

Chapter 4

Perceptions of Trust: Safety, Credibility, and “Cool”

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ABSTRACT

Having explored typical public-access-venue users (male or female, young, moderately educated, lower-middle income level, and most likely in an urban setting) and how libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés can effectively meet these users’ information needs, the authors now look beyond the critical elements of infomediaries and community engagement to determine what prompts users to use one venue over another. For public access ICT to make a contribution to human development, public access venues must be trusted and used.

In this study, the authors found that trust is a key factor that drives people to actually make use of ICT in public access venues. Several factors contribute to building this trust: safety, relevance, reputation, and what is considered “cool.” They discuss these factors throughout this chapter with a particular emphasis on the “cool factor,” which is a relatively new concept in academic literature, especially in the realm of ICT.

INTRODUCTION

Before we define “cool,” we will briefly look at notions of trust and how it has been used in the realm of ICT. Three conditions are common to definitions of trust: trust is identified with a person’s belief rather than their behavior or action,

trust refers to beliefs about the likely behavior of another person, and trust is important where context is complex, i.e. where there is no easy contractual relation or enforcement (Lazaric & Lorenz, 1998). Particular to ICT, Roberts (2000) analyzes the importance of trust for knowledge transfer when using ICT and suggests that the risks

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and uncertainties of exchanging knowledge using ICT are reduced by a high level of trust in ICT. Recent research on trust and ICT has centered around building social capital. Onyx and Bullen (2000) suggest five themes that make up social capital: networks, reciprocity, trust, shared norms, and social agency. Pigg and Crank (2004) add the concepts of “bounded solidarity” and “enforceable trust,” and suggest a framework to assess ICT based on five components related to social capital: networks, resources for action, reciprocity transactions, bounded solidarity, and enforceable trust. To further our understanding of trust and how it relates to use of public access venues, we analyzed safety, credibility, and reputation as factors that mirror the notions of networks, reciprocity, shared norms, and social agency presented above. Finally, we base our analysis of “cool” on the notion of bounded solidarity; we regard “cool” as an indicator of trust for users of ICT in public access venues.

We found little research in the academic literature about what constitutes “cool;” it, therefore, remains a concept that needs further research to understand it as an important dimension of trust. A recent study about social networking identifies “cool” as an important feature for successful social media applications: “Elusive yet identifiable, cool means different things to different people. . . . Cool has evolved to be adopted by Caucasians in the U.S. and throughout the Western world as a characteristic of youth. Being cool is important to youth, and it drives billions of dollars of consumer purchases globally every year. Product adoption and diffusion among youth often relies on the cool factor for teens to recommend the product to their friends” (Neale & Russell-Bennett, 2009). The perception of “cool” emerged in our study as a set of subjective perceptions that make public access to ICT attractive: a combination of unrestricted Internet access, friendly operators, and comfortable space for social interaction.

As discussed earlier in this volume, young people are the primary users of public access to ICT.

And “cool” is often connected to youth because they are most often the sector of the population who define it and care about it. Their perception of what is “cool” also contributes to venue use. The concept of “youthscapes” and youths’ use of media, as described by Maira and Soep (2005), is useful to understanding youth use of public access venues. Since youth are the most frequent users of public access computing, knowing where youth go and how they use the facilities available to them is important: “Young people participate in social relations; use and invent technology; earn, spend, need, desire, and despise money; comprise target markets while producing their own original media; and formulate modes of citizenship out of the various ideologies they create, sustain, and disrupt. . . . while conceiving of youth as a shifting group of people that is simultaneously a deeply ideological category” (Maira & Soep, 2005).

If youth are indeed a deeply ideological category, public access venues that seek to foster community development should promote an environment deemed “cool,” where young people will want to go to use services available to them. Research on community radio has shown that in order for young people to be engaged, people, places and things must “elicit social and emotional involvement and therefore a high level of motivation to participate” (Chavez & Soep, 2005, p. 415). This kind of emotional involvement and motivation to participate found in community radio is also important in public access computing, especially if public access venues want to attract youth toward activities that promote community development.

Figure 1 summarizes our findings in relation to the main components of trust and how they are perceived in libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés. The following sections will describe each of the components in more detail, grounded in the data that emerged from each type of public access venue studied across all 25 countries.

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