

Information Technology, Community Trust and Public Services.

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“Those who are left outside the development of information and communication technology are often the same people...who most need the welfare state’s services in any case. This is why special attention should also be paid to the needs of these people when developing a human information society.”

(Osmo Pekonen and Lea Pulkkinen, 2002)

“The level of trust in an organisation affects levels of use and engagement with services. Some [people] avoid contact with services they do not trust unless it is absolutely essential. This can have a direct impact on how well services meet the wider community’s needs.”

(Duffy et al. 2003).

We are interested in the design of technologies to promote engagement with public services. Research that explores the impact of the Internet on social engagement and community commitment suggests that this is far from being a trivial issue (Wellman et al. 2001).

The role of trust (as highlighted by Duffy et al. above) suggests that one approach might be to understand how trust is generated and circulates within communities and thence to design technologies which mediate interaction between community members and services in ways that foster and promulgate trust.

Encompassing contributions from philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and others, considerable progress has been made towards elaborating the nature of trust and trust-based behaviour. Some researchers have begun to distinguish between forms of trust, often based upon relations between people and/or social institutions. Elsewhere, we have described large scale surveys which establish empirical evidence for some of these distinctions and, in the context of public service provision, we have suggested a trust propagation cycle that illustrates the articulation between peoples experiences of public services and different forms of trust circulating within a community (Grimsley et al. 2003).

We have also been able to identify some of the experiential factors that appear to underpin levels of trust arising from engagement with public services; these are: the quality and quantity of information people have about all aspects of service provision; the extent to which the service is accessible in ways that promote a sense of personal control in their lives; the extent to which people feel able to influence service provision. Duffy et al. (2003) have identified other experiential factors that promote trust in public services, these include: accountability, absence of private commercial interest, independent endorsement, personableness, and visible leadership. Further knowledge of how these experiential dimensions can be integrated into the design of technologies that successfully mediate engagement with public services without undermining trust is very much needed.

Further, if we are to address the problem posed by Pekonen and Pulkkinen (above) we need to explore the basis upon which trust levels are seen to vary for different groups within the community. Whilst there is work which demonstrates that trust levels vary across, e.g., social class, culture (of governance), etc. we have found no work which examines whether the experiential elements that generate trust are different for such sub-groups. We have begun to explore this issue and preliminary results suggest that differences in trust levels are only partially explained by variation of experience within the same experiential framework. It seems that different social groups may have different experiential criteria upon which trust-based judgements are made. For example, our evidence suggests that women and men may construct a sense of trust towards public services in ways that relate to their social context and how they undertake them and that similar effects may arise based upon factors such as educational attainment. Such results would, we suggest, have profound implications for the design of technologies intended to mediate engagement with community public services, and especially so if they needed to promote engagement among groups which are currently socially excluded.

References

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