

## Seminar 6: Digital Technologies and Homelessness (Floor -1, Room 7)

Chair: Eoin O'Sullivan, IE

**Marco Heinrich & Frank Sowa, DE:** Homelessness & Digitalization: On the (digital) Needs of Homeless People and the Potentials and Risks of Digital Support Options



**Marco Heinrich** is a research associate at the Nuremberg Institute of Technology, Germany. His research interests include qualitative research, housing and homelessness, social inequality, discrimination, social exclusion and deviance.

**Frank Sowa** is professor of sociology at Nuremberg Institute of Technology, Germany. He received his Ph.D. degree from the University Erlangen-Nuremberg and worked as senior researcher at the Institute for Employment Research. He is sociologist specialized in qualitative and ethnographic methods. Since 2017, he has been working on the topics of homelessness.



The social phenomenon of homelessness is difficult to delineate given the dynamic complexity of social reality and is subject to constant processes of change. The global COVID-19 pandemic, for example, is changing the lives and needs of homeless people, as well as the processes of caring in homeless service institutions. In addition, the pandemic has triggered or intensified processes of digitalization in social work. However, the potentials and risks of using digital technologies in the processing of this particularly vulnerable group have been little researched so far. This is where our project comes in and asks what (digital) needs exist among homeless people, how these can be met by digital solutions, and what significance this has for the science and practice of social work. In our paper, we would like to discuss to what extent the practice of social work in homelessness assistance is confronted with new challenges through digital needs and how interactions change in the interplay of presence and digitality. Based on narrative guideline interviews with homeless people, the (digital) needs were analyzed and solutions were developed in the form of technically innovative products, which are to support the affected people in their problematic life situations in a tailored and targeted way. In our presentation, we would like to present and discuss the results of this research and the developed products.

**Vera Klocke, DE:** „This Phone is Like a Friend to Me.“ Appropriation Processes of Smartphones by Homeless People in Berlin  
*Vera Klocke is a researcher working in the field of cultural studies. She graduated in media, film and popular culture at the University of Hildesheim. In her dissertation, she investigated television in living spaces ethnographically and with artistic methods such as video works and performances. She currently works as a research assistant at the Berlin University of the Arts and conducts research on homelessness and digital media.*



In recent years, homelessness and digital media has been studied with an increasing focus on communication studies. (Hartmann, 2018, Marler, 2021; Humphry, 2021). The proposed paper builds on this perspective and addresses the question of how homeless people use their smartphones to organise their leisure time. Thereby it focuses in particular on the reception of video content, computer games and music. Three different categories are opened up. These are how this reception is used to create a private space, how it is used to organise time and how it has the potential to stabilise social relationships. The paper approaches these areas through extracts from ethnographic interviews, observations and video recordings. These were produced as part of an ethnographic study conducted between October 2021 and June 2022 in Berlin, Germany. The research process also included a smartphone distribution that took place at the beginning of the research period. This involved the distribution of 15 smartphones and sim-cards to people who did not own a smartphone at that time, in order to investigate the appropriation of the devices over

the following months. While the ethnographic results are presented with regard to the three categories described, the paper also reflects on this distribution of mobile phones and the methods used.

References: Hartmann, Maren (2018): Mobilising the Homeless? A Proposal for the Concept of Banal Mobilisation. In: Foellmer, Susanne; Lünenborg, Margreth & Raetzsch, Christoph (eds.): Media Practices, Social Movements, and Performativity – Transdisciplinary Approaches. London: Routledge, pp. 59-80. Humphry, Justine (2021): Looking for Wi-Fi: youth homelessness and mobile connectivity in the city, *Information, Communication & Society*, 24:7, 1009-1023, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1670227 Marler, Will (2021): 'You can't talk at the library': the leisure divide and public internet access for people experiencing homelessness, *Information, Communication & Society*, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2021.2006742

**David Lowis, DE:** Digital Inclusion of Homeless People in Berlin: Assessing the Current State and Evaluating Smartphone Distributions as a Policy Tool



*David Lowis is currently working as a research assistant and PhD student at Berlin University of the Arts, where he is conducting three years of mixed methods research with homeless people in Berlin on their digital media usage. He has also been supporting a Berlin-based NGO in distributing smartphones to homeless people, as well as trialling a digital payment system for homeless people in Berlin.*

This presentation's aim is two-fold: to assess the state of digital media usage among homeless people in Berlin, and to evaluate smartphone distributions as one policy tool to improve the digital inclusion of homeless people.

For the first part, I will be laying out the results of a survey recently conducted among 150 homeless people in Berlin, focusing on their digital access, skills, and outcomes. This survey also addressed whether, and to what extent, digital media access had become a more important and/or burdensome issue to homeless people in Berlin as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. I will draw on the outcomes of other, similar surveys and compare the findings, as well as using ethnographic insights to situate them. Of particular interest is the fact that multimedia consumption, more so than communication or other digital functions, seems to be at the heart of how many homeless people in Berlin use digital media.

In the second part, I will describe the ethnographic fieldwork that I have been conducting for the last two years as part of an NGO distributing over 800 smartphones to homeless people. While smartphone distributions to homeless people have been a policy tool for over a decade now, the pandemic saw them proliferate across the world. Yet, there are many challenges to carrying out successful smartphone distributions, and questions as to how effective an intervention they actually prove to be – in particular since digital access often is not a binary question for homeless people, but rather an ongoing set of practices. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic findings, I will aim to situate the concept of smartphone distributions within the wider logics and logistics of distributions that are well-established in the homelessness sector, and evaluate what impact they may have on the digital inclusion of homeless people.