Participation Cultures and Homelessness:

New questions for researchers of mobile phones and mobile internet amongst socially excluded groups

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Outline of paper

1. Introducing research study: *Homeless and Connected*
2. Mobiles and Internet: a changing landscape
3. Beyond the “digital divide” and “old media” paradigm
4. Digital inclusion and participation
5. Key issues, outcomes and directions
1. Homeless and Connected:
mobile phones and mobile internet amongst families and young people experiencing homelessness

Supported by Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), Homelessness Australia and The University of Sydney
Research approach and methods

• Qualitative research of 50-100 families and young people experiencing homelessness (survey, interviews and focus groups)

• Interviews of staff involved in service reform using digital technology to provide online delivery

• Participants recruited through service providers in NSW and Victoria

• Providers involved: The Salvation Army, Youth on the Streets, Western Housing for Youth, Womens’ Refuge Resource Centre, Hannover Welfare Services, St Kilda Youth Services
Support services’ observations

1. Patterns of homelessness amongst families and young people: 60% of people experiencing homelessness in Australia are under 35 and 26% are families with children (ABS 2006, 2011).

2. High level of mobile phone use amongst these groups, including smartphones.

3. Debt and difficulties negotiating and maintaining contracts and communication services.

4. Phones often in a state of disrepair, unreliable, internet access patchy and oftentimes unavailable.

5. Despite this, mobile phones are essential for support services to stay in contact with their clients and to exit homelessness.
Support services’ observations

“As far as I know most students and clients do have a mobile but they can be often lost/stolen/damaged and then the client is uncontactable until they can buy/steal [or] borrow another one...”

Staff member in front line homelessness support
Findings from academic studies

1. People experiencing homelessness desire digital technology in all its forms for many purposes. Users and support agencies identify mobile phones and internet access as essential.


3. High level of access and use in homeless communities, might play an even more important role in life than in the general population.
2. Mobiles and Internet: a changing landscape (in Australia)

• Ubiquity of mobile phones
  92% of Australians over the age of 18 use a mobile phone, 48% list it as their most-used communications device

• The smartphone the norm
  Smartphone ownership from 25% of the adult population in 2011 to 49% in 2012. This is approximately 8.7 million new smartphone users.

• App happy
  4.45 million Australians over the age of 18 downloaded an app in June 2012, compared to 2.41 million in June 2011. This is an increase of 85%.

(ACMA Communications Report 2011-2012)
“Mobile-only” users

• 19 per cent of the population in Australia were mobile-only users at the end of 2012, replacing their fixed-line home phone with a mobile.

• The number of fixed-line home internet connections being replaced by mobile connections is growing.

• Of all mobile-only users, 35% access the Internet only from their mobile phone and 65% have a home internet connection.

(Australians Cut the Cord, ACMA 2013)
Growth of mobile only users

(Australians Cut the Cord, ACMA 2013)
Growth of mobile only users by age

(Australians Cut the Cord, ACMA 2013)
Mobiles and Internet: a changing landscape (in the UK)

- 15% live in mobile only household
- 82.7 million subscriptions
- 94% of adults own a mobile
- 61% on contracts

(UK Communications 2013 Fast Facts, Ofcom)
All forms of mobile technology, such as smartphones, tablets, 4G, wifi, mobile-enabled websites and mobile applications, have become a ubiquitous part of Australian society.

Australian Government agencies are embracing the potential of mobile by adapting websites and services for convenient access on mobile devices, developing innovative mobile applications, and using tools, such as social media, to engage more effectively with mobile users — when and where they want to.

APS Mobile Roadmap, June 2013
In Australia:
National Digital Economy Strategy (NDES)
National Broadband Network (NBN)
Australian Public Service Mobile Roadmap (‘Digital First’)

In UK:
‘Digital by Default’
Government Digital Strategy
Departmental Digital Strategies (DECC, Defra, Defence etc)
3. Beyond the “digital divide” and “old media” paradigm

It’s not just about access...
“Meaningful access to ICT encompasses far more than merely providing computers and Internet connections. Rather, access to ICT is embedded in a complex array of factors encompassing physical, digital, human, and social resources and relationships.

Content and language, literacy and education, and community and institutional structures must all be taken into account if meaningful access to new technologies is to be provided”

(Warschauer 2002).
[The] big problem with "the digital divide" framing is that it tends to connote "digital solutions" i.e., computers and telecommunications, without engaging the important set of complementary resources and complex interventions to support social inclusion, of which informational technology applications may be enabling elements, but are certainly insufficient when simply added to the status quo mix of resources and relationships.

(Kling cited in Warschauer 2002)
4. Digital inclusion and participation

Main elements of social inclusion:

1. inclusion into social support networks;

2. social, economic, and institutional stability (through access to services);

3. public participation in mainstream activities; and individual agency (having life-skills and motivation to be self-sufficient)

(Ferlander & Timms, 1999 cited in Bure 2005).
The ‘digital gradient’ is “quite likely to extenuate socio-economic differences and in turn this double jeopardy will contribute to differential health outcomes. This effect will almost certainly intensify as access to an increasing amount of information and resources that help people get on in life are differentially available to those with good digital ICT access.”

(Newman, Baum and Biedrzycki 2010)
A preliminary map of the constellation of skills and relationships that make up foundational supports for mobile digital inclusion:

**Literacies**
- **Mobile/Computer skills & know-how:** use, maintenance, design, cross media skills
- **Knowledges – know-what:** privacy, policies, rights and legals

**Relationships**
- **Mobile providers:** devices, conduits, customer support, bills, complaints
- **Community support and government Services:** (devices, programs, contact, advice)
- **Third party mobile services:** apps, sms platforms, streaming services
- **Mentors and informal support and advice**
- **Social networks:** loose and strong ties, informal and formal networks

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Participatory cultures are characterised by:

- relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations
- some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
- members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connections with one another.

5. Key issues

1. Differential access (especially affordability) to communication devices, services and support remains a key issue within a social inclusion framework. What forms and types of access to mobiles are used by homeless families and young people? What barriers encountered? Are mobiles used for accessing the Internet?

2. How do users make use of mobile phones to engage in “meaningful social practices” (Weischauer 2002)? For what purposes and in what contexts? What new risks and harms?

3. What new set of communication needs come about through this change? Is existing communication assistance up to the task?

4. Support interface with service delivery: How are mobile phones changing this relationship? What needs to be considered in the design of digital service provision?
Project Outcomes

1. Research report with recommendations to:
   - improve and address gaps in telecommunication assistance policies and programs for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups
   - identify areas for support delivery innovation and improvement through better knowledge of communication issues and needs

2. Information leaflet listing communication assistance programs and services available to individuals and community groups

3. National workshop to bring telecommunication operators, government department and support providers together to innovate and develop services and programs
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