What Technology Says

Becoming a Part of the Conversation

by Christopher Le Dantec

This past March, a man used his mobile phone to take a picture of Michelle Obama serving food in a soup kitchen in Washington D.C. The immediate assumption from some conservative commentators was that the man taking the photo was homeless. The commentators further argued that a homeless person had no business lining up for a free meal if he could afford the luxury of a mobile phone. These comments opened up the debate of whether choosing between food and a mobile phone was choosing between necessity and luxury.

This story is a familiar one. Having spent the past two years engaged in ethnographic and exploratory research on how technology affects the homeless and their care providers, the practical necessity of the mobile phone has come up repeatedly. My interviews have cut across several demographics within the homeless community and each has surfaced the practical uses of the mobile phone. Mobile phones, it was pointed out during the debate, are necessary lifelines for the homeless. In addition to the practical benefits of owning a mobile phone, my interviews have drawn my attention to the symbolic benefit of mobile technology: owning a mobile phone signifies social membership.

Phones help homeless people stay connected with their support networks of friends and family, aid their search for employment, social services, healthcare, housing, childcare and counseling, and ultimately act as mediator to the social institutions the homeless deal with as they seek to reestablish stability and self reliance.

Simple gestures like casually placing a mobile phone on the table at a coffee shop says something about the individual, his or her connections to the world, and his or her ability to participate as a member of society. One individual I interviewed explained how he had kept a non-functioning mobile phone to put his friends and family at ease. As he put it, "They know if I got my cell phone I must be doing alright."

Perceptions of Technology and Social Status

The social relevance of the mobile phone can be traced from the history of the mobile phone as a technology of prestige. The striking image of Michael Douglas' character Gordon Gekko in the 1987 film *Wall Street* using an early, and laughably large, mobile phone can be connected to this popular association. These images link the mobile phone with the power broker, the person who needs to be connected at all times: the person with money and influence, who epitomizes and defines luxury. This early association of mobile phones with status persists and fuels the image of the mobile phone as a status symbol. Yet, technology's association with luxury has become more complicated as the mobile phone has become a low-cost, mass-market technology.

Anyone, including the homeless, can reasonably afford a mobile phone. For example, a new phone with pre-paid service is less than $15 at Wal-Mart. The rapid uptake of mobile phones in the past ten years, from 76 million subscribers in 1999 to more than 276 million in 2009, points to the general ubiquity of digital technologies across both the public and private sectors. On one hand, this is good for society. As technology becomes more affordable to a greater number of people, the gates of participation open wider. On the other hand, though cell phones have become more affordable, society has not been quick to change its perception of technology as a luxury item. This incorrect perception has led to the creation of new stereotypes and prejudgments about who has the right to access these technologies, both of which can hinder participation.

This tension between the mobile phone as a luxury and the mobile phone as essential is driven, in large part, by the legacy of social status affiliated with the technology. While the status signified by mobile phones is changing as they are used by greater numbers of people across a more diverse socio-economic landscape, it still says something about its owner. For the homeless in particular, the status a mobile phone signifies is a crucial part of why the mobile phone is a necessary item. It is more than just using the mobile phone to maintain social connections through times of uncertainty and instability. It represents the ability to demonstrate social membership through simple possession.

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Mediating Access to Technology

For groups or individuals marginalized by poverty, unemployment, and homelessness, a lack of access to these technologies both amplifies their status as outsiders but also limits their practical opportunities for betterment and change. Finding a job and securing housing are both much more tractable when one has a mobile phone, and for the segment of the population homeless from economic crisis such as job loss or health-care related expenses, the mobile phone becomes a crucial tool for a return to stability. In my own field work, the homeless pointed to mobile phones as a way to disguise their homelessness to potential employers. In one of my respondents' view, having a mobile phone meant not having to reveal he lived in a shelter, but more importantly it meant he would be able to be in contact with that employer and not miss an opportunity because he was not present to take a call.

Furthermore, local governments and nonprofit organizations are going digital in order to reap the productivity and efficiency benefits that have been prized and realized in the private sector. Yet as these public outlets of information and services move online, we begin to create a tension in who has access based on how access is mediated. For example, for the segment of the homeless population who grapple with drug addiction and mental health, the mobile phone is increasingly being used by care providers as a way to reach out and act as lifeline and counselor when these individuals most need it.

Public health researchers at the Center for Disease Control have begun to build intervention programs around mobile phones, focusing on the flexibility they afford to care providers in contacting and intervening with homeless individuals who are at a high risk for contracting or spreading HIV. For public services, like welfare and disability entitlements, the public has the right to these services. However, as these services are bound up in systems that require technology to access them such as online search, registration, and verification, then arguably, access to facilitating technologies—including mobile phones and personal computers—should also be a right.

Technology as a Necessity

Being homeless is being a kind of outsider, marginalized, often ostracized from society. For many homeless this means engaging in a struggle to regain entry into society through housing, better employment, and ultimately self reliance. It also means coping with the stigma that comes along with being homeless. The mobile phone is a potent way to mitigate these marginalizing forces. It satisfies both the practical needs of the homeless in providing a means of managing their many responsibilities as well as their need for basic social participation. In the brief examples here, the mobile phone is no luxury item. It is as necessary and as fundamental as food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare because it mediates access to these necessities.

The public's flabbergasted reaction to the idea of a homeless man taking a photo of Michelle Obama demonstrates a larger issue about our beliefs surrounding who should have access to certain technologies. However, beyond these different beliefs lies the reality that as a society, we depend and thrive on being connected to one another. More than anything, the mobile phone, the Internet, and services available through these technologies enable us to work, engage in play, and participate in contemporary society. These technologies both mediate our connections and indicate to whom we might become connected. Ultimately, we need to realize that technologies may start out as luxuries, but as they become central components of our everyday life and interactions with one another, they are elevated to necessity.

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