Families Courting the Web: the Internet in the everyday life of household families

Abstract
Popular reactions to having the Internet at home include exaggerated fears that families will split up as a result of secret on-line romances and fears that children will learn how to build bombs at home.

The Preliminary Stanford Institute Report Internet and Society (2000) which looks at the social consequences of the Internet similarly seems to presume that people are passive consumers of the technology. At the other extreme are studies which suppose that consumers have complete control over the effects of the technology. For example, Silverstone and Hirsch (1992) tend towards a notion of complete agency of the consumer with their model of the appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion of information and communication technologies into the household.

In this paper, I present findings from a series of in-depth interviews with different types of Australian household families to reveal the diversity of responses to the Internet. Conceiving of the family as a process of continual renegotiation, I theorise the way in which the Internet intersects with the daily life of household families as both an effect of the way in which individuals enact their understanding of family, while simultaneously, use of the Internet enables new performances of the family. Both the technology and the individual members are actors and the performance of family at any time is always an achievement rather than the predictable result of the interaction of the technology with a coherent household.
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“Utopian statements which idealised the new medium as an ultimate expression of technological and social progress were met by equally dystopian discourses which warned of (its) devastating effects on family relationships and the efficient functioning of the household.” (Spigel 1992:3)

Although Spigel is writing about the introduction of television in the early 1950s, she could equally well be writing about the introduction of the Internet in the early 1990s. Each new domestic technology has been accompanied by a moral panic about its likely social effects, and in particular its effect on the family. Books with titles such as Life and Death on the Internet: how to protect your family on the World Wide Web and Making the Internet family friendly both produce and reflect a popular understanding of the Internet as a potential destroyer of the family.

However, despite popular concern about the effects of the Internet on the family, little research has been done on the intersection of the Internet with family household relations. McRobbie’s observation about the attraction of researching youth culture and the comparative neglect of researching youth at home seems pertinent now with the profusion of studies about online interactions from home and the dearth of studies about the situation offline. According to McRobbie (quoted in Bennett 1999: 603) “while the sociologies of deviance and youth were blooming in the early seventies the sociology of the family was everybody’s least favourite option... few writers seemed interested in what happened when a mod went home after a week-end on speed. Only what happened out there on the streets mattered.”

Perhaps McRobbie’s observation, modified as follows, describes the contemporary situation. “While the sociology of cyberspace was blooming at the turn of the twenty-first century, the sociology of the family was everybody’s least favourite option... few writers seemed interested in what happened when a geek logged off after a week-end online. Only what happened out there in the chat rooms mattered.”

Given that access to the Internet has been available from the home for a few years now, studies that focus especially on the Internet’s impact on the family are now becoming available (for example the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2000) and the Stanford Institute’s report Internet and Society (2000). However, these studies invariably assume a particular type of family, that is, a man married to a woman plus their biological children. It is often unproblematically assumed that this particular form of family is the natural form of the family, sentimentalised as the “traditional” family (Stacey 1990). According to classic functional Marxist analysis, this type of family, far from being natural, is an ideological invention that is suited to the capitalist mode of production, enabling capital accumulation while also maintaining social order and ensuring social reproduction.

Many commentators have pointed to the lack of consensus about what a family is (Barrett and McIntosh 1982; Trost 1990; Valentine 1999; Giddens

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1 See Barrett and McIntosh (1982) for a critique of this analysis.
Bourdieu (1996) points out that the term “family” is used to refer to two separate entities; the family as an objective social category and the family as subjective experience or cultural practices. He explains how it is that the two separate entities have been conflated. According to Bourdieu, the objective idea of the family as a social category (that is the “traditional” family) shapes people’s experience of family; in turn, this experience helps validate the social category of family. “The circle is that of reproduction of the social order. The near-perfect match that is then set up between the subjective and the objective categories provides the foundation for an experience of the world as self-evident, taken for granted. And nothing seems more natural than the family; this arbitrary social construct seems to belong on the side of nature, the natural and the universal”. (Bourdieu 1996: 21)

However, it seems that there is no longer a “near-perfect match” between the objective social category of the family and people’s own experience of family in either configuration or nature. Castells (1998) documents the decline of the nuclear family and the emergence of new configurations of family in countries across the world. The same trend is discernible in Australia, where, for example, more than one fifth of all families with dependent children are one-parent families (ABS 1996 Census of Population and Housing). With respect to the nature of the family, Beck-Gernsheim argues that from being an association of mutual dependence, the family is becoming more of an elective relationship, “an association of individual persons, who each bring to it their own interests, experiences and plans, and who are each subjected to different controls, risks and constraints” (1998: 67).

It could be that the objective social category of the family is losing its purchase, and hence its relevance. Bernardes (1988) has suggested that sociologists should not try to give any specific sociological meaning to the term “the family” but rather should only use it to reflect its various social meanings in everyday use. Weeks, Donovan et al. (1999) and Weston (1991) do exactly this, documenting how in the United Kingdom and in the United States, gay men and lesbians are constructing “families of choice”. These are networks of like-minded people who offer support and a feeling of belonging that may not be available from families of origin. They may include conjugal relatives, and the ties are considered to be stronger than those of friendship, involving a level of obligation and commitment usually associated with kin.

As my work concerns everyday practices and the meanings given to these practices, my use of the term “family” is in line with Bernardes suggestion. Rather than having an objective existence and associated characteristics, the “family” that I refer to is the way that groups of individuals who understand themselves as forming a family enact that understanding in their daily life. For example, any description of a family, such as “they are a close family”, is someone’s description of the outcome at any point in time of that continual process of renegotiation which is daily life; in other words, the family will only stay close as long as they engage in behaviour that will maintain closeness.

In addition, individuals identify as belonging to a family (or not) through acts that have meaning for them in terms of maintaining a notion of family. For example, for a group of individuals who live in different parts of Australia,
coming together for a meal at Christmas may be an enactment of family. In this paper I use the term “performance of family”\(^2\) to refer to any act or attitude that gives substance to a particular version of what it is to be a family rather than having meaning only in relation to the constitution of an individual’s identity. For example, when a woman in the Canberra study explains why she can interrupt her son’s Internet use to check her emails with the words “because I’m Mum and that’s why”, she is performing parenting\(^3\), an aspect of performing family. In this case she is performing an understanding of family where the parent is an authority figure with respect to the child. If she wants to use the Internet while her son is using it, then she can.

I wish to pose “performance of the family”\(^4\)” as a way of thinking about the family. Fortier (1999)\(^5\) draws on Butler (1990, 1993) to argue that ethnicity is performative rather than natural; likewise I propose to use the concept of performance to de-naturalise the family. Rather than see particular practices as being expressions of some reified identity, “the family”, I would argue that these practices actually perform the family. Some of these performances are within existing repertoires (for example, a mother and a father and their biological children) while some constitute new ideas of family, such as families of choice. Ideas of what constitutes a family and particular performances of family do not occur in a vacuum but are derivative of previous formulations of the family. The word “performance” draws attention to the dynamic and contingent nature of any understanding of family. The performances are shaped in particular social and cultural contexts and manifest in the daily lives of a household family.

In this paper\(^6\), I tell some stories from my research to show how in the daily life of family households, the Internet is involved in both maintaining existing performances of the family and in constituting new ideas of family, such as families of choice. My research is based on data collected through a survey of almost 700 parents on uses and attitudes towards the Internet as well as interviews\(^7\) with members of nineteen household families with home connections to the Internet. This paper draws on data from these interviews with household families.

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\(^2\) This is different from Goffman’s (1956) use of the concept of performance. Goffman maintains a distinction between people’s “true” identities and the “performances” they put on in specific social contexts; performing well-defined roles in order to help define the situation and guide impressions.

\(^3\) I use the term “parenting” for this type of performance, although it is pointed out by Ruddick (1992), who uses the term “mothering” for both mothers’ and fathers’ activities, that the term “parenting” obscures the fact that it is still women who perform the bulk of parenting.

\(^4\) Note that the concept of “performance of family” does not make sense when applied to Bourdieu’s (1996) objective social category of family. This paper deals with the family as it relates to people’s experiences.

\(^5\) In her work on the formation of Italian émigré culture.

\(^6\) This paper is part of a larger research project, where I demonstrate that neither the internet, self or family are stable entities. Each are constituted through their own performance and each is implicated in the performance of the other.

\(^7\) I interviewed each assembled household family in their home and returned two weeks later to interview members individually. In the meantime I had left a record of Internet use for each member to fill out each time they logged on to the Internet.
In each household there was at least one child\(^8\) and the household members formed at least part of a family. As Beck-Gernsheim (1998) points out, not everybody in the one family has the same definition of who constitutes that family (for example, siblings may recognise different fathers). Fourteen of the household families consisted of a mother, a father and at least one child, three household families comprised a mother (two of whom identified as lesbian) and child, one comprised a father and child, and one consisted of a father and son, and the father’s new female partner. There happened to be a biological connection between at least some household members in all the households in the Canberra study. I deliberately chose a diverse mix of household family structures to reflect the diversity of social relationships that constitute families in Australia (Gilding 1991; Weeks 1991; ABS 1996 Census of Population and Housing) and confined this part of the study to families that had a home Internet connection.

Over the past few years, the number of Australian homes with Internet connections has been increasing rapidly. In February 1996, an estimated 262,000 people used the Internet from home (ABS 1996). By May 2000, 2.3 million households had home Internet access and almost half (46%) of households comprising a couple with children had home Internet access (ABS 2000).

Table 1 Recent growth in proportion of Australian households with Internet access

![Graph showing recent growth in proportion of Australian households with Internet access between May 1998 and May 2000.]

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

Many studies of technologies in the home are technologically deterministic, focussing on technology’s impact (for example, Alcorn 1997, Rosenberg 1997). The assumption is that family members are passive receivers and that the consequences of the technology are inherent in the nature of the technology.

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\(^8\) I am using the term “child” relative to the term “parent”; some of the children in my study were 18 years old.
In contrast, Silverstone and Haddon (1996) view consumers as active in their use of a technology, and use the concept of “appropriation” to describe the process by which a particular household makes a technology their own. Silverstone (1991) considers that each household family creates a “moral economy”, a system in which symbolic and material resources are mobilised, and that this provides the context for the way in which a technology is appropriated. Appropriation of a technology begins with its purchase and entry into the home and Silverstone argues that the nature of the meanings and use of a technology within a household depends on the social relations of the household. In his earlier work (1991), Silverstone considers that new technologies tend to be integrated into existing patterns of social relations within the household, including the existing order of gender relations. Studies on computers (Anderson, Page McClard et al. 1995; Lyman 1995) support this view, concluding that despite predictions of revolutionary effects, computers tend to be absorbed into, rather than transform, existing individual and group social patterns. In later work Silverstone and Haddon accept the possibility of the transformation of the household but still consider that “domestication is fundamentally a conservative process, as consumers look to incorporate new technologies into the patterns of their everyday life in such a way as to maintain both the structure of their lives and their control of that structure” (1996: 60).

Neither of the above accounts adequately explains the data in the Canberra study. The situation in any household seems to be more complex than is implied by the concept of a “moral economy”. The social and cultural values of a household are continually under negotiation and any values may not be shared by all household members or may change over time. More significantly, although people were active users of the Internet, there were instances of the Internet transforming social relations in the household. The data supported the view that the technical participates in constituting the social relations within the household as well as vice versa. In addition, the data showed that the relation between the technology and the performance of family in a particular household is not stable but can change over time.

As a way of characterising the performance of family, I have adapted a framework that Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) developed in a psychological study of three-generation extended families. The following table shows my modifications to the eight dimensions of family organisation identified by Cohler and Grunebaum.

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9 For example Lyman (1995: 24) describes how the use of a new computer program in the fifth grade was expected to revolutionise the teacher/student relationship. In fact, it was the computer program that was transformed to accommodate the existing social relations of the classroom.

10 I first came across this framework in Lunt and Livingstone’s study Mass Consumption and Personal Identity (1992) where the framework is used to show how domestic goods help to express family dynamics.
Table 2
Adaptation of Cohler and Grunebaum's framework for characterising the family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohler and Grunebaum's framework</th>
<th>Modified framework – modifications in italics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the definition of family boundaries</td>
<td>Who is in the family?¹¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the establishment of role boundaries within the family -</td>
<td>Performances within the family – gender, generation and parenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the locus of family operations</td>
<td>the locus of family operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>closeness and separation</td>
<td>closeness and separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>definition of unacceptable behaviour and basis for sanctions</td>
<td>definition of unacceptable behaviour and basis for sanctions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expression and control of affect and impulses</td>
<td>omitted¹²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>establishment of family identity and goals</td>
<td>performance of family identity and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family problem-solving techniques</td>
<td>family problem-solving techniques</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whereas Cohler and Grunebaum used the dimensions as a way of comparing different families, in my research, I use the dimensions as a way of characterising the performance of family. My argument is that with regard to each dimension, the relationship between the Internet and the family is mutually constitutive. Some families have incorporated the Internet into their existing routines, while in other households the presence of the Internet has led to a radically altered performance of a dimension of family in that household. In most households, the different scenarios intersect with regard to different dimensions of the performance of family in complex and unpredictable ways.

In this paper, I limit my attention to the first dimension “Who is in the family.” This dimension includes the degree of consensus regarding who is in the family as well as the degree of contact with relatives and the manner in which they are drawn into the family. I show how members of some household families are using the Internet to forge new “extended families of choice” while others are using the Internet to maintain relationships with families of origin¹³.

“Families of choice” – extending the concept and extending the “family of choice” via the Internet

Although Weeks, Donovan et al. (1999) and Weston (1991) discuss “families of choice” with specific reference to non-heterosexuals, I wish to appropriate the term to capture the phenomenon of family members (regardless of their sexuality) extending their families via the Internet, that is, creating an “extended family of choice”. Although different in nature from the “families of choice” researched by Weeks, Donovan et al. and Weston, these are also

¹¹ I have renamed this dimension. A change to “performance of family boundaries” would be confusing as the term “family boundaries” is used in the literature (Silverstone and Morley, 1990; Maffesoli, 1996; James, Jenks et al., 1998) in the context of making the family a safe place by maintaining boundaries with “the outside world”.

¹² Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) use this dimension with regard to the expression of sexuality, aggression and affection. Although individual family members used the Internet to express aggression or sexuality outside of the household, none of the data relating to the performance of the family mapped to this dimension.

¹³ I follow Weeks, Donovan et al. (1999) in using this term to refer to families related by blood or marriage.
“everyday experiments in living”\textsuperscript{14}. Weeks, Donovan et al. suggest that it is easier to construct elective families in urban areas than in rural areas. The following examples show that when a family of choice is constructed via the Internet, the location takes on a different type of relevance, as there is not a requirement that members of an “extended family of choice” physically meet.

Weeks, Donovan et al. also identify a tendency towards social sameness in the “families of choice.” This tendency is not at all evident in the “extended families of choice” described in the following examples. In the first case, Kim Sampson\textsuperscript{15} and her children have used the Internet to form an “extended family of choice” comprising an older American man whom they have never physically met and a man who lives interstate. In the second case, the entire Garling household family have used email to extend their family by choice to include two Indonesian teenagers living in Bandung.

In both examples, there is an understanding of family that goes beyond biological or conjugal ties and a desire to bring new people into the life of the household. However, these examples do not indicate that this type of attitude is widespread or indicative of a new understanding of family. For example, Trevor Sampson is not prepared to include the two men in his understanding of his family and in general, my research shows many people are using the Internet to maintain boundaries between the household family and the outside world.

\textit{Case 1: The Sampsons}

The Sampsons have no contact with their extended family of origin, apart from Trevor’s nephew. As a result of their relationship with the Internet, Kim Sampson and her children have changed their perceptions of who is in their family. A chance encounter through the Internet has resulted in the incorporation of an “adopted grandfather” into their family. A man who Kim met in a chat room has become like extended family, in particular to Kylie who is eight years old.

It started when Kim and Trevor Sampson were trying to work out how to use WebPhone, which enables a cheap telephone connection via the Internet. They got a wrong number and spoke to a man called Joe who lives in America. Email contact ensued and Joe has become an “adopted grandfather”.

\textit{Kim:}  he's 76 so, like, I know about all of his family, he knows all about our family, he asks all the time about, you know, how we are and he emails with the kids, I mean as soon as there's any birthdays and Christmas presents and, you know... (laughs nervously) it's, yeah. Its, um, so I would class him as probably an adopted grandfather. We don't have any other, I mean they've all died and Trevor's father is still alive but he

\textsuperscript{14} The title of the article by Weeks, Donovan et al. (1999) is “Everyday Experiments”, a reference to Giddens (1992). Giddens uses the term “everyday experiments in living” to refer to new social arrangements that people are experimenting with as “traditional” family structures become less relevant.

\textsuperscript{15} When using names of respondents in discussing the data, I use the convention of \textbf{bold} typeface to indicate that I am referring to a parent, rather than a child. Of course, all names and identifying characteristics have been changed.
doesn't have anything to do with the kids... and hasn't, you know, so, um, Joe has had more to do with them, if you know what I mean. You know, in a very remote sort of a way. But they, they are very attached to him and we've got Tom, another friend up in, in (town in NSW). He came down to visit. He's got family over in Canberra and he came and visited, and like if he comes online, Kylie specifically will, you know, will chat with him and stuff, you know, like... and and he's, I think he's about two years younger than me or thereabouts, so the that's really good, it's almost like they have become... probably it is extended family (laughs) yeah

Joe and Tom’s involvement with the Sampsons is not limited to online communication. Tom has visited the Sampsons in Canberra and Joe sends presents from America; for example, he mailed them US$150 at Christmas time. As a result of “meeting” Joe online, Kim Sampson is actually going to America later in the year to meet Joe in person.

Although Kim regards Joe as extended family and the children are involved in sending him emails (unsolicited, Kylie tells me “we love sending emails to Joe”), Kim’s husband Trevor is not so enthusiastic.

Viv: Do you have much to do with Joe? Have you ever spoken to him or emailed to him
Trevor: I spoke to him once a long time ago
Viv: Are you interested in sort of...
Trevor: (interrupts) No
Viv: Does it worry you that the kids email to him?
Trevor: (obviously uncomfortable) No. I trust my wife's judgment. Right? So I suppose I'm concerned less.
Viv: You don't have much to say to him, I suppose
Trevor: Yeah well I, you know, I don't know much about the guy.

In general Trevor tends to be distrustful about the motives of strangers on the Internet. Although he has decided to accept his wife and children’s adoption of Joe into their understanding of the extended family, Trevor has not included Joe in his own understanding of the extended family.

**Case 2: The Garling family**

“When you are born as a country person, like, country people even though they all got separate families, all the families link to each other and its like one great big family. Its just the way you are. Its just what comes through with us.” (Bob Garling)

The Garlings are foster carers for three small children. This and Bob’s quote above are examples of how the Garling’s conception of family is not linked to conjugal or biological ties. Through Bob Garling’s work, the Garling family got to know two Indonesian dancers visiting Australia. The teenagers are roughly the same age as Diana (aged 17) and Karen (aged 15) and the entire Garling family have used email to keep in regular contact with them. The Indonesian teenagers stayed with the Garlings on a subsequent visit to Australia and Bob refers to them as “extended family”.

In both these cases the relationship with the Internet has constituted a new performance of the family. Members of the Garling and the Sampson family households have performed “extended families of choice” through their use of the Internet.
Maintaining relationships with family of origin via the Internet

More commonly, in the Canberra study, people were using the Internet to perform the family of origin, both immediate and extended family. In a quantitative study, Nie and Erbring (2000) report that Internet users spend much less time talking on the phone to friends and family. There is not the data to test whether some of this time represents a shift to using the Internet to communicate with friends and family, and the report basically tells a story of social isolation induced by the Internet. In contrast, the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2000) tells a story of Americans using the Internet to “celebrate the family”, to search out long lost relatives, to increase contact with family members and to display information about their families on Web pages.16

In general, the story from my research resembles that of the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Over half of the families in the Canberra study were using the Internet to maintain contact with extended family or members of the immediate family who are absent from the household. Several had reestablished relationships with extended family who they had tracked down over the Internet, some sent regular “family emails” and photos and many used the Internet to access genealogical information. Similarly, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that almost one third of Americans had (or a member of their family had) used the Internet to do research related to their family’s history. However, whereas the Pew Internet and American Life Project links the likelihood of this to education, wealth and net expertise, in the Canberra study sample, a range of people, (men and women, rich and poor, highly educated and those with less education, novice to more experienced Internet users) had used the Internet to trace their family tree. The reasons for this resurgence of interest in family of origin are not clear. It could be an example of Castells' contention that families “are more than ever the providers of psychological security” (1988: 349). Whatever the case, the Internet facilitates this tracking of family of origin.

In several households men were involved in maintaining relationships with their family of origin via the Internet. This finding is somewhat unexpected. A main finding of the report Tracking online life: How women use the Internet to cultivate relationships with family and friends (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2000) is that a higher proportion of women than men use the Internet for maintaining family ties. Typically in studies of family use of technologies as well as more general studies, maintaining family ties is regarded as the gender work of women, that is, the work of maintaining gender boundaries within the household (Rakow 1988; Moyal 1992; Silverstone and Morley 1990; di Leonardo 1992).

16 According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2000), in March 2000 more than half of American users were using email to improve their communications with family members and more than one in ten Americans was a member of a family in which someone had created a family Web site.
However, more than half of the households in the Canberra study did not seem to conform to traditional gender relations\(^{17}\) and men were involved in maintaining family ties via the Internet in households where the performance of gender relations was traditional as well as in households where the gender relations were not so traditional. The data indicates that the involvement of the Internet in the performance of gender relations in the family does not seem to be as straightforward as some of the literature about gender and technology implies (Berg 1996; Cockburn and Ormrod 1993; Livingstone 1994; Wheelock 1994). In the Canberra study, as well as a striking example of the Internet transforming what had been traditional gender relations within the household, there was also an example of a father using the Internet to help maintain traditional gender relations in the household. In the first case, a woman had learnt web design skills via the Internet, transforming from a “bored housewife” (her words) to a web designer starting her own business. In the latter case, the father controlled access to the Internet as a way of exercising control in the family. More research is needed before any conclusions can be drawn on how the Internet is used to transform or maintain existing gender relations within the household. It is possible that those commentators who use gender to explain observed differences between men and women’s use of technology, although purporting to reveal the organisation of gender, are actually involved in the production of gender. Grint and Gill have critiqued this type of study into gender/technology relations, noting that “only those practices which reinforce or reproduce existing patterns of gender relations are ‘noticed’ analytically” (1995: 17).

Regardless of gender, a conjugal or biological connection appears to have a particular symbolic significance to some people’s understandings of family, because in practical terms, there appears to be little difference in the nature of the Internet-mediated relationships with physically distant extended families of origin and those with elective extended families of choice. People use email, ICQ, homepages and the worldwide web to facilitate these type of relationships. For example, the Blackburn family uses email extensively to communicate with overseas friends and relatives. David Blackburn considers that a family home page would be a useful adjunct to the email communication "because, the... relatives in the States, rather than having to download pictures and stuff could easily just hook into our Web site, into the home page, and have a look at what was happening”

Despite not having a family home page, David Blackburn is assisted by the worldwide web in maintaining his relationship with his extended family of origin.

David: I was talking to my brother-in-law on the weekend and he's bought himself a new car. This is in the States. So I logged onto the Chevy site in the States and had a look at his car on the web *(laughs)* so, yeah, I enjoy doing things like that.

\(^{17}\) Studies of household gender relations in Australia, show that typically the home is a site of leisure for men and a site of work (housework and childcare) for women (for example, Bittman and Pixley 1997; Baxter and Bittman 1995). The situation in the 19 households in my study was much more complex than that. In 4 of the 16 households where a father was present, the father worked from home. In 6 of the 15 households where both a mother and father were present, the household division of labour appeared to be equal. In another of these households, the father was responsible for most of the household chores.
In consultation with the rest of his family, Alan Scott (aged 18) has set up “The Scott family Web page” with photos of the family and each family member. The family have sent the address of this web page to relatives and Alan’s father Reg is keen for each member to include some information about themselves and for the page to be updated regularly so that he can “just tell people to look at it every two months and you don’t have to write to them”.

Those whose extended or immediate family were not in Canberra were more likely to use the Internet to maintain contact and in several cases, they had decided to get a home Internet connection specifically so that they could keep in contact with physically distant family members. Of course, for members of a household family to communicate with family or extended family requires that their relatives have an Internet connection or at least an email account and several people mentioned that they wished that their relatives did have an email account. However, this in itself does not indicate a desire for a closer relationship with family. Reg’s comment about the usefulness of a web page for keeping in touch with relatives without needing to write to them is echoed in Andy Holcroft’s attitude to email. In the following exchange, email is seen as a way of satisfying the desire for some sort of communication with the immediate family with minimum effort.

Andy: I wish my Mother would get on it, because you could just email her every night. Its 10 times easier emailing than picking up the phone and talking. (his daughter laughs) Emails better because..

Olivia: (interrupts laughing) you don’t have to talk to her

Andy: yes, you can say what you want to say and get off. I mean, but you still have communications. To ring up every night, you’re on there for an hour. Its much easier to just say what you want to say and get off. I wish she had it. The communication I think is fantastic, take a photo here, scan it, send it down to Mum.

Andy likes email because it enables him to stay in touch without having to spend so much time talking. In an American study, almost two thirds of those who emailed relatives also expressed this view (The Pew Internet and American Life Project 2000). However in the Canberra study, Andy and Reg were the only ones who said that they used the Internet to reduce the effort required in maintaining communications with relatives/family members. More commonly, use of email enhanced the communication with relatives/family members as in the following example of Arnold Griffin and his daughter Hilary.

Arnold Griffin was working in Vietnam for a year. Although his wife communicated with him by phone rather than email, Hilary (aged 15) communicated with her father Arnold more on email than she did when he lived in the same house.

Arnold: Like we talk to each other more now than we talked to each other when he was here so... (laughs with embarrassment) and I’ve been writing him emails in French to practise my French. Because I’ve never talked to him in French no matter how much he bugged me so ...(trails off)
Hilary is not explicit about why she communicates better with her father via email and it is impossible to generalise from the study about the quality of communication when using the Internet to maintain family ties.

The nature of the intersection of the Internet and the performance of family is not predetermined by supposed characteristics of families or the Internet. In this paper I have given an indication of some of the complexities involved. Specifically I have shown how members of some household families are using the Internet to forge new “extended families of choice” while others are using the Internet to maintain relationships with families of origin. These are just a few examples of how, in household families that have an Internet connection, the Internet is involved in both maintaining existing performances of family as well as enabling new performances of family.

18 Bingham, Valentine et al. (1999) make this point with regard to childrens’ use of the Internet.
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