Singapore Government
PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH BY MR YEO CHEOW TONG,
MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY,
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<u>The Digital Divide</u>

1.   The advent of the Internet and user-friendly infocomm appliances has had a phenomenal impact on developed nations and societies over the past few years. While much attention has focused on the business and technology aspects, one area we need to also pay attention to is the cultural impact. One example of the profound cultural impact is the flourish of active online communities. Unrestricted by geographical boundaries, these e-networks allow people from all walks of life, anywhere in the world as long as he or she has internet access, a convenient means to share their common interests and hobbies, and to build new inter-personal relationships. As we move towards a knowledge-based economy, the development of an Information Society is clearly an irreversible global trend. However, it inevitably brings about the risk of a so-called "digital divide" – the gap between those who are Internet savvy

and those who are not. This is why our efforts to promote the use of PCs and the Internet have always focussed on the need for ubiquitous adoption – that PCs and the Internet are made easily accessible and affordable to all Singaporeans, and not just a small privileged group. Dot-comming the people sector will be one of the three key thrusts under the Infocomm21, or ICT21, Masterplan.

2. Broadly, there are three potential digital fault-lines between Singaporeans that we must guard against – income, language and mindsets. The digital divide can occur between the high and low-income households, the English-educated versus those who are not, as well as the early adopters who are more receptive to new technology against the late adopters. All these are possible entry barriers to the infocomm world. In Singapore, thanks to two decades of efforts to address these issues, the digital gap is steadily narrowing. According to the 1999 IT Household Survey, both the PC ownership and Internet penetration among 1 to 3-room HDB flat owners have almost doubled in the last 3 years. PC ownership among 1-3 roomers now stand at 41% compared to the national average of 59%, while internet penetration is 27%, compared to the national average of 42%. We are indeed well positioned to bridge the "digital divide". However, with the rapid pace of development in the infocomm industry and new emerging technologies, we cannot afford to be complacent. We must continuously review our approach and strategy to bring infocomm to all Singaporeans.

Approach to "Dot-comming the People Sector"

3. So far, IDA's approach to promoting awareness and use of PC and the Internet has been driven at the national level and focused on reaching out to the masses. The programmes are essentially "one size fits all" in nature. Such mass outreach programmes have served us well when we were trying to achieve mass adoption quickly. However, now that we have achieved substantial success, to move on to greater heights, we will need to be more targeted and sophisticated in addressing each of the potential "fault-lines". We must broaden and deepen our efforts by tailoring programmes for the different population segments to cater to their different needs, abilities and interests. The *eCelebrations Singapore* activities are good examples of this new approach. We have specific programmes for senior citizens, union leaders, homemakers and

the youth.

4.   This new approach recognises that we cannot rely solely on a centralised, top-down approach to take care of all the different sub-sectors. The efforts to dot-com the people sector must be expanded to a movement -- one which involves community groups and local government, industry and unions, institutions and civic organisations, volunteer welfare groups and the media. With a decentralised, people-sector driven movement, the programmes will be more relevant to the specific target audience, and thus, more effective. IDA can actively contribute towards this movement by building a strong supporting framework and partnering the various organisations in their efforts.

5.   IDA has already begun to work closely with several civic groups to launch specific initiatives to dot-com their constituents. For example, there are collaborations with the Community Development Councils, or CDCs, to organise Internet training programmes to get senior citizens and homemakers connected. This movement is now gaining momentum, with multiple agencies such as the NTUC and the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore, also expressing keen interest to jumpstart the infocomm development of their respective communities.

6.   I am pleased to announce that IDA has committed $25 million as its contributions towards the movement over the next three years. IDA will concentrate its efforts on bridging the digital fault-lines of income, language and mindsets. In most cases, IDA will collaborate with the various organisations, with particular emphasis on five key population segments - senior citizens, homemakers, workers, NSmen and special interest groups.

7.   Let me briefly touch on the key initiatives. First, IDA will expand its programmes to improve the affordability and accessibility of infocomm to the 30,000 low-income households, with combined monthly incomes not exceeding $2,000. By partnering the self-help groups and grassroots organisations, IDA aims to offer a used PC bundled with free Internet access and basic training to each of these homes. Free broadband access will also be made available at community centres and clubs.

8.   Second, IDA will work with the industry and community groups to grow the locally relevant content in other Asian languages. Through an incentive scheme, IDA will encourage the development of infocomm applications and services that cater to the different population segments. This will bridge the language barrier and generate interest in infocomm among all Singaporeans.

9.   Finally, IDA will bring the late adopters of technology on board the infocomm revolution and motivate the early adopters to move on to embrace an e-lifestyle. To nurture an e-Community, IDA will be expanding the e-Ambassadors programme, which involves committed early adopters who volunteer as guides to late adopters in their use of infocomm appliances. Tapping on groups such as the People Association's Youth Movement, the Retired & Senior Volunteer Programme and the Parents Advisory Group for the Internet, or PAGi, the aim is to train up to 2,500 e-Ambassadors. This forms part of the efforts to provide late adopters with basic Internet training.

10.   IDA will support other civic initiatives to promote awareness of infocomm among the late adopters, change their mindsets and remove their techno-phobia. For example, IDA is collaborating with the Singapore Broadcasting Authority and PAGi to accelerate Internet training for 30,000 parents who are keen to be acquainted with Internet so that they can look after their children's online safety. IDA is also prepared to fund grassroots initiatives to upgrade the infocomm infrastructure at the community level. IDA is issuing a press release to elaborate on the details of all the above initiatives.

Conclusion

11.   The Infocomm 21 Masterplan aims to develop Singapore into one of the top five Information Societies in the world. We want all Singaporeans to reap the full benefits of infocomm in their daily lives. To be successful, we must acknowledge and address the diversity in society along the various digital fault-lines. This requires a broad-based people sector driven movement, with active participation from all the 3Ps – the public, private and people sectors. IDA will commit energies and resources to support this movement, by working with the infocomm industry and various volunteer and grassroots organisations. However, ultimately, whether we succeed or not, will depend on the active,

committed and civic-minded Singaporeans who make the difference. I thus invite all of you, stakeholders in the community and the industry, to embark on this movement with us to get all Singaporeans connected. Your commitment and action will play a key role to facilitate our transformation into an infocomm savvy society.

12.   With this, I'm delighted to declare the launch of eCelebrations Singapore with the official opening of its anchor event, eFestival Asia, alongside Internet World Asia, InfoSecurity Asia and Scan-Tech Asia.

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