

# Homelessness and Information Systems: Diverse Settings, Common Questions

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## ABSTRACT

Using a “fishbowl” panel format, five panelists and a few pre-selected audience discussants will seed a participatory dialog concerning homelessness and information systems. Specifically, this panel will raise questions about how information systems can improve the welfare of homeless people and discuss the potential impacts of information systems on four dimensions of homelessness: community, identity, stigma, and vulnerability. Among the questions that will be engaged are the following: What is known about the diffusion and adoption of digital media in homeless communities? What is at stake by the adoption of mobile and digital technologies? To what purposes are digital media and mobile technology being put by homeless people? By the diffusion of information systems into homeless communities, what stakeholders and institutions become implicated and what tensions emerge? What methodological challenges exist for conducting empirical and design-based research in homeless communities? In addressing these questions, each of the panelists will draw upon practical experiences obtained through sustained engagements in three different homeless communities.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.2 Social Issues: Miscellaneous

## General Terms

Design, Human Factors.

## Keywords

Homeless, Poverty, Information Systems, Digital Media, Community Informatics, Community, Identity, Stigma, Vulnerability, Methods, Methodology.

## 1. GOAL

The goal of this alternative event is to explore questions related to homelessness and information systems. We propose to hold a

fishbowl panel to spark and develop interest in this topic and to offer a venue for the exchange of perspectives, experiences, ideas, and visions of the future. For its diversity of research interests and for its focus on users and information systems, the 2011 iConference provides an ideal setting for engaging this topic and for networking with students, practitioners, and researchers. The topic of this fishbowl also builds upon “Community and Technology,” a topic that was engaged at the 2008-2010 iConferences.

## 2. TOPIC

Over the last several years, it has become apparent that homeless people in the U.S. desire and make use of personal digital technologies and media, in all its many forms. At the same time, it is increasingly the case that access to digital media is a basic need – necessary for finding jobs, for keeping in touch with family and friends, and, generally, for participating in society. This contemporary concern continues an enduring goal for people around the world:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, United Nations.*

To engage this topic, we propose to address four dimensions of homelessness, each of which might be implicated in the design of information systems that improve the welfare of homeless people – “community,” “identity,” “stigma,” and “vulnerability.”

Among the questions we will ask and engage through these dimensions are the following: (1) What is known about the diffusion and adoption of digital media in homeless communities and what is at stake? (2) To what purposes are digital media and mobile technology being put by homeless people? (3) By the diffusion of information systems into homeless communities, what stakeholders and institutions become implicated and what tensions emerge? (4) How do we design systems that improve the welfare of the homeless and their families? (5) How does the adoption and use of information systems change the nature of homelessness? (6) What methodological challenges exist for conducting empirical and design-based research? (7) What theoretical lenses might be applied to foresee what will be at stake in the future? (8) How, specifically, can empirical findings and design options from mul-

tiple sites be brought together for greater impact? (9) How might information systems empower the homeless to alleviate the daily challenges they cope with or more quickly escape homelessness?

### 3. FORMAT

The format for this alternative event will follow the general approach that was used in the "Impact of Community Technology Centers" fishbowl held in the 2010 iConference. Moderated by David Hendry, our proposed fishbowl will open with 3-minute introductions to three research sites at which the intersection of homelessness and information systems is being investigated: Julie Hersberger (Indianapolis, Greensboro and Seattle); Christopher Le Dantec (Atlanta); and Jill Palzkill Woelfer (Seattle). After the introduction of the research sites, Bonnie Nardi will introduce some of the methodological challenges for integrating fieldwork across multiple and diverse sites.

With these introductory remarks completed, the fishbowl will commence. Four pre-selected participants will sit in four of five chairs. In turn, each participant will then ask a question and the panel will engage the question. The preselected participants will be prompted to ask their questions from particular perspectives of which they are expert – for example, the "library," "community technology," "international," "activist," and "policy" perspectives, among others.

All other attendees will sit around in concentric circles. If someone wants to join the discussion, then he or she takes the empty chair and one of the four participants moves on. This process of someone joining and someone leaving continues until the session's time draws near and the moderator is ready to sum-up the discussion and share next steps. To facilitate the fishbowl, each discussant and panel member will be instructed to keep his or her remarks to 2 minutes. If the two minute limit is exceeded, a bell will be rung. (For additional information on the Fishbowl method, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishbowl>.)

### 4. PANELISTS' ABSTRACTS

For the last three years David Hendry, Associate Professor, and Jill Palzkill Woelfer, a Ph.D. student have been investigating the use and design of information systems by homeless young people in Seattle, creating and volunteering in a community technology center, and conducting research studies.

Woelfer, J.P., and Hendry, D.G. Homeless young people's experiences with information systems: Life and work in a community technology center. In *Proc.CHI 2010*, ACM Press (2010), 1291-1300.

Woelfer, J. P., and Hendry, D. G. Stabilizing homeless young people with information and place. *Journal*

*of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 60, 11 (2009), 2300-2312.

Julie Hersberger is an Associate Professor. Her research with the homeless originated with her dissertation work Indiana University in 1992. Studies include examining the information needs and sources of the homeless, egocentric networks of the homeless as information networks, the homeless and the digital divide, and public library services and homeless users. Currently, she volunteers at the day shelter in Greensboro and is observing the use of information technologies.

Hersberger, J.A. The homeless and information needs and services. *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 44, 3 (2005), 199-202.

Hersberger, J. A. Are the economically poor information poor? Does the digital divide affect the homeless and access to information? *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 27, 3 (September 2003), 44-63.

Christopher Le Dantec is a Ph.D. candidate. For the past three years, he has been working to understand how urban homeless in Atlanta are affected by different forms of technology. His work has brought him to investigate participatory techniques for co-designing a technology intervention to help the homeless gain access to information and participate in the production and sharing of knowledge and expertise.

Le Dantec, C.A., Christensen, J. E., Bailey, M., Farrell, R. G., Ellis, J. B., Davis, C. M., Kellogg, W. A., and Edwards, W. K. A tale of two publics: Democratizing design at the margins. In *Proc. DIS 2010*, ACM Press (2010).

Le Dantec, C.A. and Edwards, W. K. Designs on dignity: Perceptions of technology among the homeless. In *Proc.CHI 2008*, ACM Press (2008), 627-636.

Bonnie Nardi, Professor, has for many years written on the need to find new ways to think about the social and cultural changes that come with new technologies. Recently she and her students have been investigating topics related to the use of digital technologies by the homeless in the U.S., and for women in slums in urban India.

Nardi, B.A. and O'Day, V.L. *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*, MIT Press, 2000.

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