 2, which maps the field of local e-governance production in Subang Jaya, I have placed his website banner halfway between the national and local levels. In addition, I have included The Star Online as the main local press player, as well as the various e-communities discussed earlier. On the left-hand side I have placed the main governmental organisations.

Back to the future

In terms of its chief objective – a strong trisectoral e-partnership – SJ2005 has undoubtedly failed, for reasons outlined in a previous section. Yet in five years SJ2005 has contributed to USJ's 728 hectares becoming a world class e-community node (Cashel 2003). This MIMOS initiative has captured the imagination of local residents and helped to channel ICT funding to the township. In this respect, it has been a resounding success. During this time participants have 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. 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 local 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).

The USJ-Subang Jaya evidence suggests that 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-) governance is thoroughly middle class, largely involving Chinese professionals and a local council staffed by a Malay middle class created by decades of affirmative action (see Welsh 2004). In a future publication I intend to explore this deep ethno-sectoral divide within Subang Jaya's middle classes, perhaps as significant a divide as those based on income (cf. Roldan 2003, Allen 2004). USJ-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 (e-) governance. A global search for comparable suburbs is likely to take us to other Southeast Asian countries and South America rather than to the North Atlantic or Australia.

As for my informant's time-travel advice that I do not meddle in his e-community's governance crisis, I failed to heed it. Instead I posted in the forum an email from Steven Clift on his suggested rules and regulations for an online community forum. I am glad to report that some of these were taken on board by the forum administrators. Having survived both the residential college system of an old British university and Iban longhouses in Sarawak, I have concluded that no community can prosper without a strong – yet flexible – customary law (*adat*).

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank all the people who have taken time off their busy schedules to help me with my ongoing fieldwork, especially those who have done so repeatedly, namely (with apologies for any omissions!) Sean Ang, Arpah Bt. Abdul Razak, Azli Niswan, Fausto Barlocco, Premesh Chandran, KW Chang, Goh Ban Lee, Jalaluddin, KJ John, EL Ho, Douglas Ladner, Lee Hwa Beng, Loh Yoke Kean and family, Loo Chin Oon, Mahadi Mahusseini, Citizen Nades, Agnes Ng, James and Shelley Ongkili, Jeff Ooi, Concerned Subang Jaya Resident, Shamsul AB, Patrick Tan, Raymond Tan, Estnerie s/o Thamotaran, Theresa Ratnam Thong, KY Wong, Timothy Wong and family, Yap Yun Fatt and PC Yeoh. Special thanks to Michelle Lee Guy for encouraging me to write this paper, to all my *Netcultures* colleagues and, of course, to my partner, Sarah Pink.

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Notes

¹ The Malay term *cari makan* usually means 'earning a living'. On the forum it is used in the eating out section in its literal translation of 'looking for food'.

² Originally a Hong Kong term for 'whitey', commonly used in the Klang Valley where most Chinese residents are Cantonese speakers. See www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gwailo

³ Indian Muslim.

⁴ 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).

⁵ My research is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. It is part of *Netcultures*, a comparative anthropological study with colleagues at the Universities of Bremen, Manchester, and Amsterdam (www.s-hb.de/~netculture).

⁶ Arpah Bt. Abdul Razak, MPSJ (pers. comm., May 2003).

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- ⁷ Interviewed in USJ on 16, 24 and 27 June 2004.
- ⁸ Source: Patrick Tan, interviewed in USJ on 2 July 2004.
- ⁹ USJ is an abbreviation of Sime UEP Subang Jaya.
- ¹⁰ 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
- ¹¹ Aftar Singh, pers. comm., 14 July 2004.
- ¹² Interviewed in USJ on 10 October 2003.
- ¹³ 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.
- ¹⁴ 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.
- ¹⁵ 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.
- ¹⁶ Interviewed in Penang on 17 February 2004.
- ¹⁷ I shall be exploring the wider implications of this important distinction elsewhere.
- ¹⁸ Arpah Bt. Abdul Razak, interviewed at MPSJ on 20 May and 6 December 2003.
- ¹⁹ Interviewed in USJ on 18 October 2003.
- ²⁰ 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).
- ²¹ See www.unescobkk.org/education/ict/v2/detail.asp?id=1349.
- ²² 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>
- ²³ Interviewed in USJ on 10 February 2004.
- ²⁴ The model has already been adopted in neighbouring Bukit Jelutong, Shah Alam (see www.asianewsnet.net/level3_template1.php?l3sec=6&news_id=26873).
- ²⁵ Interviewed in USJ on 15 October 2003.
- ²⁶ 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, Vandon, a toddler, accompanied me to USJ6 for four months at the end of 2003. Having my own middle-class family in the field gave me a good access to equivalent local families.
- ²⁷ See www.usj.com.my/harpsgdh/harpsgdh.php3
- ²⁸ R. Nadeswaran alias Citizen Nades (*The Sun*), interviewed in Petaling Jaya on 1 July 2004.