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# We should get technology to the people who need it most - the homeless

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Published: September 11, 2016 - 11:45PM

Digital technology has great potential to be a force for empowerment, and, in so many ways, it has already allowed us to be a nation of self-publishers, commentators, entrepreneurs and disrupters.

But access to technology is far from universal. Research from welfare groups shows a nation heavily reliant on mobile technology but it also reveals a strong digital divide. Nearly half those on welfare payments, especially those living alone and older people, do not have home internet access. While rates of mobile phone ownership are high, low-income groups routinely run out of credit sooner than expected and experience "bill shock".

Far from empowering all people, technology can deepen and reinforce the disadvantage already experienced by the nation's homeless, estimated to be at least 105,000.

Take for example, Alice*, a young homeless woman I met on the pavement in Swanston Street this week. In her mid-20s, her biggest  needs are secure housing, mental health counselling and escape from social isolation and poverty. But little in the field of technological advance will improve Alice's circumstances. Although she has a smartphone, she had run out of credit and the battery was flat. The last time she charged her phone she had to sit in a public toilet cubicle to access a power point. It seems it's getting harder to charge a phone. The bank and fast food outlet in Swanson Street had closed off the power point she and other homeless people had been using to charge their phones.

She does not use any apps and doesn't know how to save a document. For Alice, her phone makes her feel a bit safer. As a woman sleeping rough, she can call for help if necessary. Just not at the moment.

Access to technology requires two things the homeless don't have: a power supply and money. The mind-boggling world of phone plans and apps also requires a level of literacy and numeracy that many homeless people lack. Most homeless people are early school leavers with literacy and numeracy problems. A proficiency with online games or social media  is no guarantee of wider skills. Setting up an email account on a smartphone, basic typing skills, or creating, sharing or downloading documents can be a struggle.

And as more of the services and information channels the homeless rely on (for example, government agencies, employers, or landlords) move to online application and query processes, people with poor digital skills are further excluded.

I was astounded to learn that in the past months Youth Projects provided the homeless with  more than 11,440 free phone calls using a dedicated landline inside our Living Room Primary Health Clinic in the heart of the city. With no phone, laptop, credit, or battery life, or a broken screen that is too expensive to fix, people remain reliant on old-school technology. The two desktop computers we have are also in constant use, and sessions are time limited to allow everyone some access. The use of our desktops reflects information-seeking behaviours as people look at bus timetables, news websites or maps, or provides a safe way to check in with family from whom they are otherwise estranged.

As access to technology is now essential, Melbourne should aspire to improve digital inclusion for the most excluded. We need the telcos to reduce handset, data and repair costs, and improve battery life. But we can also, as a city, guarantee more secure phone charging access points and widespread free Wi-Fi.

We don't have precise data on the number of people sleeping rough who have a smartphone. From our experience at Youth Projects, access to mobile technology is far from universal and a predominantly homeless client base is  frequently uncontactable and seeking assistance with provision of a phone or money access. But we know there is a clear pattern showing that low socioeconomic households, which tend to be clustered in certain postcodes, miss out more than those in wealthier areas.

There are new ways to better connect the homeless to affordable housing, such as the Victorian government's social housing register. This allows people to apply once, not multiple times, for housing. But unless we have better access, well-intended apps and websites will miss the people they have been designed to assist. Without further democratisation, the benefits of disruptive technologies won't mean much to the homeless. Uber and Airbnb are hardly relevant to people with no money or credit card.

There are other reasons why technology won't, on present form, contribute significantly to solving homelessness. Not all information can, or should, be shared. People who are homeless are not alone in their aversion to e-health records or data sharing of their most private details. Some may experience a mental health issue which makes them suspicious of technology. We must not compromise individual consent for vulnerable people in how we apply technology – and this remains a right that should be exercised by every person, regardless of status.

* Not her real name.

*Melanie Raymond is the chair of Youth Projects, a Committee for Melbourne member. The Committee for Melbourne recently launched MELBOURNE 4.0, the committee's new flagship taskforce, which will ensure Melbourne is prepared for the Fourth Industrial Revolution.*

*This story was found at: **http://www.theage.com.au/comment/we-should-get-technology-to-the-people-who-need-it-most--the-homeless-20160909-grc2ku.html***