Digital access and literacy for people experiencing homelessness
Dr Justine Humphry, University of Western Sydney

“It’s essential to be connected when experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness”
– Dr Justine Humphry

Digital Literacy Forum, State Library of Queensland, June 2015
Outline of Talk

1. ACCAN study: ‘Homeless and Connected’
2. Key findings
3. Digitally connected society and policy implications
1. ACCAN study: ‘Homeless and Connected’

Funded by Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN)
Supporting organisations: Homelessness Australia and The University of Sydney

1. ACCAN study: ‘Homeless and Connected’

Study carried out early 2014:
- a survey (95 participants)
- follow up interviews (20 interviews)

Sample: clients of specialist homelessness services in inner and outer metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne.

Youth (15-24) – N 57  
Families (defined as single parents with children or couples with children) – N 21  
Adults (over 24) –N 17
Homelessness in Australia

- Homelessness is broader than not having a shelter or ‘roof over your head’.
- 105,237 Australians are homeless (1 in 200) (ABS 2012)
- 60% of people experiencing homelessness in Australia are under 35 and 26% are families with children (26,790 people, or 7,483 families) (ABS 2006, 2011).
- Homelessness is a product of socially and systematically produced issues and can arise from large-scale structural and market failures as well as personal circumstances (Gerrard and Farrugia 2013).
1. ACCAN study: ‘Homeless and Connected’

Need and significance

- Baseline study in Australia
  - Anecdotally, people experiencing homelessness are mobile phone and internet consumers with unique patterns of ownership and use that correspond to their homeless circumstances.

- Renewed examination of the “digital divide”: 
  - When the means to communicate and participate is fundamentally transformed, new standards and expectations are created, and with this, new points of social exclusion.
2. Key findings

95% (90 of the 95) of the homeless families, youth and adults surveyed had a mobile phone.
2. Key findings

68 (77%) had smart phones, 7 (8%) had feature phones and 13 (15%) had basic phones.
2. Key findings

The study found a large variation in ways mobile phones were acquired.
2. Key findings

32% of participants reported difficulty recharging their handset battery

Power outlet at Wynyard Station, Sydney
2. **Key findings**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of respondents who find mobile devices important for various activities. The most important is staying in touch with friends at 80%, followed by making new friends at 74%, and so on.]

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2. Key findings

Which of these is the Internet important for?

- Staying in touch with friends: 84%
- Contacting family: 66%
- Entertainment: 52%
- Looking for a job: 47%
- Contacting support services: 43%
- Contacting emergency services: 34%
- Learning new skills: 33%
- Being contacted by employers: 33%
- Making new friends: 30%
- Contacting a doctor or medical services: 29%
- Finding accommodation: 27%
- Paying bills: 26%
- Keeping safe: 18%
- Other: 8%
2. Key findings

![Diagram showing percentage of mobile phone usage for various activities]

- Receive calls: 98%
- Text / SMS: 94%
- Make calls: 93%
- Take photos: 83%
- Listen to music: 73%
- Access online information: 69%
- Use social network sites: 67%
- Playing games: 60%
- Download apps: 54%
- Watch videos: 51%
- Banking: 44%
- Check recorded messages: 39%
- Read blogs: 14%
- Using dating sites: 11%
- Betting: 7%
- Other: 4%

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I use the memo pad a lot. I write my work hours in my memo pad because I’ve got to report to Centrelink. So it helps me work how much I got paid because, unless they’re really fast with the pay slip, I don’t have my pay slip before I have to report...

Jen, a young person in supported accommodation
The main things are the school stuff, my banking, job searches. I’ve got my Centrelink on there. I’ve got the deals, a lot of shopping deals, OurDeal, CatchofTheDay, Groupon, so if I can always buy something cheaper from somewhere else I’ll do that...

Melinda, a single parent with a five year old son, living in an outer Melbourne suburb
2. Key findings

### The Cost of Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost type</th>
<th>Average Monthly Cost overall</th>
<th>Average Monthly Cost on Plan</th>
<th>Average Monthly Cost on Prepaid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$57</td>
<td>$72</td>
<td>$53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mobile payment costs averaged over the month according to plan type
2. Key findings

### The Cost of Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centrelink Income Support (figures as of June 2014)</th>
<th>Maximum monthly payment (4 weeks)</th>
<th>Proportion of payment if on a mobile plan</th>
<th>Proportion of payment if on pre-paid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YOUTH ALLOWANCE (under or older than 18 years with no children who is required to live away from parental home)</td>
<td>$828.80</td>
<td>8.69%</td>
<td>6.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEWSTART ALLOWANCE (a single parent with one or more dependent children)</td>
<td>$1,104.80</td>
<td>6.52%</td>
<td>4.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEWSTART ALLOWANCE (a single person with no children)</td>
<td>$1,021.00</td>
<td>7.05%</td>
<td>5.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISABILITY SUPPORT PENSION (a young person (under 21) with a disability living independently)</td>
<td>$1,065.20</td>
<td>6.76%</td>
<td>4.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISABILITY SUPPORT PENSION (over 21 and with a disability living independently)</td>
<td>$1,532</td>
<td>4.70%</td>
<td>3.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE MONTHLY SALARY OF AUSTRALIAN ADULT *Based on ABS average weekly earnings, Nov 2013</td>
<td>$5088.13</td>
<td>1.42%</td>
<td>1.04%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2. Key findings

The Cost of Contact

“I wish Centrelink was a free number from mobiles. It costs so much. Like you’re expected wait time is 90 minutes sometimes. I don’t have over an hour of talk time on my prepaid. So I prefer to just go and deal with them in person”.

Jen, a young person in supported accommodation in western Sydney
2. Key findings

The Cost of Contact
2. Key findings

The Cost of Contact

Yeah it was a lot of stress. A lot of stress and sleepless nights and stuff like that and them saying, “I’m sending debt collectors round to your mum’s house”. “I’m not living there”, my mum’s told them that. She’d told them many times when they come to the door, “I don’t even see my son”.

Jack, 21 year old young man living in supported accommodation in western Sydney
2. Key findings
2. Key findings

**Smart Ways to Keep Costs Down**

- Using budgeting and usage monitoring tools/apps
- Tethering the mobile phone as an Internet server for other digital devices
- Avoiding downloading/turning off features that use data
- Using Facebook messenger, Live Chat and Skype for free messaging
- Using available public/private power sources for charging wherever possible
- Limiting or avoiding charged voicemail services
- Using SMS/text and call back to contact support services
- Purchasing a low cost basic mobile for temporary use
Key Policy Implications
For libraries and other public institutions

• improving community phone and internet facilities, including free wifi, fixed-internet and charge stations to assist access for people experiencing homelessness.

• providing skill and literacy support and training especially for those members of the public with little or no access or experience using the internet and mobiles such as disadvantaged mature aged men.

• partnering up with other service providers to provide combined or in house services such as legal service drop ins for customers to address telecommunication and internet debt matters.

• building digital capacity of library staff and other services to support customers better online and via mobile channels.
3. Digitally connected society

Current project: ‘Making Connections’
Supported by Young and Well CRC and School of Humanities and Communication Arts at the University of Western Sydney

For more information: contact j.humphry@uws.edu.au

Thank you

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