SOCIETAL ACCEPTANCE OF URBAN DRONES

BRIEFING REPORT

CONTEXT

This briefing report series are targeted at policy makers and industry members in the fields of technology governance and innovation management. Our goal is to raise awareness of the importance of societal acceptance, and to shed light on how to address it based on our own research findings.

OBJECTIVE

Societal acceptance of the use of drones in urban areas is crucial for their successful integration into society. This thematic analysis of expert interviews focuses on the perceptions of stakeholders active in urban drone development and operation, offering insights for setting strategies and policies for drone implementations.

EXPERT INTERVIEW

• Identify expert views across sectors & domains
• Provide insights for informed decision-making
• Support evidence-based governance strategy

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KEY FINDINGS

> **Drones are perceived as intrusive**, entering into people's visual and auditory fields in a way that is not only annoying but can trigger fear. There is considerable work to be done to change these perceptions such that the public may respond more positively when seeing a drone in the sky.

> The public is more likely to support drone use if it is evident that societal values are being promoted. Whether societal values are seen as promoted depends largely on **whether the organisation operating the drone is trusted by the public.**

> Establishing trust requires **honest and transparent communication, readiness to listen and respond to public concerns, and being ready to be held accountable.**

> **Societal values are not necessarily just the obvious 'good causes'.** They can also be centred around, e.g., innovation, entertainment, education, creativity, economic opportunity, or social cohesion.

> **A strong and trusted regulatory framework that responds to public concerns and that enforces limits** can provide reassurance to the public, and demonstrate that the organisations operating the drones can be trusted.
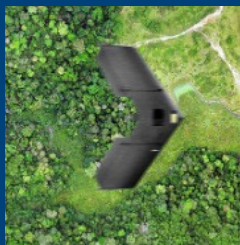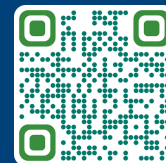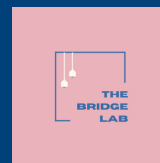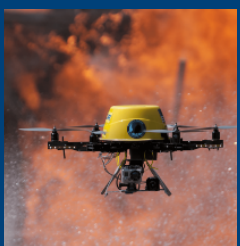
IMPLICATIONS

> Establishing trust is above all about perceptions. Reiterating that drones are safe without understanding why the public worries will not result in a change in perceptions.

> A trusted reputation cannot be built overnight. Organisations cannot just decide to fly drones and expect it to be accepted by the public, even if they explicitly aim to promote societal values.

> Collaboration and consensus promote trust. Trust cannot be established if experts work in silos, as disagreement amongst themselves undermines trust.

> Evidence on the societal impact of drones is crucial. A coherent, enforceable, and trusted regulatory framework relies on evidence, in terms of not only the actual noise levels but also the psychological impact of having many objects in the sky.

> Weak or invisible enforcement mechanisms are ineffective. They risk leading the public to believe that the regulatory frameworks lack power, thus reducing their trust that regulatory limits will be respected and upheld.

RECOMMENDATIONS

DO > Reflect on how an organisation can promote societal values.

Avoid gimmicks in drone use but focus instead on concrete societal values, such as education, food security, economic opportunity, and environmental benefit. Think about how these values best resonate with the public, e.g., the value of entertainment might be better expressed as social bonding or cultural expression.
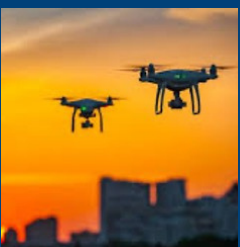

DO > Make efforts on building trust.

Start small, building trust in less populated areas and using the reputation gained as a basis to expand. Consider partnering with trusted organisations, be conscious not to do anything that might undermine them as trusted promoters of societal values.

DO > Find creative ways to connect with the public.

Changing perceptions requires connecting with the public on a deeper level. Be reminded not to underestimate how much trust depends on the personal aspects, e.g., emotions and humour, which can help strengthen the human connection.

DO NOT > Lose sight of providing regulations on the basis of trust.

Regulations focusing solely on the technical specifications of drones do not respond to public concerns. Regulators should take the approach of identifying where public trust is threatened, and finding robust solutions to address it by setting clear limits.

DO NOT > Work in silos or with disagreements amongst each other.

Finding ways to reach evidence-based agreement among a wide range of experts gives much greater credence to drone implementation. It encourages buy-ins from the operators, and makes enforcement on the basis of widely accepted limits.