

# The consumption of the Internet in household families

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This thesis is completely my own original work.

## **Acknowledgments**

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines the consumption of the Internet by household families. It is based on data collected in Canberra; 689 responses to a self-completion survey to parents on attitudes to, and use of, the Internet and more than 75 interviews with members of 19 household families who had the Internet connected at home.

My project is not a test of existing theories about socio-technical networks in a domestic setting nor is it purely descriptive. Rather my intention is to generate theory from the data drawing on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) strategy of grounded theory. My approach to the data draws from symbolic interactionism which has the premise that people act on the basis of the meanings that things have for them. It is also feminist in that I pay attention to issues of gender.

My central argument is that the Internet, the family and the self are performative. Through an empirical examination of the intersecting performances of the family and the self with the performance of the Internet, I show that there is nothing stable or natural about a particular version of the Internet, family or self. Each is constituted through its own performance and each performance impinges upon the other. My analysis of peoples' stories about their everyday use of the Internet shows that the nature of the intersection is complex and cannot be predicted by looking at characteristics of the Internet, the family or the self in isolation.

I draw from Science and Technology Studies to demonstrate that the Internet's performance varies within and between households in complex and contradictory ways. I build on existing work by Silverstone (1996) to develop a model for characterising the performance of the Internet in domestic consumption.

With regard to the family, I look at how home use of the Internet is implicated in debates about the changing nature of the family. Rather than giving any specific sociological meaning to the term 'family', I have used the term to refer to the way that groups of individuals who understand themselves as forming a family enact that understanding in their daily life.

Drawing on studies of consumption and enlisting Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, I also analyse how people mobilise the Internet as a resource for the performance of self.

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# Prologue

## A PARABLE

In the town of families, the sound of hail hitting the houses was common enough. Only this time it wasn't hail. Hard round objects, unlike anything anyone had ever seen before, were falling from the sky.

With frightened faces, people peered out through tightly shut windows, shaking their heads at those fools who had run enthusiastically outside to scoop *iT* up and with naïve excitement welcome *iT* into their house. *iT* signals the destruction of our way of life they warned, refusing to have anything to do with *iT* themselves.

But fantastic claims soon began to circulate about *iT*. Every day came a new report about what *iT* could do.

Whatever you thought of you could see in *iT*. Whoever you wanted to speak with – you could – just as long as they had *iT* too. You could transmit messages just by holding *iT* in both hands and concentrating intently. *iT* could teach you about any subject in the world. *iT* could keep both adults and children entertained for hours. *iT* could do your shopping. *iT* could do your banking. You could be whoever you wanted to when you were holding *iT*.

In some houses, families sat around *iT*, feeling closer to each other than they ever had before.

In some houses, parents watched helplessly as their children sat entranced, hypnotised by the strange power of *iT*, neglecting work, study and play.

In some houses, spouses watched helplessly as their partner sat entranced, hypnotised by the strange power of *iT*, neglecting work, study and play.

In some houses, there was shouting and tears as people fought over *iT*.

In some houses it was welcomed as a Godsend and each family member had their own special relationship to *iT*.

In some houses, *iT* received a cautious welcome; children were not allowed to be alone with *iT* for they could not be trusted with it.

In some houses, *iT* received a cautious welcome; children were not allowed to be alone with *iT* for *iT* could not be trusted.

In some houses, spouses viewed their partner with silent suspicion, as night after night the partner spent hours alone with *iT*.

*iT was transforming the town of families. But a strange thing had happened to iT and in every house, iT was different.*

In some houses, *iT* was a wild thing attacking almost all who dared to come near it. In these houses, there was almost always someone in the family who knew the secret of how to approach *iT*. They either tried to teach the rest of the family or kept the secret to themselves, revelling in their newly found power.

In some houses, *iT* took on a menacing glow and from *iT* emanated a rotten stench.

In some houses, *iT* grew bigger and bigger, dwarfing the occupants, making it impossible to move freely around the house. However, the occupants appeared not to notice that this had happened, or that friends had stopped visiting, unable to get through the door.

In some houses, *iT* sat shrinking in a forgotten corner of the cupboard.

In some houses, *iT* had replicated itself. Parents presented children with their very own *iT* to encourage them to learn responsibility and self-control.

In some houses, *iT* had gone soft and fluffy and brought smiles to children's faces and relief to weary parents and joy to mothers isolated in their houses with young children during the day.

In some houses, *iT* had woven itself seamlessly into the fabric of the family's everyday life and was barely visible.

No one could agree on how life had been before the coming of *iT*. Some reminisced about Arcadian days of innocence; others spoke of The Dark Period before *iT* happened.

In the town of families, the sound of hail hitting the houses was common enough. Only this time it wasn't hail. Hard round objects, unlike anything anyone had ever seen before, were falling from the sky.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

A common question from acquaintances who know that I am researching household families using the Internet, is 'What have you found out?'. This question presumes that there will be a clear pattern to my observations. That I will find, for example, that 'children know more about the Internet than their parents' or 'women use the Internet to maintain contact with kin' or 'the Internet is tearing the family apart'. There is a multitude of stories about household use of the Internet. In this thesis, I tell a number of stories about aspects of the relationship between the Internet and the self or the Internet and the family in particular households. However, although I use the words, Internet, self and family as if they are pre-existing categories, the conclusion that I came to in my research is that these stories demonstrate that neither the Internet, the family nor the self are stable entities. These stories also point towards the instability of other categories such as gender and class.

At one level, this thesis is about the performative nature of categories that describe humans and assemblages of humans and non-humans. My central argument is that the Internet, the family and the self are performative. Through an empirical examination of the intersecting performances of the family and the self with the performance of the Internet, I show that there is nothing stable or natural about a particular version of the Internet, family or self. Each is constituted through its own performance and each performance impinges upon the other.

The main focus of my empirical investigations are family households in Canberra<sup>1</sup> who have the Internet connected at home. In this chapter, I outline why this research is important and outline the scope of the research. I then explain some of the conceptual tools I use.

### Why?

'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)

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<sup>1</sup> Canberra is the capital of Australia and had a population of 310,000 in 1999. (ABS 2000)

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 (Denzin 1992; Campbell 1994; Haddon 1992), and in particular its effect on the family. Fears about the effect of the Internet at home include exaggerated fears that families will split up as a result of secret online romances and fears that children will learn how to build bombs at home.

More generally, in its infancy, the Internet was the subject of both utopian and dystopian discourses as it made possible communication and information exchange on an unprecedented scale. It was likened to the printing press in terms of the magnitude of its potential to revolutionise the way that we live (Franzen 2000; Cook 1996). Utopian claims about the Internet included claims that it would allow 'every individual to have their voice heard' and would 'reshape the way our political system works',<sup>2</sup> that it would enable global understanding and tolerance through the creation of an online global village, that it would 'narrow the gap that separates capital from labour' and 'deepen the bonds between the people and the planet' (Editors of Wired magazine quoted in (Brosnan 1998:155). This was in stark contrast to the hellish descent into a 'bleak wasteland of panoptic centralisation and anomic screen-bound cultural dupes' (Golding 2000) envisioned by writers such as Talbott (1995) and Nguyen and Alexander (1996). Accompanying these various discourses about the Internet has emerged a whole new discipline, the sociology of cyberspace; this includes studies of cyberculture, virtual communities, computer-mediated communication and cyberactivism. Although much has been written on cyberspace and on the potential of the Internet, there has been little empirical research on what the Internet actually means in use, to different types of users. As Shields (1996) points out, very early studies of Internet use tended to assume that the typical Internet user was a young computer 'nerd' (white, American and male) and cast the Internet as 'a bright technical toy for engineers' rather than 'a phenomenon of social and political interest.' Shields (1996:8). When I commenced work on

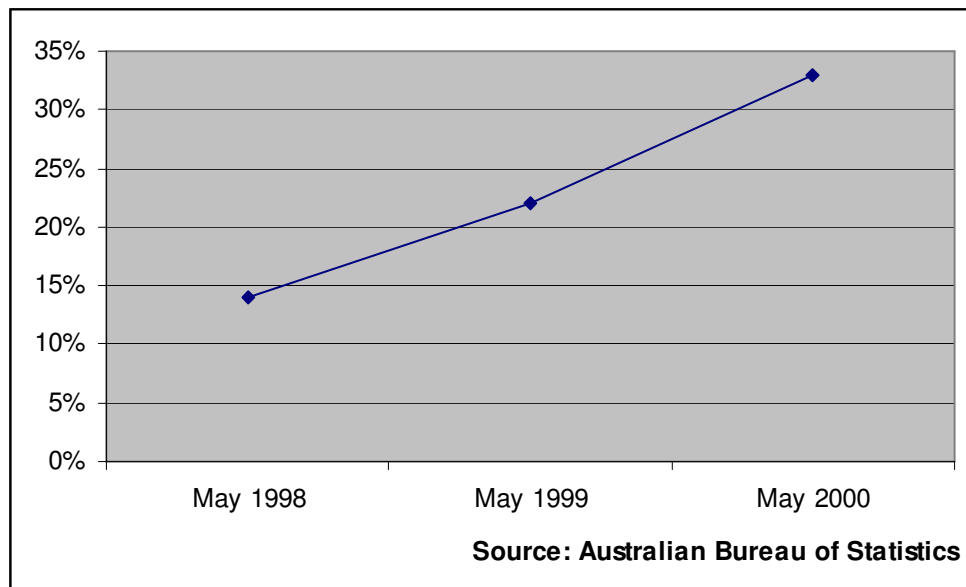
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<sup>2</sup> Politician quoted in *The Canberra Times*, Saturday November 8 1997.

this doctorate, the Internet had only recently become domestically available and less than 5% of households in Australia had an Internet connection (ABS 1996).

In the few years since I commenced my research, the situation has changed dramatically. By December 2000, more than 400 million people worldwide had Internet access<sup>3</sup>. More than half of these Internet users (59%) were from outside North America, and it is predicted that this proportion will continue to increase. In Australia, the number of homes with Internet connections has increased rapidly over the past few years (see Figure 1-1).

**Figure 1-1 Recent growth in proportion of Australian households with Internet access**



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).

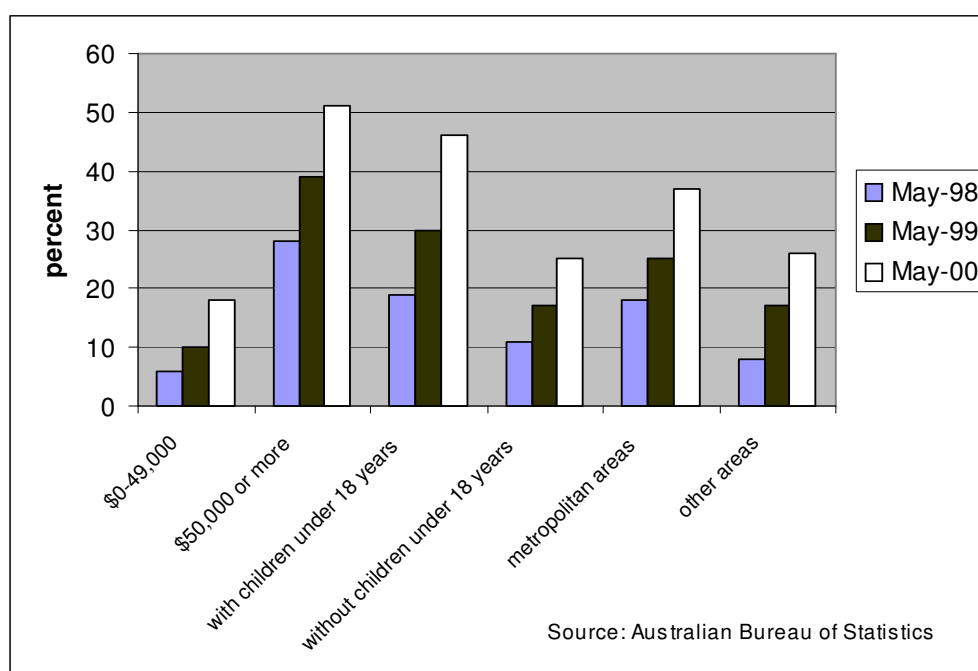
Data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics gives some summary information about how having accessed the Internet varies according to age and gender. Young people aged between 18-24 years were much more likely

<sup>3</sup> Source: NUA Internet surveys (<http://www.nua.ie/surveys/>)

than older age groups to have accessed the Internet at all (in the twelve months to May 2000) but only slightly more likely to have accessed the Internet at home than the 25-39 years and 40-54 years age groups. Those aged over 55 were much less likely to have accessed the Internet from any site. Males were more likely than females to have accessed the Internet from home, work or another site. (In May 2000, 51% of males had accessed the Internet in the last 12 months compared to 41% of females).

As Figure 1-2 shows, the likelihood of having Internet access at home is positively correlated with income, living in a metropolitan area and having children under 18 years. For example, in May 2000, more than half of Australian households with an income of more than \$50,000 were connected to the Internet compared to less than one fifth of those with a household income of less than \$50,000. Just under half of the households (46%) with children under 18 years had Internet connections compared to one quarter (25%) of households without children under 18 years. Just over one third (37%) of metropolitan households had Internet connections compared to one quarter (26%) of households from other areas. With only three years of data, it is too early to tell whether the size of these differences are increasing, reducing or staying basically the same.

**Figure 1-2 Characteristics of Australian households with a home Internet connection, 1998-2000**



Despite the overall rapid growth in the proportion of Australian households with Internet access and 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 1999:601):

'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.'

It is important to have studies of people's relationship with the Internet while the Internet is still a new phenomenon. As Zuboff found when she studied organisations experiencing the introduction of new technology, users of new technologies are still 'ripe with questions and insights regarding the distinct qualities of their experience' (Zuboff 1988:13). This is in contrast, say, to the findings of Brown and Bryant (1990) who were involved in researching the interaction between television and family life in America. They found that the television has become such an integral part of American family life that it is virtually invisible. This means that most people are unable to describe its effects or its place in their life and that any effect the television may have had has been naturalised (Akrich 1987); it seems that it could have not turned out in any other way.

The place of the Internet in people's everyday lives is of both practical and sociological significance. The Internet has practical implications for issues such

as peoples' privacy, freedom of speech, and ability to access violent or pornographic material. In addition, the Australian Government has an agenda to make the Internet integral to the everyday lives of all Australians. The official position of the Australian Government is that 'access to computers and the Internet, and the ability to effectively use this technology are becoming increasingly important for full participation in economic, political and social life.'<sup>4</sup> Although some commentators have been sceptical about the necessity or desirability of access to the Internet, the Government is actively involved in making access to the Internet functionally important; for example, all 'appropriate' Commonwealth services will be moved online by 2001. As well as making policies that actively promote the Internet, the Government is injecting massive funding into a range of initiatives that aim to ensure that all Australians have access to the Internet as well as the relevant skills<sup>5</sup>. This is to prevent the emergence of what has been dubbed the 'digital divide', a new form of inequity between those who have full access to the Internet (the 'information-rich') and those who do not (the 'information-poor'). Empirical information about the nature of the Internet in people's everyday lives can inform Government decisions about Internet policy.

As well as being of practical significance, the place of the Internet in people's everyday lives is of sociological significance. I demonstrate this, through linking with several broader debates about technology, families and the self.

With regard to technology, I draw from debates about the nature of the relationship between technology and users. Actor Network variants of Science and Technology Studies (STS)<sup>6</sup> try to understand how the social and the technical mutually constitute each other<sup>7</sup> (Law 1991; Woolgar 1996; Latour 1991). This is what I am concerned to do also, although I conceptualise my social and technical objects of study in terms of their performances rather than

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<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.noie.gov.au/projects/access/community/digitaldivide/Digitaldivide.htm>

<sup>5</sup> For example, Networking the Nation provides \$250 million over five years for projects that will provide the infrastructure for people in rural communities to access the Internet.

<sup>6</sup> I borrow this phrase from Woolgar (1996) given that ANT is not really a theory as such. See Latour (1999) for a discussion of this.

<sup>7</sup> I use the discrete terms 'social' and 'technical' for convenience rather than to signify some essential difference between the two.

their constitution. This is a move that several Actor Network Theorists have begun to make just recently (Dugdale 1999; Law and Singleton 2000; Strum and Latour 1999). I engage also with debates about the consumption of technology and in particular, the work of Silverstone (1991; Silverstone and Hirsch 1992;1993; Silverstone, Hirsch et al. 1994; Silverstone and Haddon 1996). I use these debates as a point of departure for developing my own conceptualisation of the domestic consumption of the Internet.

With regard to the family, I look at how home use of the Internet is implicated in debates about the changing nature of the family. For example, Castells (1998b) argues that the patriarchal family is in decline, Weston (1991) and Weeks, Donovan et al. (1999) argue that new types of families are emerging whereas Bittman and Pixley (1997) considers that the nuclear family is still the predominant form. What happens to how ideas of family are understood and enacted when the Internet is connected at home?

With regard to the self, Internet use or non-use feeds into debates about the extent of people's ability to negotiate the course of their lives as a reflexive project of self (Beck and Beck-Gersheim 1995; Giddens 1991; Giddens 1992) and debates about the relationship between consumption and the self (Miller 1987; Warde 1996). The online environment of the Internet has been widely touted as a means of freeing oneself from the symbolic and, to some extent, the material constraints of social context.

The study of consumption is a neglected area in sociology (Warde 1996) and the consumption of technology is a neglected area of STS (Grint and Woolgar 1997). Linking sociology of the family with studies of technology usually only occurs in the form of studies of the impact of a technology on the family, where the family is taken for granted as a reified entity. Drawing on STS, I integrate investigation into the areas of technology, the family and the self. As Woolgar (1996) notes, STS is no longer just concerned with substantive findings about science and technology, but is also involved in 'attempts to 'respecify' key notions such as 'social,' and 'agency''. Similarly, this thesis attempts to use an approach that draws from STS to give insights into the meaning of the notions of 'family' and 'self'. This is the only study that I know of which uses a detailed empirical

investigation of everyday domestic life to analyse how the consumption of a technology may be used to invest meaning in the notion of family as well as the self.

Given that access to the Internet has been available from the home for several years, studies that focus especially on the home use of the Internet 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 tend to be survey reports rather than sociological analyses and they invariably assume a particular type of family, that is, a man married to a woman plus their biological children. 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 with members of nineteen household families with home connections to the Internet. There is a diverse mix of family structures in my study (heterosexual couples living with their biological children, sole parent families, blended and same-sex couples with children) reflecting the diversity of social relationships that constitute families in Australia (Gilding 1991; Weeks 1991; ABS 1996 Census of Population and Housing).

### **What?**

When I commenced this research, there had been, to my knowledge, no sociological research on the use of the Internet at home. I was venturing into completely uncharted waters and did not know what theoretical maps would help me make sense of what I observed. I had no clear destination in terms of a clear research question that I would answer. My task involved mapping out a new territory, but I lacked the standard cartographer's tools. There were established methods for researching use of the telephone and the television but not the Internet.

For a start, it is not obvious what precisely is meant by the term 'the Internet'. Just as the definition of steel is socially constructed, and has undergone a variety of forms (Misa 1992), so the definition of the Internet is currently being constructed and has not yet reached, and may never reach, closure. When I started my research, the term 'internet' was sometimes used to refer to various interconnected computer networks such as Usenet and dial-up bulletin board



services (BBSs). Now, the term generally begins with a capital letter to refer to a very particular interconnected network or Internet. In one sense, the Internet is simply a particular way of moving data from an origin to a destination. Hence it is meaningless to refer to the Internet without reference to specific applications (Slevin 2000). The Internet has been likened to a highway, the 'information highway', and the applications, such as World Wide Web, email, chat, and file transfer have been likened to different types of vehicles on that highway. The content of the email, chat message or whatever, is then similar to the passengers or contents of the vehicle. There is often a conflation of the term 'the Internet' with what can be accessed via the Internet. For example, the statement 'the Internet is dangerous for children' refers to aspects of the content of the Internet rather than the nature of the interconnected network itself. This slippage of terms is similar to the conflation of television as a technology with the television programs that are broadcast. Like the television, the Internet is what Silverstone, Hirsch et al. refer to as a 'doubly articulated' technology in that it is both 'the means (the media) whereby public and private meanings are mutually negotiated; as well as being the products themselves, through consumption, of such negotiations of meaning' (Silverstone, Hirsch et al. 1994:20). In the empirical discussion it becomes evident that the specific applications, such as chat and email are themselves also doubly articulated.

Various competing histories of the Internet have now been written (for example, Lafayette 2000; Hafner and Lyon 1996). Most refer to its origins in a computer network designed for military purposes to enable communication and act as a repository for information. Because information was stored on numerous computers in scattered locations, there was no central nerve centre that could be destroyed by attack. From the military, the Internet entered universities where academics could use e-mail, bulletin boards and newsgroups to communicate. In the mid 1990s the Internet became domestically available in Australia and in 1996, for the first time, the Australian Bureau of Statistics collected information on the number of people who accessed the Internet from home. In 1998, the ABS produced its first publication specifically on household use of the Internet (ABS 1998). In the late 1990s, there was a rapid growth in Internet Service Providers and in organisations locating information on the Web. Although hundreds of thousands of people join the Internet each month and

millions of users now have their own home page, the Internet is still in its infancy and its meanings as an object of consumption are far from stable; it is possible that no single meaning given to the Internet will ever become dominant.

Currently, the Internet is subject to a mix of conflicting interests. On the one hand, there are commercial interests exploiting the media to sell products, including information, or attempting to control the Internet and limit its definition to what can be accessed through subscription services. Countering this are anti-commercial interests, such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, concerned with keeping the experience of the Internet free and open and protecting individual privacy on the Internet. Various meanings given to the Internet include the Internet as an educational product, the Internet as a business product, the Internet as interactive entertainment, the Internet as a giant shopping centre, the Internet as cybersex, the Internet as a social network, the Internet as surveillance, the Internet as global village and the Internet as a moral danger. The Internet can itself be thought of as an actor in Callon's sense of an actor being 'any entity able to associate texts, humans, non-humans and money' (1991:140).

Drawing on studies of the social construction of technology as well as Actor Network variants of STS, my theoretical starting point when I began the research was that the technical is fully social and the social is also technical. My original goal was to analyse this mutually constitutive relationship between the social and the technical with respect to household families with Internet connections. In other words, I wished to investigate the Internet's involvement in the construction of household users (and non-users) as well as the household construction of the Internet. I hoped that this would enable me to formulate a theory about the mutual constitution of the Internet and the social relations of the household family.

There is a large body of literature on domestic use of the telephone and television (for example, Lull 1988; Bryant 1990; Lull 1990; Bazalgette and Buckingham 1995; Moores 1996; Morley 1986; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Moyal 1992; Frissen 1995; Lembo 1997) and an increasing number of

works on domestic use of the computer (for example, Haddon 1992; Wheelock 1994; Lally 2000). When I commenced my project, I used this type of study as a point of departure and comparison, as there were no works on domestic use of the Internet and the Internet incorporates aspects of many other information and communication technologies. As Green puts it when discussing the relevance of audience studies to the Internet: 'the Internet has the potential to mimic the features of all the media and genres that have preceded it, and more' (2000:2).

The Internet has some aspects in common with the personal computer, the television and the telephone. A personal computer is used to access the Internet and as with the personal computer, the home is not the primary site of consumption of the Internet; it has an equally established presence at work and in educational settings. Like television, the Internet is a live media that enters the home and some of the content is governed by commercial interests. Like the telephone, the Internet is a technology that can be used for communicating on a one-to-one basis. Hence, studies on the domestic consumption of technologies like the telephone, the personal computer and the television are relevant to the study of the Internet. However, the Internet is vastly different from both the personal computer the television and the telephone. For example, the Internet has a visual and textual dimension that is absent from the ordinary telephone. Unlike the television, the Internet is interactive and the user actively constructs their program of use. In addition, the home consumer of the Internet may also be a producer of Internet content. Whereas personal computer use may be characterised as a solo activity, rational and linear in nature (Henman 1995), the Internet allows communication with other users and the activity of surfing the Internet is generally neither rational nor linear. As I write this the distinctions between the personal computer and the television are blurring. Although they are still separate objects in almost all households in Australia, it is possible to watch television on a personal computer or access the Internet via the television. In addition, people can talk on the telephone via the Internet (for example, using WebPhone) and it is also now possible to send and receive email via a mobile telephone.

## How?

One of the things that first struck me as I undertook my fieldwork was the diversity of the level and type of engagement with the Internet. Whereas the telephone is primarily a mode of two-way communication and the television is primarily a one-way source of information and entertainment, the Internet can not be characterised so easily. No particular form of Internet use appears to be dominant and the various uses are very different from each other. For example, using email and chat rooms interactively is very different from looking up webpages for information. Even within the one household, the Internet as a technology is not a stable entity but is continually constituted in use.

I had similar trouble when trying to characterise the people in my study, at the individual and household level. I could not simply apply categories such as gender and class as the subjects of my study did not fit these categories in 'expected' ways. Hence to make sense of my observations, while acknowledging that gender, class and the family have, or as I later argue *are*, real effects, I have reconceptualised my research in terms of performance, a process of continual construction and re-construction, that when repeated may give the appearance of stability. My research focuses on the intersection of the performance of the Internet with the performance of the self and the performance of the family. Given that there was no established field of research on the Internet, it was inappropriate for me to anticipate any theoretical outcomes and difficult to formulate precise research questions before conducting the research. Now, having completed the analysis, I have formulated the following open-ended research questions in terms of performance:

- How is the Internet performed in different households?
- What are the implications of a home Internet connection for the performance of self?
- What are the implications of a home Internet connection for the performance of family?

As my focus is on households that have an Internet connection, I do not investigate the use of the Internet outside the home; for example, at work, in educational settings, libraries or cybercafes. The households in this study are not representative of Canberra, let alone further afield. I have limited my investigation to household families with children and hence have no information on, for example, older people, people living alone or people living in remote areas. In particular, I have tried to include children's own voices in the thesis, alongside those of adults, making no a priori analytical or methodological distinctions between the two. It is now considered appropriate for researchers to use the same methods for researching children and adults as long as the specific practices used to research children 'resonate with children's own concerns and routines' (Christensen and James 2000:7). In doing this, I acknowledge the agency of children without universalising the category 'child' (Holloway and Valentine 2000).

However, despite these limitations and even though the households I investigated are not representative of household families in Canberra, this does not invalidate my findings. Although I have not captured the full diversity of experience and am not able to indicate the frequency of different types of experience, it is reasonable to assume that the stories that I tell about the households in my study are replicated in other households across Australia. Hence the information in this thesis provides some of the necessary foundations on which to build further research on the use of the Internet and provides a way of conceptualising the relationship between the Internet and its users.

### **Sociological context: the nature of these times**

Although my research focuses on the everyday, the findings could possibly be linked to macro accounts of social change. I will very briefly sketch out several different theoretical perspectives about the nature of these times at the turn of the twenty-first century. I will only attend to these theories as they relate to the family and/or the self or perhaps what Castells (1998a) dubs the 'relationships of experience'. I discuss Beck and Giddens because of the enormous influence that their detraditionalisation thesis has had on recent sociological writing on the family and the self. The other theorists I have chosen because they are specifically concerned with the relationship of technology to the social. A

common thread in the accounts is a link between explanation of social change at the macro level and everyday life.

According to both Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), we have passed from traditional modernity into a new age of 'late' or 'reflexive' modernity. Traditional modernity was marked by the authority of tradition to determine social relations and the course of an individual's life. Now, at the turn of the twenty-first century, our everyday lives have been disembedded from social context and local traditions to such an extent that each individual negotiates the story of their own life undertaking a 'reflexive project of self'. Beck goes so far as to consider that the individual is now the unit of reproduction of the social. Giddens places greater emphasis on the importance of the negotiation of intimate relationships.

Some theorists agree that we are witnessing a major social change but disagree on the nature of the change. For example, Thompson (1996) distinguishes between several types of tradition and argues that although there is a gradual decline in tradition as an authoritative guide for living, people still refer to traditions to understand the world and to form their identity. He argues that these are no longer necessarily local traditions but are mediated via mass communication technologies.

In contrast to the linear view of history underpinning the detraditionalisation thesis, Maffesoli (1996) views human history as a pendulum swinging between society and sociality. He argues that currently we are experiencing a cultural paradigm shift. The rational economic society of modernity is ending and there is a resurgence of sociality in the form of tribes. The pendulum has swung back to a sociality similar to that of the Middle Ages. However, in this time, communications technology is being used to forge new tribes. These include 'electronic mail, sexual networks, various solidarities including sporting and musical gatherings' (1996:73) which 'in various forms, refuse to identify with any political project whatsoever, to subscribe to any sort of finality, and whose sole *raison d'être* is a preoccupation with the collective present.' (1996:75) Maffesoli's idea of tribes has some broad similarities to Bourdieu's notion of social field. However, in contrast to Bourdieu's detailed elaboration of how the habitus (embodied history) of each individual intersects with their social field (for example in Bourdieu 1977), Maffesoli's account of

tribes is sketchy and does not explain why particular people belong to particular tribes.

In contrast to the somewhat speculative nature of the work of these theorists, Castells (1998a;1988b) work is based on detailed case studies. Castells identifies a clear break with the past occurring around the early 1970s. Whereas Beck and Giddens characterise changes in capitalism in terms of a change in emphasis from production of wealth to production of risks, Castells characterises the changes in capitalism in terms of a transition to an information economy. He considers that we are entering the Information Age, an age characterised by a new social structure, the network society; a new economy, the informational/global economy; and a new culture, the culture of real virtuality. He identifies a trend towards new family composition and considers that families are 'more than ever the providers of psychological security and material well-being to people, in a world characterised by individualisation of work, destructuring of civil society and delegitimation of the State' (1998:349). His idea of new forms of sociability constructed on the basis of the actual experience of the relationship rather than following norms for relationships is similar to Giddens' idea of the pure relationship. Castells considers that the rise of social movements could lead to 'the rise of tribes' (1998a:352). However whereas Maffesoli's tribes may be united on the basis of style only, Castell's tribes are always politically allied.

Haraway's (1987) characterisation of the 'informatics of domination', a world system of networks of production/reproduction and communication, is somewhat similar to Castells (1998a) formulation of the network society of domination. As with Castells, Haraway identifies new forms of social relations and links these to changes in capitalism towards an economy of information. However, Haraway gives greater weight than Castells to the effects of changes in science and technology. Communications technologies are an explicit actor in Haraway's story. She considers that they 'embody and enforce' new economic social relations for women worldwide (1987:18) worsening women's material conditions of existence. So, whereas Beck and Giddens each tell a story of a (genderless) individual for whom social structures are holding less sway, Haraway, a socialist-feminist, tells a story of women trapped in an exploitative world system of production/reproduction. She contends that we are

moving from the Western dualisms of white capitalist patriarchy (including for example, the nature/culture dichotomy) to a 'polymorphous, information system', the metaphoric time of the cyborg, a hybrid of the natural and the technical. Perhaps Haraway would interpret Beck and Giddens' notion of individualisation as an example of false consciousness.

Whereas the theorists referred to thus far all agree that the present is very different from the past, some theorists critique such a distinction between 'now' and 'then'. Referring specifically to Beck and Giddens, Heelas (1996), Rose (1996) and Luke (1996) all argue that the past was not different from the present in the ways suggested by the detraditionalisation thesis. There are elements of tradition in the present and elements of modernity in the past. Luke concludes that spatial terms are more appropriate than temporal terms to explain social change. Adam argues against a simple binary division between the past and the present on conceptual grounds; the present always includes the past. According to Adams, 'tradition constitutes renewal at every moment of active reconstruction of past beliefs and commitments' (1996:137). This is not so far from Morris's (1996) position that there never actually was a traditional time. He argues that rather than being in a time of detraditionalisation, we are in a time of 'retraditionalisation' where the past is constructed as traditional.

Latour also critiques the distinction between now and then but from a quite different angle. For Latour (1993), the defining characteristic of modernity is the separation of nature and society; for example, science in the modern view is an unmediated translation of nature, unaffected by the social. Latour argues that we have never actually been modern because in practice, nature and society cannot be distinguished. He goes further to argue that being modern is characterised by a proliferation of hybrids that refuse to be neatly separable into either nature or society. He argues that we are not witnessing a change that means a break with what has gone before; the difference is one of scale rather than one of kind. For example, according to Latour, the so-called phenomenon of globalisation is just a lengthening of networks of the local rather than the global being of a different nature to the local.



These various accounts of the nature of these times provide a range of theoretical backdrops for my account of the everyday use of the Internet in household families. In the conclusion of this thesis, I will return briefly to these stories to make a tentative assessment of the fit between any of these accounts of what is happening at the turn of the twenty-first century and my detailed account of interactions surrounding use of the Internet within household families in Canberra.

## **Conceptual tools used in this thesis**

### ***Negotiation of meanings***

My approach to addressing the research issues draws from symbolic interactionism, which has the basic premise that people act on the basis of the meanings that things have for them. With respect to the Internet, I show how these meanings are not essential properties but are negotiated through interactions between a person and the Internet within a particular social context.

There are many versions of symbolic interactionism and many criticisms of symbolic interactionism seem to be based on limitations of particular studies from a symbolic interactionist perspective rather than an understanding of and engagement with the premises of symbolic interactionism. The version of symbolic interactionism that I draw from does not rely on an assumption that everybody has the same perspective or shared meanings. Reynolds' (1990) criticism that symbolic interactionism sees the world as interacting equals when in fact people from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds will have different understandings seems misplaced. There is plenty of scope for examination for how meanings are constructed and relate to the particular social location of a person. For example, in chapter 4 'The Internet and performing the self' I show that people act towards the Internet on the basis of the meanings that it has for them, and I show both how these meanings are related to particular social locations and help constitute particular social performances.

As there is no systematic or sustained symbolic interactionist position on power (Prus 1999), symbolic interactionism has been criticised for ignoring power and

power imbalances and hence being apolitical. With his tongue firmly in his cheek Prus critiques, as the type of thinking one would expect in Introductory Sociology courses, the notion that to understand power 'you have to look at the "big picture" to consider structure, institutions, industrialisation, class, race, conflict, nations, States, politics and other things of that sort. Amen.' (1999:xv) Prus considers that far from ignoring power, symbolic interactionism 'provides the essential methodology for studying power as an element of human lived experience' (1999:124), arguing in Beyond the Power Mystique: Power as Intersubjective Accomplishment that power is negotiated in everyday life. Extending this concept to involve non-humans in the negotiation process, in Actor Network Theory power is conceptualised as 'the effect of a particular alignment of humans and non-humans, the character and capacity of which changes as alliances are disrupted and reformed' (Grint and Woolgar 1997:57). In other words, what appears to be a structural power imbalance is an effect of negotiations.

Symbolic interactionism has also received much criticism for lacking a theory of institutions or structures, and institutional change (Giddens 1976).

Reynolds (1990) defends symbolic interactionism against this charge pointing to a range of Blumer's works that include theoretical analysis of institutions and structures. Strauss's negotiated order perspective (Strauss, Fagerhaugh et al 1985) is one way in which symbolic interactionism can account for institutional change. Another is Giddens own theorisation of the link between structures and individual acts which he summarised as follows:

'Every act which contributes to the reproduction of a structure is also an act of production, a novel enterprise, and as such may initiate change by altering that structure at the same time as it reproduces it – as the meanings of words change in and through their use' (1976:128).

Although Giddens does not consider himself to be a symbolic interactionist, this position does seem to be compatible with symbolic interactionism. Castells more explicitly links social structure and symbolic interactions. 'Social structure is formed by the interplay between relationships of production/consumption; relationships of experience; and relationships of power. Meaning is constantly produced and reproduced through symbolic interactions between actors framed by this social structure, and, at the same time, acting to change it or reproduce it.' (2000:7)

## ***The Conceptual Lens of Performance<sup>8</sup>***

A major thread in my argument is that neither the Internet, self nor the family is a stable entity. Each is constituted through its own performance and each is implicated in the performance of the other. As the term 'performance' is used in a multitude of ways by different theorists, I will locate my usage of the term.

The various conceptions of performance are underpinned by different understandings of the self and agency. Carlson (1996) outlines typical meanings of the concept by discipline; the performance of culture in anthropology, the performance of the social in sociology, the performance of language in linguistics and performance as theatre or art.

For someone like Stone, who describes herself as a performance artist and theorist, performance is a 'public inscription practice' (1997:62), an articulation of theory in a public space as distinct from the performance of everyday life. In contrast Goffman uses the concept of performance to explain everyday behaviour. His is a functional view of performance where the actor, who is ontologically prior to the performance, performs well-defined roles in order to help define the situation and guide impressions. He uses theatrical terms distinguishing between the 'front region' where the performance happens and 'backstage' 'where action occurs that is related to the performance but inconsistent with the appearance fostered by the performance' (1956:82). In The Anthropology of Performance, Turner (1986) extends Goffman's concept of performance to include the possibility that a performance 'breaks' roles and Giddens (1991) also uses the concept of performance in a similar manner. These theorists all maintain a distinction between peoples' 'true' identities and the 'performances' they put on in specific social contexts.

Conquergood collapses this distinction between identity and performance when he theorises identity as like a performance in process. Rather than conceptualising a person as a unitary actor who performs a single role, he conceptualises a person as 'a polysemic site of articulation for multiple identities and

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<sup>8</sup> This phrase comes from Conquergood (1991).

voices' (1991:185). However, a limitation of Conquergood's conception of performance is that there is no link between the social context and the performance and no explanation as to how it is that some types of performances become the norm.

Butler explains how some types of performances become the norm in her analysis of gender as a category that is constituted through performance:

'The effect of gender is produced through the stylisation of the body, and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.' (Butler 1990:140)

This gendered self only has meaning as such within its social context, in this case, the regulatory sexual regime of heterosexuality. That gender is not natural, and that the regulatory sexual regime of heterosexuality is not immutable is evident by the fact that they both rely on the repetition of norms for their re-production. Paradoxically, it is this reiteration of norms which produces a subject capable of resisting these norms (McNay 1999). Hence Butler accounts for both the likelihood of continuity and the possibility for change, as well as the agency of the subject within the constraints of the social context.

Patton argues that Butler overemphasises the actor while undertheorising the context of the performance, 'what was once called the 'social' ' (1995:181). She argues that the context of a performance, for example, an institution or discourse, may also be regarded as performative and not necessarily ontologically prior to an actor. This is similar to Conquergood's conception of culture as an 'unfolding performative invention instead of a reified, system, structure or variable.' (1991:190) and Law's contention that 'performances always exist in the context of other performances' (2000:5). However, I would argue that this is not incompatible with Butler's position. Although gender norms exist at any moment, prior to the performance of any one particular actor,<sup>9</sup> these norms are not fixed and are constituted only through performances.

Whereas Patton critiques Butler for ignoring the dynamic aspects of the social context, McNay critiques Butler for insufficient attention to the already existing

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<sup>9</sup> I use the term 'actor' for convenience; my position is that the 'actor' has no ontological status prior to the acts which constitute it.

aspects of social context. She notes that in Butler's account of gender there is no account of 'how the performative aspects of gender identity are lived by individuals in relation to the web of social practices in which they are enmeshed' (1999:178). Through offering detailed accounts of aspects of the consumption of the Internet in everyday life, I am hoping to show how the performative aspects of not only gender identity, but other aspects of the self and the family, are lived in relation to their social context.

'Performativity' is a term that is sometimes conflated with 'performance' (Gould 1995). For Butler, performance is distinct from performativity: 'the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of a subject' Further: 'performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established. Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed' (1994:33). For example, to say that the ontological status of gender is performative means that gender is constituted through its performance:

'Performativity is thus not a singular "act", for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition.' (Butler 1993:12)

Patton's (1995) distinction between performance and performativity is slightly different. Referring specifically to discourses, Patton regards performance as a simple deployment of signs within an existing regime of meaning and uses the term 'performative' when a new subject is constituted through the performance. It seems that this is similar to Austin's distinction between constative and performative utterances, where a constative utterance signifies and a performative utterance enacts something. For example the constative utterance, 'I want to marry you' signifies desire to marry, while 'I marry you,' when uttered by an authorised person in a specific context, enacts a legally binding marriage (Butler 1995). However, as Butler argues in her analysis of hate-speech, simply by virtue of being interpellated into a system of meaning, any constative utterance 'magically invokes' that system of meaning. For example, the utterance 'I want to marry you' could be said to 'magically invoke' the whole patriarchal system of which heterosexual marriage is an indispensable part. In this sense, the utterance 'I want to marry you,' or any other deployment of signs, could also be understood as performative.

Like Butler, and unlike Patton, I will use the word 'performance' to encompass both those performances which are repetitions of norms and those performances which are subversive repetitions. Both types of performance constitute the subject, within an existing framework of meaning. This framework of meaning is not fixed, but is re-produced by the repetition of norms and changed by the repeated subversion of these norms.

Hence I will use the concept of performance as something that is constitutive of identity and categories and can explain both continuity and change within a given register of social norms. In terms of the family, I look at specific performances that embody norms about what constitutes the family, performances that subvert norms and performances of family via the performative use of discourse. For example, in cases of elective kinship where there are no socially recognised family ties, one calls the family into being, simply by naming it as such.

### ***Including non-humans as actants***

I do not limit the concept of performance to refer to people. Drawing on the Actor Network premise that the human and non-human should be analysed with the same conceptual framework (for example, see Law 1987, Latour 1987), I extend the concept of performance to refer to the Internet.<sup>10</sup> For example in chapter 3, I demonstrate that the Internet is performed both by discourse (including statements about what the Internet is) and in use. My approach is somewhat akin to that of Law who argues that 'entities, things, people are not fixed' (Law 2000:5) but have a 'performative character' (Law 1999).

For Butler, agency is to be located in the possibility of subversive repetitions. However, following Gomart and Hennion (1999) I sidestep the question of who or what has agency. In the context of discussing Actor Network Theory, Gomart and Hennion argue that the source of action is not important. They suggest a move from 'action' to 'events'. Moser and Law (1999) give an example of this.

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<sup>10</sup> The human/non-human distinction is itself problematic. As Grint and Woolgar (1997) argue, it is difficult to sustain 'if only because humans do not act without some form of "artificial" (ie humanly constructed) construction (clothes, tools, buildings, machines etc) and non-humans of this "artificial" form do not act in the absence of humans'. (1997:10)

In a study of Liv, a physically disabled woman, they refer to Liv as being 'performed by an endless network of heterogeneous materials, human and non-human' and give specific examples of how Liv is so performed. Similarly, rather than specify who performs what, I am merely observing performances, recognising and hence labelling them as performances of the self (including performances of class and gender), performances of the family, or performances of the Internet.

My attention is limited to the intersecting performances of the Internet, the self and the family. As Dugdale (2000) points out, 'objects and subjects .... take their forms relationally; they become what they are as an effect of all the entities and practices in the situation in which they are located.' In practice, it is impossible in an empirical study, to take account of all the entities and practices which are related to the objects/subjects of study. Hence, I have chosen to limit my focus to the relationship that the Internet, located in the household, has with the family and the self. For example, I do not pay attention to the relationship that the Internet has with the television or the relationship that the self has with activities undertaken outside the household, even though these relationships may be important in terms of the performance of the Internet or the performance of the self.

### **Organisation of the thesis**

The central finding of this study is that the nature of the intersection of the performances of the Internet with the self and the family is not predetermined by supposed characteristics of either the self, families or the Internet. The following chapters provide the empirical detail that gives substance to this finding, in the form of stories about people's everyday use of the Internet embedded in an analytic framework. I have organised the discussion of the data so that after discussing the methodology, I first discuss the performance of the Internet, then the performance of the self and finally the performance of family. This separation of the Internet, the self and the family is a convenient way of structuring the data; however, a crucial part of my argument is that the performance of each is entwined in practice.

Because the Internet and the family and the Internet and the self are mutually constitutive, some stories that appear in the performance of the Internet, could also be taken as instances of the performance of family or the performance of

self, or vice versa. In addition, stories, events or quotes often illustrate more than one point. Hence, occasionally, a quote or story is repeated in a different context to make a different point.

I also incorporate my discussion of relevant theory into the discussion of the data. There are two reasons for this. The first is pragmatic; when I commenced work on this thesis, there was no established body of literature on the Internet against which to situate my research.<sup>11</sup> The other reason is methodological; as I am using the strategy of grounded theory, I did not set out to test a particular hypothesis from the literature. Rather, I endeavour to develop a theoretical approach that is grounded in the data. This means that my theoretical discussion is inseparable from my discussion of the data.

In chapter 3, "Performance of the Internet in domestic consumption", I show the complex and contradictory ways in which the Internet's performance varies within and between households. I extend existing theoretical work on the design and consumption of technologies, in particular that of Silverstone (1991; Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; 1993; Silverstone, Hirsch et al. 1994; Silverstone and Haddon 1996), drawing on Latour's (1993) concept of networks of practices to theorise the performance of the Internet as a network of the technical, the social and the narrated.

In chapter 4, "The Internet and performing the self", I demonstrate how people mobilise the Internet as a resource for the performance of self. Domestic use (and non-use) of the Internet as well as the meanings given to use (and non-use) can participate in the performance of self and the ways in which people use (or do not use) the Internet can be linked to their offline social context. The Internet can also transform performances of self while some people experience technical and cultural constraints to mobilising the Internet as a resource for the performance of self. The Internet participates in the performance of self, while simultaneously the meanings given to use (or non-use) participate in the performance of the Internet. In other words, the

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<sup>11</sup> I do however, compare my findings with those of studies that have been published subsequent to my fieldwork.



relationship between the self and the Internet is an ongoing process that is mutually constitutive.

In chapter 5, "The Internet's involvement in the performance of family", I indicate the diversity of responses to the Internet. In some families the Internet is being incorporated into the existing life of the family and individual members. In other cases the use of the Internet within the household enables new ways for family members to relate to each other or present themselves in the world. In most households, the above scenarios intersect with regard to different dimensions of the performance of family in complex and unpredictable ways. Extending my findings to sociological conceptions of the family, I show that 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.

## **Chapter 2: From epistemology to methodology to methods**

Skeggs lists three questions that she sees as fundamental to the structure of any research project. These are 'What can be known?' 'What is the relationship of the knower to the known?' and 'How do we find things out?'. (1994:77) My project is an empirical one and my methods and methodology derive from my epistemological position. Hence, before discussing the data collection, I will briefly outline my position on each of these questions.

### **What can be known?**

Following Haraway, my position regarding what can be known is to hold simultaneously to two positions usually seen as incompatible with each other (Haraway 1991). The first of these positions is the radical constructivist position that at its extreme sees reality as being actively constituted through representations or discourse. The second position is that of the feminist critical empiricist. At its extreme, this is a positivist belief in a reality 'out there' that exists independently of human action.

Reality has aspects that are best understood by assuming that reality exists prior to representation and aspects that are best understood by assuming that reality is constructed through representation. Other aspects of reality are perhaps best understood by assuming, like Haraway, that the material world has agency and reality is the result of the interaction between humans and the material world. Recognition that 'objects do not pre-exist as such' (Haraway 1991:201)<sup>12</sup> is not to deny the existence of a material world independent of human agency. It is simply an acknowledgment that the definition of what constitutes a particular object is a human act of drawing a boundary. In everyday life, the definition of objects is so taken for granted as to often appear natural and universal. As a counter example, there is nothing natural about the definition of what I will call a particular patch of grass. One person may define this particular patch of grass as an oval and use it to play football. The same patch of grass may be considered to be part of a sacred site by another person, while to a third person just one part of that patch of grass is worthy of definition,

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<sup>12</sup> Woolgar also makes this point, asking the question 'Are there objects or is there a continuum?' (1991:63)

being host to a rare species of ant. In my research, I draw new boundaries, in particular around what I choose to call the Internet, the family and the self. For example, the household family as I define it (at least one adult co-habiting with children aged between 8 and 17) is an obvious example of this.

In this way, humans interact with the material world to produce objects. Aspects of these interactions are beyond the control of human imagination. Haraway refers to these aspects as the agency of the world. Attributing agency to the world can be a useful explanatory device but I do not go as far as Haraway does in assuming that this agency is unified, with the world akin to a 'coding trickster' or 'coyote'. (Haraway 1991:201)

### **What is the relationship of the knower to the known?**

My account of the world is an account of the result of my interaction with the world. I do not believe that it is possible to present an unmediated slice of reality. As a researcher, my vision is partial and situated and embodied. The data that I collect from interview and observation is by nature incomplete and selective. Further, my assembling of this data into an account of the research involves the filter of my interpretation. Hence, my findings or descriptions of my subjects/objects of study are mediated through my partial and specific abilities for observation and understanding. The way in which I observe and decipher my subjects of study is shaped by my identity as a researcher, my life experience, my previous education, what I have read, who I have met, what I believe in and how I relate to my subjects/objects of study. To some extent, this problem is unavoidable. I see the research process as a bit like a dialectic between the researcher and the research subjects. On the one hand, I do not want to privilege the stories of my research subjects such that my analysis is limited to their partial perspectives. On the other hand I do not want to privilege my position as researcher such that I fail to take seriously the perspectives of the research subjects. This is somewhat akin to Haraway's (1991) notion of research as a 'non-innocent conversation' with the subjects/objects of study and (Skeggs 1995:18) notion of a 'politics of positionality' whereby the experience of the researcher and the researched is 'discursively understood and located in a nexus of positionalities'.

A further complicating factor is that the very act of conducting research is an intervention into the lives of the research subjects. As Hitzler and Keller put it, the sociologist of everyday life is an everyday being too and is 'permanently in the dilemma of being at the same time co-actor, observer and reporter of the social constructs of reality' (1989:100). The following is an example of how I was a co-actor in my own research. I asked a child who was an avid reader whether the thought of reading stories on the Internet appealed to her. It then became obvious that she had not realised that there were books on the Internet. For whatever reason, her father tried to downplay this fact, but by the next interview the girl had actively searched for books on the Internet.

There is no easy way around this dilemma. I have tried to achieve 'embodied objectivity' which according to Haraway is the only level of objectivity achievable by a researcher (Haraway 1991:188). I have tried to be reflexive about my involvement in my research; how my own experiences, values and expectations shape and affect my research. I have included myself as an actor in the transcripts of dialogue; I use the first person in this text and I have outlined my own experience of the Internet. This does not imply that my vision is parochial; rather, I recognise the contingency of my vision (Haraway 1997). My account is not a birds-eye view; as Smith says 'indeed there is no bird' (1989:44). In other words, my account of my research is one possible version, given legitimacy by its acknowledged location in the filter of my experience; it is 'a view from somewhere' (Haraway 1991:196) which I hope will weave in with the partial vision of others as part of the web of knowledge claims that support new ways of looking and understanding. My account of my research is more than just a narrative that I have constructed because, despite the problems, the stories that I create in this text are based on people who exist quite independently from my account.

### **How do we find things out?**

A major claim within the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge tradition is that knowledge is inscribed with particular power relations. Like most (arguably all) forms of knowledge, categories that are taken-for-granted as self-evident or natural are the result of a particular alliance at a particular time. For example, Butler (1994), shows the political nature of the categories 'subject', 'sex' and 'the body'.

I consider that it is both methodologically and politically important to have accounts of the world that do not take existing power structures (including categories) for granted. The very act of articulating possibilities for alternatives destabilises categories or structures that have a regulatory effect on people's lives,<sup>13</sup> through exposing their constructed nature. Rather than using a top down structural approach that relegates people to particular social categories, I draw from Maffesoli's (1989) sociology of everyday life which privileges people's everyday experiences of reality over traditional sociological understandings of society in terms of institutions and prescribed attributes of different groups of people. Maffesoli's stress on the theoretical importance of affective communities,<sup>14</sup> 'everyday banality' and 'the imaginary, the ludic and the oneiric' is a refreshing antidote to the distance that much sociology has from people's everyday experience. However, I do depart significantly from Maffesoli in several respects.

Firstly, Maffesoli believes that studying the particular leads to an understanding of the universal. Rather than aim to reach understanding of the universal (if such a thing exists) through study of the particular, I aim, as I have mentioned, to provide a 'view from somewhere'. In addition, Maffesoli's unproblematic acceptance of the importance of lived experience begs the question of whose lived experience. As Scott argues, individuals' experience is 'not the origin or our explanation .... but that which we seek to explain' (1992:26). Maffesoli does not seek to explain how social location participates in shaping a person's experience or their definition of their experience. Instead, he quotes Schutz (1962) advocating that sociologists' concepts must be based on the common sense of 'men living in the social world'. Not only does this assume a unified self with regard to the notion of common sense, and ascribe universality to the experience of men, the experience of any woman is rendered quite invisible; Maffesoli does not engage at all with ideas of gender or class. My position is more akin to that of Amirou who modifies Maffesoli's assumption of a unified,

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Butler (1990) argues that gender is a category that regulates sexuality within a regime of heterosexuality.

<sup>14</sup> Affective communities are communities by choice; for example, those joined by a common interest.

male self and allows for the effect of social location when she writes of a 'plural subject engaged in a process of continuous creation and recreation, in accordance with our social situations, linked together by our memory'. (1999:117)

Maffesoli distinguishes between the 'sociological fact' and the 'societal fact'; the latter including 'whatever warmth and disorganisation existence possesses' (1989:14). My research includes societal facts; thick descriptions that defy neat categorical analysis. There is a tension between these thick descriptions and summary devices such as the use of categories. I do not deny that we can observe patterns in aggregate data, according to observable attributes such as gender, age and class. However, I rail against the idea that categories or structures are immutable and have a predictable effect. As I argue more fully later, the structure is the label we give to the effect. This is not so far from Cockburn's point that 'categories like gender, race, and class ... are necessary for making sense of the large-scale inequalities that exist' (1994:38). Hence, in the interests of a more complete vision, I view my research subjects from both the top and the bottom of Haraway's (1987) greasy pole; the bottom being the near-sighted perspective on everyday banalities and meanings and the top being the far-sighted perspective that recognises the impact of structures and the usefulness of analytical categories. What Haraway says about the cyborg world is relevant here; 'the political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point' (1987:8).

My means of 'finding things out' (Skeggs 1994) although drawing on the tradition of symbolic interactionism, radically departs from this tradition in some aspects. I use as my point of departure the three main premises of symbolic interactionism as outlined by Blumer<sup>15</sup> (quoted in Denzin 1992:xiv). These are

- 1) 'humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them'
- 2) 'the meanings of things arise out of the process of social interactions'
- 3) 'meanings are modified through an interpretative process which involves self-reflective individuals symbolically interacting with one another'

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<sup>15</sup> There are many schools of symbolic interactionism. See Stryker (1980) for an overview of this.

My research draws from a reworking of the first two of these premises as follows:

- 1) Actants (both human and non-human and hybrids (Latour 1993) act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.

This includes behaviour that may be considered by others as irrational or unreflexive and that may at first sight appear to contradict this statement. For example, it may appear irrational for a man to violently kick a door<sup>16</sup>, especially if it is a completely innocent door that has never wronged the man by, for example, slamming in his face. However, perhaps the man does not consider that he is kicking a door. In the moment of kicking, the door is his boss who just fired him.

To give an example of a non-human actant acting towards things on the basis of the perceived meanings, consider a front door that operates on a voice-recognition system. It may fail to allow entry to the owner of the house who has a bad cold. In this case, the owner's voice is not recognised by the door as such and so the door does not open.

- 2) The meanings of things arise out of the process of social interactions, and also interactions between the social and technical, interactions between the social and natural, interactions between the natural and the technical,<sup>17</sup> and interactions between the material and the semiotic.

As an example, consider some different meanings of Nike shoes. When considered in terms of the meanings that arise out of the social relations of their production, Nike shoes may mean the suffering of the exploited factory-workers. When considered in terms of the material-semiotic interactions between the Nike shoes and the advertisements for Nike shoes, Nike shoes may mean

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<sup>16</sup> In the tradition of Latour, I use the door as an example for discussion of actors, human and non-human.

<sup>17</sup> This is also a distinction made for heuristic purposes. Haraway critiques the distinction between the natural and the technical and writes of 'natural-technical objects, embedded in matrices of practical culture and cultural practice'. (Haraway, 1991:60)

achievement of goals.<sup>18</sup> When considered in terms of the social interactions surrounding their use, Nike shoes may mean embarrassment as the wearer is refused entry to a club because of inappropriate footwear.

Meanings are negotiated between objects, between people, between people and objects. Any meanings inscribed in objects during production are not fixed but are negotiated in use. The door that was kicked in yesterday may today be chopped up for firewood.

### **What am I trying to find out?**

In looking at the intersection of the Internet and the household family, my project is not a test of existing theories about socio-technical networks in a domestic setting nor is it purely descriptive. Rather my intention is to generate theory from the data drawing on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) strategy of grounded theory. By theory I mean a mode of conceptualisation which describes and explains much of the behaviour to do with families and the Internet (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In other words, when I started my research I aimed to develop an explanatory theoretical scheme rather than just compare different types of families. According to Glaser and Strauss, an aim of grounded theory is to uncover an explanatory variable which 'allows the organisation of many events that otherwise might seem disconnected or paradoxical' (1967:261).<sup>19</sup>

Glaser and Strauss suggest that a theory needs to fit the data, be understandable to a lay person, be general and allow the user partial control over the situation under study. This type of theory is induced from the data rather than logically deducted. Given that my aim was not to verify a hypothesis, I did not need a sample that was representative of any particular population; rather I engaged in theoretical sampling, whereby the sample is chosen specifically to enable generation of theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

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<sup>18</sup> I refer here to the 'Nike - Just Do It' advertising campaign.

<sup>19</sup> Glaser and Strauss (1965) base their analysis of chronic illness on 'awareness context', that is, who in the dying situation (family, nurses, patient etc) knows what about the probability of death for the dying patient. This explanatory variable has 5 different dimensions and 36 possible types.



As themes emerged I purposely selected further households with characteristics that enabled me to check the validity of any categories that I established. Rather than forcing the data to fit the theory, the theory then fits the data by the very nature of its construction.

I depart from Glaser and Strauss in two important respects. Firstly, my work is more reflexive than that implied by Glaser and Strauss. They use the term 'slices of data' to refer to different views of the one subject of study enabled by using a range of techniques of data collection. Implicit is the idea that although a subject of study may appear different depending on the perspective, the nature of its existence is completely independent of the research. As I discussed earlier, research is both a dialogue and an intervention; the researcher's perceptions are contingent not only upon the data collection instrument, but on the interaction between researcher and subject of study.

My second point of departure from Glaser and Strauss is that I bring particular feminist values to the project and they shape my research. It is impossible to have the completely 'empty' head that is implied by grounded theory (Stanley and Wise 1990:22) and part of my situated vision is to look at gendered responses to technology. Some feminists have argued that grounded theory and a feminist perspective are incompatible. For example Kelly, Regan et al state that 'as feminists we cannot argue that theory emerges from research, since we start from a theoretical perspective that takes gender as a fundamental organizer of social life' (1994:156). I would dispute this maintaining that having a theoretical perspective does not preclude being open to the generation of theory from data. The very fact of engaging in research, presupposes some sort of theoretical perspective that has guided decisions about the subject area, the validity of empirical research and so on.

There has been a history of debate about what makes a project feminist (Stanley and Wise 1990). Kelly, Regan et al. and Stanley and Wise point to the binary oppositions that are often constructed around quantitative/qualitative, traditional/feminist research methods. They suggest that there exists a feminist orthodoxy that 'feminist method' must investigate women's lives and entail an equal power relationship between the researcher and the researched. Millen

(1997) suggests that empowerment of women as well as equality of the research relationship are central concepts in orthodox feminist research. Various feminists have contested this version of feminist research. Millen herself goes on to suggest that feminist research is better defined in terms of values rather than particular techniques. She describes as feminist any research which has:

‘a sensitivity to the role of gender within society and the differential experiences of males and females, and a critical approach to the tools of research on society, the structures of methodology and epistemology within which ‘knowledge’ is placed within the public domain of sociology’. (Millen 1997:63)

Skeggs (1995) considers that a feminist methodology should recognise that gender identity is negotiated in both the social and cultural domain.

I consider my project to be feminist in that I do not take for granted that Internet use is gender neutral.<sup>20</sup> However, rather than just compare the different experiences of males and females, I look at how gender is constituted in particular uses or non-uses of the Internet. My project is feminist in terms of these political assumptions that underpin it rather than because I use a methodology considered to be specifically feminist.

### **Data collection**

Having explained why I have chosen particular methods, or particular techniques of research, I will now discuss the data collection in some detail.

I chose to base my research in Canberra because at the time of my research the proportion of households connected to the Internet was almost twice the national average (ABS 1998).<sup>21</sup> As I was interested in families, I focused my research on households that comprised at least one adult and at least one child attending school and aged over 8.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> As Wajcman (1991) has pointed out, studies of technology that assume gender neutrality are not neutral but tend to universalise the experience of the white male.

<sup>21</sup> See Morley and Silverstone (1990) for a detailed justification of why studies of consumption of information and communication technologies tend to focus on the household.

<sup>22</sup> This was a somewhat arbitrary cut-off point but I considered that children aged under 8 may be too difficult to interview.

I designed a questionnaire on uses and attitudes towards the Internet for completion by a parent. The questionnaire collected basic information on the structure of the household, income, parental occupation and educational attainment, involvement in religious activities, the domestic division of labour, the types of household technologies, and attitudes towards the Internet. Those who had access to the Internet from home were asked about the extent and types of use by each member of the household, as well as questions about the Internet competence of household members and knowledge of the password (a copy of the questionnaire is at Attachment A).

After pilot testing, this survey was administered to parents via six schools. It was either given out by teachers directly to students, or included in a school newsletter with a letter of support from the Principal. To increase the likelihood of obtaining families across a range of world views, religious backgrounds, and socio-economic status, I included Government, Catholic and Independent schools. The number of questionnaires sent to each school was roughly proportional to the number of students at each type of school in Canberra. However, given that there was a response rate of approximately 35% (approximately 2,000 questionnaires were sent out and 689 questionnaires were returned), I cannot consider my sample to be representative of Canberra families with school-aged children. Those who responded to the survey may have been different from those who did not respond. For example, those with Internet connections or those interested in getting an Internet connection may have been more likely to respond. Hence, statistics such as the proportion of those who had an Internet connection or the proportion of those who had ever used the Internet are likely to be misleading if considered as indicative of the larger population. Hence, in my analysis, I compare the characteristics of different subgroups within my respondent sample; for example, the characteristics of those with connections with the characteristics of those without connections, attitudes to the Internet with respondent characteristics and so on.

I included space on the questionnaire for people who had a home Internet connection to fill in their phone number if they were interested in participating in

household and individual interviews; 85 people filled in their contact details. From these I selected an initial sample of households to interview.

Household interviews are a typical method in critical reception studies (such as Morley 1988; Lull 1990; Moores 1996). Even though it is difficult to do much more than a one-off in-depth interview when needing to enter someone's home, it is still possible to observe the social setting and group interaction and identify patterns of meaning and power in families or households (Moores 1996). Hence, I first interviewed each household family assembled together. These interviews were semi-structured and generally lasted approximately 45 minutes. In these interviews, I tried to gauge the general household family environment by asking questions about typical routines, members' main interests, and activities as a family. I also asked questions about attitudes towards and ownership of technology, how, when, and why the Internet was first connected, household rules for Internet use, the type and level of use, competence and interest, perceived effect on the family, friendships developed or maintained over the Internet and general opinions and experience of various aspects of the Internet (such as chat rooms, email, home pages, and the World Wide Web). I also obtained the web addresses of any home pages authored by adults or children in the household.

Another reason for interviewing the household assembled first was that the presence of other members of the family can be what Morley terms a 'powerful safeguard' challenging a member of the family who is considered to be misrepresenting their activities (Morley 1988:33). I have no way of knowing to what extent my presence had an effect on how the families interacted although Lull concluded from his research on family television viewing choices (1990) that the presence of a researcher did not have any major effect on families' behaviour.

In their study of television and everyday life, Rogge and Jensen use what they call an 'empathic-interpretative method', whereby the researcher 'enters into the everyday worlds of families and seek[s] to understand families within the context of their individual and social frameworks and then to describe those particular actions' (1988:85). I have endeavoured to view the family's everyday world and to understand how

families account for their own behaviour, but I am also interpreting their actions from my own viewpoint as a researcher, rather than just providing descriptions contained within their own frameworks or narratives. As researchers it is inevitable that to some extent we speak for the people we study, we 'inscribe their lives, we bestow meanings and promulgate values' (Richardson 1992:131). However, in contrast to Durkheim's (1938) rules for sociological method, what subjects feel or think is very relevant and I have included verbatim quotes in an effort to give the respondents (both adults and children) some voice.<sup>23</sup>

However, how people talk about their use of the Internet may not be a reflection of what they actually do. Frow makes this point critiquing researchers for directly substituting their own experience for that of the user, or through reconstructing a text 'through indirect modes of textual objectification, such as the administration of questionnaires' (1995:59). He critiques David Morley's and Janice Radway's ethnographic style audience research for 'confusing responses given in interview with the direct experience of the programme; the mediating sociological apparatus is simply disregarded.' (Frow 1995)

The class of the researcher is part of this 'mediating sociological apparatus.' In a study of a community after a tornado, Schatzman and Strauss (1991) found that middle-class respondents presented differently from working-class respondents in interviews.<sup>24</sup> Middle-class people were more able to describe from a variety of perspectives and more able to control their communication. Somewhat similarly, I found that those with higher educational status were more reflexive about their practices. This may be because my interpretation of my respondents is situated in a middle-class perspective; Schatzman and Strauss admit that as middle-class researchers they may have not understood some of the cultural codes in working class ways of talking.

The age of the interviewer is another part of this 'mediating sociological apparatus'. Commentators have drawn attention to the inherent problems

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<sup>23</sup> Taking what actors say seriously is compatible with an ANT perspective (Latour 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Schatzman and Strauss (1991) assigned class on the basis of education and income. I assigned class on the basis of education and occupational status.

associated with an adult researcher trying to enter into a children's world and, in particular, the unequal power relationship between adult researcher and child in the research situation (Holmes 1998; Zwiers and Morrisette 1999; Jenks 2000; Davis et al 2000). One consequence of this unequal power relationship is that children may try to give the adult researcher the answers that they think the researcher wants (Zwiers and Morrisette 1999). Of course, this can occur when researching adults.

Gender also confounds the research situation. For example, as a female researcher I did not feel comfortable pursuing the issue of pornography on the Internet, particularly with male interviewees, some of whom were logged on by themselves for several hours each night. As a result, I only have data on the use of the Internet to access pornography in terms of parental concern about children's use of the Internet.

In view of the fact that people's behaviour may differ from how they say they behave, and in order to collect some more direct information on how people actually use the Internet, I supplied copies of a Record of Internet Use (Appendix B) for household members to fill in each time that they accessed the Internet over the following fortnight. The closeness in time between the experience and the record of the experience (Elliott 1997) enabled more accurate data than that obtained through recall. The household interview gave me the opportunity to establish a rapport so that respondents would want to fill in the records and be more likely to be honest and careful in their answers in the individual interviews (Lull 1990). The Record of Internet Use required each individual to record the time spent on the Internet, their purpose for accessing the Internet, their actual use, the reason for logging off and any interactions with people (in their immediate physical environment) while on the Internet. Of course the act of filling in the Record of Internet Use, involves some reflection about the amount of time spent on the Internet, and the purpose of use, which may not have otherwise been there.<sup>25</sup> However, none of the participants

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<sup>25</sup> Elliott (1997) discusses how the fact of filling in a diary means that it is not just a record, but also may become a reflection upon the experience. She is referring in particular to diaries relating to the experience of illness, in which some participants wrote very detailed and reflective accounts.

considered that filling in the Record            had changed the level or nature of their Internet use.

After a fortnight, I visited the household, collected the completed Records of Internet Use and interviewed the members separately. There were some general issues that I covered with everybody and some that I particularly focussed on as a result of issues emerging in the household interview.

Following the initial interview, I studied any home pages authored by adults or children in the household. In the individual interview I was then able to ask the author specific questions about the content.

In some cases there was a disjuncture between questionnaire responses and responses in the family interviews. For example, some fathers who filled in the questionnaire ticked adult entertainment as an actual use of the Internet, but did not include this as a use in the household interview or in the individual interview.

As Scott points out, 'the best people to provide information on the child's perspective, actions and attitudes are children themselves' (2000: 99). In almost all cases, the interviews with children were held with just the one child present. However, in a couple of cases, one or two of the parents remained present during the interviewing of the child. Just as the presence of children has been shown to inhibit parents responses (Scott 2000), so the presence of the parent could have inhibited the child's responses. Indeed, some family members presented differently in the individual interviews regarding matters that they wanted to keep private from the rest of the family.

The following is a stark example of this and shows just how 'non-innocent' (Haraway 1991) the interview is. Here I present three possible stories about a respondent called Lyn. The first two are compiled by selecting verbatim quotes from transcripts of interviews with Lyn. The third story is my own interpretation.

Lyn, who is 42 years old and married to Andy, has two daughters, aged 15 and 17. Lyn also works as a receptionist. The following is the story that she told me in the household interview; that is, when the rest of the family were present.

I'm very frightened of computers. Andy is the only one who knows the password. He'd go through withdrawal symptoms if the Internet was disconnected (*laughing*). I don't really have the chance to use it. I come home from work and cook dinner and that's when Andy will sit down and take his turn on the computer. Yes, he used to stay in there until two o'clock in the morning. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and he'd still be sitting there. He does spend a lot of time on it, but we know where to find him, if we need him. I take his dinner in there on a plate, so that he can eat his tea there. But we don't stress out about those things, we're very relaxed about it. No, I'm not going to get stressed out about that.

But I think its totally fascinating, just the thought of all that information. Andy'll look at something and he'll say, you know, he'll know I'll be interested and he'll call me in to have a look and say "come and have a look at this" and while he's here, then we'll start going through other things.

This is the story that Lyn told me when her husband Andy was not there.

I really would like to learn more about the Internet. My neighbour who is a school teacher, she's really heavily into it... I envy her, you know.

Andy won't teach me to use the computer. He's quite impatient when it comes to teaching. As I said I..., I lack confidence in myself, I'd probably end up thinking oh I couldn't do that, you know, I'm pretty stupid, oh I wouldn't be able to do it. And to do a course, well, I don't know what the expense of it would be. That would be something I would think of, Hey, can I afford it this month? No, I'll put it off, buy the girls some clothes, and I might go and do it again another time. I'd probably never eventually get around to doing it you know. I sort of get the Internet second hand from Andy I suppose...

Andy would go crazy if the Internet was disconnected. We've had to have a second telephone line put in because it really disrupted, because Andy at first, I mean he became obsessed with it and he was using it quite a lot and family and friends would just complain and complain that they couldn't get through to us for sometimes two or three hours at a time. And that, ... I used to get quite annoyed with Andy and other people would get upset because they couldn't get through, the kid's friends couldn't ring, and so in the end, I rang up and I just said 'right we're having a second telephone line put in and that made a big difference. But we went for a good two and a half years or so without it. Before we had the other telephone line, I would get very, Oh I'd get so frustrated. Just the fact that people couldn't get on to us and they kept saying if there's an emergency and we can't get through to you, something wrong with the telephone and that feeling of being isolated because of this thing. We'd been taken over by the computer almost. It was running our life there for a while, but... the rest doesn't worry me

This is my interpretation of the intersection of Lyn's performance of self with the performance of the family and the performance of the Internet.



Lyn couldn't stand it when Andy was always on the Internet and no one could ring in. She felt so isolated – she knew that something had to give – it was bad enough that Andy never talked to her let alone her friends not being able to contact her. After she got the second phone line, it seemed more manageable. She decided then that if she was to stay with Andy she would need to change her approach to the Internet. Now, she uses the Internet to help them to stay close. She makes sure that she is always interested in what Andy is doing on it and responding to his desire to show her what is on it.

Lyn does not really know much about what Andy does on the Internet. Every night he is in there by himself until late. She can't afford to care about what he is doing in there. She doesn't want to lose him. As long as she is able to sustain the illusion that she is independent and has a healthy relationship with her husband, she can cope.

In my story about Lyn, I constructed a performance which could well be in Lyn's repertoire of understandings about herself, although it would not necessarily be one that she would care to reveal to me. As mentioned before, rather than being a problem, contradictions or conflicting data indicate the need for further investigation of how contradictions are experienced and lived (Skeggs 1994; Glaser and Strauss 1967). In Bourdieu's words:

'to be able to see and describe the world as it is, you have to be ready to be always dealing with things that are complicated, confused, impure, uncertain, all of which runs counter to the usual idea of intellectual rigour' (Bourdieu in Kraus 1991:259)

The sample of households that I selected for interview was not a representative sample of Internet users in Canberra; I purposely selected households that spanned a range of household types, income levels, attitudes towards and use of the Internet. I also deliberately selected some households with a mother and father present where the domestic division of labour was not typical (Baxter and Bittman 1995); that is, where the father had equal or greater responsibility than the mother for household chores. Fourteen of the selected 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.<sup>26</sup> There happened to be a biological connection between at least some household members in all the households in the

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<sup>26</sup> An outline of the composition of the families selected for case study is at Appendix C.

Canberra study. I deliberately chose a diverse mix of household family structures. On the basis of educational attainment and occupational status, I classified 11 of these households as middle-class and 8 of them as working-class.

I conducted household and individual interviews with the household families in two phases. I interviewed and transcribed the interviews from the first phase before returning to the field so that I had a sense of what were important issues and emerging themes. I then selected households for the second phase via theoretical sampling.

‘Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop his theory as it emerges’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967:45).

For example, I included two lesbian families in the second phase, partly to test ideas about family and gender; I also focused on families where at least one person used chat or had a homepage.

In the second phase I interviewed a further 9 households. I transcribed each of these interviews, with a resulting 88 interview transcripts. I summarised the material from each of the households to get an overview of the themes in each family household and analysed the home pages authored by adults or children in the household. However, in order to analyse the material more thoroughly, I loaded all of the transcripts on to a software package called NVivo. This enabled me to code, shape and continually recode and reshape the data as I discovered new themes and patterns. It also enabled me to explore the data via sophisticated search functions. The final data set was incredibly complex, consisting of 9 major codes, 279 fine codes and 40 attributes. Ideally, the process would be more iterative than it actually was; I would have started to code and shape the data before I returned to the field, and would have had very specific ideas to test. However, the software did not become available until I had almost completed my fieldwork.

In my discussion of observed patterns in the case study material, I tend not to be explicit about exact numbers of respondents because the sample is not representative. For example, a pattern observed in 8 of the 19 households is

not necessarily of less practical significance than one observed in 14 of the 19 households. However, the numbers can mislead the reader into imputing a false hierarchy of importance. My purpose is to analyse the nature of cases and the nature of associations rather than provide representative data. As Glaser and Strauss (1965,1967) point out, the reader will engage in a discounting process when reading the final analysis, bringing their own qualifications to its generability. In her/his head, the reader of my analysis will have to make adjustments; because, for example, all of the respondents resided in, or just outside of Canberra and all were English-speaking. Nevertheless, this does not impact upon the validity of my analysis for the sample under study.

Traditionally in sociology there has been a divide between qualitative and quantitative research and value judgements made about the relative merits of each. Historically qualitative research is used as a preliminary to developing appropriate categories and hypotheses to be tested by quantitative research (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In my work the survey of parents could be labelled as quantitative and the household visits as qualitative. However, there is no useful purpose served by this distinction.<sup>27</sup> Both are interventions and both involve reduction of people's lived experience through coding or textual representation. Although people fill out the written questionnaires themselves, most of the responses are pre-coded. During the face-to-face interviews, the research subject has a greater opportunity to present their experiences in their own words. However, the interview situation is completely artificial (Gray 1995). As a researcher, I am ultimately in control of the interview and its direction. Furthermore, my analysis of the interview transcripts involves my interpretation and coding of the research subjects' words.

My analysis of the survey data is similar in some ways to my analysis of the interview data, except that some coding has already been done; the data is already further reduced than the interview data (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

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<sup>27</sup> Glaser and Strauss also critique the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research as 'useless' for the generation of theory. (1967:9)

I do not mathematically manipulate the data although I coded it in a manner conceptually similar to how I coded the interview data. For example, when constructing a measure of the domestic division of labour from the survey data, it became obvious that there were several distinctive patterns of organisation: that the mother did all of the housework, the mother did most of it, the father did most of it or it was shared equally. These codes were developed from scanning the data during data entry, rather than starting from a prior assumption that, say, neglected to include the mother doing all of the housework as a separate code.

Another example is that I had originally considered using ASCO, the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ABS 1997) to code the parental occupations. However, during data entry, it became obvious that ASCO would not be appropriate. For example, the occupation of 7% of mothers was listed as home duties; this is an important identification, but not one included in ASCO.

My analysis of the survey data comprised extensive cross-tabulations with no tests of significance. Tests of significance are used to determine whether differences between two groups indicate actual differences between the larger populations from which these groups are drawn. 'Although in principle, tests of significance have a place in non-experimental research, in practice, conditions are rarely suitable for the tests.' (Selvin 1957) The conditions in the case of my survey were definitely not suitable; in particular, the fact that I cannot be sure that my sample is representative of a particular population. Decision rules for significance (not statistical) guided my choice of what to consider important<sup>28</sup>.

In fact, any patterns that I identified through the survey of parents, and expressed numerically as percentages, are effects of what is happening at the local level. This is in contrast to statistical manipulations of quantitative data which impose categories that the research subjects themselves may not relate to. The categories that I developed in my analysis of interviews were subject to constant checking (through theoretical sampling) to ensure that these codes were justified by the data. Hence rather than manipulate the data to fit my a

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<sup>28</sup> Glaser and Strauss (1967) give some examples of practical decision rules.

*priori* set of codes, I was constantly checking my codes against new data. Each category is my achievement rather than having always existed in the data as an entity, just waiting to be discovered.

Although I focussed on household families who use the Internet from home, non-users are an important aspect of a study of the consumption of any technology. Pinch and Bijker (1987) recommend that a sociology of technology should be concerned not just with the success stories, but with the technologies that failed to become developed or widely used, (akin to Bloor's recommendation of symmetry in the sociology of scientific knowledge). Somewhat analogous to this recommendation is the proposition that an investigation into the consumption of a particular technology, should not be biased by looking only at the users of a particular technology. It should also investigate non-users, the reasons for non-use and how the meanings that non-users give to a technology also participate in the construction of that technology. A user constructs the Internet through the way that they use it, while at the same time, the very act of using the Internet in a particular way helps to constitute the user; similarly, for non-users. This distinction between Internet users and non-users does not presuppose particular attributes of each group; it merely marks the boundary. I have collected some information on non-users; I have interviewed households with access to the Internet which include family members who do not use the Internet. In addition I sent the questionnaire to households with home Internet access and those without.

### **Chapter conclusion**

I have argued that researchers need to be reflexive about how their own experiences, values and expectations shape and affect their research. My attitude towards and experience of the Internet is implicated in my interpretations of other's attitudes and experiences. Hence I suppose somewhat akin to declaring my interests, I conclude this chapter with a story, admittedly quite banal, of my involvement with and experience of the Internet.

In 1992, two of my friends were university students who used a now primitive email system to communicate to each other over a distance of several hundred miles. I did not really understand how it worked or why one would use email rather than the phone. I first saw the information superhighway in 1994, before it was readily available publicly in Australia. I was

working in a government department and one of my colleagues had access to the World Wide Web. I had heard about the information superhighway and was intrigued. My colleague agreed to show me what it looked like. I sat and watched as he accessed a US government site and downloaded the text of a speech that Bill Clinton had delivered the previous day. I was tremendously excited.

The following year everybody in my immediate work area had Internet access at work and the year after that it became readily available publicly. The day after I left my job I bought a computer and an Internet account so that for the period that I was not in education or employment, I could still feel connected to the world (via email and the World Wide Web). I was also very excited by the possibilities for communication and information retrieval. By then, even though I didn't spend much time logged on, the Internet had become naturalised into my life.

I have had accounts with nine different Internet Service Providers to get an idea of how they compare in terms of ease of set up, ease of use and presentation of the Internet.<sup>29</sup> I subscribe to several professional and social email lists, and regularly email friends who are physically far away as well as friends who I see every day. I do not spend much time on the Internet, but I do find the World Wide Web fascinating. On the odd occasion, I have stayed up until early morning randomly following links. I often listen to music from Internet radio stations while I work. I have used ICQ<sup>30</sup> and visited chat rooms only a couple of times. One day I will get around to learning how to put up a homepage.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, America Online (AOL) has its own Internet browser.

<sup>30</sup> ICQ is a software program that allows messages to be sent instantly between online users.

### **Chapter 3: Performance of the Internet in domestic consumption**

Although much has been written on what the Internet promises, there has been little empirical research on the actual performance of the Internet in domestic consumption. Various commentators (Warde 1996) have referred to both the lack of empirical case studies of consumption and the lack of theoretical understanding of consumption. This chapter addresses both of these issues. I present the findings of my own empirical research, showing the complex and contradictory ways in which the Internet's performance varies within and between households. I do not simply describe the data and then try to analyse it. As a convenient way of ordering my discussion of the data and laying the groundwork for the presentation of my model for conceptualising the domestic consumption of the Internet, I first situate the findings against Silverstone and Haddon's (1996) model of the design/domestication interface. As I suggest via an overview of relevant literature on technologies and consumption, this is possibly the most developed model of consumption of information and communication technologies in the household. However, I argue that this model needs to be both modified and extended to account for the performance of the Internet in domestic consumption.<sup>31</sup> I also borrow from Latour's concept of networks of practice to present a conceptualisation of the Internet as a narrated, fully social technology.

#### **Introducing networks of practice: Theorising the Internet as a narrated, fully social technology**

Latour (1993) argues that there are three ubiquitous but distinct Western intellectual traditions. In very simple terms, in the first tradition it is assumed that reality exists independently of human action and can be apprehended through facts and knowledge. In the second tradition, reality is perceived as socially constructed with what counts as knowledge an effect of power. In the third tradition, reality is perceived as an effect of discourse. Latour perceives the mutually exclusivity of these three traditions as a major weakness, arguing

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<sup>31</sup> Valentine (1999) shows how the domestic consumption of the Internet in the home can also be affected by its consumption at work, or school or another space. My analysis is limited to consumption within the household as I did not collect data on consumption in other spaces.

that in practice, the tenets of each tradition all exist simultaneously. Hence, he advocates conceptualising our world as composed of heterogeneous networks of practice, that is, networks of the real, the social and the narrated. Here the word 'network' is being used in a very particular way linked to Actor Network Theory. It means 'a series of transformations' in contrast to the common use of the term to refer to something like the World Wide Web, which Latour describes as 'transport *without* deformation, an instantaneous, unmediated access to every piece of information' (1999:15).

Latour illustrates his contention that the world is composed of heterogeneous networks of practice with the following example:

'The ozone hole is too social and too narrated to be truly natural; the strategy of industrial firms and heads of state is too full of chemical reactions to be reduced to power and interest; the discourse of the ecosphere is too real and too social to boil down to meaning effects.'  
(Latour 1993:6)

In this chapter, I use data from the survey and case studies to argue that the Internet in domestic consumption is performative and can be conceived of as simultaneously constituted by the real (technical), the social and the narrated. When first I started this research, however, I conceptualised the Internet as a socio-technical network.

### **Theorising social aspects of the production of technology - limitations**

'Technology is always, in a full sense, social.' (Williams 1989:173)

The idea that the social and the technical are not discrete first gained widespread recognition in the school of thought now known as the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT). Theorists from this tradition suppose that the design, technical content and use of technology is not determined by some technological imperative but is socially and historically contingent (Bijker, Hughes et al. 1987; Bijker 1995; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985; Cockburn and Ormrod 1993). For example, detailed empirical studies of engineers and laboratories (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Knorr-Cetina 1981) show how science and technological developments are infused with social relations.

A technology is not only socially constructed in its initial design and production, but is constantly reconstructed in use, as the act of using a technology gives it a



particular meaning. SCOT originated as a reaction to technological determinism<sup>32</sup> and has been subject to critique (for example, by Grint and Woolgar 1997) for falling into the opposite trap of 'social determinism' where the technical capabilities are dismissed as socially constituted. Actor Network Theory avoids both these extremes with a model of the social and the technical as interrelated. An Actor Network is 'simultaneously an actor whose activity is networking heterogeneous elements and a network that is able to redefine and transform what it is made of' (Callon 1987:93). Bijker, Hughes et al. (1987) identify two main views of the relationship between the social and the technical. Under what they term the interactive view, a fairly stable division between the social and the technical is assumed. Each is regarded as shaping the other in a socio-technical network. According to the other view, the social and the technical form a seamless web, where any distinction made between the two is an accomplishment rather than simply description (Law 1991).

The following description of a woman navigating Virtual Reality is a graphic example of the potential seamlessness of the boundary between a computer user and the computer demonstrating how each participates in the constitution of the other:

'Working with a VR simulation, the user learns to move her hand in stylized gestures that the computer can accommodate. In the process, changes take place in the neural configuration of the user's brain, some of which can be long-lasting. The computer molds the human even as the human builds the computer.' (Hayles quoted in Hillis 1996:84)

As well as designing a technology for a particular use, producers may inscribe a technology with particular social meanings and user behaviour (Akrich 1987). Woolgar (1991) and (Grint and Woolgar 1997) refer to this as the process of 'configuring the user'. A perhaps trivial example of this would be the fact that the standard computer mouse is contoured to be used by the right hand. Hence, left-handed people will often use their right hand to operate the mouse, simply because the design has configured them in that way.

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<sup>32</sup> This is the idea that the effects of a technology can be predicted according to its intrinsic technical qualities.

Winner (1985) argues that politics are inscribed in technologies, giving the example of how overpasses on the way to Jones Beach, Long Island were specifically designed to be too low to allow buses through. This effectively prevented poor people, including most blacks, from travelling to Jones Beach, hence preserving it for the sole use of the predominantly white middle-classes. Likewise, although the Internet has been touted as enabling a global village, any such 'global village' would comprise mainly developed English-speaking countries. This is because Internet access requires a certain level of telecommunication infrastructure and computer literacy and English is the dominant language of the Internet.

Various feminists argue that particular gender relations are inscribed in technologies (Altman 1990; Rakow 1988; Weber 1999; Wajcman 1991; Cockburn 1994). For example, Wajcman argues that domestic appliances such as the washing machine and the microwave have been designed 'for use by women in their capacity as houseworkers' (1991:100). Some feminists (Spender 1995) have argued that the Internet is inscribed with masculine values<sup>33</sup>.

Akrich (1987) hones in on moral aspects of the design of technologies, using the term 'moral delegation' to refer to producers' attempts to design technology in such a way that the moral behaviour of users is controlled. An obvious example of this is Internet blocking software that prohibits access to sites deemed morally unsuitable.

In general, however, the notion of inscription becomes very complicated when applied to the Internet. The Internet has no heterogenous engineer (Law 1987) or system builder (Hughes 1987); no one has an overall picture of the structure of the Internet<sup>34</sup>. In addition, the Internet is what Silverstone and Haddon (1996) call a 'doubly articulated' technology in that consumption of the Internet involves consumption of both technology and content. The boundaries between

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<sup>33</sup> There are, however, competing feminist claims about the nature of any gendered values inscribed in the Internet. I return to this issue in chapter 4.

<sup>34</sup> Computer scientists are still trying to model the structure of the World Wide Web and a recent theory suggests that there are parts of this web inaccessible from other parts. (Broder Kumar, et al. 2000)

producers and consumers of Internet content are blurred as consumers may produce Internet content in the form of home pages, sound files, postings to discussion lists and so on. The boundaries between producers and consumers of Internet technology are also blurred as consumers may produce Internet software applications and make them freely available over the Internet.

When using the idea of inscription, care needs to be taken not to *a priori* privilege the effect of the technology at the expense of the agency of the consumer. The notion of inscription focuses on the social meanings encoded in the production of a technology. However, there are many examples of a technology being used for purposes quite different from those intended by the designer.<sup>35</sup> These demonstrate that in practice inscription does not completely determine the nature of the use of a technology. Bijker, Hughes et al. (1987) refers to this open-endedness in the uses to which a technology can be put as the 'interpretative flexibility' of the technology. Latour (1987) refers to 'de-inscription by the user'. Both authors are referring to the same phenomenon, although the first refers to a characteristic of the technology while the second refers to behaviour of the user. Bijker tends to theoretically dismiss the consumption aspects of a technology with the assumption that the meanings given to a technology will eventually stabilise or reach closure; closure being the point where the purpose, meaning and physical form of the technology are generally agreed upon. The interpretative flexibility of a technology is seen as a transitional stage before the emergence of closure, when the meaning of a technology becomes fixed. I would suggest that although at any point in time enduring meanings of a particular technology may appear to be fixed, if the technology is part of a socio-technical network where the social never stabilises, then logically these meanings must be contingent. Hence any theory of the consumption of the Internet needs to account for the behaviour of the user and the process of negotiation of meanings. For example, while Berg and Lie (1995) accept that gender may be inscribed in technology, they argue that this can be renegotiated by the user.

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<sup>35</sup> For example, see Fischer (1991) on the telephone and Lemos (1996) on Minitel.

Miller (1995:1) considers that the topic of consumption has suffered 'extraordinary academic neglect' across the disciplines. This is true of Science and Technology Studies (STS) where the emphasis has tended to be on the development of particular socio-technical systems. Diffusion has been theorised as the final stage of technological development, (see for example, Rogers 1995) leaving no theoretical space for consumers to invest their own meanings in a technology, other than in the transitional stage of interpretative flexibility. Cowan (1987) goes part way to opening up what she calls the 'black box of technological diffusion' extending her analysis to the 'consumption junction'. This is the point where a consumer decides to buy one particular technology rather than another. In the case of the Internet, the 'consumption junction' could be interpreted as the point where a consumer decides to get connected to the Internet choosing one Internet Service Provider over another. Although the concept of the 'consumption junction' includes the consumer as an active agent in the spread of a particular technology, what happens after a consumer decides to buy a technology and brings it into the home is still left untheorised.

One reason that few studies in the tradition of STS address the consumption of technology is that scholars in this tradition have been at pains to avoid deterministic studies of the impact of a technology. However, acknowledging that a particular way of using a technology may have social consequences is not the same as assuming that these consequences are predetermined by the nature of the technology. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that it is the object of consumption that is fixed and that the consumer is changed through consumption. Just as technologies are shown to be fully social in their production, so technology is fully social in its consumption.

### **Theorising consumption**

Silverstone (1996) offers one of the most developed theorisations of the domestic consumption of information and communication technologies. Before exploring Silverstone's work in more detail, I locate it in the context of some of the more common approaches to the sociology of consumption, from which it derives.

With respect to theories concerning the consumption of objects, Miller characterises the split between 'producer-led' (Lury 1996) approaches which 'appear to emphasize productive forces as the prime mover, and are concerned with consumption only as the outcome of capitalist interests and the problems of ensuring that desire and demand correspond with the needs of industry' and 'consumer-led' sociological approaches where industry 'is seen as handmaiden to the pattern of consumer group demands' (1987:144). Both these approaches generally focus on the utility of consumption whereas Featherstone (1991) and Baudrillard (Lury 1996) focus on the symbolic value of consumption, arguing that consumers consume signs rather than functions. Although coming from a very different perspective from this, Bourdieu (1984) also acknowledges the symbolic value of consumption, theorising consumption as a means of displaying social class. Miller (1987) critiques Bourdieu for ignoring the creative aspects of consumption. He himself takes a 'consumer-led' approach theorising consumption as a way of articulating identity (Miller 1995). Other theorists link the meanings given to objects in consumption to particular social relations (Wheelock 1994; Murdock, Hartmann et al. 1994) and group identities (Lury 1996). A weakness of all of these approaches is that they each focus on only one particular aspect of consumption.

Warde suggests that there is a need for a theory of consumption that is an amalgam of the consumer-led approaches, describing consumption as:

'a set of practices which permit people to express self identity, to mark attachment to social groups, to accumulate resources, to exhibit social distinction, to ensure participation in social activities, and more things besides' (1996:304).

Sociological theories of the consumption of objects have developed separately from theories of media consumption but there are parallels between the two. For example, Marxist and structural/semiotic approaches to media consumption (Bazalgette and Buckingham 1995) correspond to the producer-led theories of consumption of objects, theorising consumers as passive dupes of a media serving capitalist interests. By contrast, the 'uses and gratifications' approach, critical reception studies approach and what has been labelled a 'cultural studies' approach (Ang 1994) theorise media consumption as consumer-led. According to the 'uses and gratifications' approach (for example, Palmer 1986;

Robinson 1990; Alexander 1990), consumers interpret the media according to their needs. For example, in a study titled 'The Lively Audience', Palmer observed children actually watching television and documented the different ways in which children actively engaged with the television. This study countered the idea of the 'wide-eyed and impassive child viewer' (Palmer 1986:90). This approach and cultural studies approaches have been critiqued (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Longhurst and Savage 1996) for insufficient attention to 'the complex social, psychological, ritual and ideological, active and passive dimensions of an audiences involvement with the medium' (Morley and Silverstone 1990:44). Critical reception studies (such as Cupit 1994; Lull 1988; Lull 1990) try to overcome this limitation through locating consumers of media within particular social, economic and political formations with specific material and symbolic resources at their disposal.

Silverstone bridges the divide between theories of the consumption of objects and theories of media consumption (for example in Silverstone and Haddon 1996) with a model of the design/domestication interface. Silverstone draws explicitly on Miller (1987) to argue that all consumption involves production of meanings. However whereas Miller limits his attention to material objects, Silverstone considers that the consumption of non-material objects, including media content, can be treated in the same theoretical manner. Silverstone also bridges the divide between producer-led and consumer-led approaches by explicitly theorising the interface between production and consumption. While acknowledging that consumers are active, Silverstone also acknowledges that consumers are not totally free in their consumption choices. This is expressed in the model of the design/domestication interface (Silverstone and Haddon 1996).<sup>36</sup>

Silverstone's earlier work (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; Silverstone 1991; Silverstone 1993; Silverstone, Hirsch et al. 1994) focused specifically on the consumption of information and communication technologies in the household. In later work (Silverstone and Haddon 1996), the focus is still on the consumer,

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<sup>36</sup> The design/domestication interface is one particular aspect of the production/consumption interface.

but consumption is explicitly linked with production, with design and use set in the context of the market and commercial interests. This is because Silverstone and Haddon's (1996) stated purpose is to look at the dynamics of innovation with respect to information and communication technologies. Whereas Bijker theorises how design can influence but does not determine use, Silverstone includes in his model an explicit theorisation of how use feeds into design. Silverstone conceptualises the design/domestication interface as a feedback loop. Put very simply, the artefact is designed according to how it is imagined it will be used; its design is modified according to how it is actually used or how users wish it could be used; this is the process of domestication. 'Domestication is anticipated in design and design is completed in domestication' (Silverstone and Haddon 1996:46). Consumption is theorised in terms of domestication, comprised of three main processes; commodification, appropriation and conversion. Commodification is the way in which technologies are defined prior to consumption, both in production, marketing and official discourses around a technology. The process of commodification can be elaborated into three dimensions of 'creating the artefact', 'constructing the user' and 'catching the consumer'. In the first dimension, the object is designed to be appealing and functional. The second dimension of 'constructing the user' weaves in with creating the artefact so that a user for the artefact is imagined<sup>37</sup>. For example, Noble (1999) argues that in Australia the home computer was marketed as a symbolic and emotional investment in the nuclear family; in this case the nuclear family was constructed as the user of the home computer. The third dimension of commodification, that of 'catching the consumer', tries to ensure a perfect match between the artefact and the imagined user. The design of the artefact is fine-tuned so that it appeals to imagined *users*, now recast as *consumers* of a range of products. For example, during the development of television in Britain, the BBC imagined a domestic viewing situation whereby the mother watches the television with her child. They constituted television viewing within the practice of 'good mothering' and created children's programs that specifically included references to the mother as a viewer (Oswell 1995:38). Altman (1990) describes how, in America, domestic labour-saving technologies

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<sup>37</sup> The identity of the user is just one aspect of how the user is configured in Woolgar's (1991) conceptualisation. He considers that users are 'taught what to want'. (Woolgar 2000:169)

were associated with women, whereas broadcasting technologies such as the television and the radio were associated with men's leisure and as an accompaniment for women doing housework.

According to Silverstone, these dimensions of commodification are continually occurring as designers receive feedback from users about how they are using the artefact and how they would like to use it. Drawing upon my primary data, I will now argue that Silverstone and Haddon's concept of commodification needs to be extended in order to capture the performance of the Internet as a domestic technology before it entered the household.<sup>38</sup>

### **Performance of the Internet before entering the household**

Silverstone's model of commodification relies on the idea that:

'consumers are confronted not with a technology in its nakedness but with an idea, a dream, a promise that advertising and marketing or public policy creates' (Silverstone 1993:230).

This description of the process of commodification does not apply neatly to the Internet. In fact when the Internet first became domestically available in Australia in 1996, there was much speculation surrounding the potential of the technology for the future of society but little about how a family might actually use the Internet if they could access it from their home. My fieldwork was conducted in 1998 and 1999 when the Internet had been domestically available for just a couple of years and there were not many Internet service providers in Canberra. It seemed that Internet Service Providers did not know on which aspects of the Internet to focus their advertising as the Internet was advertised in vague and exotic terms as something that enabled 'surfing' (with images of surfboards and waves), meeting people or access to 'the world'. That the domestic user had not yet been constructed (to use Silverstone's terminology) is also reflected in my primary data, both the questionnaire and the case studies.

The questionnaire to parents asked those who had a home Internet connection to identify the original reasons for the connection. The results in Table 3-1 show that most consumers imagined functions of the Internet in terms of email,

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<sup>38</sup> As mentioned before, I am referring to Internet access as provided by Internet Service Providers rather than Internet content.



information and their children's education; these were the most common reasons given for having the Internet connected.

**Table 3-1 Original reasons for establishing a home Internet connection**

n = 305 (those who had the Internet connected)		Original reasons %
Email		82%
Information		77%
Children's educational needs		70%
Business		43%
Surfing the world wide web		43%
Adult educational needs		30%
General entertainment		23%
Children's games		11%
Newsgroups		13%
Real-time chat		7%
Adult entertainment		7%
Shopping		4%

The above table gives the impression that people had clear ideas about their reasons for connecting to the Internet. On the contrary, people in the case studies tended to have very vague ideas about what they were going to use the Internet for at the time of connection. In one case, the Internet connection package came with the purchase of a computer and was connected with no idea of what it was – just a willingness to take advantage of a free offer. In five of the households, it was the children who wanted Internet access because 'everyone else had it'.<sup>39</sup> In almost half of the households, and not only in houses that tended to have the latest technologies, a parent had organised the Internet connection, either from a pre-existing interest in computers or curiosity and a desire to be at the forefront of the (then) new technology. This indicates that a significant aspect of the performance of the Internet at that time, and before it had entered the household, was symbolic rather than functional. It was a new technology that was to be had for its own sake.

<sup>39</sup> Given that only 14% of Australian households had Internet connections in 1998, this is clearly an exaggeration.

Silverstone and Haddon (1996) consider the neglect of commodification in earlier models of domestication (for example Silverstone and Hirsch 1992) as a flaw. However, I will use the data to suggest that the process of commodification that Silverstone and Haddon describe is not necessarily relevant for very new technologies that, like Internet access, are not in the form of a physical object. Silverstone and Haddon assume that a technology will only reach the consumer with some conception of the user embedded in its design or packaging; this is because they imagine technologies that are physical objects. Changing physical aspects of a material object is an expensive process involving changes to manufacturing processes and disposal of objects with superseded designs. Hence new products and new versions of products tend to be launched onto the market only after much research and a clear vision of the target consumer.<sup>40</sup> I suggest that the stages of 'constructing the user' and 'chasing the consumer' had not occurred for the Internet at the time of my research. Access to the Internet was available domestically, but Internet service providers had not yet imagined how the domestic user would use the Internet and it had not yet been packaged as a particular type of product. This was possible because it was access that was being sold, rather than a new type of physical manufactured product. Hence the data seems to challenge Silverstone's assumption that the consumption of non-material objects can be treated in the same theoretical manner as the consumption of material objects, at least in the early stages of their availability.

I suggest that non-commercial stories were important in the decision to get a home Internet connection. As part of Silverstone and Haddon's focus on the link between designers and consumers, they look at the commercial meanings of an information and communication technology packaged as a commodity. They assume that these are the meanings that will influence whether a person chooses to purchase a particular technology and so pay no attention to other stories about the meanings and potential use of an information and communication technology. However, Murdock, Hartmann et al. (1994) point to the importance of non-commercial as well as commercial stories about personal

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<sup>40</sup> Woolgar's (1991) empirical study of useability trials of a new model of computer suggests that, in practice, the vision of the target consumer may not necessarily be clear.

computers in both the decision to purchase a computer and the nature of subsequent use. When the home computer came onto the British market in the 1980s, there were two main discourses about their meaning and appropriate uses. These were commercial discourses promoting the computer as entertainment alongside official discourses emphasising the use of the computer for serious work and educational purposes. Conceiving of consumption as a way of articulating identity, Murdock, Hartmann et al. argued that:

‘each discourse offers particular user identities, which intersect with the material resources and social relations inside and outside the household to produce specific patterns of use or disuse.’ (1994:146)

Stories about the Internet influence the consumption of the Internet and at the same time, people’s experiences and perceptions create new stories. Bingham, Valentine et al. (1999) use the terminology of ‘boosters’ and ‘debunkers’ to characterise two types of commentators with very different stories about children’s use of the Internet. ‘Boosters’ advocate young people’s use of the Internet as essential for participation in the future networked world. Tapscott (1997) is one such ‘booster’. He considers that we have entered the age of the ‘net generation’ and warns parents of the need to educate their children to be ready. In contrast, ‘debunkers’ see the Internet as unhealthy for children; a site of pornography and violence, and with an absence of face-to-face (read ‘normal’) interaction.<sup>41</sup> General discourse about the Internet also tends to be polarised around visionary ‘boosters’ proclaiming a utopian transformation of society and the individual and ‘debunkers’ predicting a dystopia.<sup>42</sup>

There were both negative and positive stories about the Internet in circulation at the time of research. The questionnaire asked respondents to rate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with nine generalisations about the Internet.

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<sup>41</sup> See Kling (1996) for a summary and analysis of these extreme claims about the Internet.

<sup>42</sup> See Edwards (1995) for a description of the parallel utopian and dystopian claims made for computers.

**Figure 3-1 Attitude to Internet according to whether respondent has ever used the Net<sup>43</sup>**

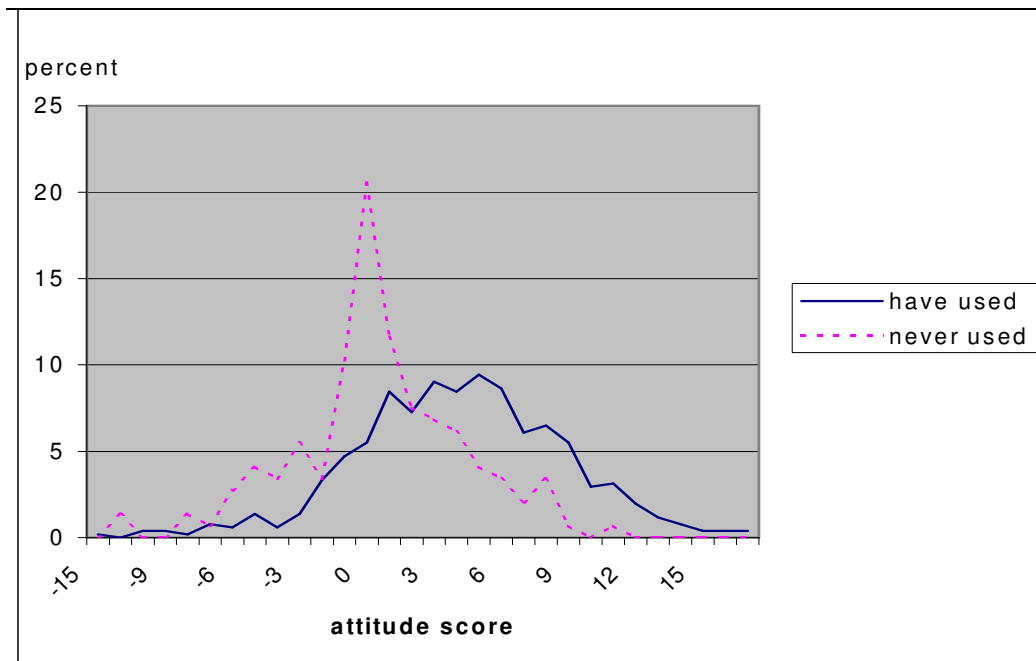


Figure 3.1 shows that respondents who had used the Internet were more positive about the Internet than those who had never used the Internet, while those who had never used the Internet were much more likely to have no opinion about aspects of the Internet and were more likely to be negative. The following comment by **Bob**<sup>44</sup> Garling indicates a possible explanation for this in terms of negative stories about the Internet then in circulation:

‘Cause when you first listen to all that is said about the Internet. When it first started, you know, Okay. It sounded great first off but then you hear all... you don’t hear all the good sides. Its like anything with news. You never get a good side. You hear the bad side, you know, pornography and so on. And all the things happening and all the bad things about it. You soon think... you are scared about people accessing all your things because there are stories about people hacking the things and you tend to get this negative feeling ‘Oh, its bad’. Once we got it. Its like we were set. We can’t live without it’.

<sup>43</sup> This graph is based on a simple additive index derived from nine items with a five point scale indicating extent of agreement or disagreement with each statement – four of these statements were framed in a positive way and five were negative. A higher score indicates a more positive attitude. See Question 11 of the questionnaire at Appendix A for a list of the statements.

<sup>44</sup> When using the names of respondents in discussing the data, I use the convention of **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.

In addition to dramatic stories that attribute tremendous significance to the Internet, there are local, more mundane stories about the nature and usefulness of the Internet. Within households in the Canberra study, families' and family members' own stories about the Internet had their place in the network of practices constituting the performance of the Internet in the household. Using data from my questionnaire as well as data from the case studies, I now outline those stories that played a part in the decision about whether or not to connect to the Internet.

The questionnaire data on reasons for not connecting to the Internet indicate the existence of three common stories about the Internet that affect whether people decide to become consumers of the Internet at home.<sup>45</sup> The most common reason that respondents gave for non-connection was that the costs were too high (41%). Obviously, some people who may wish to connect to the Internet are constrained by the cost. At the time of the research, home access to the Internet required a computer with at least 486mhz processing speed. Among the respondents, ownership of a computer was related to income and those on a low income were most likely to give cost as a reason for non-connection and least likely to give access elsewhere as a reason. (The reverse was true for those on an income above \$57000.) However, most (84%) of those who considered that costs were too high already had a personal computer.<sup>46</sup> For these people, the actual cost of connecting to the Internet was as little as \$3 a week for access of an hour per day through a local users group and \$10 per month for 3 hours of access a month or \$30 per month for unlimited access through commercial providers. This suggests that a story about the high cost of the Internet may have been in circulation among people who did not have much information about what the actual costs were.

Since the time of the research, the Australian government has put substantial effort into telling a story about the importance of access to the Internet for full

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<sup>45</sup> In the questionnaire to parents, respondents were asked to indicate from a list the main reasons for non-connection. (see Appendix A).

<sup>46</sup> I have no information on the type of computer owned. However, only a very few respondents who owned a computer (4%) gave 'hardware reasons' as the reason for not connecting to the Internet.

social, political and economic participation in Australian society.<sup>47</sup> However, this was not a theme that I encountered from any of the respondents. Rather, the following data indicates that there was fairly widespread acceptance of a story about the unimportance of a home Internet connection. One in four males and females who were not connected to the Internet gave 'access elsewhere' as the reason. It is not clear whether this means that one family member or the whole family had access elsewhere. Regardless, it does suggest that these respondents did not consider that there would be any additional benefits in accessing the Internet from home rather than at work or some other place; an example of a failure on the part of Internet Service Providers to 'catch the domestic consumer'.<sup>48</sup> Another one in eight of those who did not have an Internet connection gave 'not interested' as the reason. It seems that in most cases, this lack of interest was due to ignorance about the Internet (perhaps further evidence that the Internet had not yet been commodified) as those who had never used the Internet were three times as likely as those who had used it to give 'not interested' as a reason for not having the Internet connected.

To conclude this discussion of the performance of the Internet before it enters the household, I suggest that Silverstone's account of commodification needs to be extended to take into account the influence of these non-commercial stories about the technology as well as modified for technologies that are non-material objects.

### **Performance of the Internet within the Household**

In contrast to theorists who assume that technology diffuses into a household, Silverstone and Haddon use the concept of 'appropriation' to describe the process by which a particular household makes a technology their own. Non-material objects are explicitly included in this account (Silverstone and Hirsch

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example, strategies outlined in the home pages of Office of Government Online (<http://www.ogo.gov.au/>) and National Office of the Information Economy (<http://www.noie.gov.au/>)

<sup>48</sup> Now Internet Service Providers advertise packages of Internet access designed specifically to appeal to families. Generally these include several email addresses (one for each member of the family), a filter program (so that parents can limit the type of content accessed on the Web) and access to a 'safe for kids' area.

1992). 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. In a similar vein, Rogge and Jensen (1988) argue, in their work on television viewing, that each family constructs its own media world that includes knowledge about programs, genres, influences and effects.

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 (for example Silverstone 1991), he 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 support this view (Anderson 1995; Lyman 1995), concluding that despite predictions of revolutionary effects, computers tend to be absorbed into, rather than transform, existing individual and group social patterns.<sup>49</sup> 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).

My research did not support such 'social determinism.' As I show later in this chapter, in the Canberra study there were instances of the Internet transforming social relations in the household. Hence my data supported the view that the technical participates in constituting the social relations within the household as well as vice versa. In addition, my data showed that the relation between the technology and a particular household is not stable but can change over time.

Silverstone and Haddon (1996) identify two aspects of appropriation. The first is 'objectification', drawn from Miller (1987). This refers to the space (physical or discursive) which is given to a technology. The second is 'incorporation'

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<sup>49</sup> For example Lyman (1995) 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.

which refers to the function of a technology and its pattern of domestic use. Although these concepts are useful ways of demonstrating how the same technology can have different manifestations, meanings and uses within different households, I will demonstrate that by themselves they do not capture the importance of the nature of peoples' engagement with the Internet and the stories about the Internet for constituting and revealing the social relations within the household as well as influencing the nature of its domestic consumption.

Silverstone and Haddon (1996) conceptualise conversion as the final stage of domestication. This is the conversion of the use of a technology into social and cultural capital outside the household. For example, with regard to the television, cultural capital may be manifest in conversation through a display of knowledge of particular types of programs. Silverstone argues that this process completes the link between domestication and design as it is through this process of conversion that producers and marketing agents gain information about how a technology is actually being used within the home. Having a home page, emailing executable attachments to friends, talking about web sites visited; these are all instances of 'conversion' of use of the Internet into social and cultural capital outside the household. In this way the Internet becomes a resource for the performance of self. Hence, I do not include this in my model of the performance of the Internet in domestic consumption but discuss it in terms of the performance of self in the next chapter.

### **Theorising the Internet in terms of performance**

In the remainder of this chapter, I outline a model for the performance of the Internet within the household. This extends Silverstone's model by including attention to the physical configuration of the technology, the stories and meanings given to it within the household, and the level and type of engagement with the technology. I will draw upon the data to demonstrate that the performance of the Internet participates in constituting social relations in the household, participates in revealing social relations in the household and participates in constituting the relationship between the household and the Internet.



In using the word 'performance' to refer to the Internet, I explicitly recognise that the nature of the appropriation of a technology within a household is not necessarily stable. STS theorists are also beginning to refer to technologies in terms of their performance (Law and Singleton 2000). For example, Dugdale (1999) characterises the multiple identities of the IUD as an 'oscillation' between the performance of a single object and the performance of different objects. Although he does not use the term 'performance', Morley (1986) allows for the changing performance of television in the household. He argues that an individual's use of the television is shaped by the family's rules governing use of the medium. These rules may not even be consciously recognised by the family members and are constantly updated as the children's level of understanding increases and the needs of the family change. This was evident in my study in families where the rules for what younger children could access were different from the rules for older children, contributing to a different performance of the Internet in households with older children.

In their account of appropriation, Silverstone and Haddon also allow for the performance of the Internet in the family to change. They consider that families are significantly affected by the introduction of a new domestic technology, 'perhaps in the brief period of its novelty' (1996:11). I also found that the interactions between a technology and the household may be different in the period where the new technology is a novelty. Similarly there were families in the Canberra study who were significantly affected by the Internet for what would seem to be much longer than a brief novelty period. For example, in several households, it seemed that an adult had spent excessive time on the Internet until the novelty wore off. This is in contrast to the finding of The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2000) that those who were 'veteran' Internet users were much more enthusiastic about the Internet, and that it was much more a part of their life. Using the word 'performance' with reference to the Internet highlights the inherent instability of the presence of the Internet in the household. Any appearance of stability over time is an achievement rather than an indication that the presence of the Internet in the household has an essentially unchanging quality.

## **The social performance of the Internet in the household**

The data suggests that there are two ways in which Silverstone and Haddon's account of appropriation could be extended in order to characterise the social performance of the Internet in the household. Firstly, it needs to allow for different types of relationship between the family and the technology. Secondly, the model of incorporation needs to allow for the complexities of use. In practice the interaction between the Internet and the household is extremely complex and depends not only on the use, but also on the meanings attached to the type of use, and the often different effects on different family members.

### ***The complexities of the relationship between the Internet and the family***

Silverstone and Haddon (1996) assume that all families who consume a technology will incorporate that technology to fit in with their patterns of daily life. In other words it seems that they assume a uniform relationship between the Internet and the family and do not distinguish between degrees of incorporation. However, I observed a range of levels of incorporation of the Internet and a variety of relationships with the Internet. Although they had purchased access to the Internet, some households in the Canberra study seemed to want to keep the Internet at arm's length from the daily life of the household. In addition, two other types of relationship were apparent. In some households, individual family members had their own particular relationship with the Internet. In two of the households, the relationship between the household and the Internet had been one where the Internet was perceived as being in control.

As an example of a family that had completely integrated the Internet into their household patterns of daily life, I will briefly outline the place of the Internet in the daily household stories of the Baker family. Every couple of days **Greg** Baker logs on over breakfast to check the share market. **Nerida** Baker logs on a couple of times a week to check her emails and the rugby results. Jenny Baker logs on most days for about an hour to check her emails, visit chat rooms, post to discussion forums and maintain her home page. Alison Baker logs on infrequently, either to look up information for school, or, if she is bored, she logs on to surf.

In families like this, where the Internet was fully incorporated into domestic life, members variously described the Internet as 'second nature', 'virtually an extension to the family', 'normal', 'a way of life', something that is 'just there' and something that they did not know what they did without. This did not relate to how much time was spent using the Internet, or to the length of time that the household had access to the Internet. Those who had fully incorporated the Internet included those who were most enthusiastic about the Internet. They were also those who saw the time they spent on the Internet as more rewarding than how they would have spent that time in the absence of the Internet, that is, watching television, doing nothing, or 'mucking around on the computer'. There seemed to be an association between individual (or household) consumption of the television or recreational consumption of the computer, and the consumption of the Internet. Those who had been big television watchers prior to the Internet connection transferred time spent watching television to time on the Internet. Similarly for those who had often used the computer for recreation.

In contrast to the full incorporation of the Baker family, in the Davis family, there seemed to be a distance maintained between the family and the Internet; a resistance to incorporating the Internet into the daily life of the family. Both **Noel** and **Marlene** Davis have access to the Internet at work and do not tend to use it at home. Their eleven-year-old son Roger is not really interested in using the Internet, and while fourteen-year-old Anna is quite interested, her parents discourage her from exploring the Internet. The Davis family do a lot together as a family, including holidays, gardening, meals, films, bush-walking and skiing. Several of **Marlene's** references to family activities and Internet use indicated that she saw the two as mutually exclusive. For example, in the following quote where she talks about how she would like Roger to spend his time, she makes a distinction between family activities and accessing the Internet on the computer:

'Obviously homework or reading or something that he should be doing for the family is more important than being on the computer.'

Perhaps Marlene perceived a tension between fully incorporating the Internet and maintaining the existing performance of family.

In a number of families there was not a uniform relationship between the Internet and the household. In other words, various members of the household had their own particular relationship with the Internet. This usually took the following form; the Internet was fully incorporated into the daily life of one household member and had a peripheral place in the daily life of the other household members.<sup>50</sup>

Silverstone and Haddon's model of appropriation emphasises the control of the consumer over the technology. However, **Lyn** Holcroft and **Jill** Blair felt that the Internet had control over them.

'We'd been taken over by the computer almost. It was running our life there for a while.'  
(**Lyn** Holcroft)

'(It was) taking over our world.' (**Jill** Blair)

**Lyn** Holcroft was referring to her husband's previously obsessive use of the computer and the fact that they had only one telephone line. Installation of a second phone line changed the nature of the relationship between the Internet and the family. **Jill** Blair was also referring to her husband **Terry**'s obsessive use of the Internet after it was first connected. Any model of domestic consumption of the Internet needs to allow for this type of relationship where the consumer feels controlled by the technology.

### ***The complexities of how the Internet is used by the family***

In order to show how the social performance of the Internet in the family household is constructed largely through use, I include the substance of Silverstone and Haddon's concept of incorporation, that is, I show how the function of the Internet is related to patterns of use. However, whereas Silverstone and Haddon seem to conflate function and meanings, I show how they are not necessarily equivalent. I begin by indicating some of the complexities involved in characterising people's use of the Internet before exploring the meanings that my informants constructed in their use of the Internet.

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<sup>50</sup> This type of relationship is discussed further in the next chapter.

As Valentine demonstrates in her study of household food consumption, the home can be a site of 'multiple and sometimes contradictory consumption practices' (1999:502). Statistics on the use of the Internet often hide these complexities of actual use. For example, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2000), 32% of people who access the Internet from home do so daily, while 41% do so 2-6 times a week. These statistics obscure the fact that within some households some people do not access the Internet at all and they also conceal the huge variations in the level of use. In the Canberra study some daily users spent a few minutes each day checking emails while others were using the Internet for eight hours each day. Information on length of time logged on is not the full story either. Internet users, and in particular children, were often doing other things while they were logged on such as listening to music, or talking on the phone at the same time as they used the Internet.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the significance of the use to the user does not equate with time spent. For example Samantha spent only a few minutes a day checking her emails. However, this had huge significance for her in terms of feeling connected to her boyfriend who was overseas. With these caveats in mind, I turn briefly to the questionnaire data on intended and actual use of the Internet.

People in the case studies described the Internet (when asked to do so) as either a resource for information or a tool for communication or both of these things. However, the actual uses were much more varied than this as table 3.2 shows.

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<sup>51</sup> The fact that television viewing is usually accompanied by some other forms of activity is well documented (Robinson 1990; Alexander 1990).

**Table 3-2 Use of the Internet**

n = 305 (those who had the Internet connected)	Original reasons	Actual uses	Not an original reason, but an actual use
Email	82%	86%	9%
Information	77%	79%	11%
Children's educational needs	70%	77%	14%
Business	43%	42%	8%
Surfing the world wide web	43%	58%	20%
Adult educational needs	30%	35%	11%
General entertainment	23%	37%	18%
Children's games	11%	30%	21%
Newsgroups	13%	20%	10%
Real-time chat	7%	31%	25%
Adult entertainment	7%	10%	4%
Shopping	4%	11%	8%

More than one third of respondents used the Internet for email, information, children's educational needs, business, surfing the World Wide Web, adult educational needs and general entertainment. According to Silverstone (1991; 1996) the way in which a computer is used in the family is often very different from what was imagined at the time of purchase. For example a computer bought for the educational benefit of everyone in the household may become a games machine for just one member of the family, or not be used at all. As table 3.2 indicates, the actual uses of the Internet were often different from the intended uses. Chat, surfing, general entertainment and children's games were the most common unintended uses. For example, in one quarter of families, chat was actually used but was not part of the original reason for connection.

In the field of television research, it is now well recognised that television viewing is located within the social relations of the family or household as well as a broader cultural context. For example, Morley (1986) showed empirically how an individual's use of the television was largely shaped by the social/familial position of the viewer. Silverstone assumes that actual use of a home technology will depend upon whether a parent or a child initiated its purchase. For example, he considers that a computer that is introduced to the household as a result of pressure from the children, 'will be marginalised within the

household, neither parent taking much interest in it or in the skills they could encourage their children to develop' (1991:13). This was not the case in the families in my study. The person who instigated the Internet connection was not necessarily either the greatest user or the one who was perceived as 'owning' the Internet connection.

As would be expected, confidence and skill in using the Internet affected the frequency and type of use. Both adults and children (male and female) reported not using particular aspects of the Internet because they had not been able to work out how to do it. A common problem was identified by **Iris Moser**:

'The trouble is that I don't use it often enough to think I'm any good at using it. I tend to back away and it sort of compounds itself I think.'

### ***Meanings constructed in use***

Use is affected by meanings and meanings are constructed in use. For example, if someone thinks the Internet is fun, then they are likely to use it more; however, it is also through enjoying using the Internet that they construct the Internet as fun.

It was mainly (but not exclusively) children who said that using the Internet was fun. These children were of all ages and all levels of skill. They came from households where there were strict rules about use as well as from households where exploration of the Internet was encouraged. The types of use that were constructed as fun by at least some children included chat, email, surfing, and having a homepage.

For **Bob** Garling, using the Internet was a form of escapism from the demands of having four foster children all under five and all with severe disabilities. In contrast, several parents who used the Internet at work commented that they could not conceive of the Internet as entertainment as they associated the Internet with work.

How people talked about their use (or non-use) of the Internet indicated three different constructions of the Internet, which were not mutually exclusive. These were the Internet as a tool, the Internet as entertainment and the Internet as a link to the outside world. These different constructions of the Internet did

not map onto particular types of use. For example, for some people surfing the Internet was fun, for others surfing was simply a tool for finding out information, whereas for others, accessing information about other places and cultures was a link to the outside world. In addition, the one person might construct the Internet differently according to the purpose of their use. For example, a child might use the Internet as a tool to find out information for a school project and look up information on television shows for fun. Furthermore, different people using the Internet in the same way may construct it differently. For example, one person sending emails to overseas friends may construct the Internet as a tool, whereas another person sending emails to overseas friends may see the Internet as a link to the outside world.<sup>52</sup>

Studies of gender and technology typically report that men use information and communication technologies for functional purposes and women use them for communicative purposes (see Livingstone 1994; Wheelock 1994; Rakow 1988; Moyal 1992). I did not observe this association in the Canberra study. Both men and women were just as likely to use the Internet for communication or functional purposes.<sup>53</sup>

Functional uses of the Internet were homework, finding out information, banking and keeping in contact with family and friends. With regard to this last use, the Internet was regarded as a replacement for letter writing and phone calls. It seems that adults in high educational attainment/occupational status families were more likely to construct the Internet as a functional tool, whereas adults from low educational attainment/occupational status families gave the Internet a greater social and cultural significance.

Although the act of accessing the Internet is by definition, an act of connecting to the outside world, adults from low educational attainment/occupational status families seemed to attribute a special significance to the nature of this connection. In all but one of these families, a parent spoke about the Internet as being a key to the outside world. It seems that they meant that the Internet

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<sup>52</sup> As Jackson and Thrift (1995) point out, the same person may construct different meanings over time.



was a connection to a world, not only physically outside their home, but also culturally outside of their previous experience. See for example, the following quotes:

'It really, really broadens your horizons.' (**Bob** Garling)

'I mean when you're not a healthy person your world is very narrow and it is difficult to meet people... and this has really opened up a whole new ballgame for me... its opened up a big world.' (**Grace** Gisborne)

'Before, I was very Canberra, Canberra this and Canberra that.' (**Kim** Sampson)

'You get the feeling of being connected to the world though. Even though I'm at home, I'm very aware of what's out there.' (**Fay** Corso)

These people had low educational attainment and low occupational status in common. In addition, home is the locus of their operations. (Although **Bob** Garling has a job outside the home, he is at home after work because of the foster children.) Both **Bob** Garling and **Kim** Sampson talk to people from overseas on the Internet. As well as meeting embroiderers from all around Australia through the Netbroid email list, **Grace** Gisborne is studying a Canadian Reiki course via the Internet. It seems that these are very new sorts of experiences for these people. It is possible that the Internet is a cultural resource for people who, say, do not travel overseas or read widely, in the way that people who have more cultural and economic resources at their disposal can.

**Cecilia** Hyslop was the only professional, university-educated person who explicitly constructed the Internet in use as a connection to the outside world. However, in this case the connection was to a world that she used to be physically involved in:

'We came back from Canada in May last year and the first thing I did was buy a computer and connect it to so that I could feel connected to the world... I would feel very isolated if I didn't have the Internet... both from a professional and personal perspective. I have a lot of connections. And it's not just even just the emails, like, just checking out what's going on is very important to me.'

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<sup>53</sup> I explore issues of gender in chapters 4 and 5.

**Elsbeth** Arlington was the only person in the study for whom the Internet was a way of connecting to a *local* community. **Elsbeth** subscribed to the Canberra gay and lesbian email list. Previously it had been difficult for her to access the Canberra gay and lesbian community as she was not 'out'. Through the email list, she met and made friends with other lesbians. She also used the list to find out about social events for lesbians.

Non-use of the Internet also participates in its construction. Here I give an example of the Internet constructed as something difficult and frightening though non-use. As well as constructing the Internet as something that is useful and fun, **Lyn** Holcroft and her daughters construct the computer, which is the means of accessing the Internet, as something to be afraid of.

**Lyn:** I'm frightened of computers

Yasmin: Yes, I'm always scared I'm going to click a button and I'm going to...

**Lyn:** (*interrupting*) exactly. I've, I've, to me, I always think of the computer as something like a video machine or a cassette player where if you press the wrong button, it will wipe everything. I know it's not true but...

Olivia: (*interrupting*) No, it is true because I used to do things and Dad would go 'DON'T DO THAT' (**Lyn laughs**) and yell at me and get all angry. (*She continues resentfully*) That's why I'm scared of computers.

Besides showing how non-users of a technology participate in the construction of that technology, this example also demonstrates how fear of computers, rather than being a taken-for-granted property of females, is produced in specific and observable situations. In the Holcroft household, **Andy** is the only one who knows the password to access the Internet. His stringent control of the Internet helps to produce this story and is also reinforced by this story that technology is frightening.

As I have mentioned, although Silverstone and Haddon recognise, in principle, the possibility of social relations being transformed through domestic consumption of a technology, the model of appropriation does not allow for this possibility. In this section, I look at what people considered were the effects on the family of having the Internet connected at home. I have included this in the chapter on the performance of the Internet, rather than the chapter on the

performance of the family, because household members' opinions of the effect of the Internet form part of the stories about the Internet in the household rather than necessarily constituting an actual effect on the performance of family.

As people become used to a new technology, they are often unable to describe its effect or use in their life (Brown and Bryant 1990). A 1995 study on the impact of computers in Australian homes (Apple Computer Australia 1996) found that people were very low-key about the effects of the computer. Similarly, in general, families and family members were very low-key about the effect of the Internet on the family. Sometimes different members of the same household family had conflicting points of view about the effect of the Internet on the household family. However, what people considered was the effect of the Internet on the household family can be classed as being of two broad types; effects on activities and effects on the social relations in the household family.

Many of those respondents who considered that the Internet had an effect on activities did not regard these as important effects, prefacing their comments with a disclaimer that the Internet had not made much difference. The types of effects identified were that the Internet enabled more communication, either with the outside world or with extended or absent family. It was also mentioned that the Internet was more convenient. In some cases, the ready access to information saved trips to the library, and email was considered to save trips to the post office. In more than half of the households, at least one member considered that they watched less television as a result of having the Internet at home.<sup>54</sup>

A few respondents thought that the Internet helped to bring the family together but these were in household families where members did activities together and

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<sup>54</sup> Nie and Erbring (2000) also found that use of the Internet is replacing the watching of television. Before the Internet was available domestically, more than 30 hours of television was watched per week in the average Australian household. (Cupit 1994)

were quite close anyway. So it is quite possible that this is more a reflection of how they used the Internet, rather than the Internet having an effect.

In general, it seemed that families downplayed the effect of the Internet with many respondents considering that it had not made much difference. Although this could be taken as evidence that most households are incorporating the Internet as suggested by Silverstone and Haddon, it was those who were not very competent on the Internet or who had not engaged much with the Internet who were most likely to consider that it had not made much difference. In addition, the data indicates that people adjust to the changes and hence are less able to identify the effects. When I asked those who did not consider that the Internet made much difference to the household, what they thought would be the effect of disconnecting the Internet, most people were unwilling to admit any kind of dependency. Still, the responses indicated that the Internet did have an effect, as in the particularly dramatic response from **Bob** Garling.

Each member of the Garling family regularly uses the Internet and is very positive about it. They have embraced the Internet although they do not actually spend a lot of time on it. **Bob** and **Trisha** pay their bills and do their banking on the Internet and subscribe to different news emails and special interest email-lists. Each member sends emails to two teenagers in Indonesia who have become like family to them. **Trisha** checks and sends emails regularly, including sending complaints to companies. She spends about an hour each day surfing the Internet and looking up useful information. **Bob** likes to chat via ICQ and is very interested in the people he has met. He also regularly checks and sends emails. Diana (aged 17) claims to love the Internet and would be on it 24 hours a day if she could. She likes to use ICQ to meet people from around the world, and then continues corresponding via email. She also uses the Internet for assignments. Kathy (aged 15) thinks the Internet is fun for learning and meeting new people. She receives email from Disney blast, but does not send emails herself. She composes music on the Internet and posts it there on Disney blast. She also plays some multiuser games over the Internet. The following is Bob Garling's response to the hypothetical prospect of losing home access to the Internet:

If we lost it we would be really bashing our heads against the wall I think. And its really frustrating when sometimes you get on and you can't connect or something straight away. So I can imagine if it wasn't actually working, we would be really... *(He laughs as he stops himself from saying something impolite.)*

In the other households, the reaction was not nearly as strong. Typical reactions were statements such as 'it would not make any difference', 'it would be a bit more inconvenient', or 'we'd go back to our old way of doing things'. In half of the households, at least one member said that they would be bored if the Internet was disconnected. This was in the households where the television had been displaced by the Internet and the Internet was incorporated fully. Those who considered that they would use the phone more if the Internet was disconnected were those who used the Internet to email to friends. Others who used the Internet to email to friends considered that they would go back to writing letters which they considered less convenient than email.

However, in some households, people considered that the Internet had had an effect on a particular member rather than the whole household. When an individual was a keen user of the Internet, it was generally recognised by the whole family. When I asked about the effect of disconnection, they would typically say, 'well, it wouldn't make much difference to me, but it would to *'name of household member'* because ...'

For example, **Andy** Holcroft is the only person in his family who uses the Internet. He denied that loss of access would make a difference, whereas his wife considered that he would go crazy and his daughters each thought it would have a huge impact on him.

**Lyn:** it would make a difference in so far as **Andy** would go to crazy *(she laughs then says to Andy)* You would go through withdrawal symptoms

**Andy:** it would be no different

**Lyn:** it would *(laughing)*

**Adele** Murfett also considered that her daughter Jenny 'would go crazy' while Wayne Arlington considered that 'for mum, it would be the end of the world'

**Elsbeth's** response was:

'No it wouldn't. Because I'd just do what I was doing before and that's using the email at work (*laughs*) and if that got disconnected, well that's another thing (*laughs uproariously*)'

There was only one case where it was considered that the Internet had fundamentally transformed the social relations in the family. It seemed that the Internet was involved in both in the separation and the reuniting of **Kim** and **Trevor** Sampson. According to them both, **Kim** used to spend hours obsessively visiting chat rooms and **Trevor** became suspicious of who **Kim** was meeting there. As a result, he separated from **Kim**, leaving the house. **Kim** considered that what brought her and **Trevor** back together was an incident where, via the Internet, she was able to locate a cousin of **Trevor's** who was living in Canada. This changed **Trevor's** perception of the Internet.

'You know, so, and Trevor was just blown away by that. I think that was the beginning of, that, that was the beginning of the mending, knowing that like, you know, these people are normal people and they are friends' (**Kim** Sampson, **Trevor** agreeing)

In this example, the Internet had a clear effect on the family. However, this does not mean that the family were passive victims of the technology. In this case, the effect was a function of **Trevor's** attitude towards the use of the Internet, and in particular, visiting chat rooms.

### **The technical performance of the Internet in the household: physical aspects**

In a provocative essay titled 'What's social about being shot?', Grint and Woolgar (1997) liken technology to an onion composed of many layers. They critique those who presume the existence of a technical core beneath the social layers and argue that one should not stay at a particular layer of the onion, presuming that the limits of sociological analysis have been reached; one should keep peeling back the layers, even though 'as the descent continues progress becomes more difficult' (1997:155). Although recognising that all technologies are mediated by social arrangements, Kling (1992) critiques the reduction of sociotechnical systems to social relationships. He argues that for practical reasons, that is, in order to be able to say something meaningful about the uses of a technology and the consequences of those uses, one needs to at some point treat technology as a black box (Kling 1992). Hence Kling uses the phrase 'technologies and their social arrangements' rather than 'socio-technical network'. My position is somewhere between that of Grint and Woolgar and

that of Kling. For heuristic purposes, I stay at a particular layer of the onion, discussing the 'technical' aspects of the Internet's performance as if they were purely technical. However, I acknowledge that, in principle, these 'technical' or physical aspects comprise social aspects.

The Internet had a different technological presence in each household. I will use the term 'physical configuration' to refer to aspects such as the number of computers in the household with Internet access, the capability of the computer (for example, processing speed and multimedia), the location of the Internet access point(s), the access plan, the speed of the modem, the length of time that the Internet had been connected and whether or not there is a separate phone line. A couple of examples indicate how the particular physical configuration participates in constituting and illuminating the social relations within the household and also influences the nature of the relationship between the Internet and the household.

It is a fairly obvious point that the physical configuration can participate in constituting the nature of the relationship between the Internet and the household. For example, the processing speed of the computer and the speed of modem, which help to shape the experience of using the Internet, actually affect frequency of use; several people mentioned that they had stopped using the Internet because it was too slow.

The physical configuration can also both constitute and reveal the social relations within the household. For example, in families where more than one member had a computer connected to the Internet in their bedroom, the distribution of computers (in other words, who had the best computer) simultaneously reveals and constitutes the social relations within the household. For example, Natalie had the best computer because her use of the Internet to produce web pages about a famous actor was valued by her parents. In turn, the fact that Natalie had the best computer gave her a particular standing amongst her siblings. Both her older and younger brother had to ask her permission if they wanted to access the Internet on this computer located in her bedroom.

Under half of those questionnaire respondents with an Internet connection had a separate phone line (41%). Whether or not a household had a separate phone line did not appear to be related to income, but appeared to be related to the number of children in the household; the more children there were, the more likely it was that there was a separate phone line. It also seemed related to cultural factors. Those families where there was a shared domestic division of labour were much more likely to have a separate phone line than those in which the mother did all of the domestic work. In the case studies, I observed that culturally 'working class' families in my study had only one phone line, whereas culturally 'middle-class' families had separate phone lines. The reason for this pattern is not clear. However, the Internet and a separate phone line seems to be a completely different entity to the Internet and no separate phone line in terms of the performance of the Internet in the family. In households where there was no separate phone line, the Internet stopped incoming or outgoing phone calls. Several families mentioned that they got a separate phone line as part of getting the Internet connected. However, as discussed later in the chapter on the family, having only a single phone line caused a great deal of conflict in several households as incoming phone calls could not be received.

Subject to material constraints, it is the consumer who determines the particular details of the physical configuration of the Internet in their home and this may be with the intention of experiencing certain effects. In chapter 5, I give an example of how the location of Internet access points can be chosen so as to perform family closeness. It is also quite possible that the consumer is not aware of the effect of the particular physical configuration. Not all the different aspects of the Internet's physical configuration necessarily have an effect, or the same effect on different households. It is also the case that particular aspects that do not have simple effects that can be observed easily, still do participate in complex ways in the performance of the Internet in the household. For example, taken alone, the length of time that the Internet had been connected did not seem to have an effect on people's attitude toward the Internet, their use of the Internet or their competence. However, as I discuss in a later chapter, the length of time that the Internet had been connected *did* have



an effect in those families where the performance of the Internet changed over time.

Since the fieldwork was conducted, the technical aspects of the Internet have changed considerably. For example, the Internet can be accessed via mobile phones, email can be accessed via small portable devices such as PocketMail and high speed connections (more than 100 times faster than a phone line) are now available in parts of Canberra.

### **The narrated performance of the Internet in the household: stories about the Internet**

It is difficult to separate stories about the Internet from the use of the Internet, in the sense that the boundaries between them are blurred. Stories about the Internet may result from use as well as influencing use (or non-use); sometimes they contradict use. Examination of some of the more common stories that people told me about the Internet shows how they can participate in constituting and revealing the social relations within the household as well as influence the nature of the relationship between the Internet and the household.

A common story told to me by respondents was about the type of people who frequent chat rooms. People's perceptions of the type of people who frequent chat rooms were affected by whether they themselves had ever visited a chat room or regularly used chat. Those who regularly used chat considered that, in general, people were friendlier and more polite than in real life. They dismissed any unpleasant experiences as atypical.

However, parents who had never visited chat rooms expressed concern about the 'weirdos' to be found there. For example, based on stories that she had heard about the dangers of chat rooms, **Pauline** Ruyton expressed a concern about Jane's use of chat rooms:

'Its just a private concern that she may get onto people... that we don't know who they are, and might have ulterior motives. So it's the safety aspect. You do hear about it on television, and it is a concern that we have, that Jane could end up being stalked or something.'

In some cases, stories like these participated in the expression of parental authority as parents forbade or restricted their children's use of chat.

In several households, people who had not used chat were deterred from doing so by a different type of story about the type of people in chat rooms. In this case chat room users were 'othered' with stories that the type of people who frequent chat rooms were not at all like themselves. **Marlene** Davis gives an example of this type of story:

'Yes, well we don't use the chat rooms and we don't talk to people and go to, have those, sex things that I read about, (*Anna laughs*) No, no there's some people you know, their husbands or wives stay up all-night and go and talk in these chat rooms...Yes and then you wake up and find that your husband's gone off and wants to go and meet some person or other from the USA or England or something like that.'

**Marlene** Davis considered the Internet to be useful as an information resource, but a rather anti-social activity. Some people referred to the Internet as a waste of time, whereas others considered it a constructive use of time. Which story had precedence in a household did not depend on the type of Internet use, but was related to the activity displaced by Internet use and the perceived effect of the Internet. In families where Internet use displaced watching television, sometimes for the whole family, it was considered a good use of time. People spoke in disparaging terms about 'watching rubbish on television', while parents, in particular, considered that their children were learning using the Internet. Television was constructed as a very passive activity, with respondents referring to 'vegging out in front of the telly', 'falling asleep in front of the TV' having ones 'bum in a chair watching TV', and being 'stuck in front of the TV'. In comparison, these people spoke of Internet use as requiring active participation. For example:

'At least, you have to interact with the computer, at least you're going off to another site, you're clicking, you're looking, and all the rest of it, so you are actually involved.' (**Brian** Gisborne)

Whereas the story about the relative merits of Internet use seemed clearly related to the activity displaced by Internet use, the stories about the cost of the Internet were contradictory and were not necessarily related to actual cost.

**Bob** Garling's story is that Internet access is not at all expensive. Hence, he hates it when people think his family must be rich to have Internet connection:

'One thing that really annoys me is when people know that we've got an Internet connection, they say "Oh you must be really rich". It's really stupid because it's not expensive at all and we get cheaper local calls.'

The Garling family is not rich; there are eight in the family (including four foster children) and their total annual income is in the \$24,000 to \$38,000 bracket.

As mentioned before, acceptance of the story about the Internet being expensive was the most common reason for not connecting to the Internet. It was typically parents who spoke about the cost. However, their stories about the cost were not necessarily related to actual cost. For example, they were not related to the existence of a separate phone line for the Internet even though rental of a separate line is several times more costly than the cheaper access plans. They also were not related to the perceived usefulness of the Internet. Level of use and the type of access plan chosen seemed to affect the story about cost. If the plan was for a limited number of hours per month and the household had to watch their use in order not to go over that amount, then they tended to be conscious of the cost. If they tended not to reach their monthly limit then they tended not to be conscious of the cost. In turn, attitudes to the cost of the Internet helped determine the household rules about use and the type of access plan chosen.

No one in the study could be characterised as purely a 'booster' or a 'debunker' (Bingham, Valentine et al. 1999). People's stories about the effects of the Internet were often contradictory and those who were most enthusiastic about the Internet still expressed specific reservations while those who were most pessimistic included specific positive aspects in their stories. In particular, parents were ambivalent about the Internet; on the one hand wanting to encourage children's use of the technology, and on the other hand being very aware of the risks. The fact that everybody in my case studies had some experience of the Internet probably meant that they were unlikely to subscribe to completely negative or completely positive stories about the Internet.

Nevertheless, stories about the Internet help to constitute the relationship between the household and the Internet and hence are an integral part of the performance of the Internet in the household.

### **Chapter conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented the findings of my own empirical research, showing the complex and contradictory ways in which the performance of the Internet varies within and between households. Drawing on Latour's contention that the world is composed of networks of the real, the social and the narrated, I have demonstrated that key constitutive elements of the performance of the Internet in the household are the physical configuration of the technology, the stories and meanings given to it within the household, and the level and type of engagement with the technology. I suggest that this conceptualisation explains the data better than previous accounts of the domestic consumption of information and communication technologies.

## **Chapter 4: The Internet and performing the self**

We choose light but there is no power, we choose darkness and the curtains are torn; in the ordinary and the everyday, we create our truths and perform ourselves, selectively transformed by the props that we choose.

### **Introduction: the self, gender, class and cultural capital**

The underlying argument in this chapter is that rather than being stable entities, both the Internet and the self are mutually constitutive, each affecting and shaping the other. Whereas in the last chapter I focussed on the performance of the Internet, in this chapter, my focus is on how people mobilise the Internet as a resource for the performance of self.

In my introduction chapter, I referred to the influence of Giddens' (1991) suggestion that each individual negotiates the story of their own life undertaking a 'reflexive project of self'. Giddens assumes that a 'true' self exists and that people engage in particular lifestyles as a way of creating a coherent self-identity.

Commentators have suggested that the nature of the Internet and cyberspace greatly extend the possibilities for this project of self and mean that coherence of self-identity is no longer important (Stone 1997; Jones 1997; Turkle 1995). In a study of MUD players,<sup>55</sup> Turkle describes the Internet as 'a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterise postmodern life' (1995:180). This idea that online you can be anyone, regardless of who you are offline is encapsulated by the cartoon depicting a dog at a computer keyboard and the caption 'On the Internet, nobody knows that you're a dog'.

However, as Slevin (2000) points out, studies of the interaction between the Internet and the self have typically focussed on the online performance of self in computer-mediated communication (for example, Schroeder 1997). Much of the research has been conducted via the Internet itself (for example, Chandler

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<sup>55</sup> Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) are text-based virtual environments where players can engage in fantasy role-playing.

and Roberts-Young 1998; Miller 1995; Kibby 1997). My research, however, is set in the household and shows that the ways in which people use the Internet can be linked to their offline social context. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the Internet can be mobilised as a resource in the performance of the self. I also look at constraints, technical and cultural, to mobilising the Internet as a resource for the performance of self. The data demonstrates the complex relationship between the social context and Internet use, challenging the notion referred to above that Internet users have complete freedom to experiment with different online identities.

My approach, drawing on symbolic interactionism, has the premise that people act on the basis of the meanings that things have for them. With respect to the Internet, I show how these meanings are not essential properties but are negotiated through interactions between a person and the Internet within a particular social context. Before discussing the data, I will briefly introduce some of the main concepts used in this chapter.

### ***Performance of self***

In this chapter, I use the term 'performance of self', not to mean the expression of some inner core, but to refer to the enacting of the self through performance. Bull (2000) conceives of the self as neither free nor colonised but in a dialectic relationship with technology (in his case the personal stereo). Similarly, I show how the self is in a dialectic or mutually constitutive relationship with the Internet.<sup>56</sup> It is also 'multiple but integrated' (Turkle 1995:258) rather than a coherent, unified subject whose actions reflect its essence. 'Media tastes do not simply reflect identity, but are actually constitutive of it.' (Seiter 1999:29) The same could be said of the way in which the Internet participates in the performance of self.

I use the term 'self' rather than 'identity'. As Miller (1995:33) notes, the concept of identity was developed in a bureaucratic context as a way of establishing 'clear attributes of personhood that could be registered and responded to', such as ethnicity and class. Hence the term identity seems to refer to a label that

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<sup>56</sup> Obviously the Internet is not the only participant in the constitution of self; however, the role of the Internet is my focus.

can be recognised by others, where as the term 'self' encompasses more than this. As Munro puts it:

'identity and self can be understood as different ways of looking at belonging. Identity is always from the eyes of the other; a matter of difference, where the addition or deletion of a few artefacts may be sufficient to mark that difference...Selves are never so flimsy, since an ability to make an attachment or detachment depends on a sedimentation of past additions and deletions, the material of previous affiliations and former exclusions'. (1996:268)

### ***Gender and Class***

Empirical studies of domestic use of technology often report on observed differences between men and women as gender differences. Broadhurst (1997) considers that men perceive computers as toys, and hence associate them with fun, whereas women perceive them as machines related to work. Lull researched television viewing patterns across the world and concluded that regardless of 'the political-economic system of individual nations or specific television programming policies', 'men everywhere prefer sports, action-oriented programs, and information programming (especially news), while women prefer dramas (including serials, soap operas, and films) and music/dance/comedy-based programs'. (Lull 1988:248) Morley (1986) had similar findings. Lull concludes that these differences in viewing patterns between men and women are not bound by culture or time and there his analysis ends. For example, he describes the case of a man in the West-End who was accused of becoming 'half woman' for not being interested in watching sporting events but he does not analyse the contingent way in which gender is understood. Moyal, in her 1992 Australian study 'Gendered Use of the Telephone', documents that men use the telephone for functional purposes such as shopping, making appointments and seeking information - she refers to this as the 'masculine business information flow'. She argues that in contrast women use the telephone for intrinsic purposes, such as personal communication with relatives and friends, maintaining what she calls the 'feminine information flow' (Moyal 1992:67).

I suggest that there is a fair degree of arbitrariness as to what gets coded as masculine or feminine. In addition, in reporting on observed differences between men and women rather than observed similarities, the researcher participates in maintaining and extending a particular version of gender. I have invented the following example as a way of illustrating this.

Suppose I observed that women were more likely to use Netscape Navigator and men were more likely to use Internet Explorer.<sup>57</sup> I could argue that women were performing their femininity through using a program whose title offers calm assurance to technophobic women in suggesting that it will assist the user to successfully Navigate the confusing terrain of the Internet; men were performing their masculinity through using a program with associations of adventure and technical challenge, namely Internet Explorer. If I had observed the opposite result, that men were more likely to use Netscape Navigator and women more likely to use Internet Explorer, I could argue that men were performing their masculinity through using a program with connotations of technical mastery – the ability to confidently navigate one’s way through the Web. Women were performing their femininity through using a program that did not have connotations of confident mastery, but rather could be associated with small timid steps taken to explore what will largely remain an unknown terrain.

My characterisation of either use can be in terms of performances of masculinity and femininity. Because I have labelled the behaviour so that it resonates with traditional understandings of gender, I have added to the credibility of these understandings of gender. Hence these studies tend to reify observed differences as essential properties of the category gender. In addition, they tend to ignore issues of class.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that people’s use of the Internet can only be understood in terms of the meanings that people invest in particular uses or non-uses. However, although it may seem that these meanings are patterned (or predictable) by class or gender, I will argue the opposite: people perform class and gender by imbuing aspects of the Internet with particular meanings. I am drawing on Butler (1990) here, but whereas she focuses on surface performances of the body, I am referring to a whole set of dispositions and values (somewhat akin to Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of *habitus*). Butler is concerned to show the *meaningless* of the performance (and uses the example

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<sup>57</sup> Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer are both software programs used to browse the World Wide Web.



of people who parody gender performance through drag). In contrast, I am concerned with those performances that are so *meaningful* to the performer as to become naturalised and regarded as an essential quality of the person. What counts as a performance of gender depends on dominant understandings of gender. Similarly what is 'culturally intelligible' as a performance of class depends on dominant understandings of class. These dominant understandings of class and gender are not fixed. Hence there are always exceptions; for example, (all other things being equal) men will not always behave 'this way', women 'that way'. The exceptions are important in that they have the potential to subvert the dominant meanings of class and gender.<sup>58</sup> They also show that what counts as a performance of class or a performance of gender is not an essential property.

Each type of performance requires particular material resources and cultural competencies. For example, Turkle (1995) found that college students who could not get 'a good job' (and hence were working class in terms of their position in the relations of production), performed 'middle class' in MUDs, through the way that they decorated their virtual environments. They had the cultural resources to do this by virtue of their college education and perhaps also their background. A person with a low level of education and a low status job is unlikely to have the material resources or the cultural competencies to perform middle-class.<sup>59</sup>

Keeping the above limitations in mind, I refer to people as being 'male' or 'female' and 'working-class' or 'middle-class' as a shorthand to enhance readability.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately this may have the undesired effect of making these categories seem both fixed and essential properties of the person. In addition, I do not suggest that my interpretations as researcher necessarily match the way that people consciously understand themselves. As Bourdieu puts it: 'the

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<sup>58</sup> In practice, class and gender are interwoven.

<sup>59</sup> Various commentators have remarked on the asymmetric nature of class with respect to competencies in high and popular culture. Hall (1992)

<sup>60</sup> I found it relatively straightforward to classify the families in my study as working-class or middle-class on the basis of educational attainment, occupational status, income and cultural style.

strategies I am talking about are actions objectively oriented towards goals that may not be the goals subjectively pursued'. (1993:76)

### ***Cultural capital***

Throughout this chapter, I draw on Bourdieu's (1984) notions of cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital.<sup>61</sup> Cultural capital is 'an embodied state of tastes, preferences, and knowledge, ranging from educational credentials, to preferences in music, to embodiments of femininity', social capital 'consists of networks, connections, group memberships, familial relationships' and symbolic capital is 'the form achieved when the economic, cultural and social capital are recognised as legitimate and institutionalised' (Seiter 1999:25). Legitimate cultural capital is that which can be converted to symbolic capital; hence by definition, symbolic capital is legitimate and can be converted to power.

Bourdieu has been criticised for assuming that there is one overarching hierarchy of values in which 'high culture' continues to be legitimate (Frow 1995; Hall 1992; Seiter 1999). 'There may coexist multiple and incongruous values and distinctions that cannot be reduced to one another' (Hall 1992:264). John Hall reverses Bourdieu's approach to cultural capital. 'Instead of reducing status to class, social classes must be recognised as one among myriad kinds of status groups.' (1992:279) He further suggests that:

'in market societies, people typically participate in more than one status group, and each individual thus works with incommensurate kinds of cultural capital, entering into social relationships with others whose status situations, and concomitant forms of cultural capital may be quite different'. (1992:272)

Star (1991) also makes this point that we are members of more than one community of practice. Hence, what is legitimate cultural capital in one field,<sup>62</sup> is not necessarily legitimate in another field. For example, Skeggs (1997) makes the point that not being middle-class is valued in many working-class social groups.

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<sup>61</sup> Because I conducted my research using the strategy of grounded theory, I did not begin with a conceptual scheme and then try to fit the data to it. I decided to use a derived version of Bourdieu's model of capital as a helpful way of interpreting the data, only after immersing myself in the data and investigating the suitability of a variety of conceptual tools.

<sup>62</sup> Bourdieu defines a field as a particular configuration of some kind of capital.

Because Bourdieu assumes that there is only one legitimate ordering of values, he does not make a distinction between his use of the terms 'cultural capital' and 'legitimate cultural capital'. However, the contention that there are many fields of distinction, each with their own array of values means that the term cultural capital often has to be qualified to indicate what type of cultural capital is being referred to; in other words, in which field(s) it is considered legitimate. Hence, I use the terms 'working class cultural capital'<sup>63</sup> and 'middle class cultural capital' to indicate in which 'array of practices'<sup>64</sup> (Hall 1992), this capital has value. As John Hall explains:

'cultural distinctions do not represent some generalised currency of "legal tender" among all individuals and status groups... Cultural capital, after all, is good only (if at all) in social worlds where a person lives and acts, and the value that it has depends on sometimes ephemeral distinctions of currency in those particular social worlds'. (Hall 1992:275)

Aspects of use or non-use of the Internet have different currency depending on the particular social world.

### **Stories about the Internet and the performance of the self**

My research was conducted at a time when there was very little empirical data on how people used the Internet. In order to situate my findings, I will now briefly indicate the range of stories that were in circulation about the effect of the Internet on the performance of self and about the relationship between the Internet and gender.

As I have already mentioned, there were utopian stories that anyone can be who s/he wants to be on the Internet (Jones 1997; Negroponte 1995). Slevin

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<sup>63</sup> These terms are potentially misleading because the mapping of particular dispositions onto class is not guaranteed. In addition, my use of these terms may not translate well from the Australian context. Lawler (1999) also uses these terms. However, her theorisation of the relationship between class and the performance of self is slightly different. Lawler considers that the class one is born into remains part of a person's core self, so that one can never be completely successful in performing another class position.

<sup>64</sup> Hall prefers to use the term 'array of practices' instead of 'field' as the term 'field' has connotations of fixedness. However, what counts as middle-class or working-class cultural capital, for example, is not fixed. These concepts are similar to Strauss's (1991) concept of 'social worlds' and what Star (1991) refers to as a 'community of practice'. In fact, Star uses the terms 'social worlds' and 'community of practice' interchangeably, while Hall uses 'social worlds' and 'array of practices' interchangeably.

(2000) argues that the Internet may enrich and transform the nature of the self and experience in everyday life. Drawing on Giddens, he argues that people can use the Internet to regain a sense of control in what he considers is currently a time of risk and uncertainty.

Some commentators presented a dystopic vision. For example, Nguyen and Alexander consider that in cyberspace human agency will be 'transformed into usership or monadism'. They speculate that 'power based on knowledge, as exercised by subjects, may have transformed itself into operations based on information, exercised by monads'. (1996:105)

A common weakness in these types of predictions is that they seem to assume that everybody will understand and use the Internet in the same way. These commentators seem to have unproblematically accepted William Gibson's rhetoric. Gibson, who invented the term cyberspace,<sup>65</sup> defined it as: 'the ultimate extension of the exclusion of daily life. With cyberspace as I describe it you can literally wrap yourself in media and not have to see what's really going on around you.' (Gibson quoted in Woolley 1992:122)

These stories about the effects of the Internet ignore the social context of use and the meanings that people give to use. Those who access the Internet from home are using the computer in a domestic environment where everyday 'real world' issues such as cooking, cleaning, sleeping and relating to others who are physically present are constantly being negotiated within a context of social relations. Internet use can only be properly understood within this context. In addition, one needs to take account of the meanings given to use. Morley (1986) identified the many ways in which television was used, other than to just watch a program. These included using the television to create personal space in a restricted physical environment, to block out other family members and to express anger with other family members (for example, a husband watching sport after a conflict with wife). Whereas Morley catalogued different meanings of use, I hope to relate these meanings to the social context of the user, using the concept of cultural capital intersecting with class and gender.

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<sup>65</sup> In his novel *Neuromancer*, Gibson first used the term cyberspace to mean a particular form of 'consensual hallucination'.

The Internet is a relatively new medium. Hence, there is no established body of literature based on empirical research locating use (or non-use) within the social context.<sup>66</sup> The empirical research that has been published suggests that what is happening in practice is much more complex than is suggested by the utopian and dystopian stories I have outlined (see, for example, Bingham, Valentine et al. 1999). Apart from the observation that Internet use is correlated with income (ABS 1998) there are, to my knowledge, no studies on the intersection of Internet use with class. However, there are a variety of stories about the relationship between the Internet and gender.

The three main approaches taken by commentators are either to equate the Internet with femininity, or to equate the Internet (as a computer technology) with masculinity and traditional gender relations or to consider that gender is irrelevant with regard to Internet use.

'Cyberfeminists' like Sadie Plant (1996) characterise the Internet as something that is intrinsically suited to women and hence will be appropriated by women to overcome global subordination of women by men. However as Luckman (1999) points out, this literature is technologically determinist and utopian, ignoring political realities that enable only a privileged few (on a global scale) with the money, time and skills to access the Internet in the creative way proposed by cyberfeminists.

In contrast, there are feminist theorists of gender and technology who consider that the Internet, like all technology which men wish to control, has relations of male domination inscribed in its production and use. As a consequence, women are denied access or scared of it (see for example Kramarae 1988; Herring, Johnson et al. 1995; Spender 1995).

Bingham, Valentine et al. (1999) criticise dominant discourse about children's use of the Internet for being based on the supposed characteristics of children and the Internet, rather than what happens in practice when children use the

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<sup>66</sup> At the time of writing, some studies grounded in the social context are starting to become available. For example Wakeford (1999).

Internet. This criticism could be extended to how the above theorists of gender and technology have characterised the relationship between women and the Internet. These commentators seem to have supposed specific characteristics of each (women, the Internet) in isolation rather than look at what happens in practice when the two interact. In practice, as I demonstrate in this and the next chapter, the way in which gender both shapes and is constituted by Internet use is more complex than any of these commentators suggest.

The third approach taken by commentators on the Internet and gender are that the Internet makes gender irrelevant (Rheingold 1994). Stone (1997) uses the story of the New York psychiatrist Sanford Ellis and his online persona Joan to argue that there may not be a physical reality behind a Internet persona. She contends that the Internet demonstrates that agency need not reside in the body. However, I consider that this example reinforces the relevance of gender; The final part of this story is that many of the women who had confided to Joan online felt violated on finding out that Joan's offline 'author' was a man.

Having outlined some of the stories in circulation at the time of my research, I now turn to discuss the actual data from my study. I examine various relationships between the Internet and the performance of self. First I discuss the use of two people in my study as case examples illustrating how use and/or the meanings given to the use participate in the performance of self. In each case, although my focus is on the individual, I show how the context of the household is relevant to my analysis. I expand upon the issues raised by these cases, drawing in data from other cases to analyse the various meanings given to home pages, addiction and technical skills in particular social contexts. I show how these meanings are used in the performance of self. I then analyse those cases when the Internet is not used in the performance of self in terms of the meanings given to use and non-use.

***Case 1: Jenny Nicholls, mobilising the Internet  
as a resource in the desired performance of self***

I will discuss Jenny Nicholl's use of the Internet to demonstrate the ways that meanings and uses of the Internet can participate in the performance of self. I

also show how the Internet can be used to overcome constraints to particular performances of the self as well as how use is associated with, but not determined by, the social context of the user.

Jenny is sixteen years old and from a middle-class family. She lives in a luxurious house and attends a private school. She lives with her mother and father, both of whom have professional jobs, and her younger sister Alison, aged thirteen. Jenny was not really interested in using the computer until the Internet was connected. The Internet has since become extremely significant in Jenny's life, even though she only spends about an hour a day logged on. If the Internet was not connected she would probably be spending that time doing more music practice or more homework or watching more 'boring TV'. As a teenager who lives at home and does not drive, she has limited opportunities for meeting like-minded people other than through participation in school and mainstream interest groups. I will show how Jenny values the Internet as a form of communication. The Internet enables Jenny to perform herself as politically active and as having alternative tastes in an environment where such a performance of self is valued; at her school, such performances are neither valued nor allowed.

Jenny is a very competent user of the Internet and taught herself HTML (Hypertext markup language) just through reading books. She has a home page, which is technically quite sophisticated. When I asked Jenny to log on to her home page and show it to me, it seemed obvious that she took a lot of care and delight in the visual design as well as the content. However, it seems that technical skills per se do not hold much currency for her. Jenny considers herself to be quite outgoing and what she values about her home page is the opportunity to communicate her ideas:

'I find that I think I feel like a bit of a nerd just sitting here playing with this but if I am talking with lots of different people and going around and making stuff for people that makes me feel better and part of the big ... just lots of people.'

Jenny claims to enjoy writing a lot more as a result of the Internet 'because you can share it with other people and not just people at school or people you know – just anyone'. She considers that her involvement in discussion forums is improving her skills in arguing and thinking for herself.

In discussing the content of home pages, rather than treating the content as a text for my interpretation (as does Miller 1995), my focus is on the meanings which the author gives to the content. Chandler and Roberts-Young (1998) argue that personal homepages can be an important part of the construction of adolescents' social identities, and that changes in form and content reflect developments in the adolescent's identity.<sup>67</sup> Certainly Jenny considers that her home page has changed to reflect changes in how she performs herself. She is always revising what is there:

'looking up and going "I don't like that. I don't like hand written I love youse all. I don't do that any more, that's not me" or like there is an old contents page here and it is full of old stuff that if I go there, I just sit down and go "hmmm"... '

'I deleted a whole bunch of pages. I had "I am feeling sad at the moment because..." and "I am feeling happy at the moment because..." and I got rid of those and I thought "Oh God they are pointless". '

However, not all of Jenny's past performances of self are deleted from her home page. Over the last couple of years, Jenny has been adding instalments to a piece of fiction called 'Unfinished Opus'. This work is semi-autobiographical in tone and Jenny considers that it documents the development of her writing style as well as her emotional life:

'It is really interesting when I read the beginning and I think "Oh wow my writing style has changed as you go along and go through it".... It's sort of a half diary of what I am thinking and sometimes if they are having an argument it is because I have been having an argument. And if they are all happy, I am happy at the time you know.'

In a study of e-zines,<sup>68</sup> Leonard describes zines as 'a tool for empowerment allowing geographically isolated people to correspond with each other and share a common sense of identity' (1998:109).<sup>69</sup> Jenny considers that at school she is isolated from like-

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<sup>67</sup> Note that Chandler and Roberts-Young conceptualise this in terms of 'self-presentation' whereas I would conceptualise it as a 'performance of the self'. The difference is that Chandler and Roberts-Young assume the existence of a self that is ontologically prior to its presentation.

<sup>68</sup> Zines are a type of online magazine constructed as a critique of, and alternative to, mainstream media. See for example [www.geekgirl.com](http://www.geekgirl.com).

<sup>69</sup> The notion of empowerment through consumption has been critiqued by Marxists for being an illusion. For example, Frow suggests that this use of the term 'empowerment', has a psychological orientation 'which offers little disturbance to the real social relations of advanced



minded people. She uses aspects of the Internet (her homepage and participation in discussion forums and chat rooms) to connect with people with whom she has similar interests and as a form of psychological empowerment:

'I find school very suffocating and very boring, not as many different people and via the Internet and friends out of school they are just so much more interesting I think and they are into a lot more of the things I enjoy. You are not just tied down to people at your year level. You can be friends with Uni students or young. It doesn't matter; it doesn't seem to make that much difference.'

It is important to Jenny that she performs in an 'individual' rather than 'stereotypical' way;<sup>70</sup> her tastes in music are not at all typical and she plays the timpani in an orchestra. Her home page promotes The Doors and a philosophy of Riderism.<sup>71</sup> Although she was interested in The Doors before the Internet, the Internet has enabled her to develop this interest and join in a virtual community of Riders. She participates in Australian and International Riderist discussion forums, subscribes to mailing lists about The Doors and receives a lot of emails related to her web page. Unlike those in Turkle's (1995) study who use the Internet to perform an online self entirely different from their offline self, Jenny considers that she is exactly the same person online as offline. She has physically met and become close friends with some of the Riders who she has met online. These people live interstate and the Internet also facilitates regular contact.

Although Jenny considers that she is exactly the same person on the Internet as offline, she experiences less constraints online and considers that her performance of self on the Internet is more authentic than her performance of self at school; in her words, she considers that she can be more herself on the Internet. This is because she has found like-minded people on the Internet, rather than it being an effect of the technology. This finding contrasts with those studies of computer mediated communication which interpret the Internet as a male domain and find that women are silenced, unable to be themselves on the

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capitalism' (1995:62). Skeggs (1997) avoids this problem through making an overt distinction between interpersonal power and access to wider institutional power.

<sup>70</sup> These words are in quotes as they are Jenny's terms.

<sup>71</sup> Jenny explained that Riderism was an attitude to life espoused by Jim Morrison, lead singer of 1970s' rock group The Doors.

Internet (for example, Herring, Johnson et al. 1995). Jenny also experiences a sense of personal empowerment in her use of the Internet to find out different perspectives on issues and to email to sites to express her opinion. For example, Jenny, who is an avid reader, reads novels on the Internet and then emails to the authors to suggest changes: 'And I can say I don't like that bit, change it and they do. You know? Its cool.'

As well as enabling Jenny to perform herself culturally in the way that she desires, the Internet enables Jenny to perform a political self that is not allowed at school. For example, Jenny supports Aboriginal reconciliation and sees the Internet as her only avenue for publicly expressing this support. Her web site opens to a picture of a Reconciliation ribbon and a statement in support of Reconciliation:

'I was getting angry at people at school who started being - sometimes at my school there is a bit of, you know, a lot of very conservative people about the reconciliation thing. And I just felt like - I don't know where else I could put it up or like I wore it around at school and I got told to take it off and I felt "no" and wore it for a while and then... some people are just very ignorant. "Why are you wearing Germany (sic) colours" and stuff like that which really got me irritated and also someone wrote "Oh do you want to put this anti Hanson thing up, this place goes red the day before election day?". "Yes sure." It is a little outlet for people to come so they can put up their political things you know.'<sup>72</sup>

Studies of Internet use tended to be conducted as if the online user was disembedded from their social context. For example, Slevin (2000) critiques Chandler and Roberts-Young (1998) for exactly this. The data in my study indicates that a person's use of the Internet at home and the meanings given to this use are associated with, but not determined by, the social context of the family household. I will now show how Jenny's use of the Internet is associated with her social context, beginning with a discussion of how Jenny's use of the Internet is facilitated by her parents' interpretation of her use.

Jenny's parents (**Bridget** and **Grant**) each place a different value on Internet skills based on the different meanings that the Internet has for them. Hence they have very different attitudes to Jenny's use. **Grant** regards the Internet as

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<sup>72</sup> Pauline Hanson is an Australian politician who is renowned for her outspoken opposition to Aboriginal rights.

a means to accumulate capital whereas **Bridget** regards it as a form of entertainment. **Grant** is a computer professional and tends not to use the Internet at home as after a day at work in front of a computer screen 'the last thing I want to do is to get on a computer again'. He values competence in using the Internet as a form of capital that can be converted into a well-paid job. When **Bridget** complains that Jenny is spending too much time on the Internet, **Grant** comes to Jenny's defence: 'Sometimes I suppose I get a bit cranky with her and **Grant** says "You shouldn't. She is using it for educational things".' **Bridget** regards the Internet as something that is a lot of fun and can easily eat up a lot of time. She uses the Internet at home for relaxation; in particular to look up information about her favourite sport, football. Given that she is quite busy with part-time study as well as full-time work, she always feels slightly guilty when she uses the Internet. For her, it is a source of pleasure rather than a resource for capital. Hence she does not place any value on the time that Jenny spends on the Internet. 'I just say to her, homework and horn practice first, the Internet last' (**Bridget** Nicholls). Whereas **Grant** is very proud of the technical skills evident in Jenny's home page, **Bridget** has not even looked at it.

The Nicholl's family appeared to be fairly close and harmonious. There are no real rules for Jenny's use of the Internet, and she does not face any competition for use from any of the other family members. They all respect her privacy so that it does not worry her that she shares an email account with her family; she knows that she could get her own account if she wanted to. Although Jenny's parents do not trust the Internet in terms of providing credit card information, they are not worried about the sort of people that Jenny is communicating with on the Web. In fact, they are very pleased about the fact that Jenny has met such nice people over the Internet:

'I have always felt dubious about meeting people over the web. But the fact is that it is not a bad way once all the hype has settled to meet people, like-minded people. So she has met some really good friends over the Net.' (**Grant** Nicholls)

**Grant's** encouragement of Jenny's Internet use seems stronger than **Bridget's** reservations, such that overall, Jenny uses the Internet in a supportive environment. Jenny is confident in her technical abilities and confident in her online communications (for example, her willingness to email to people that she does not know to give her opinion on a variety of issues). Without this

confidence, Jenny would not be able to use the Internet in the way that she does. Confidence can be a form of capital and it could be argued that Jenny's confidence in relation to Internet use is associated with her privileged social and cultural position.

That use is associated with, but not determined by, the social context of the user is demonstrated by the completely different attitude that Jenny's younger sister Alison (aged 14) has to her own use of the Internet. Alison rarely uses the Internet but, when she does, it is as a way of escaping the need to communicate with anybody. 'I suppose when I get on the computer, I just tune out, like tune off from everybody else and just do what I want to do. I just can't be bothered to talk.' This is in complete contrast to Jenny who values the Internet as a tool for communication.

***Case 2: Kim Sampson, from 'bored housewife' to web designer***

Whereas Jenny uses the Internet to find an environment where her desired performance of self is valued, **Kim** Sampson's use of the Internet has completely transformed her performance of self. She appears to have moved from being a bored housewife with low self-esteem to a busy, gregarious web designer. **Kim**, aged 38, is married to **Trevor**, aged 37, and they have three children: Dylan aged 11, Kylie aged 8 and Sue aged 6. The family is working class. The annual family income is in the \$24000-\$38000 bracket. **Kim** has trained as a cook, while **Trevor** works two jobs; as a mechanic and in a bar. **Kim** does all of the housework and does not tend to go out whereas **Trevor** is out most nights either playing sport or working. The family were just finishing dinner in front of a large-screen television (they have three televisions) when I arrived for the first interview. They live in a very modest house in an outer suburban area of Canberra. In manner and appearance, **Kim** performed as culturally working class. Despite the fact that she spoke very quickly, she used different words in a hesitant manner as if she was not confident that she was using them correctly.

Jenny Nicholls exuded the comfortable confidence partially constitutive of a performance of cultural middle-class and did not seem to place any value on her technical skills in using the Internet. In contrast, the acquisition of these

technical skills seemed to be of paramount importance to **Kim** in increasing her self-esteem and enabling a completely new performance of self:

'yeah, my confidence to be able to do something that I ...I mean, at one stage there I thought this is all hieroglyphics and there's no way I'm at that level, no way. You know, I'm just this dumb person who sort of just walks around the house and vacuums, you know, to the point of like when people would come into the room or into my, my, WebSite or whatever and leave a message saying, Oh you know, "we thought it was really beautiful"... that was my stuff, that was like my heart stuff that somebody liked, you know. I wasn't getting the recognition sort of anywhere else and all of a sudden all of these people were saying "no no, you're doing really good there"... so, yeah, that sort of, that's what I meant, like, more confident for me, so... yeah'

**Kim** had initially been opposed to the idea of a home Internet connection. However, when **Trevor** bought a card giving 40 hours prepaid access, **Kim** was determined not to waste the hours. With **Trevor's** help, she learned how to access the Internet. Bored by being at home all day, she started visiting chat rooms. She made friends over the Internet, including some who taught her how to design web pages. As a result, at the time of research, **Kim** was in the process of starting a web-design business with two women whom she had met online and who live interstate. Each night they meet online to work on the 'True Blue Sheila's website' that they are developing.<sup>73</sup> At present, people can visit and download designs for themselves free of charge. However, they plan to make it a business and charge for downloads. The other two women are designers while **Kim** is basically the webmaster. She spends upwards of 30 hours a week on the Internet and has done web pages free of charge for small businesses in order to get a name for herself. **Kim's** new-found skills, acquired via the Internet, are a form of cultural capital and can be converted to economic capital, and perhaps, financial independence.

In addition, using the Internet has been a personally empowering experience. Because **Kim** values her new-found skills, it seems that she values herself more and is more assertive. She has booked an overseas trip to meet some of the people whom she has met online. A year earlier, she would not even have contemplated travelling overseas by herself. Like Jenny, **Kim** does not feel

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<sup>73</sup> 'True Blue' is a colloquial reference to being patriotically Australian. 'Sheila' is a slang term for an Australian woman.

connected to people who are geographically close and uses the Internet to link to a community of like minded people. She considers that this helps her to feel less isolated:

‘At the time when **Trevor** and I were having troubles and then I could sort of blast my words out onto a screen because I couldn't do it to anyone else. You know what I mean. Like no one wanted to listen to you on the telephone and... I had no one else so, yeah,

It seems that **Kim** places an enormous amount of significance on the Internet because when she was at home minding the children it was her ‘only link to the outside world’. She also considers that it has positively transformed her performance of self: ‘I wouldn't go back to the way I was... if you know what I mean’. Whereas Jenny Nicholls used the Internet as a way of exploring her interests, the Internet itself is an interest for **Kim**:

‘I used to be bored completely. I mean, I just don't like watching TV. There's a couple of shows on TV that I like to watch. I don't read, as I said before. Um... so, yeah, I would be just... frustrated. Bored,... do nothing... yeah...I mean, I used to go to bed at about half past nine at night, 10 o'clock at night bored, nothing to do. I mean, the kids go to bed at half past eight. From half past eight to whatever time, you're walking around going “well this is exciting”.’

‘I love it. It's better than watching... “Days Of Our Lives” or something like that.’

**Kim** has designed a personal home page of which she is very proud. It contains a glamorous photo of **Kim** looking quite unlike her appearance in the interviews as well as a flattering photo of herself as a teenager. **Kim** does not see any disjunction between how she performs herself online and her offline performance of self (although as I discuss in a later chapter, any references to, or pictures of her husband, are strikingly absent). The information on **Kim**'s home page relates to topics which are important to her, for example, her children, domestic violence and being Australian. For **Kim** being Australian has a lot of currency and she considers it important to promote Australia. In her house was a row of little china kangaroos and other cheap Australian souvenirs. **Kim** intended to send these to her new friends that she had met online and who lived overseas. The page also contains images of these friends and postcards that they have sent to her.

There is to date a paucity of literature on the cultural form that is the home page and even less that integrates analysis of the content of the page with any analysis of the offline author.<sup>74</sup> Stuart Hall (1981) has argued that cultural forms do not have fixed meanings; for example, he counters the idea that the novel is a 'bourgeois' form. Drawing on Hall, Frow argues that 'there is no one-to-one relationship between a class and a particular cultural form or practice.' (1995:173). Despite this, the data supported Bourdieu's contention that 'taste classifies and it classifies the classifier' (1984:7). Although the Internet as a whole has an ambiguous social status, it seems that chat rooms and home pages were classified by middle-class adults (who thereby classified or performed themselves as middle-class) as something to be distanced from.<sup>75</sup> **Kim** Sampson was proud of her home page and had received many compliments about it in her guest book. However, translated to middle-class currency, her web page could be interpreted as tacky and banal. There were no middle-class adults in the study who had home pages whereas home pages appeared to be a form of cultural capital for working class adults.

As well as being a matter of performance of cultural taste, it seems that the performance of self via a home page may be linked to a lack of political and cultural power. There were seven people in the study who had homepages (two males and five females). The homepage designed by Natalie Cole, aged 17, was a professional looking and technically sophisticated tribute to various movies in which Brad Pitt had starred. It was different from all the others in that the only personal detail on the page was Natalie's first name as the designer. All of the other homepages in the study (three by male and female working-class adults and three by male and female middle-class children) contained a picture of the author and expressed the author's political point of view as well as their interests. One could argue that as neither working-class adults nor children have much institutional power, the home pages in the study could be interpreted as a means of performing a self that has no public voice other than on the Internet.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> For example, Chandler and Roberts-Young (1998) found his sample online and interviewed them on line. Similarly, Miller (1995) trawled the Internet to find home pages.

<sup>75</sup> See the example of the Rileys in the next chapter.

<sup>76</sup> This accords with findings by Michael Pusey (2001) that it is working-class and lower middle-

Although much has been made of the possibility for performing a self online that bears no resemblance to the offline self,<sup>77</sup> the online performance of everybody in my research was an extension of their offline performance. In addition, from the nature of the home pages in the study, it could be argued that the type of online performance in a home page is constrained by the cultural resources available to the author offline. For example, an adult with a low level of educational attainment who performs as culturally working-class offline, is unlikely to have the cultural resources to present a home page that will pass as middle-class.<sup>78</sup>

### **Internet addiction: Does this mean that the Internet controls the performance of self?**

The case of **Kim** Sampson is a useful starting point for unpacking the notion of Internet addiction. In addition to enabling a new performance of self for **Kim**, it seems that there was a time when the Internet dictated **Kim**'s performance of self. **Kim** talked about friends of hers who were addicted to the Internet and would sleep next to the computer while still logged on to the Internet. She admitted that she could spend hours on the Internet, but she did not consider it to be a problem. She justified her time on the Internet as time well spent, describing how she would be working on ten pages at once and referring to all the other activities that she was engaged in whilst on the Internet:

**Kim:** 'I'm probably very chronic too, sort of, I could sit there and, and, like fourteen hours have gone by and I'll go "Oh dear, I should of eaten probably thirteen and a half hours ago" (*laughing with embarrassment*) I'm a bit chronic actually I mean, the only thing that stops me is, it is getting hungry (*more laughter*) or getting so tired that I can't actually physically type any more you know (*more laughter*) and that, that's me but... that would probably be my addiction, if you know what I mean, like, some people can go on you know, do the pokies for... three or four hours. I couldn't, it would bore me to tears. I mean I would be on their five minutes going, you know. On TV, I mean, I'm just, like this, (*indicates boredom*) I mean, it doesn't stimulate me at all. But on the Net, or even on the computer, it doesn't matter, you know whichever, regardless. Like on the Net, I

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class people, who identify as losers from economic reform, who listen to talkback radio.

<sup>77</sup> Take for example, the home page of the male indigenous artist Eddie Burrup. Eddie Burrup has no physical presence but is the creation of, and authored by, white woman Elizabeth Durack. ([www.ozpages.com/eddieburrup](http://www.ozpages.com/eddieburrup))

<sup>78</sup> This asymmetry in access to cultural resources has been discussed by Hall (1992).



can have, I'll have ten pages up. I mean I work on all the ten pages. I can't work on one. It's just too slow then, drive me crazy. I mean I have ten pages, if I can't have ten pages up there, I don't want to be up there at all, you know. It's got to be just like bang, bang, bang all the time, so that's me and I'm happy with that, so...

Viv: the time just goes

**Kim:** the time just goes you know, but in the meantime I've probably done the washing and the dishes and, and, you know, sort of like a page is loading up, I've gone off and done something else and I come back and thought "Oh well it's loaded now" and I finish doing that and then I go off and you know, put a log on the fire or whatever.'

Eventually **Kim** admitted that her Internet use had been a problem in the past when she was on the Internet from 9 o'clock in the morning until 2 a.m. the next morning.

**Kim:** 'Like I think that happened at the beginning, like, it, where, it did addict me. I was at the point where I didn't want to go shopping, I didn't want to go to work, I didn't want to go to sleep, I didn't want to do anything you know, like, I mean, we ate take away for, I don't know, (*laughing with embarrassment*) probably three months I suppose. Not really. But, like, you know, that's how it felt. That's not how things are now. I mean, certainly I did... I did, um, it was almost like, a sponge. It oh, I mean like I wanted to, there was so much stuff, I just wanted to know it now, I wanted to do it all now. I didn't want to do it in two weeks time, I wanted to do it now and... I'm past that now like, I can walk past it, I can turn this lot off now whereas if you had have been here before say, a year and a half ago, if you had been here before I would have been going (*she pretends to look at her watch with impatience*).'

**Kim** admitted that this amount of Internet use was excessive, but downplayed any effect this might have had on her children. When I asked her whether it affected the children, she replied that they were out playing and they were fine. I asked 'did they miss you?' and she said 'oh, you know, probably a little bit'.

**Trevor**, on the other hand, although he was very low-key in talking about **Kim's** excessive use of the Internet in the past, did consider that it had been a source of conflict as well as having had a negative effect on the children.

Many in the study mentioned Internet addiction. However, people mean different things by the term and have different benchmarks for defining what constitutes Internet addiction.<sup>79</sup> The data revealed that whether or not a person

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<sup>79</sup> For example the Centre for Online Addiction (<http://netaddiction.com/>) defines five different

considers that they (or someone else) are addicted to the Internet, or whether they consider it to be a problem, depends not only on the amount of time spent on the Internet. It also depends upon whether the time spent on the Internet is perceived as a legitimate use of time and whether the person considers that they are in control of their Internet use or that the Internet is dictating their performance of self.

For example, **Kim**'s son Dylan has multiple disabilities including defective hearing and motor skills. However, whereas he is unable to write letters, he is able to communicate on the Internet and visit sites of interest as well as play Battlenet, a multi-user game played over the Internet. His disabilities are less of a constraint to Internet use than many other activities and, perhaps as a consequence of this, he loves using the Internet:

Viv: If you could spend as much time on the Internet as you could, if you were allowed to, how long do you think you would spend on it?

Dylan: *laughing* till I had to go to bed

**Kim:** He would too

Viv: Do you get sick of sitting there though? I mean, do you think you'd want to go outside and do something else?

Dylan: *interrupting* 'No. um... last Friday, I sat there for about... how long?... for about... for about... nearly the afternoon and that was a long time. And near the night, I went out and got my pillows and just sat them on the chair so that I feel a lot comfortabler (*sic*)'

**Kim** is not concerned by the amount of time that Dylan spends on the Internet. She does not consider that he is addicted to the Internet; rather, she considers it a completely legitimate, and in fact valuable, use of his time:

Viv: do you have any worries about Dylan spending so long on the computer?

**Kim:** I don't, I don't, and I think that its really silly to say that he shouldn't... for him, he's not a sports person, he's not a person person. He won't get out and play with the kids, friends in the street. He won't go out and kick a ball or whatever, like, so, that's just him, and I can't push him to that. Kylie certainly, she could leave, I mean, she will be on the computer for ten or fifteen minutes and off, bored, that's it, not her, her style. But she'll go out into the street and kick a ball (*laughs embarrassedly*) you know what I

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types of Internet Addiction. However, my interest is not in official theories or definitions of Internet addiction but in the meanings that people give to the term.

mean. And Sue is the same, but Dylan, no, he will sit, he mesmerises... so, that's him and if it keeps him happy, then realistically the only thing that can go wrong is, well OK, he could strain his eyes, I mean, he could probably strain his eyes... but its still stimulating him, you know, particularly him. But, yeah, the only thing that does worry me is the fact that he's not playing any sport. But then he plays sport every Sunday now so... he's actually outside then. But if he wasn't, like, on the computer he would just be sitting in front of the TV with his thumb in his mouth. So, like, to me, he might as well be on the computer, actually physically doing something than just sitting there going, you know... that's another wall... So... yeah... so... but that's Dylan'

**Kim's** attitude to Dylan's use is partly to do with her assessment of the type of activities in which Dylan is able to participate. However, I would suggest that it is also because she considers her own Internet use to be a legitimate use of time. In complete contrast **Bridget** Nicholls always feels guilty when she uses the Internet at home and expresses concern about Jenny using the Internet for an hour or two a day: 'I think Jenny is probably on it a bit too long and should do something perhaps different'.

That judgements about frequency of use are completely subjective is illustrated by the following statement where **Cynthia** describes the frequency of Janes' Internet use: 'She's constantly on it. I mean she's on it on a, on a...at least once every couple of days.'

In most households someone mentioned the threat of Internet addiction. Stories were told about acquaintances who were addicted to the Internet or references were made to other members of the family having been addicted in the past. However no one identified her/his-self as being currently addicted to the Internet.<sup>80</sup> Being addicted to the Internet implies that one has a lack of control over her/his performance(s) of self. It appeared that people did not want to posit the Internet as having control over them or a family member unless it was presented as a problem that had existed in the past and had now been overcome. For example, the Moser family were all very low-key about the Internet's relevance to their family, although they spoke about other people being addicted. **Rod** Moser spoke casually of the Internet as 'just another tool to play with'. However, once the tape was turned off, he admitted that he did

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<sup>80</sup> This is similar to Morley's (1995) finding that people always talked about others being

get a bit addicted to it initially, clocking up a \$300 bill in the first month of access. **Rod** seems to be aware that he needs some assistance to limit his time on the Internet. He has reduced the amount of access to a plan of two hours a day (described by his wife **Iris** as 'self-regulating') even though the four hour a day plan is virtually the same cost. He has also done things to help manage his time, such as put a timer on the screen. **Rod** does not defend his use of the Internet as a legitimate use of time and hence refers to himself as being addicted during the time that he was spending a lot of hours on the Internet.

In contrast, **Reg** Scott defended spending several hours on the Internet every night until early morning. He considered that this was a legitimate use of time as he was using the Internet to learn things and only using it at a time when he would normally be sleeping. His sons considered that this was not a legitimate use of time as it was taking away from the time that he spent with his wife **Beryl**. She considered that it stopped him going out and doing other things and referred to him as being 'hooked' on it: 'I don't know how you can justify it. But that's his choice I guess. I mean, wouldn't be my choice; people are different' In other words, **Reg**'s family did not regard the Internet as a cultural resource in the same way as did **Reg**, the 'Internet addict'.

From the Canberra study, it is impossible to make any sort of generalisation about the sort of person who considered that extensive Internet use was legitimate. However, it seems that regardless of the amount of time spent on the Internet, it was whether the user considered that they were still in control and/or whether they considered that the Internet was a legitimate use of time that determined whether or not they would perceive their Internet use to be an addiction.

### **Technical mastery as a resource in the performance of self**

Just as people placed different values on using the Internet, so people placed different values on technical skills. I have discussed how **Kim**'s technical skills seemed to be a source of self-esteem. These skills have a practical significance as she hopes to be able to earn money from them, and they enable

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'television zombies', never themselves.

her to refer to herself as a web-designer rather than just a housewife. Whereas **Kim** wanted to learn how to use the Internet for functional reasons, some people placed value on having these skills for their own sake. In the following examples, I show how various people valued technical mastery in and of itself as a form of cultural capital that could be converted into either symbolic or social capital, as well as being a source of personal self-esteem.

Skeggs (1997) refers to the working-class lads in Willis' (1977) study who value 'macho, physical hardness'. Although this has no currency in their paid employment, it can be used to gain power (but not capital) in relationships with women. I observed this phenomenon in three of the working class families in my study. The interests and physical disposition of **Andy** Holcroft, **Trevor** Sampson and **Don** Ruyton (all of whom I would describe as 'Aussie blokes') indicated that they valued 'macho, physical hardness.' In the case of **Andy** and **Trevor**, it seemed that technical mastery of the Internet was a source of self-esteem as well as a way of gaining power in their relationship with their wives. **Don** Ruyton did not actually have Internet skills but tried to appropriate the benefits through various tactics. Before discussing **Don's** tactics,<sup>81</sup> I will discuss the case of **Trevor**.

**Trevor** Sampson, whose ICQ nickname is Toolman<sup>82</sup> talks about the Internet as an arena where he can feel like he is achieving something such as learning more about how to use Internet software, progressing through a game like Battlenet, or finding music that he likes. He talks about using the Internet in terms of it being a challenge:

'Ah, yeah, I just go around looking for songs I like. If I hear a song on the radio, I'll go and see if I can find it. Bit of a challenge, sort of, you know trying to find the right site that's got it. And trying to download and stuff like that.'

**Trevor** plans to have a home page which **Kim** will help him design. He has no ideas yet about the content. However, that is secondary to meeting the

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<sup>81</sup> Skeggs (1997:10) draws on de Certeau to describe tactics as the 'constant manipulatio(n) of events to turn them into possibilities'.

<sup>82</sup> There did not seem to be deliberate sexual connotations in this choice of nickname. **Trevor** claimed that its significance was in the fact that he is a mechanic.

technical challenge involved in creating a home page. His main motivation for the homepage is for personal achievement; he does not care if people look at it or not:

Viv: So what would be your main motivation for putting up a home page?

**Trevor:** Oh, just... something that's going to achieve something. You know what I mean. At the moment, I've been saying, for I don't know how long, that I want to put up a web page. And so far I just haven't had a chance to do it (*laughs*) and its annoying the crap out of me. I want to build one but I just... (*gestures to show that he doesn't have enough time*)

Viv: does the fact that people will look at it, does that aspect...

**Trevor:** it doesn't worry me. If they want to look at it, they can look at it. If they don't want to look at it, they don't have to

Viv: no, but doesn't that sort of excite you, that possibility, that you can have something up there that other people can...

**Trevor:** (*interrupting*) yeah, it does, in a little way. It doesn't, you know, I,... its something that I want to be able to do myself and say that I've done it. I mean, that's basically for personal achievement, nothing more. If someone had said "no one looks at it", I don't care, you know. As long as I'm happy and its there, then that's as far as it goes.

**Trevor** spends a lot of his spare time assisting people with computer problems and in this way he converts his technical skills into social capital. It is possible that he also values technical skills as a form of symbolic capital to increase his power in the relationship with **Kim**. **Kim** seemed to be uncomfortable with the fact that she was more skilled in using Internet software than **Trevor**. In general, she seemed very hesitant to talk about her having more expertise on the Internet than **Trevor** and would always qualify any mention of her skills with the rider that **Trevor** has the hardware and programming skills.

Whereas **Trevor** and **Andy** actually are proficient at using the Internet, **Don** uses tactics to appropriate the benefits of technical mastery, rather than being technically proficient himself. **Don** and **Pauline** Ruyton live in an expensive house but have low levels of educational attainment and display working-class cultural capital in their personal style, and the style of their house. **Don** is often away from home driving his transport; when at home, he potters in his shed. **Pauline** possesses feminine cultural capital and seemed extremely friendly and

anxious to please.<sup>83</sup> She works in a service industry in the afternoons and also types **Don**'s business correspondence for him. In addition, she does all the household chores.

I found **Don** to be quite defensive during the interview and observed that he employed various tactics during the interview to present himself as being the head of the household. These tactics, described below, involved representing himself as having control over the Internet. I contend that he tried to appropriate technical mastery as a form of cultural capital that he could convert into symbolic power in the household.

As the following exchange shows, **Don** had very little understanding of the Internet. The context for this extract of dialogue is that Jane has just told how she sometimes likes to look up television shows to see what happens in advance.

**Don:** Where do you, what, where do you dial for that?

Jane: You don't. You just search for it

**Don:** Yeah?

*Silence while **Don** tries to digest this then everyone laughs*

**Don:** What, do you dial-up Home and Away or something, do you or what?

**Jane:** Yeah, you just say the title and then you press search.

**Don:** Oh.

**Don** seemed reluctant to disclose his level of ignorance about the Internet. He claimed to have 'dialled up' a few web addresses but did not know how to search for anything. When it became obvious that he knew almost nothing about the Internet, he tried to downplay its significance and hence the need to know about it. For example, he referred to the Internet dismissively as just a 'novelty thing' and told me that he preferred using the fax to using email. He also tried to rewrite his lack of skill in using the Internet as something positive, an indication that he used his time well; he could learn how to do different things on the Internet but 'I've got better things to do'. In addition, he was at pains to

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<sup>83</sup> Skeggs (1997) considers that femininity can be seen as a form of cultural capital. I would add that it is only valued when associated with women's bodies and that there are a range of types of feminine cultural capital, valued differently according to the social field.

point out that it was his idea to have an Internet connection; this contradicted **Pauline's** account. To some extent, **Pauline** validated **Don's** tactics by painting **Don** as being the technical expert and speaking proudly of how he had worked out (with Jane) how to install a game. In the interviews, **Don** only ever referred to **Pauline** as 'my wife' and **Pauline** only ever referred to **Don** as 'my husband.' It seems that **Don** constructed himself as having control over the Internet, and **Pauline** to some extent colluded with this, so as not to destabilise the performance of traditional gender relations in the household.

In much of the literature, technical mastery is seen as a valued form of cultural capital when associated with a male body. However, the data suggests that such performances are not the exclusive preserve of males. In the Arlington household, it is the woman who appropriates technical mastery to gain personal power in her relationship with her son. **Elsbeth** and Wayne seemed to have a similar level of Internet skills. The following exchange is just one example of how in the household interview, **Elsbeth** tried to position herself as having greater Internet skills as a way of gaining power in her relationship with her son. I asked Wayne to rate his Internet skills:

Wayne: Yes, I suppose I'm about seven out of ten.

**Elsbeth**: I'd put you at about a six love.

Wayne: Oh thanks.

**Elsbeth**: (*patronising tone*) Well there's a lot... you see, you don't know what you don't know until someone shows you you don't know it. And then you realise, Oh well, I didn't know that. So I can see what you don't know you see. So... you're a six. You wouldn't be any lower.

Spender (1995) and Herring, Johnson et al. (1995) suggest that men have some sort of patriarchal investment in maintaining control of a technology by keeping women in the dark about how to use it. In the Canberra study it was not so straightforward.

Both Natalie Cole and Jenny Nicholls had designed technically sophisticated web pages. However they did not seem to value the technical skills per se, but placed more value on the purpose of their skills, namely the content. As I will



now argue, technical mastery had currency for Diana Garling, aged 17. She described herself: 'I'm a wannabe computer nerd... I would love to know everything about computers'.

Diana does not go out much at all and regularly visits a teen romance chat room. Although she only spends a couple of hours a week online, she considered that most of her social life is conducted online and claimed that she would spend 24 hours a day online if she had the chance. She is lacking in confidence and self-esteem about both her appearance and her intelligence and, although outgoing, she finds it easier to talk to people on the Internet 'because they don't know what I look like'. She considers that her appearance is not an issue online 'because, like people who meet me in person, they think, oh, she's fat, she's ugly, I don't want to be friends with her. But there's a lot of people on the Internet who don't care what you look like.' Even so, she lies about her appearance in online communication, writing that she has an athletic build.

One possible interpretation of this behaviour is that online, Diana has the cultural capital of a teenage girl, with interests in boys and pop groups. Femininity is a discursive position that is available to Diana online and can be converted into social capital. However, Diana does not possess embodied feminine cultural capital (in her appearance and demeanour). This means that offline, femininity is not available to her in the same way. Hence, she aspires to be a computer nerd; technical skills are a form of cultural capital that do not need to be associated with a physical performance of femininity to be valued.

It should be noted that appearance is not just valuable as cultural capital when associated with a female body. Wayne is 13 years old but looks much younger; he is studious looking, a little bit chubby, and very quiet. He describes himself as half-in-half shy/outgoing and he does not play any sports. Just as femininity is not a discursive position that Diana can successfully inhabit offline, masculinity is not a discursive position that Wayne can successfully inhabit offline. Online, however, Wayne has taken the name of a powerful James Bond character, and online he is 17 years old. Like Diana, Wayne considers that it is easier to get to know people through chat than in real life 'because usually people in chat rooms don't know what you look like so they don't really care... and like all they really want to know is about your personality and so (*trails off*)'.

In all of the previous examples, the Internet was considered an important resource in the performance of self (although respondents did not use the term 'performance of self'). I now turn to analyse those cases where the Internet was not mobilised as a resource in the performance of self. First, I examine those cases where there were constraints to enlisting the Internet as a resource in the performance of self.

### **Constraints to mobilising the Internet as a resource in the performance of self**

The preceding discussion shows how complex is the relationship between technical mastery and gender. Just as there is a literature associating technical mastery with males or masculinity, there is a literature associating technical incompetence with females or femininity (Cockburn 1994; Turkle 1995). Hence many studies of gender and technology highlight the fact that women's technological skills and their confidence in their skills are less than men's. For example, Morley (1986) found that most women in his sample claimed no understanding of machinery and thus did not trust themselves to operate the video. Cockburn interprets technical incompetence, when associated with female bodies, as an integral aspect of Western femininity. In my research, there were no examples of women using technical incompetence as a form of currency that could be translated into either cultural capital or interpersonal power although, as I have discussed, **Pauline** Ruyton paints **Don** as having technical mastery over the Internet as a way of maintaining traditional gender relations. Some commentators have explicitly associated technophobia with women, considering that women exhibit technophobia as a way of enlisting femininity as a tradeable resource (Cockburn 1994). This was not evident in the Canberra study. The only women who were actually scared of the computers were the Holcrofts and as the following discussion shows, this could be interpreted as an effect of the way that **Andy** controlled the computer rather than an investment in feminine cultural capital.

**Lyn** described herself as 'a shy person, a shy person and, and lacking, lacking in confidence'. She lived with her husband **Andy** and their two daughters, aged 17 and 15. Andy worked as a tradesperson and she worked in a semi-skilled

service occupation and did all of the housework. Culturally, they presented as working class. **Lyn** had never used the Internet and expressed contradictory views about whether she thought that it would be easy to learn or too difficult. She considered that she was frightened of the Internet, but she also considered that it looked easy; she was sure that she could learn if someone showed her how. 'I lack confidence in myself, I'd probably end up thinking Oh I couldn't do that, you know, I'm pretty stupid, Oh I wouldn't be able to do it. But I'd probably surprise myself, I probably would be able to do it, its just making that first move.'

However, **Lyn's** computer skills were very basic; she had only just learned how to use a mouse. Her fear of the computer seemed to be partly due to her lack of familiarity with computers and also due to **Andy's** impatient attitude when it comes to showing her how to do anything on the computer. This reinforced her sense of being quite stupid.

When **Andy** was out of the room, **Lyn** and her two daughters all referred to the fact that they were frightened of computers. The daughters explicitly blamed their father for their fear as he would yell at them if they did things like hit the wrong key.

'No, I think it does look easy, I've just never, I need someone to show me how to start to use it and then I need the confidence, I'm really quite frightened of computers... But that comes with just that knowledge.' (**Lyn** Holcroft)

**Lyn** was very enthusiastic about what she would look up if she had the knowledge and the ability; she had a particular interest in gruesome, forensic sites. Even though she expressed a desire to learn about the Internet, she and **Andy** both considered that it was not a viable option for **Andy** to show **Lyn** how to use the Internet; both agreed that he would be a terrible teacher. The current situation was that **Andy** was the only one who knew the password and knew how to use the Internet. It seemed like this was an extension of the traditional gender relations that existed in the home. **Lyn** was complicit in her husband's control of the Internet and refusal to show her or her daughters how to use it. This situation compounded her fear and anxiety about using the Internet. The trade-off was perhaps that traditional gender relations in the home were not disrupted.

## **Cultural capital through not mobilising the Internet as a resource in performances of the self**

According to Buckingham, Harvey et al.:

'access is not just to do with technology, but also to do with cultural capital, that is, with the cultural skills and competencies that are needed to use that technology creatively and productively. Here again, research suggests that middle-class children have significant advantages, as a result of their parents' greater experience of computers at work and their involvement in other social networks'. (1999:12)

This may be true but whether people will use the technology, and in what way, depends on the meanings given to use. I now move to discuss some of the cases where people have access to the Internet but do not use it (or particular aspects of it) because they do not value this use as a form of acquiring social or cultural capital. As I only have detailed data on those people who lived in homes with Internet connections, my analysis of non-use of the Internet is not intended to be comprehensive. Nevertheless, it does give an indication of the complexity involved in considering questions of access.

With regard to television viewing, Morley (1986) argues that it is not just preferences that determine actual viewing practices; there are other factors that constrain the satisfaction of preferences, such as desired programs being on at an unsuitable time. The case of **Lyn** Holcroft could be construed as an example of a constraint that prevents the satisfaction of preferences; in this case **Lyn** is unable to acquire the technical skills necessary to access the Internet. In general, however, I would argue that the situation is more complex than just being a matter of preferences subject to constraints. People's own preferences may be contradictory and act as constraints on their own behaviour. For example, there were males and females, adults and children who considered that they would like to create a home page but they did not have the technical skills. Generally, these were middle-class people who were confident in using the Internet and who could easily have acquired the technical skills. However, they told me that they could not be bothered investing the time and energy necessary to acquire the technical skills. This could suggest that they did not value the technical skills as cultural capital. (This also supports my contention that home pages were not a form of cultural capital for middle-class people. Middle-class individuals who had a passing interest in the idea of

having a home page may have been disinclined to actually put one on the web because of potential conflict with a middle-class performance.) Unlike the working class males discussed earlier, those middle-class men who were very interested in technical aspects of the workings of computers and the Internet did not seem to place any value on their technical mastery as a form of cultural capital. These two observations further support my contention that technical skills, in and of themselves, were a valued form of working class cultural capital, but not a valued form of middle class cultural capital.

I observed similar class differences in relation to meeting new people online. In the Canberra study, those who used the Internet to meet other people were either adults with working class cultural capital or children. It seemed that the acquisition of online social capital was not valued as a legitimate form of middle-class social capital for adults. As I show below, **David** Blackburn, the only middle-class adult who acquired online social capital, was at pains to point out that this capital had no value at all to him.

**David** Blackburn, a university educated middle manager displayed middle-class cultural capital in his disposition and his home. He uses the Internet for an average of between half an hour and an hour a day, writing letters to the extended family, banking, paying bills and just surfing. He visits news sites and reference sites and likes to just 'roam around and look at things. Like you would sit and click through a magazine'. In addition, he visits chat rooms. He seemed a bit embarrassed to disclose the fact that he visits chat rooms. He described his involvement with chat rooms as like playing a game:

'Some people enjoy computer games and they bore me to tears but I find a chat room a bit like a game in that I can, by putting in a comment, its interesting to see the response I get, and then I respond to that. It's a bit of a game to see how people respond to comments.'

He has had interesting conversations with a few people in the chat rooms and has established some sort of connection but he makes no effort to maintain any of these connections, either through email or the chatroom. He considers that these are people with whom he would not normally interact. Basically, it seems that he has a voyeuristic fascination in observing the chat exchanges, and he participates in them if he is in the mood. However, although he participates as a married man with two kids, there is a level of detachment from who he is in real life. He does not consider that this is an authentic performance of self. The

'real' him observes the whole thing and is somewhat scornful of those who engage the 'real' them in chat. **David** is like the urban flaneur described by Featherstone; a stroller 'who play(s) with and celebrate(s) the artificiality, randomness and superficiality of the fantastic melange of fictions and strange values which are to be found in the fashions and popular cultures of cities.' (Featherstone 1991:24)<sup>84</sup> **David** was the only person in the Canberra study whose consumption of the Internet matched the idea of Internet use as a form of mobile privatisation (Williams 1974); that is, the idea that users are tourists of cyberspace while remaining in their private realm.

### **Enlisting the Internet as a resource for the accumulation of social capital**

I also observed a difference in the meanings that people gave to the Internet as a form of communication. Various studies report that the Internet has a socially isolating impact (Nie and Erbring 2000). The data in my study did not support this conclusion in any way. Those who used the Internet for long periods of time were generally engaged in some form of computer-mediated communication. There were, however, six people in the study who expressed a clear preference for voice communication (face-to-face or phone) with people who resided locally; some of them expressing a preference for talking to someone 'in person'. Altman (1990) has shown the historical contingency of the concept of 'in person'. When it first became available, the telephone was not considered to be proper communication, whereas now it is generally regarded as a method for communicating 'in person'. This suggests that as the Internet becomes more commonly used as a means of communication, ICQ, chat and personal emails may be more generally considered a valid form of communication. As would be expected, those who expressed this idea that communication over the Internet is not as desirable as face-to-face communication were all adults, five females and one male. **Marlene** Davis clearly articulates this position in the following statement about her attitude to her children's use of the Internet:

'I prefer to see them go out and play directly with the person or interact directly with another person rather than interact by the Internet. Given that there is no reason to play with someone over the Internet when you can do it directly.'

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<sup>84</sup> In the literature, the association between Internet user and urban flaneurs has usually been made in terms of the practice of surfing the Internet, rather than visiting chat rooms.

Children, and males, in particular, used email as an additional way of communicating with friends they saw on an almost daily basis. Email was seen to have particular advantages over face-to-face communication or the telephone. Children who did not have the mobility to meet their friends in person were able to use email to communicate with their friends in private. Several boys mentioned emailing executable attachments, such as messagemates and screen savers to their friends as a way of sharing in a humour that was generally quite coarse. It was not just children who used email in this way. For example, **Andy** Holcroft recounts:

‘Oh, I email all the...if we get ... , what gets around, the jokes or funny graphics, or something, you might email out to all the people you know out there. Those things go around and you might want to say “look I’m going down for a beer on Friday night” and send it off to the boys and they come back and say ‘yeah righto, no worries’..., just for contact like that.’

As I have shown, for some people (including both teenage boys and girls), the chat rooms were a way of meeting new people and making new friends who would perhaps become offline friends as well. In other words, participation in chat rooms was a way of accruing social capital. There were others in the study (all happened to be outgoing teenage boys) for whom a different type of participation in chat rooms was a way of gaining social capital amongst their offline friends. Four of the teenage boys told of how they would prearrange with their friends to meet online in a particular chat room at a particular time, or would gather physically with their friends to visit a chat room. The purpose of the activity was to ‘pay people out’ or ‘give them a bit of abuse’. Some of this was particularly targeted at women. For example, some of the older boys had visited ‘sort of dirty’ chat rooms, making up names for themselves or pretending to be women. Oliver described how he and his friends had established a regular conversation with a particular woman who always seemed to be online: ‘Eventually we realised that this lady didn’t really have a life. This is what she did, so we kind of, it was kind of mean, but we kind of took the piss out of her, paid her out.’

Daniel’s description of the activity is reminiscent of the childish practice of ringing doorbells and then running away. He considers that ‘there’s an advantage because you can just do anything and not really get caught... like... not bad stuff but run around teasing people and running off’. This seemed to be one of the main attractions for

this sort of behaviour; the fact that you could engage in it and not be caught. All considered that in chat rooms they said things that they would never dream of saying to someone face to face.

Tapscott (1998) came across these type of pranks in his online research but does not refer to the gender of the pranksters. It seems relevant to comment on the fact that in my study, only boys were engaged in this type of behaviour. One could argue that this aggressive type of behaviour is a legitimated form of cultural capital in the field of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995).

### **Distancing one's performance of self from the Internet**

I conclude the discussion of the data with an example of the Internet mobilised as a functional resource for the performance of self at the same time as the user disidentified himself from Internet use. This example shows that it cannot be assumed that symbolic significance of use is equivalent to its functional significance. For a period in seventeen year-old Jim Riley's life, the Internet had enormous functional significance in enabling him to communicate effectively:

'A while ago I was having lots of problems talking because of some illness or something and I used the email a lot then to communicate with my girlfriend. Because I couldn't... a lot of the time I couldn't talk, but after that, I haven't really used the Internet at all... I think I have occasionally.'

In the interview, Jim expressed disinterest in the Internet and a dislike for email, homepages and surfing. He basically just used the Internet as a tool in his study. One can only speculate as to the reasons. It could be that for him the Internet has associations with his time of illness. Regardless of the precise reasons, despite its crucial functional significance in the past, the Internet had no place in his everyday performance of self. Jim only mentioned this near the end of the interview because I was questioning him specifically about the Internet.

### **Chapter conclusion**

Use of the Internet can only be understood in terms of the meanings given to it. The meanings given to use depend on the discursive position that the user inhabits. In other words, the nature of, and meanings given to, this use constitutes part of the performance of self.



In this chapter, I have shown how domestic use (and non-use) of the Internet as well as the *meanings* given to use (and non-use) can participate in the performance of self. I have also shown how the Internet can transform performances of self and how the 'same' use can have different meanings for the performance of self and different currency according to the cultural field in which the user is operating.

The Internet participates in the performance of self, while simultaneously the meanings given to use (or non-use) participate in the performance of the Internet. In other words, the relationship between the self and the Internet is an ongoing process that is mutually constitutive.

## Chapter 5: The Internet's involvement in the performance of the family

### Introduction: the relationship between the family and technology

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. Books with titles such as *Life and Death on the Internet: how to protect your family on the World Wide Web*, *The Parent's Guide to Protecting Your Children in Cyberspace* and *Making the Internet family friendly* both produce and reflect a popular understanding of the Internet as a potential destroyer of the family.

Similar fears were initially expressed about the television. Early studies on the impact of the television on the family argued that the presence of the television decreased conversation and face-to-face interaction (see Kubey, 1990) (for a review of this literature). At the other extreme is the idea that people have complete control over the technology. For example, Lull (1990) describes how people actively use television to achieve a wide range of social and personal objectives. In the edited collection *World Families Watch Television* (Lull 1988), his position is slightly different. There he concludes that there are constant dialectical processes at the level of the culture, the household and the individual. This means that 'while certain homogenising tendencies of television and video appear throughout the world, world families also watch television distinctively within their own cultures' (Lull 1988:259). Similarly, (as I described in chapter 3), Silverstone and Haddon (1996) view consumers as active in their use of a technology, arguing that a technology introduced to a household will be incorporated into that household in a way that preserves the existing 'moral economy'.

I have suggested that neither a technologically deterministic account nor an account that ascribes complete control to the consumer adequately explains the data in the Canberra study. For example, 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, as I have demonstrated, although people were active users of the Internet, there was an instance 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. As I showed in chapter 3, the way in which the Internet is used in a particular household is an effect of the household's performance of the family in the particular household environment. At the same time, the way the Internet is used helps to constitute the performance of family. The data also shows that the relation between the technology and the performance of family in a particular household is not stable but can change over time. Hence, 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. Any appearance of stability masks the complex daily negotiations that maintain a particular version of the family.

In this chapter, I use data from my research project to argue that in household families, the relationship between the Internet and the performance of family is mutually constitutive. For heuristic purposes, I borrow a framework developed in the field of psychology to divide the performance of family into different dimensions and use the data to demonstrate that with regard to each dimension of the performance of family the relationship between the Internet and the family is mutually constitutive.

First I explain more fully what I mean by the term 'family', situating my usage against common sociological conceptions of the family.

### **What counts as a family: some sociological conceptions**

Many commentators have pointed to the lack of consensus about what a family is. When Trost conducted a study in Sweden asking people about their concept of the family, he observed a high degree of variability: 'Indeed the variation is almost overwhelming... What is familiar is the term only, certainly not the concept' (1990:431).

In her book *The Anti-Social Family* co-authored with Barrett, McIntosh argues that the family is:

'as much a collective fantasy as a concrete institution, yet the privileged place this fantasy gives to familial relations and the way in which other ties of intimacy and support are

devalued and undermined mean that it has very real - and very negative - social effects'. (McIntosh 1996:149)

A similar point from a more positive point of view is made by Bittman and Pixley (1997) who argue that the 'myth' of the normative family has actual effects such as 'normative expectations of warm, harmonious and unbreakable bonds of family'.

The structure of the taxation system and welfare payments provides an incentive to conform to a particular ideological type of domestic family arrangement (Bourdieu 1998). This type is invariably the 'modern' family, 'an intact nuclear household unit composed of a male breadwinner, his full-time homemaker wife, and their dependent children' (Stacey 1990:5) or a variant, where the wife also works. It is often unproblematically assumed that this particular form of family is the natural form of the family, and hence it is sentimentalised as the 'traditional' family (Stacey 1990). In this type of family, members are linked by legally recognised kinship ties and relations of mutual obligation. 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.<sup>85</sup> It has been shown that this conception of the family is so pervasive that it is held even by those whose own experience of family does not fit it (O'Brien, Alldred et al. 1996). This traditional conception of the family has, however, been challenged by studies that emphasise the diversity of family forms and the negotiated nature of kinship ties in contemporary families (Giddens 1992; Weeks 1991; Beck-Gernsheim 1998; O'Brien 1996). The term 'postmodern families' is used by Valentine (1999) and Stacey to mirror the diversity of these arrangements, although Stacey uses the term to refer specifically to household arrangements.

Various commentators link different types of families with different stages of capitalism. For example, Haraway (1987) argues that we have entered a post-modern era of multinational capitalism, where the heterosexual family shaped by the family wage is giving way to women-headed households.

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<sup>85</sup> See Barrett and McIntosh (1982) for a critique of this analysis.

Beck (1992) and Giddens (1992) also link their analysis of the conditions of late modernity to their analysis of families, extending notions of detraditionalisation and the rise of the individual to families. Both Beck and Giddens have argued that the family is decreasing in importance as individuals negotiate relationships that last only as long as there is mutual benefit. Beck considers that families are breaking apart as a result of individualisation and the requirements of the labour market. He considers that there is a contradiction between the labour market's demand for mobility and the requirements of marriage and family. However, he does not address the fact that there is an increase in people working from home.<sup>86</sup> In Beck's view, as women enter the labour market and gain financial independence, there is no incentive for them to participate in what he refers to as the feudal roles of nuclear families. He suggests that men and women experiment with new types of families. One emergent form of family is the 'negotiated provisional family'. It is negotiated in that men and women do not follow traditional gender roles but negotiate the parameters of their relationship. It is provisional in that it can be cancelled at any time. It is also exclusively heterosexual. A limitation of Beck's analysis is that it relies upon the 'fact' that relationships are between people of the opposite sex. Beck dismisses homosexuality as an ascribed characteristic of an individual rather than including same-sex relationships as just another type of relationship negotiated between two people of the same sex.

In a similar vein to Beck, Giddens argues that relationships are being transformed. Giddens characterises four types of contemporary heterosexual marriage. These are the companionate marriage which is similar to friendship, marriage as a home base where neither partner has much emotional involvement with the other, co-dependence and the pure relationship (or an approximation to it). Giddens defines a pure relationship as when:

'a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it'.  
(1992:58)

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<sup>86</sup> The number of employed adults with a teleworking agreement increased from 100,000 to 400,000 between May 1998 and May 1999. (ABS 2000)

Both Beck and Giddens have been critiqued on political grounds as well as for not being grounded in empirical research. For example, Jamieson (1999) locates Giddens as part of popular discourse and argues that there is a gap between this and everyday life. She also considers that Giddens view is associated with and contributes to therapeutic discourses that disempower lesbians and gays as well as laying blame on individual women rather than acknowledging the constraints of dominant gender relations.

Jones and Wallace use empirical data to critique Beck arguing that, far from being free to negotiate the parameters of their relationships, people are still suffering from patterns of inequality, 'rooted in capitalist and patriarchal social structures' (1990:154). Lash (1994) also critiques Beck, arguing that he ignores the position of economic dependency that many women with children are in with respect to men. However, in their analysis of the rise of lone mother families, Roseneil and Mann (1996) side with Beck and Giddens against Lash in suggesting that, even within constraining social circumstances, women can exercise agency and choose to bring up a child without depending upon a male partner. However, they attribute the growth of this preference for sole motherhood to feminism rather than just individualisation.

### **The family as subjective experience or cultural practices**

As Valentine argues, given its ideological content it is 'intensely problematic to retain the term "family" at all' (1999:494). However, 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 (1998b) 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 the number and proportion of (heterosexual) couple families with dependent children has been declining. In 1996, one fifth of all families with dependent children were one-parent families and this proportion has been increasing steadily over recent years (ABS 1996 Census of Population and Housing). Although this data could be taken to indicate a change in the composition of families, Bittman and Pixley (1997) use similar data to argue that Australian families are not changing significantly. They critique the use of cross-sectional data to look at family composition, arguing that households that are not currently nuclear households may have been in the past, or may be in the future. They contend that the decline in the nuclear family apparent from time series cross-sectional data is an artefact of an increase in the ageing population and decreased fertility rates. They argue that the nuclear family is alive and well although they acknowledge the growth of sole-parent households. However, any analysis of family using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics is limited by the fact that the data only counts families that contain a male and a female partner.

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. Bernardes points out that even then, the term is used differently by the same person in different contexts. For example, it can be used to mean one's household, an extended kin network or what Bernardes refers to as 'some image of solidarity' (1988:268). This notion of the 'family' as an association that by virtue of its existence protects its members from the outside is a long-standing one, having precedents in the Mafia and the Christian community (Maffesoli 1996).

In an American study, Weston (1991) argues that whereas being non-heterosexual used to be identified with renouncing the family, now gay identity is associated with a particular type of family. Similarly Weeks, Donovan et al. (1999) draw explicitly from the thesis of detraditionalisation to document how gay men and lesbians are constructing 'families of choice' in Britain. 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. Weeks, Donovan et al. (1999) and Weston (1991) use of the term 'family' reflects cultural practices and biological connection is not a necessary characteristic.

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 and Weeks, Donovan et al. and Weston's use. 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. I use the term 'performance of family' 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,<sup>87</sup> 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 as a way of thinking about the family'.<sup>88</sup> Fortier (1999) draws on Butler (1990, 1993) to argue that ethnicity is performative rather than natural;<sup>89</sup> 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. For example, in a study of how lesbian mothers talk about their families, Lewin (1997) found that despite the non-traditional structure of their families, lesbian mothers had relatively traditional notions of 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:

Family dynamics are expressed and managed through shared goals, family myths, rules and routines, conflicts and tensions.' (Lunt and Livingstone 1992:76)

Although often conflated in much of the sociological literature, the household is not the same as the family (Wilson and Pahl 1988). Whereas families are the 'ambiguous symbolic terrain in which kinship is represented', households are 'the residential units of daily life' (Stacey 1990:279). 'Families exist within and between households and not all households contain families.' (O'Brien, Alldred et al. 1996:84)

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<sup>87</sup> 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.

<sup>88</sup> Note that the concept of 'performance of family' does not make sense when applied to Bourdieu's (1996) objective social category of family. I use the term as it relates to people's experiences of family.

<sup>89</sup> Fortier's work is on the formation of Italian émigré culture.

The family has typically been the site of investigation in studies of technological impact, while studies of the consumption of technology often focus on the household as a unit of consumption (for example Silverstone and Hirsch 1992 and Lunt and Livingstone 1992). In my research, I investigated household families, that is households which contained at least one child and where at least one member defined themselves as constituting at least part of a family. This is not a conflation of household with family; rather I am just looking at that part of a family that is in a household. 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.

### **Who is a child?**

Just as there is no universal agreement as to what counts as a family, so 'there is no universal agreement as to when a child ceases to be a child and becomes an adult.' (Gittins 1998:3) It is only recently that childhood has been recognised as socially constructed rather than a universal phenomenon. Psychological development models based on socialisation theories tend to dominate theories of childhood and everyday thinking (Prout and James 1990; Scott, Jackson et al. 1988). According to these development models the child is an asocial being who evolves through successful socialisation into a functioning adult. These theories ignore the agency of the child, the interpretative world of the child and the cultural environment of the child. Studies of information and communication technologies typically take a development view. For example, Kubey (1990), Desmond, Singer et al. (1990) and Alexander (1990) all emphasise the importance of television in socialising a child.

Prout and James (1990) spell out some of the conditions for the emergence of a sociology of childhood which allows for the agency of children while also acknowledging the existence of childhood as an institution. The problems in articulating a sociological theory of childhood seem similar to those involved in articulating a sociological theory of gender; namely, avoiding essentialism with respect to a child's age, while acknowledging the differences between the bodies of children and adults. Prout and James argue that the absence of a sociological theory of childhood (Alanen 1994 also points to this absence) has

silenced children just as inattention to gender silenced women. In a later book, James, Jenks et al. (1998) articulate a theory of childhood which allows for four discourses of childhood. These are the social structural child, where children are seen as a structural category present in every social system (for example Frones 1994), the minority child, where childhood is understood as a universal category with particular rights, status and qualities, the socially constructed child, where childhood is a product of social practices and the tribal child. This last view attaches significance to the child's own view and recognises childhood's social worlds as different from those of adults, but just as legitimate.

Alanen (1994) appears to be located between the discourse of the minority child and the discourse of the tribal child. She suggests that just as there is a gender system that positions women as subordinate to men, so we can imagine an analogous 'generational system...a particular social order that organises children's relations to the world in a systematic way, allocates them positions from which to act and a view and knowledge about themselves and their social relations' (1994:37). She critiques sociology for being adultist and advocates 'Sociology from a Children's standpoint'. Whilst provocative, this analysis obviously suffers from the same limitations as feminist standpoint theories. There is no universal 'child' position; James, Jenks et al. (1998) show the difficulties in conceptualising 'childhood' as a unitary concept. Other commentators have a less strong position, advocating work that recognises children as key social actors (Leonard 1990; Valentine 1999). In particular Valentine stresses that children have power in shaping the consumption practices of a household, and are not just the passive subjects of regulatory mechanisms.

James, Jenks et al. (1998) draw on Beck and Gidden's theories of social change in their characterisation of contemporary treatments of the child. Although not framed explicitly in the same terms as theories of social change, they argue that individualisation has extended to children. Children are now seen as autonomous individuals, rather than bound by the traditions of their particular social setting. They cite the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as an indication that children are now seen as persons in their own right. In contrast, Jones and Wallace (1990) argue that it is inappropriate to

extend individualisation theory to                      conceptions of the child because it ignores inequalities of opportunity among children according to their social location, for example class, gender and ethnicity.

Although my work included interviewing children to get their perspective, my theoretical position draws mostly from the discourse of the socially constructed child. Rather than assign specific attributes to the child, I am looking at everyday practices (Bazalgette and Buckingham 1995) specifically those involving the Internet, which construct the child as someone with possibly different needs, rights and understandings from an adult. James and Prout (1996) suggest that a child performs different versions of the self according to their social context. Solberg (1996) places slightly less emphasis on the agency of the child, arguing that in each social context the meaning of age and childhood is the outcome of a negotiation with other actors. In general, I am using the term 'child' relative to the term 'parent'; some of the children in my study are 18 years old. Drawing on James and Prout (1996), I regard childhood as a culturally constructed category and children as both heterogenous and possessing agency, rather than being wholly a product of their social context, especially the family.

### **Organisation of the data in this chapter:**

#### **dimensions of performance of family**

In a study on three-generation extended families, Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) identify eight dimensions of family organisation that can be used to characterise families. In the context of a discussion about families' home use of objects, Lunt and Livingstone (1992) present this framework as an example of how domestic goods help to express family dynamics. Lunt and Livingstone reinterpret each dimension and include interactions between people and domestic objects. I revisited this conceptual framework when I was experimenting with different ways of grouping together codes relating to the 'performance of the family'. Three features made it seem very suitable for adapting to my study. Firstly, each dimension could be used to characterise the relations between people and the Internet. Secondly, it does not presuppose a particular notion of what constitutes the family; Cohler and Grunebaum use it to

characterise and compare four three-generation extended families but consider that it may also be used for characterising family relationships among subsystems of the family. Thirdly, with some adaptation to the dimensions, my own coding framework mapped very neatly.

I needed to adapt Cohler and Grunebaum's framework for my own purposes, as their framework focuses on psychological processes and draws on concepts of socialisation and sex role theory. I have renamed some of the dimensions to reflect my use of performance as a conceptual tool (for example, performance of gender). Cohler and Grunebaum's use of the words 'definition' and 'establishment' imply that the nature of the family is fixed, whereas the word 'performance' highlights the dynamic and contingent nature of each family dimension. Like Lunt and Livingstone, I am specifically interpreting each dimension in terms of the relations between people and objects (in this case, the Internet), although my interpretations do not always coincide with those expressed by Lunt and Livingstone. I also depart from them in my conceptualisation of the relationship between family and objects. Lunt and Livingstone conceptualise the family as the result of negotiation between family members. Hence, objects are used to *express* aspects of the family. My position is that the performance of family at any time is the result of the relationship between individual members and the Internet. In my account, the Internet is involved in constituting the performance of family, rather than just being a prop in a given performance of the family.<sup>90</sup> As I show, in some cases the nature of the performance of the family will be maintained, in other cases transformed.

Cohler and Grunebaum's original framework and my adaptations to the first, second and seventh dimensions are shown in table 5.1.

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<sup>90</sup> Livingstone (1994) arrives at this position in a later work.

**Table 5-1 Dimensions of performance of the family**

<b>Cohler and Grunebaum's framework</b>	<b>Modified framework – modifications in italics</b>
The definition of family boundaries	<i>Who is in the family?</i> <sup>91</sup>
The establishment of role boundaries within the family	<i>Performances within the family – gender, generation and parenting</i>
The locus of family operations	The locus of family operations
Closeness and separation	Closeness and separation
Definition of unacceptable behaviour and basis for sanctions	Definition of unacceptable behaviour and basis for sanctions
Expression and control of affect and impulses	<i>Omitted</i> <sup>92</sup>
Establishment of family identity and goals	<i>Performance of family identity and goals</i>
Family problem-solving techniques	Family problem-solving techniques

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

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<sup>91</sup> 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'.

<sup>92</sup> Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) use this dimension with regard to the expression of sexuality, aggression and affection. None of my data relating to the performance of the family mapped to this dimension.

dimensions of the performance of family in complex and unpredictable ways. Whereas Cohler and Grunebaum perceive that gender, generation and parenting are fixed roles, I conceptualise them as performative and so I look at how the Internet is involved in some of the performances of gender, generation and parenting that constitute the social relations within the household family.<sup>93</sup>

### **Who is in the family?**

Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) use this dimension to refer to who is in the family, 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. In this section, I will 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 origin.<sup>94</sup>

### ***'Families of choice' – extending the concept and extending the 'family of choice' via the web***

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 'everyday experiments in living'.<sup>95</sup> 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.

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<sup>93</sup> Performances of parenting are a particular form of performances of generation.

<sup>94</sup> I follow Weeks, Donovan et al. (1999) in using the term 'families of origin' to refer to families related by blood or marriage.

<sup>95</sup> 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.

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 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 there is 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 that many people are using the Internet to maintain boundaries between the household family and the outside world.

#### 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 also become like extended family, in particular to Kylie (aged 8).

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':

**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 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, eight-year-old 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 teenagers performing in Australia. The teenagers are roughly the same age as Diana (17) and Karen (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.<sup>96</sup>

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 re-

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<sup>96</sup> 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.

established 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 Internet 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' (1988a: 349). Whatever the case, the Internet facilitates this tracking of family of origin.

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:

'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.'

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:

**Hilary:** 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. It is clear, however, that the Internet is involved in constituting the family.

### **Performances within the family- gender, generation and parenting<sup>97</sup>**

Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) perceive gender, generation and parenting as fixed roles whereas I conceptualise them as performative. In this section I look at how the Internet is involved in some of the performances of gender, generation and parenting that constitute the social relations within the household family.

In the previous chapter I discussed how observed differences between men and women are reified as essential properties of the category gender. In the following discussion, I look at the involvement of the Internet in constituting the household gender relations. I argue that the situation in the Canberra study is more complex than the 'gender expectations' (Gray 1995) of many commentators. These include expectations that technology is used to maintain traditional gender relations, that men will control the technology, women will fear it, and that men will use it for their leisure whereas women will use it to carry out their household duties. I make a related point to that in the previous chapter; I suggest that studies that focus on observed differences that maintain traditional

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<sup>97</sup> I also discuss performances of gender and generation in other sections as they relate to the particular dimensions of performance of family under discussion.

gender relations, rather than revealing the organisation of gender relations, may actually reproduce a particular version of gender.

There is a large body of literature on gender and technology (Berg 1996; Cockburn and Ormrod 1993; Livingstone 1994; Wheelock 1994) supporting the view that 'the gender-technology relation involves the production and reproduction of a hierarchy, between women and men, the masculine and the feminine'. (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993:15) In the Canberra study, there was one classic example of this. In the Holcroft family, as I have mentioned, the performance of gender was quite traditional; for example, **Lyn** did all of the household chores. **Andy** Holcroft's use of the Internet reinforced the existing gender hierarchy; **Andy** completely controlled access to the Internet, refusing to divulge the password and monopolising the computer. I would argue that this is not, however, the inevitable relationship between gender and technology. For example, in the case of **Kim** Sampson, discussed in the previous chapter, use of the Internet transformed what had been traditional gender relations. **Kim** Sampson learned web design skills via the Internet, transforming from a 'bored housewife' (her words) to a web designer starting her own business.

Explanations of observed differences between men and women's use of technology in the home tend to rely upon *a priori* assumptions about the nature of gender relations within households and, in particular, the domestic division of labour. 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). In a British study, Morley (1986) explains differences between men and women's engagement with the television in these terms, arguing that women's viewing was constrained by guilt and obligation and that women could only watch television attentively if no one else was at home. This type of explanation is inadequate for the Canberra study, as the domestic division of labour in the 19 households was not typical. More than half of the households in the Canberra study did not seem to conform to traditional gender relations. 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.

Another assumption typically made in studies of family use of technologies (as well as more general studies) is that maintaining family ties is the gender work of women, that is, the work of maintaining gender differences and hierarchies within the household (Rakow 1988; Moyal 1992; Silverstone and Morley 1990; di Leonardo 1992). 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. However, this was not a finding in the Canberra study. I have given examples of how in several households men were involved in maintaining relationships with their family of origin via the Internet. 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 performance of gender relations did not conform to traditional notions.

In households where both a mother and father were present, the decision to connect to the Internet was either joint or made by the father. However, the claim that men wish to control the Internet and hence stop women from gaining technical expertise (Kramarae 1988; Herring, Johnson et al. 1995; Spender 1995) was not substantiated by the situation in the households in the Canberra study. Rather than males wanting to control use of the technology, it was common for girls and women to be shown how to use the technology by males in the family. Whereas Morley (1986) found that men tended to define women's television viewing tastes as frivolous, thus undermining women's power in viewing conflicts, this was not apparent in the Canberra study. With one exception (**Andy** Holcroft), husbands seemed to be extremely supportive of both their wives and their daughter's interests on the Internet. In those households where girls or women were the Internet experts, this type of engagement with the Internet was encouraged or at least supported by the

father. For example, both **Grant** Nicholls and **Richard** Cole were extremely proud of the fact that their daughter's were self-taught webmasters.<sup>98</sup>

In addition, it was not just women who were scared of the technology and who thought that it would be difficult to learn:

'Our perception first off was, to us it seemed frightening. You think Oh, its this big high-tech thing, and you know, you hear all these things, you know, surf the Internet and all that..... If you haven't been to it, it is frightening.....' (**Bob** Garling)

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 the gender and technology studies referred to imply. These studies focus deliberately on differences between men and women's use of technology, because as Berg and Lie point out, 'the relevance of gender does not spring to ones eyes unless gender is actively used as an analytic tool' (1995:344). However, Grint and Gill identify a danger in this type of study into gender/technology relations, namely that 'only those practices which reinforce or reproduce existing patterns of gender relations are 'noticed' analytically' (1995:17). It is possible that those commentators who only 'notice' those practices which accord with their expectations, actually collude in constituting a particular version of gender. I suggest that no conclusions can be drawn on the Internet's involvement in the transformation or maintenance of gender relations within the household without further research.

Another complicating factor is that, in practice, it is difficult to separate performances of gender from performances of generation. While Wheelock (1994) found that men were more likely to be self-taught on the computer than women, female Internet users in my study seemed just as likely to be self-taught as males. However, there was a difference in terms of role as teacher. In seven households, fathers taught their children to use the Internet, whereas none of the mothers took on this teaching role (although, women did assist their husbands and children in using the Internet). This apparent gender difference may have been due to the intersection of performances of gender and generation as those women who lacked Internet skills interpreted their lack of

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<sup>98</sup> 'Webmaster' is the term used by these fathers to describe the fact that their daughters design and maintain complex web pages.



skills in terms of generational differences rather than gender differences. The following statement is typical of women in my study who were not in jobs which required computer skills and who had never had the opportunity to learn about computers:

I suppose I come from a generation where we just didn't learn computers at all until,... the closest thing I came to a computer was the automatic teller. (**Lyn** Holcroft)

This statement is in stark contrast to the following quote from a woman who is in the same age group as the women referred to above (that is, early forties) but whose job involves the use of computers. This woman constructs herself as technically competent:

Because I'm that generation where we're all computer literate, or we hope we are anyway. (**Elsbeth** Arlington)

Frones considers that generational difference is diminishing: 'The relationship among the generations is characterised by a weakening of previously clear cut distinctions and by more individualised relations within a framework of prolonged economic dependency and early maturation.' (Frones 1994:164). Rather than showing that a particular form of generational difference exists and documenting how this is manifest, the above example demonstrates how people use their consumption of the Internet to either mark or play down generational difference within the household.

### ***Performance of parenting (parent/child relationship)***

The parent-child relationship is a particular form of intergenerational relationship unique to the family. New theories about the significance of the child in the family, and in particular, the nature of the parent/child relationship, draw from theories about the changing nature of the family, and the changing nature of adult relationships.

Bittman and Pixley (1997), in one of the few recent Australian studies to address these issues, and Jenks (1996) both argue that attitudes towards childbearing changed during the twentieth century. Whereas people used to perceive children as human capital, a way of investing in the future, this is no longer justifiable as for some time now, the economic benefits of having children

have been negative.<sup>99</sup> Bittman and Pixley show in some detail the inadequacy of economic theorisation of child-bearing to explain why people still continue to have children and conclude that now people are having children for their own sake. Similarly Jenks argues that whereas children used to be a form of human capital, now they are seen not in terms of their future worth, but through a nostalgic lens as 'primary and unequivocal sources of love, ...partners in the most fundamental, unchosen, unnegotiated form of relationship' (1996:19). This echoes Beck's romantic view of the child as a 'private type of re-enchantment' in a time of disenchantment (1992). Beck argues that because contemporary adult relationships are always provisional, the importance of the child is increasing.

It is postulated that associated with this change in motives for having children is a change in the nature of the parent-child relationship. According to Beck, parents are displaying excessive affection for children, because the parent-child relationship is the last 'remaining, irrevocable, unexchangeable primary relationship'. He considers that a 'democratisation' of the family is occurring (Beck 1997). Similarly Giddens (1992) asserts that parent-child relationships are tending towards the pure relationship.<sup>100</sup>

Jamieson (1998) critiques Giddens's conjecture that parent/child relationships are moving towards pure relationships as it ignores material inequalities between adults and children; for example, children are still economically dependent upon their parents. Jamieson draws on empirical research to argue that parenting now seems to be as diverse and complex as it always has been. She and Brannen et al (1994) distinguish class differences in modes of exercising parental (specifically mother's) authority. They both found that middle class mothers emphasised maintaining a good relationship with their children whereas working class mothers were more upfront about their desires to control their children's activities. The middle-class strategy of trying to disguise the

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<sup>99</sup> Jenks (1996) and Bittman and Pixley (1997) have different estimates of when exactly it changed. Jenks considers that human capital theory explains childbearing until the 1950s. Bittman and Pixley argue that human capital theory has not been able to explain childbearing since the 1920s.

<sup>100</sup> See Giddens's definition of the pure relationship in the introduction to chapter 5.

unequal power relationship did not necessarily result in reduced conflict with children or a closer relationship.

Bittman and Pixley's depiction of the situation in Australia is similar to Brannen's and Jamieson's findings on middle-class parents in Britain. They argue that although actual parent-child relationships have not changed, parents' expectations about the nature of the relationships have. According to Bittman and Pixley, contemporary parents have an expectation that their relationship with their children will be akin to Giddens's 'pure relationship'. Bittman and Pixley argue that this is unachievable in practice because parents still have power over their children. Hence there is a tension between the parent's desire to perform as a responsible parent and their desire for their children's friendship.

Frones (1994) identifies another tension in contemporary Western parent-child relationships. He argues that there is a tension between parental responsibility and children's rights. Frones uses the word '*individualisation*' to refer to an emphasis on the individual as a psychological personality.<sup>101</sup> He identifies '*individuation*' as another process that is occurring in tandem with '*individualisation*'. '*Individuation*' refers to treating the individual as the basic unit in contemporary bureaucratic and State organisation. Frones argues that both of these tendencies emphasise that the child should be treated as a unique individual, but at the same time emphasise the parent's responsibility for their children. So, in contrast to this contention that the role of the parent is increasing in importance, Frones also identifies the existence of a view that the responsibility that parents have traditionally had for their children's social development is being taken over by professionals and institutions. In line with this view, Silva (1996) has suggested that parent's role in their children's lives is diminishing as peers, teachers, mass media, television, video games and stories grow in importance.

There are fears that parents will not be able to control their children's use of the Internet at home. Papert (1996) assumes that all children love computers and are skilful in using them. James, Jenks et al. (1998) argue that the effect of the

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<sup>101</sup> This is a different sense to Beck and Giddens' use of the word '*individualisation*'.

current risk society (Beck 1992) on children is increased parental regulation as parents try to protect their children from risks outside the home, including the presence of technology inside the home: 'The boundaries of the family are held to be at risk of penetration by insidious technologies like video and the Internet which could purvey serious moral threats to our children's childhoods' (James, Jenks et al. 1998:7). Similarly Silverstone and Morley (1990) interpret parental concern about their children's television viewing habits in terms of the 'fear of family boundaries being transgressed'. Referring specifically to the video and television, Bazalgette and Buckingham (1995) argue that the concerns surrounding the development of new media technologies are due to adult fears that these technologies undermine their control over what children can know and experience. The level of parental concern may not be linked to the level of risk. Scott, Jackson et al. (1988) discuss how in Britain, despite the extremely low number of children attacked by strangers, parents' top fear for their children was of attack by strangers.

Netnanny, an American company which markets Internet filtering software offers a free screensaver for parents which randomly selects one of the following eight tips to parents about children's use of the Internet:

Educate yourself and your child about the dangers of the Internet.

Establish an acceptable use policy for your child's online time.

Remember people who you meet online may not be who they say they are.

Protect your children from spam and offensive email by sharing an email account with your child.

Establish strict rules about ordering things online.

Parental supervision is the best way to protect your child online.

Set up your child's computer in an area of the house, such as the family room or den, where you can easily monitor your child's online activities.

Take the time to explore the Internet with your child.<sup>102</sup>

The following data from the Canberra study shows that, regardless of their level of Internet expertise, parents are employing a variety of strategies, including those suggested above, in order to control their children's use of the Internet. In more than half of the families studied, one or more children knew at least as

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<sup>102</sup> Source: <http://www.netnanny.com>

much about the Internet as the parents. It is conceivable that a child's role as teacher or mediator of the use of the Internet destabilises existing parent-child power relations, making a parent's agenda of policing their child's use of the Internet problematic. However, there was only one case in which a child demonstrated that she could exercise power in the family through her Internet expertise and, as the example shows, the final authority still rested with her parents. Diana Garling (aged 17) tells:

'I'd been getting in trouble and in trouble and trouble and I get home from school one afternoon and Mum was really nice to me. The computer had crashed and they needed me to fix it' (*laughs*)

But this power was still tempered by parental authority:

'If I get the shits I don't help.... But then they get the shits with me so it doesn't matter.'

- Performances of parental control<sup>103</sup>

Brannen (1996) discusses the ways in which the construction of adolescence by parents affects the way that parents negotiate relationships with their adolescent children. She identifies two different ways that parents may discharge their parental responsibilities for their children. The first calls upon traditional parental authority in the form of a set of explicit rules and responsibilities to facilitate the adolescent's transition to adulthood. Brannen explicitly links the second, to the thesis of individualisation. Here parents expect that the young person will negotiate their own transition from childhood to adolescence, exercising self-control rather than following parental rules. Brannen argues that in this case, the parent uses communication and surveillance as a method of control. Parents want to know where their children are and what they are doing when they leave the home.

Performances of parenting in the Canberra study did not necessarily fit neatly into the categories I have outlined. In many cases, parents exercised control in contradictory ways; for example as both authoritarian parent and friend. In general, however, the data supports the argument that parents value a good relationship with their children and will try to exercise control of the Internet in a

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<sup>103</sup> Here I discuss parental control specifically with reference to control intended to protect the child; for example regulating children's access to particular types of content or interactions with people over the Internet. Parental control of time spent on the Internet that is related to cost of use or fair allocation among family members is discussed in the section on negotiation of use.

way that does not jeopardise this. The data also suggests that regardless of level of Internet expertise of parent or child, parents are exercising some measure of control over the child's activities. The data does not support the suggestion that parent-child relationships are moving towards 'pure relationships'.

Following Brannen, I have grouped the various strategies that parents use to control their children's type of use of the Internet into those that involve the exercise of traditional parental authority and those that require the child to exercise self-control. In addition, I identified some novel forms of control that did not fit into either category. These are summarised in the following table; it needs to be borne in mind that in some cases there were different performances of parenting in the one household.

**Table 5-2 Forms of Parental Control of the Internet**

Parents exercise control	Child expected to exercise some self-control	Novel
Explicit rules about type of use	Inspecting cache	Serendipity – technical problem remains unresolved
Password protected	Hovering	Definition of Internet
Internet setup prevents certain activities	Trust	
Remote supervision	Actively involved in child's use	

Brannen argues that whether parents exercise traditional parental authority in the form of a set of explicit rules or whether they expect their children to exercise self-control, is shaped by the interaction of the 'structural factors' of social class, culture, and gender. Through reifying the effect of these 'structural factors', she does not allow the possibility for different or contradictory performances of parenting within the one household. In my study, within the one household family, parents often had different attitudes towards different children. For example, **Paul** Larkin was not worried about his 18-year-old son

John's use of the Internet, but had a different attitude to John's brother (who was of a similar age and lived interstate):

'I don't have any concerns about John doing a single damn thing. Um... do I have concerns about people John's age? Yes, probably. Um... not all of them came to earth as well equipped with good moral sense and ability to critically judge things as John did. Um... I've got another son who lives in another state. I'd probably be more concerned about him. Not that that would lead me to censor anything. But I could see him getting more obsessive about things. But that's not a judgment about the Net. That's a judgment about the kid.'

The following examples demonstrate that some parents are still exercising traditional parental authority in controlling their children's use of the Internet. These performances of parental control of Internet use included the setting of explicit rules about the type of Internet use and control of the password giving access to the Internet. The data did not support Brannen's (1996) finding from a British study that working class parents were more likely to explicitly exercise parental authority than middle-class parents. However in families where there was both a mother and a father and the father had greater Internet expertise, mothers tended to leave control of Internet use to the father. In families where there was both a mother and a father and the mother was as competent or more competent on the Internet than the father, control of children's use of the Internet was shared.

Parents typically downplayed the existence of any explicit rules about Internet use referring to them as 'informal' or 'no formal rules' or making light of them. The children's perspective on these rules was quite different; they seemed to have a clear idea about what type of sites they were allowed to visit and whether or not they were allowed to visit chat rooms or buy anything over the Internet. This reticence on the part of parents to articulate the rules accords with Morley's (1986) findings on rules for television use and supports Bittman and Pixley's (1997) contention that parents desire the friendship of their children.

In the Blackburn family, the authoritarian character of the explicit rules was downplayed by their lighthearted presentation:

'When it was actually delivered, Santa wrote them a letter. And the letter that Santa wrote said that there were two things that they were not allowed to access. One was terrorist sites, you know, bomb making and violence and all that sort of stuff and they weren't to access hard-core pornography. They were the two rules. Since we've used it, it's pretty apparent that its pretty hard to avoid a lot of those sites. Not that, I haven't bumped into any terrorists sites. I guess you really have to go looking for that.' (**David** Blackburn)

In the Moser family the Internet was password protected as a way of controlling the access of the two boys (Adam, aged 17 and Neil, aged 15). The parents were quite upfront about the reasons why they wanted to be there if the boys were on the Internet by themselves:

'I'd still like to be here. I'd just like to keep an eye on what it was that they were actually looking at from a bit of a censorship point of view or whatever because that's the big thing, you know, that there are sites that kids can get into and you hear about it on the news that there is a site here and a site there that ... um... I just don't think that that's appropriate so I'd like to exercise a degree of... censorship, I guess over just what they could get to and what ever. I guess if I'm not here then I can't really do that but its password protected so it's not really an option for them at this stage.' (**Iris** Moser)

I have mentioned that parents typically downplayed the authoritarian side of explicit rules. In this case, it was one of the children who provided the opportunity to make a light of the rules.

Viv: If Neil or Adam wanted to log on, do they ask you (*to Iris*) or you (*to Rod*)

**Rod**: Yes. Well basically I'd log on for them

Adam: So we don't muck it up and waste a lot of money

**Iris and Rod** *both laugh*

In this case, far from the exercise of parental authority creating a divide between parents and children, the sons participate in the strategy of pseudomutuality<sup>104</sup> to preserve good relations between the parents and children.

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<sup>104</sup> Bittman and Pixley define pseudomutuality as when 'participants in a non-mutual situation engage in actions which conceal this fact and instead portray the situation as mutual'. (1997:81)



In some cases, the parents enlisted the technology itself to assist them to perform traditional parental authority, through either setting up the Internet to prevent certain activities or through 'remote supervision.'

Internet filters are advertised as ways of giving parents complete control over what is accessed on the Internet. This form of control of the Internet requires initial parental effort and then displaces the exercise of parental authority on to the technology. Since the time of the research, there has been much public debate in Australia about the usefulness of Internet filters. As part of the debate surrounding Australian Government efforts to introduce filters to block pornographic material on the Internet, the Australian Minister for Communications, Information Technology, and the Arts has publicly stated that it is the responsibility of Government rather than parents to make sure that children do not access unsuitable sites on the Internet (Alston, Leach et al. 2000).

However, despite suggestions that parents' responsibility for their children's social development is being taken over by professionals and institutions, parents in my study were not using this method of controlling their children's Internet use. Only 7% of respondents to the questionnaire used filters or some sort of program to limit what their children could access on the Internet. These households included those with young children and those with teenagers and generally had members who were actively involved in organised religion. In the case studies, **Elsbeth** Arlington was the only parent who claimed to have set up filters. However, as I will discuss later, she had not actually put them in place.

The technology of the Internet facilitates new ways of exercising parental control. Rakow and Navarro (1993) use the term 'remote mothering' to refer to mothers using the mobile phone to supervise children at home. Somewhat akin to this, the Sampson family were using the Internet as a vehicle for the supervision of Dylan's Internet use. However, whereas 'remote mothering' refers to mothers themselves using the mobile phone, in this case of 'remote supervision', it was Mick, a friend of **Trevor's**, who supervised Dylan's participation in the online multi-user game Battlenet. Dylan's parents were not worried about Dylan's behaviour. They were worried about possible nasty

behaviour from other participants. When **Trevor** was home, he would supervise Dylan playing Battlenet just by watching. However, Trevor worked several jobs and was often not home. **Kim** would not supervise the game as she did not understand it and had no interest in it at all. If Trevor was unable to supervise Dylan, **Kim** or **Trevor** would ensure that Mick was online before they allowed Dylan to enter the Battlenet zone.

I now turn to discuss those methods of control whereby the child is expected to exercise self-control, rather than respond to parental authority. This does not mean that parents abdicate all control; it is just less overt. Brannen's research shows that in cases where parents tell their children that they expect them to exercise their own self-control, the parents use communication and surveillance as a method of control. Brannen identifies these methods as a particular way for parents to control children's activities when they leave the home. Home use of the Internet introduces an interesting dimension to this because children may be involved in interactive activities that extend beyond the home, without actually leaving home. The tension that Frones (1994) has suggested exists between parental responsibility and children's rights is apparent in parents' attitudes towards surveillance in the form of inspecting the cache and hovering.

Inspecting the cache is a form of surveillance of children's Internet use that requires a level of familiarity with technical aspects of the Internet and the computer.<sup>105</sup> In families with a mother and a father present, it was the father who threatened to or actually tracked the cache. **Terry** Blair was the only parent who consistently tracked the Internet use of his children. The way that the intranet was set up in the Blair household, **Terry** could actually observe his children's use from his computer in the kitchen: 'The main reason I have the log on the screen is so I can see if they're wandering into areas they shouldn't. But it hasn't been a problem.'

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<sup>105</sup> The cache are files created during a period of Internet use. Inspecting the cache is simple but fairly tedious; one can check every web site visited and every picture that appeared on the screen. It is not a simple matter, however, to track conversations held in chat rooms or messages sent via ICQ.

Several parents *threatened* to inspect the cache but had not actually bothered, considering that the power of the threat was enough. Some of the parents who inspected the cache or threatened to inspect it seemed to exhibit conflicting feelings. On the one hand they wanted to keep an eye on what their children were accessing; on the other hand they wanted to respect their children's privacy. For example, during the household interview **Elsbeth** Arlington said:

We have respect for each other, what we're both doing. You know, we don't pry over each other's shoulders to see.

However later in this interview she contradicted this:

**Elsbeth:** Well I sometimes hover, because I worry about what he is getting into sometimes Wayne: which is usually nothing at all.

**Elsbeth:** Yes, I know that I know that... because I know how to check back. (*laughs*) You didn't know that. Every now and then I have a look and see.

Wayne: (*interrupts*) History.

**Elsbeth:** Hey, history. See he knows that.

Wayne: Yes, you showed me.

**Elsbeth:** Do you know how to change it?

Wayne: No.

**Elsbeth:** (*laughs uproariously*) I won't show you that. ... what I've also done, is that I've also put filters on the machine as well, on the program.

After the interview **Elsbeth** showed me the filters, but it seemed that they were not actually on, and she had trouble remembering how to access them. She considered that it was OK for Wayne to access a certain level of nudity and sex, but not 'hard porn' or encouraged violence. In front of her son, she said 'look I trust Wayne anyway. You need to trust your kids. He probably will look at it some time, but it's a matter of being balanced. You know, I've looked at it myself'.

It seemed that **Elsbeth** did basically trust Wayne but that she used the threat of checking cache as an extra form of control. In the individual interview she maintained that she never actually had checked the cache, even though she was aware that he had been accessing some sites that she considered unsuitable: 'I wanted to but then I thought "Nuh" '.

**Elsbeth** was also concerned about whether the people that Wayne is talking to in chat rooms are who they say they are. However, she has no way of controlling this.

'Hover' was the term used by **Elsbeth** to refer to hanging around the user or physically coming in and out of the room in which the computer is located to keep an eye on what the child is doing on the Internet. This form of surveillance does not require any Internet expertise on the part of the parent and many parents mentioned that this was how they controlled their child's Internet access. It seemed that parents were more comfortable with this form of control than explicit rules.

Parents were more likely to 'hover' when the computer was located in a public place in the house, rather than in a separate room. I do not have the data to draw any conclusions about whether parents placed the computer in a public space (consciously or unconsciously) so that they could exercise greater control or whether, with the computer located in a public area, the parents were more aware of, and hence more concerned about, their children's use.

In the Griffin household, **Vera** Griffin, who had very basic Internet skills, was the sole source of parental control, as her husband was overseas for eight months. During the interviews, **Vera's** children were quite disrespectful of her in the way that they teased her about her lack of Internet competence. In addition, Sebastian referred to the Internet as 'mine' and boasted in the interviews about his ability to do change browser settings to suit himself: 'No one can fix what I do'. **Vera** spoke as if the children's use of the Internet was an area over which she felt she had little control. Hence, she used a combination of mechanisms in an effort to control her children's use of the Internet.

For example, **Vera** expressed the view that the father had very good skills on the Internet when according to the children, the father had very basic Internet skills and came to both of them for help. It seemed that as a supplement to her own efforts to control her children's use, **Vera** tried to enlist the parental authority of the absent father, through constructing him as an Internet expert.

She had also set some explicit rules about use, but her main form of control was hovering, a practice that she referred to several times:

'I walk in and,..(*laughs embarrassedly*). I don't read their emails, although Sebastian always reckons I'm trying to read it over his shoulder but...um... you know, I can just sort of see what they are doing, or what she's doing, yeah'

'just be aware of when they were on and,... yeah, glance at what they were doing'

'occasionally I've found Sebastian at sites. I've said no, you don't look at that thanks very much but, I mean... he's 18. It's not... too big a deal but'

'I think that you occasionally have to wander in and see what your kids are doing over their shoulder because... yeah... I mean even in Year 12 they need to be, just, guided occasionally.'

'Yes, so there's no formal rules but, yeah, I mean, I would occasionally just sort of check what Hilary is doing on it, just... I don't think she'd do anything silly, but...'

Although Brannen (1996) characterises surveillance as a less upfront form of control than explicit rules, the Griffin children were aware that their mother hovered over them while they used the Internet. The following statement by Sebastian shows that he is aware that in 'hovering' his mother experiences a tension between being a responsible parent and respecting her children's rights:

'Mum likes to think that she gives us privacy but she's just kidding herself. She is a sticky beak'.

Even so, the strategy of hovering appeared to be effective in constraining Hilary's behaviour:

'I'm always worried that Mum is going to walk in and look'.

Brannen found that communicating with the child about what was appropriate use of the Internet was the form of control favoured by middle-class parents as it posed less threat to the parent-child relationship.

In most of the households, parents claimed to trust that their children would use the Internet appropriately.<sup>106</sup> In some cases parents linked this to their having brought up their child to behave appropriately, whereas in a couple of families, parents made distinctions between children, constructing some children as responsible and others as not. As shown by **Paul** Larkin's previous comments,<sup>107</sup> this was not necessarily related to the sex of the child. It was also not related to biological age per se, but to parents' interpretation of the social meaning of biological age. Some parents referred to their children as being 'old enough' to be trusted with controlling their own use of the Internet. However, the meaning of 'old enough' varied between and within households. **Rod** Moser considered that Adam (aged 17) would be old enough to control his own use of the Internet when he turned 18. **Cecilia** Hyslop considered that Scott (aged 9) was old enough to be trusted to access the Internet by himself and was in the throes of buying him his own computer, with Internet connection. Although most parents claimed to trust their children's use of the Internet, in most households there was some other form of parental control concurrently in operation.

Some of the literature on television and the family describes how parents view television with their children providing interpretive commentary as a way of educating their children into the social norms of the family, for example, with respect to violence (Alexander 1990). Citing research that links heavy television viewing with aggression and restlessness in children, Desmond, Singer et al. (1990) advocate that a parent mediate their child's television viewing, providing explanations and value judgements about what is occurring on screen. Although this literature interprets this type of parental behaviour as education or socialisation, it could also be interpreted as a form of parental control.

There were numerous examples, in my data, of parents actively involved in their child's Internet use. Of course, unless the parent is explicit (and honest) about

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<sup>106</sup> In households with young children, the issue becomes slightly different. In these cases, parents were more concerned about children accidentally encountering unsuitable material.

<sup>107</sup> See quote earlier in this section.

the intentions, it is difficult to distinguish between involvement as a form of surveillance and involvement for the sake of improving the relationship with the child.<sup>108</sup> **Trevor** Sampson was explicit about the reason that, if he was home, he would participate in Dylan's Battlenet games. It was to protect Dylan from unpleasant behaviour of other participants.

**Trevor:** We always vet whoever's in there and decide whether or not its suitable and then I'll watch him for say 10 or 15 minutes, whoever else is in there and if, you know, the tone of the conversation is fine and...um... what do you call it, if the tone of the conversation is fine and there's no sort of language or anything like that and they're not sort of killing just to get all of his gear off of him, then I'm quite happy to let him go. But if someone new comes into the game, then I check on them as well. And I'll just keep an eye on it....

**Viv:** How do you check?

**Trevor:** Well, I just sit back and watch and see what goes on. Because I can, I can pull him out of a game faster than what I can tell him to get out of a game. You know, if someone is trying to kill him, then I know how to get him out quick.

**Terry** and **Jill** Blair always tried to be involved in their young children's use of Internet search engines so that they could explain why they considered certain sites inappropriate as they came up. **Bob** and **Trisha** Garling were very involved in the ICQ activities of their older daughter Diana. They would reply to ICQs that came for Diana and mentioned several long conversations that they had had with the people that Diana has met over the Internet. Although neither parent framed this in terms of surveillance, it meant that they had a good sense of the type of people that Diana was conversing with over the Internet.

There were two other ways in which parents were able to control their children's use of the Internet. These did not require the overt performance of parental authority and also did not require that the child exercise some self-control.

The first was serendipitous, with parents taking advantage of a technical problem with the Internet. Parents in two households turned an unforeseen

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<sup>108</sup> Those cases of parental involvement in the children's use of the Internet that seemed to be motivated by a desire for a closer relationship with the child are discussed later in the section on closeness and separation.

event (a technical problem with the Internet connection) into a method of controlling their children's use. This was a form of control that did not rely on explicit exercise of parental authority. It could be used regardless of the level of Internet expertise of the parent, but relied on the child not having a lot of technical expertise as the following examples show.

In the Ruyton household, both **Don** and **Pauline** were concerned about Jane using chat. They were worried about her making contact with 'weirdos' and perhaps being stalked. Conveniently for them, the chat line connection was no longer working. Neither parent had any idea as to what had gone wrong as they both had very basic Internet skills. However, they did not plan to fix it. The mother in particular had not wanted to tell Jane that she could not use chat. Neither parent could hide their relief and pleasure in the fact that it was no longer working.

**Richard** Cole expressed some concerns about Daniel using the Internet inappropriately. The fact that Daniel accessed the Internet from his bedroom made it more difficult for **Richard** to control. When something went wrong with the Internet connection to Daniel's computer, it meant that Daniel could only access the Internet from the computer in **Richard** or Natalie's room. **Richard** considered that this was a good outcome as it gave him more control over what Daniel was doing on the Internet. He did not give any indication that he was going to have Daniel's connection fixed, despite Daniel's requests: 'It means he's only using either Natalie's or my machine, so that means I have a pretty good idea about what he's looking at.'

The second method of control, that did not require overt parental authority or for children to exercise self-control, related to how the Internet was defined by the parents. One way of trying to prevent children from watching television after midnight is to tell them that there is no broadcasting after midnight. It probably would not take long before the children realised that, in fact, there was broadcasting after midnight. In terms of defining the Internet, what it is and what one can do on it, the situation is not so straightforward. At the time of the research, the Internet was a relatively new phenomenon and apart from



dedicated enthusiasts, people generally had little idea about the range of services and activities available online.

In the Davis family, **Noel** Davis intentionally tried to construct the Internet as something that was useful for homework and nothing more. For example, the children, both of whom enjoyed playing computer games did not know that you could play multi-user games over the Internet. The father became very cagey in the household interview when I brought up the topic of multi-user games. He admitted in the separate interview that he intentionally did not want them to know about multi-user games as they would 'blow out the usage and their time'.

Anna, who was an avid reader (in her words, 'addicted to reading') did not know that you could read books on the Internet. When I mentioned online books in the interview, the father tried to give Anna the impression that only books about computers were available on the Internet, as he did not particularly want her to spend time looking for reading material on the Internet.

Obviously, as knowledge about what one can do on the Internet becomes more widespread this method of control will become less effective, except in the case of very young children.

However, the data indicates that parents' authority is not being undermined in the way suggested by some commentators. Regardless of their level of expertise, parents are employing a range of strategies in order to exercise control over what their children access on the Internet.

### **The locus of family operations**

Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) use the dimension named 'the locus of family operations' to explore the dimensions of the physical and psychic world of the family. Lunt and Livingstone express this dimension in terms of how objects facilitate connection with life outside the house or symbolise 'closing the door on outside hassles and relaxing in private' (1992:77). By virtue of its very construction (computers networked across the world), the Internet symbolises connections that extend outside the household. However, in some ways it symbolised a retreat into the household.

In none of the families studied did the use of the Internet result in family (as distinct from individual) engagement with local activities or networks. In this way it was similar to how Silverstone and Morley describe the use of the television in some families as an 'electronic hearth', 'opening up the outside world to the family while enabling them to be physically closed and enclosed.' (1990:82) The Garling family used ICQ as a family to chat with people across the world while several parents of teenage boys considered that their boys were spending more time at home because of the Internet.

**Terry** accidentally broadened the locus of family operations of the Blair family. Just for amusement, **Terry** Blair put up a web page that gave a set of rules for a ball game. He included his home telephone number as the contact number for further information. **Jill** Blair had no idea about this until she started receiving calls from around the world from people wanting to join the club (even though there was no club). As **Terry** put it, 'It sort of attracted unwanted attention from the world'.

### **Closeness and separation**

Whether an object brings the family together or does the opposite has been a concern of many studies of the impact of the television on the family. There has been a plethora of studies but no consensus. Kubey (1990:74) draws attention to the split between commentators who argue that television enhances family togetherness (watching television together is a means of achieving greater interaction between family members) and those who claim that the socializing role of the family is passed onto the television set, decreasing conversation and face-to-face interaction; the latter are mainly older studies. Kubey concluded from his own research that overall television viewing harmonizes with family life.

The co-author of a recent US report speculates that the Internet could be 'the ultimate isolating technology' (Nie and Ebring 2000). As I have discussed elsewhere, I am not assuming that the Internet has an impact (one way or the other) on a given entity, the family. I am addressing the issue in terms of how family members use the Internet to perform either closeness or separation, recognising that each family member has their own story about the dynamics of family life.

I depart from Cohler and Grunebaum's (1981) detailed breakdown of this dimension and follow Lunt and Livingstone who characterise this dimension in terms of the following: location of the object, whether or not it is jointly consumed, and whether the object is used to express 'autonomy and difference or withdrawal and rejection' (1992:77).

### ***Location of Internet access points***

The 'micro geographies of domestic interiors' are important to understanding the social relations within a household (Valentine 1999:521). When discussing the 'objectification' of technologies, Silverstone, Hirsch et al. (1994) argue that the location of technologies reveals information about household relations. Just as research on the television typically shows how the location of the television in a family room enables family viewing whereas location in individual bedrooms results in individual viewing (for example, Silverstone and Morley 1990), data from my study shows how the location of the Internet can participate in constituting the relations in the household.

Slightly more than half of the households had Internet access at a private location. Although the household members determine the location, this does not mean that they are aware of any consequences of this location. The only time that anyone mentioned, and hence demonstrated awareness of, the effect of the location was when it had been changed. For example, **Beryl** Scott told me how the computer had been relocated from the living room to a study. She described the presence of the computer in the lounge room as 'the hub of the family'.<sup>109</sup> Internet use, when the computer was in the lounge room, was a performance of family closeness. Family members would talk to each other while using the Internet and call each other over to look at items of interest. Now that the computer was in the study, Internet use was a more solitary activity. This had the advantage that the children could use the computer for homework in a quiet place. However, **Beryl** missed the conviviality of Internet use being more of a family activity.

In the Blair household, the Internet was used to perform family closeness in an unusual way. The children each had a computer in their room connected to the others via a family intranet. Use of the computer as a standalone was an individual activity. However, the children often played games with each other across the intranet and the father sat at his computer in the kitchen sending frequent messages to each of the children.

### ***Household Interactions around Consumption of the Internet***

Alexander reviews the extensive body of literature on family interactions within the field of mass communication (Alexander 1990). Most of this literature concentrates on describing different types of family interaction and how these are manifest in television viewing practices. Early accounts of family interactions around the television were framed in a technologically deterministic way. In other words, they tried to give a definitive answer about the nature of the impact of the television on the family, ignoring any agency on the part of the family.<sup>110</sup> Later accounts were more sophisticated, allowing for variation in how different families use the technology. However, these accounts tended to go to the other extreme, attributing all agency to the family and none to the technology. For example, a 1985 study of representative American families found that the importance of family life, closeness of household family members, along with the desire to spend time with other family members, as components of an Index of Household Family Orientation, seemed to predict family television consumption. (Andreasen 1990)

I asked family members to describe a typical week and also asked whether they tended to do things as a family or separately. Only four of the household families seemed to consistently do things as a family. In the case of the Garling and Blackburn family, this extended to their use of the aspects of the Internet:

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<sup>109</sup> **Reg** Scott also referred to the Internet as being 'in the centre of the hub of activity' when the computer was in the lounge room.

<sup>110</sup> A return to this type of technical determinism is evident in Nie and Ebring's (2000) report on the Internet.

'It's brought us together, well, its moulded us a bit more than what we already had, you know. We always had been together as a family. It's just a little bit, I suppose it's the icing on the cake, its just putting a smooth surface on it.' (**Bob** Garling)

The Garling family tended to do things as a family and this extended to their use of *chat*. For example, the two sisters often visited a chat room together. The younger sister would sit and watch the older sister, suggesting things for her to type in. The parents had answered ICQ postings sent to their older daughter and ended up chatting with people that their daughter had met over the Internet.

The Blackburn family also tended to do things as a family and this was reflected in their use of *email*:

'We certainly share emails a lot and the kids will log on and they'll yell out, you know, we've got mail from such and such and so everyone will come around to read the emails. And we will share in responding.' (**David** Blackburn)

'We talk about the Internet a lot, I guess about the emails and that.' (Oliver Blackburn)

As the following examples show, however, the nature of family activities did not necessarily predict the nature of the household family's Internet consumption.

The Gisborne family tended to do things together as a family. However, their Internet use was quite separate. **Grace** Gisborne used it during the day to correspond with other women involved in embroidery. Ansel used it to play chess online. **Brian** Gisborne used to surf the web, visiting sites that took his interest. As discussed shortly, **Grace** also used the Internet to express autonomy within the family.

The Sampson family were inclined to do things separately. However, the Internet was used to perform family closeness. Both **Trevor** and **Kim** recounted how they used to each sit at separate computers with the children running between them to hear ICQ messages they were sending to each other via a text-to-voice program. There was also a time when **Trevor** and **Kim** would simultaneously log on at different computers and chat with joint friends. (They had stopped doing this because their friends had disconnected from ICQ.)

Many of the families studied used the Internet separately but shared information found on the Internet. In some families, the Internet was the only common point of interest between family members and facilitated a closer relationship. This was not necessarily related to gender as the following, mother-son, father-daughter and father-son examples show.

The Internet seemed to be a common interest for **Elsbeth** and her 13-year-old son Wayne. They share technical information and, during the interview, they had an extended conversation about animated backgrounds.

**Richard** Cole told me before the first interview that he had a difficult relationship with his 16 year-old daughter Natalie and he was unsure if he was going to be able to get her to participate in the study. She did participate, and **Richard** recounted how the Internet, as their only point of common interest, enhanced their relationship:

'It's probably good for her relationship with me in that its given us something common, and, and often, just in 16-year-olds, very much that age, where parents are socially backward, old-fashioned, almost sort of handicapped. And so, that's been good, because she actually helped me set up my site and we had that in common and often chat about Internet related stuff and I pass all my computer journals straight to her. And thats been quite good actually. It's one area where I think despite my poorly fashion and terrible taste, and my habit of saying silly things as all adults do, I do have some computer and Internet knowledge so that raises my standing in her sight. So in terms of the relationship with me, its been good.'

In her study of young people in London, Brannen (1996) notes that the closest observed relationship between father and son was one that was described in terms of being able to talk and joke. Sharing jokes and executable attachments on the Internet was the main way that **Paul** and John Larkin bonded. In this case, the bonding was also a performance of masculinity that brought **Paul** and John together but excluded **Barbara**. This is indicated in the following exchange that occurred in response to a question about multimedia applications.

**Paul:** We're really enjoying our frog in a blender at the moment. (*John laughs*) That's multimedia.

**Barbara:** And what's virtual girl?

**Paul:** Virtual girl, no, she's just a little program.

**Barbara:** Yeah? (*somewhat disapprovingly*)

**Paul:** (*dismissing*) It came by email.

The Internet sometimes was involved in performances of both closeness and separation in the one household, between the same family members. As mentioned above, the Internet brought **Elsbeth** and Wayne closer in terms of a common interest. However, Wayne considers that he sees less of **Elsbeth** because of the Internet connection at home. Whereas previously, **Elsbeth** would watch television with Wayne, Wayne now ends up watching television by himself while Elspeth uses the Internet.

### ***Autonomy and difference***

Both parents and children used the Internet to express an autonomy that they did not experience in the household family.

**Grace** Gisborne used the Internet to express autonomy within her family. She used to travel interstate with her husband and son for Ansel's chess tournaments. She told me bitterly:

'Watching chess is like watching wet paint dry. It is dreadful and quite frankly, I loathe it. So its just delightful to be able to get away from it.'

Through her email list of embroiderers (Netbroid), **Grace** had made friends with people across Australia. Previously she had seen no option other than to sit and watch her son play chess, going 'stark, staring, bored, ... really mad'. Now whenever there was a chess tournament, she would use it as an opportunity to visit one of her Netbroid friends who she had met over the Internet. **Grace** was also doing an online Reiki course that cost several hundred dollars. She was at pains to let me know that she did not want her husband to know that she was doing this. The Internet was a psychic escape for her but also allowed her to be physically separate from the family.

Diana Garling's parents, who considered it very important to perform family closeness, placed strict controls on Diana's activities outside the house. Diana,

aged 18, felt quite suffocated by this. She visited chat rooms as a way of having a social life outside of the family, without leaving the household.

Although Sebastian Griffin had freedom to leave the house, he felt somewhat oppressed by his mother while he was at home. Whenever he or his girlfriend were not allowed to use the phone, they would talk via ICQ. Private email was also important to his sense of autonomy:

'I mean you don't have to worry about mum reading it and stuff like that, I mean... you know, me and my friends are pretty silly and stuff so, we like to have the freedom to write whatever we want on emails and stuff like that.'

Children in one third of the families in my study mentioned that having a private email was very important to them. For example, Samantha Corso lives alone with her mother. When I interviewed Samantha, her mother hovered nearby for most of the interview, listening and occasionally interjecting. Samantha had a private email account that she used to communicate with her boyfriend. This gave her some independence from her mother.

### ***Withdrawal and rejection***

**Andy** Holcroft used the Internet as a way of withdrawing from the family. He spoke a lot about his mates and only mentioned his family in response to direct questioning about them. Each night as soon as he got home he went for a run and then logged on to the Internet. It seemed that this was a way for him to psychologically escape from home while still being physically there.

'I can't come home from work at 5 o'clock in the afternoon because its just totally a waste of time to me, like there's nothing I want to do at 5 o'clock at home, absolutely nothing. I'll just stay at work until 6, 6.30 and come home then, go for a run or whatever and then go up and get on the computer and then relax later on at night, and then watch a bit of telly later on at night. I'd get really bored, if I came home early.' (**Andy** Holcroft)

**Andy's** daughters complained that they did not see much of him because he was always on the Internet. It was common for him to have his wife **Lyn** bring his dinner in to him so that he could stay logged on to the Internet rather than join the rest of the family for meals. He spent his time surfing, maintaining his home pages and communicating with 'the boys'. The Internet was not taking



**Andy** away from his family. Rather it seemed that **Andy** was using it as a way of maintaining separation from his family, just as he had used playing sport and watching television before there was a home Internet connection. As I have mentioned, **Lyn** used the Internet to perform family closeness. Although she was terrified of computers and did not know the password for the Internet, **Lyn** tried to use the Internet to help her stay close to **Andy**. She made a show of always being interested in what he was doing on it and always responded to any desire on his part to show her something on it.

The above examples demonstrate how in various ways, the Internet is used to perform family closeness and separation. Use of the Internet in family households can not be characterised simply in terms of the Internet bringing families together or dividing families. Moreover, it is too simplistic to say that a close-knit family will use the Internet in a way that enhances closeness or that in a family where everyone is quite separate, that each member will use the Internet separately. Family members are using the Internet to perform closeness or separation in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

### **Definition of unacceptable behaviour and basis for sanctions**

Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) use this dimension to look at the kinds of behaviour which are defined as unacceptable within the family, how this fits with cultural norms and the types of sanction and their justification. I look at this dimension in terms of parent-child relationships and focus on parent's definitions of unacceptable behaviour surrounding Internet use in the household. These definitions of what is unacceptable behaviour help to constitute the household's performance of family.<sup>111</sup>

James, Jenks et al. (1998) argue that psychological theories of child development still have a large effect on parenting. This seemed apparent in the attitudes of parents to pornography. Most parents objected to their children visiting pornographic or violent web sites. It seemed that they feared that such accessing of pornographic or violent material was unhealthy for their children's development. Several parents expressing this view referred to media reports

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<sup>111</sup> I did not explicitly ask what were the sanctions imposed for unacceptable behaviour and no one mentioned sanctions in their discussions of unacceptable behaviour.

warning parents of unsuitable sites for children on the Internet and it would seem that the current cultural norm in Australia is for parents to prevent their children from accessing pornographic or violent sites.<sup>112</sup>

Ironically it seemed that those parents who did not object to their children accessing pornography on the Internet had the same reasons as those who did object; that is, that it was an important part of children's healthy development:

'You don't hide children from the real world because they're not going to learn how to deal with the real world and the Internet's no different.' (**Terry Blair**)

'But you know, for a lot of things, you know, pornography, how to make a homemade bomb... yeah, so what. I mean you can... you can get those in other places and kids are going to find those things and use them or not use them. No, I don't, I don't understand people, why people get uptight about those things.' (**Geoff Riley**)

Within the one family, parents did not necessarily have the same standards for what was unacceptable behaviour. As an example, compare **Jill Blair's** comment with **Terry's** (above):

'They're quite responsible. I mean, they know that there are areas that they can't go into.' (**Jill Blair**)

Various parents mentioned that they did not want their children to spend hours on the Internet, surfing or in chat rooms. In some cases this was partly to do with cost or allowing other family members to use the Internet. In almost all cases, however, it seemed that part of the reason for this was an adherence to a current popular belief that spending long periods of time on the Internet is unhealthy.

Parents of girls had told their children not to divulge any personal information over the Internet. The implicit penalty for this sort of behaviour was the risk of being harassed or tracked down by some 'weirdo'. Again, these had come from

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<sup>112</sup> This research was carried out before the Commonwealth Government introduced legislation banning the posting of pornographic material on Australian web sites.

media constructions of the Internet and popular perceptions of proper behaviour.<sup>113</sup>

It is interesting that with the exception of using the Internet when someone else wanted to use it, the definitions of unacceptable behaviour were all oriented towards protecting the children. For example, not one parent mentioned telling their children that it was unacceptable to abuse other people over the Internet. It seems that, in general, the definitions of unacceptable behaviour constitute the family as being at risk from the outside world. This adds support to James, Jenks et al.'s (1998) argument that parental regulation is increasing as parents try to protect their children from risks outside the home.<sup>114</sup>

### **Performance of family identity**

I have renamed this dimension from 'Establishment of Family Identity and Goals' and reinterpreted it. Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) use this dimension to explore family traditions that have preexisted the family unit under study, as well as family secrets and unresolved psychological issues that manifest as family themes. Lunt and Livingstone (1992) follow Cohler and Grunebaum fairly closely, expressing this dimension in terms of how objects are used to express family traditions. Rather than looking for continuity of traditions across previous generations, I am using this dimension more generally to look at how the Internet is used to perform a family identity in the current household family.

Just as shared meals are important ways of producing a family identity (Valentine 1999), so shared consumption of an object/technology can help to produce a family identity. Although I did not observe instances of how the Internet was used to perform the family's offline identity, it appeared that, in some families, homepages are being used as a way of performing an online identity.

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<sup>113</sup> For example, the NetNanny home page ([www.netnanny.com](http://www.netnanny.com)) lists a US Report from the Attorney General to the Vice President August 1999 titled 'Evidence suggests cyberstalking is a growing problem'.

<sup>114</sup> I do not have the comparative information necessary to be able to make any assessment of whether this was the case prior to Internet connections.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the homepage is a new resource for the performance of the self. Similarly, the homepage is a new resource for the performance of family. I use the term 'online family' to refer to the family existing on a web site as data (text, images, and perhaps sound). This online family may be the result of a collaboration between household family members or it may be one member's version. It may bear little or no resemblance to the offline household family. Internet skills aside, in the households studied, how and whether the online family was actually performed was closely related to attitude to the Internet and offline experience of the family. The following examples relate the different ways in which online families are being performed (or not) to the household environment and individual understandings of the family.

The Rileys, for example, are a middle-class family with teenage children. They do not tend to do things as a family and seem to keep emotional distance from each other. They are quite contemptuous of the idea of having photos of their family on the Internet as the following exchange shows:

**Geoff:** It's usually Mum and Dad, their kids, a Ford and a dog.

**Jim:** They've all got a photo of themselves behind themselves on the wall as well.

**Marj:** And in that photo, is a photo of Simsock the pussy.

*Much laughter all around*

The Riley's view of the family web page as a ridiculous public display is reflected both in their dismissive attitude to communication on the Internet and the relative insignificance of understandings of the family to the attitudes and daily acts of each member.

In contrast, the online family is performed in the Scott, Blackburn and Cole families (also middle-class and with teenage children) as an efficient way to display information about the family to overseas relatives and friends. Within each of these families a degree of emotional closeness is achieved in the way that the family is constantly enacted in everyday household life. Two of the families are actively involved in Christianity which places a great deal of importance on the performance of the family. In the other family, members emphasised to me how important it was for each of them that they do a lot

together as a family. In the Cole family, **Richard**, the father, came up with the idea to create a web page with photos and text about the life of his wife as a surprise for her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. He intended to keep it a secret from her until it was 'ready and rolling' and it was not going to contain 'too many personal or revealing things' about her. He intended to set it up so that only people who were invited to the celebration and had been given the web address were likely to access it. He had asked Natalie, his elder daughter to assist him and she was looking forward to helping him create it. In these three families, the online family is the result of a collaboration in the household family and its purpose is to display information about the household family to relatives and friends. In each case, it is the father who originally had the idea to use the Web to facilitate the presentation of the family to relatives and in each case he required the technical assistance of one of his children. Here the online family is intended as an extension of email communication; the fact that anyone can access it is irrelevant.

The online family as performed by **Kim** Sampson on her personal website is not a way of communicating to friends and relatives as **Kim** has no contact with her extended family. It is her particular version of the family and it differs in composition from the online household family. When I interviewed the Sampson family, **Kim** referred to her website as if all of the household family were on it:

*'(talking to Dylan) And you and Dad and... Kylie and all their school photos are on there'*

In fact, the 'Come Meet My Family' link on the opening page of **Kim's** web site goes directly to a picture of **Kim** and pictures of her three children, but there is no mention of her husband **Trevor**. When I asked **Kim** why **Trevor** was not included or mentioned on her web site, she responded:

*'When I first got on there too and did that web page, initially he wasn't that interested in the whole thing and so I didn't feel like including him. I mean, to me, my kids were, you know, more important to show off.'*

The online family created by **Kim** is an enactment of family that highlights her performance of self as mother, rather than being the result of a shared real-life understanding of the family. Her website is a member of the 'Loving Mother's

webring'. This is a webring 'for anyone who is a Mother and proud of it! And somewhere on their homepage it shows!'<sup>115</sup> **Kim** also uses her home page to express her understanding of family. Her website has information and links related to domestic violence, abused and missing children, and children with disabilities. She is hoping to start her own webring for parents of children with disabilities.

Similarly **Elsbeth** is developing an individual web page to express her understanding of family, albeit a very different one to **Kim's**. Part of her purpose for this page is to cater to the 'great need for creating more of a public awareness about gay people to straight people. So that more straight people realise that gay people are just as normal as everyone else'. **Elsbeth**, as a lesbian mother, is using the Internet to publicly perform a type of family that she feels uncomfortable performing publicly in offline life. She is also consciously using the Internet as a political tool in the struggle for recognition and legitimation of lesbian families. Her site will not include a picture of her son, but will be a performance of her understanding of the family.

Another type of performance of the family on the Internet is evident in the home pages of **Andy** Holcroft and Jenny Nicholls. The real-life household family seems peripheral to both **Andy** and Jenny's performance of self and this is reflected in their home pages which only incidentally include a couple of small photos of the family. **Andy's** website is about him and his interests; the only mention of his wife and children are five unlabelled pictures, three of which were taken more than five years previously. Jenny's site includes many pictures of her friends, but just a few, mainly very old, pictures of her family. These performances of the online family assist in locating **Andy** and Jenny as individuals. The reaction of the other household members in both cases is related to their attitude to the Internet. The other members of **Andy's** family are in awe of the Internet; consequently they are proud that their picture is included in his home page and conscious that other people may view it. In Jenny's family, where she is the main user of the Internet, the rest of her family are unconcerned and vague about whether there are any pictures of them on Jenny's home page. The father's statement about the number of people likely to

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<sup>115</sup> The Loving Mother's Webring is located at <http://danisplace.simplenet.com/mothers.html>.

take notice encapsulates the level of their disinterest about whether or not they have a presence on the web: 'Someone did describe having a home page as a bit like putting a billboard on the Nullabor.' (**Grant** Nicholls)

In summary then, the Internet is involved in the performance of the family's identity in a variety of ways. Internet skills aside, the different types of involvement are related both to the household environment and individual understandings of the family.

### **Family problem-solving techniques**

I depart from Cohler and Grunebaum (1981)'s specifically psychological take on this dimension and look at how the negotiations surrounding the use of the Internet, as well as any conflict surrounding the use of the Internet, are involved in the performance of family in the household.

I have discussed how attitudes towards use of the Internet depended upon the meanings that were given to use. Murdock, Hartmann et al. (1994) had a similar finding in their study on home computing where they identified discourses that existed around home computing in the mid-80s. They found that the various meanings given to home computing provided 'the symbolic context within which the parents and children... negotiated and struggled over the uses of their machines' (1994:157). Like Silverstone, Murdock et al assume a household environment which is stable with respect to the technology. Hence they found that the outcomes of the negotiations over the computer 'depended on the way households were organised as economic and cultural units, their moral economies, and, in particular, on the structure of authority and the distribution of computing expertise among family members'. (1994:157)

I depart from Murdock, Hartmann et al. (1994) and concur with Valentine (1999) who argues, in her study of household food consumption, that the negotiations and conflict that occur in the home are not an *effect* of family relationships and the home. Rather, they are themselves *constitutive* of family relationships and the home. The following examples of some of the conflicts and negotiations surrounding the use of the Internet in the home show how these constitute the performance of family in the home.

It seemed that some level of conflict about the use of the Internet occurred in most families and not just in a particular type of family. It was difficult for me as a visiting researcher to get a sense of the level of conflict occurring with regard to the home Internet connection; it seemed that parents, in particular, were not really keen to articulate any current conflict. Where there was mention of current conflict, it was either fairly minor arguments when more than one family member wanted to use the Internet at the one time, or was expressed by children as resentment when they were not allowed to access the Internet as they wanted (for example, they were not allowed to visit chat rooms). Where there had been major conflict surrounding the Internet, it was presented to me as now resolved. For example in the Sampson family, the father had left the marriage for a while but had returned. In the Holcroft family, the conflict was resolved by the installation of a phone line. In the Blair family, the father had eased off on the time that he was spending on the Internet.

I will describe the situation in the Sampson and Holcroft families in more detail. The first of these stories is about the father coming to terms with the mother's use; here the main issue is trust. The second is about the mother coming to terms with the father's use; here the main issue is perceived isolation through the Internet tying up the phone.

Once **Kim** Sampson had learned how to use the Internet, she started to spend a large amount of time on it:

I was at the point where I didn't want to go shopping, I didn't want to go to work, I didn't want to go to sleep, I didn't want to do anything you know, like, I mean, we ate take away for, I don't know, (*laughs embarrassedly*) probably three months I suppose.

**Trevor** was very reluctant to comment on this period, but he and **Kim** separated for a while. Another contributing factor was that **Trevor** was worried about what **Kim** was doing in the chat rooms.

**Kim:** I mean, he was really against it because I, I was on there. You see, I wasn't actually going to chats and stuff but... so, he went quite anti. Because he couldn't understand it. Yeah.. he sort of, he didn't have that trust there for me. You know, he used to sort



of think, oh well, everyone else is doing the wrong thing here, Kim must be too as well. You know. And...

**Trevor:** (*interrupting*) Oh, just with the stories you hear and stuff like that, you know.

**Kim:** And like, actually, and not just Trevor either. I mean, my sister, most of my family, people... all my friends, used to say, but yeah, but you're going to go off, racing off to America or Canada or somewhere (*laughs embarrassedly*) with some guy or whatever. And, OK, I mean, do you realise that, you know, you're telling me that you don't trust me for number one. And also, you're telling me what I'm going to do. Like, you know. Why don't you just sort of say **Kim** what are you doing? You know, rather than sort of saying you should be doing this. So it became a big rift actually. Um, so, it was funny when he, when the actually did this, um, this link-up. He got on to ICQ and of course he had half of my friends on ICQ. And all of a sudden he started realising, they're really nice people. You know, they're not a threat to me. And I still had the same people as I had when I first started and...(*trails off*)

In this family, the conflict around the Internet contributed to the separation between **Kim** and **Trevor** Sampson. However, as I have previously mentioned the Internet has also been used by the Sampsons to perform family closeness.

Conflict around the Internet stopping incoming phone calls was a recurring issue, and for some families, not having a separate phone line was the worst aspect of the Internet. The strongest emotions were expressed about this in terms of being able to receive incoming calls. Women in particular resented feeling that they were isolated from the outside world because their partner (or perhaps child) was on the Internet. It is interesting that so much weight was placed on this, given that children talking on the phone to their friends also ties up the phone. Several families said that in order to circumvent any potential problems, they got a separate phone line at the same time as the Internet connection.

In the case of the Holcrofts, the conflict was particularly acute. **Lyn** Holcroft did not say that **Andy** was addicted to the Internet, but she did say that if it was disconnected, he would go through withdrawal symptoms or go crazy and that his use was 'all under control more now'. **Andy's** use of the Internet was obviously a huge issue that she tried to make light of. In the individual interview with her, it emerged that they had to get a separate phone line because family and friends were upset that they were never able to get through and she was

getting annoyed with it. In the end, after two and a half years, she just rang up herself and got a second phone line put in. The subtext was that **Andy** did not think it was necessary to have a second phone line in, but in the end **Lyn** defied him and went ahead with getting an additional phone line installed. Before **Lyn** had the extra phone line put in, she felt very isolated and completely disempowered by **Andy's** use of the Internet. By putting the separate phone line in, she felt that she had regained some control and was able to cope with the way that **Andy** used the Internet to cut himself off from the rest of the family. In this story it is clear that family members had agency in both the nature of the conflict and its resolution. The effect of the Internet on the relations in the household is also clear. Both intersect to constitute the performance of family in the household at any time.

### ***Negotiation of use***

Various studies have concluded that, within the home, males control information and communication technologies such as the television and video (Morley 1986; Lull 1990; Lull 1988).<sup>116</sup> It has also been argued that men and boys are physically controlling the computer (Spender 1995; Herring, Johnson et al. 1995). For example, in a study conducted in England in 1989, Wheelock found that in some cases, 'daughters are squeezed out of using the computer by their brothers, sometimes aided by their parents'. (1994:110) I found no instances of this occurring. However, in the Canberra study, there were several instances of the father controlling the Internet. This could be interpreted as a performance of gender or a performance of generation. The literature on information and communication technologies would suggest that it is a performance of generation. Lull (1990) points out that most research on VCR technology shows that men are in control of the VCR but children of both sexes develop competency with VCRs. Lull concludes that: 'accommodation of new entertainment technologies into the home, therefore, may be influenced as much by generation as it is by gender, at least in certain cultural settings'. (1990:170) Similarly, it seems that in the case studies, father's control of the Internet was a performance of generation. In those instances where the father controlled access to the Internet,<sup>117</sup> he

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<sup>116</sup> Lull (1988) cites Venezuela as an exceptional case.

<sup>117</sup> As I have discussed, **Andy** Holcroft was an exception.

generally controlled children's access and the children were generally Internet competent.

In cases where children participated in negotiations surrounding the use of the Internet, it is difficult to tell whether these negotiations constituted new relations within the household or reproduced existing relations. However, it is clear that in some cases new hierarchies were formed with respect to Internet use.

Although theorists describe the modern family as democratic (Beck 1997), this does not mean that parental authority disappears. Frones (1994) considers that negotiation in decision-making, with parental authority maintained, characterises the 'democratic' modern family: 'Negotiation ensures children's participation, emphasises the position of the individual actor, and, at the same time, underlines the democratic authority of the parents.' (1994:154)

In more than half of the households studied, Internet access was shared with consideration for the desires of other family members or use became self-policing. For example:

'It becomes self policing. No one can stay on the computer for hours and hours and hours because someone else will be saying I want to the computer so that (*laughs*) sorts of forces a bit of discipline'. (**David** Blackburn)

In a few families there was a clear-cut hierarchy of use according to the user. It seemed to be related to interest in Internet use rather than position in the family in general. When someone in the family, whether it was the parent or the child, had a particular enthusiasm for the Internet, it was basically accepted by the others in the family that they had some sort of claim to ownership of the Internet connection and they were first in the hierarchy of use. This did not seem to be related to gender. For example, in cases where the mother worked and was not particularly interested in the Internet, she tended to be at the bottom of the hierarchy (that is, below the children). In those cases where the mother did not work and was interested in using the Internet, she was at the top.

In several families, the hierarchy was according to the perceived importance of the intended use rather than the identity of the user. In those cases where a parent worked from home, their work tended to get first priority. Otherwise,

homework had first priority in several families. In families where there was only one computer, the hierarchy of use related to the computer regardless of whether it was to be connected to the Internet.

These examples all illustrate how the negotiations and conflicts in a family household surrounding the use of the Internet, participate in constituting the relations in the home.

### **Chapter conclusion**

In this chapter I have demonstrated the complexities of the relationship between the Internet and the performance of family. For heuristic purposes, I have divided the performance of family into different dimensions. With regard to each dimension of the performance of family, I have provided examples to demonstrate how the relationship between the Internet and the family is mutually constitutive. Some families have incorporated the Internet into their existing routines, maintaining aspects of their performance of family. However, in some households the presence of the Internet has changed the performance of family in that household. In most households, the presence of the Internet results in a complex mix of stability and change along the different dimensions of the performance of family.

These detailed examples of how people use the Internet to perform the family refute the suggestion that the Internet is destroying the family or radically changing it. The nature of the intersection of the Internet and the performance of family is not predetermined by supposed characteristics of families or the Internet.<sup>118</sup> 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.

I have also extended my findings to sociological conceptions of the family. I have shown that in the daily life of family households, the Internet is involved in both maintaining performances of existing notions of the family and in constituting new ideas of family, such as families of choice.

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<sup>118</sup> Bingham, Valentine et al. (1999) make this point with regard to children's use of the Internet.



## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### The 'view from somewhere'

This thesis set out to examine the domestic consumption of the Internet. After detailed analysis of the use of the Internet by household families, I arrived at the conclusion that neither the Internet, the family nor the self is stable entities but each is performative in nature. In other words each is constituted through its own performance; a process of continual construction and reconstruction, that when repeated may give the appearance of stability. Each is implicated in the performance of the other in a way that is mutually constitutive. This means that in using the Internet, a household family participates in the constitution of the performance of the Internet while at the same time the Internet is also a participant in the performance of the family; similarly for the self. Of course, the Internet is not the only participant in the performance of the family. For example, the house or dwelling in which the family lives is a participant in their performance of family. As an example, a house with an open plan living area and no yard is likely to contribute to the performance of family differently to a house with several separate living rooms and large front and back yards. Similarly, the family is a participant in the performance of the house (for example, using each room for a specific function). It is possible that not just the Internet, the family and the self, but all things that we give names to could be conceptualised as performances rather than as stable entities. This mode of conceptualisation is politically desirable in that it destabilises categories or particular alliances that have a regulatory effect on people's lives, articulating possibilities for how things could be different. It also fits Glaser and Strauss's (1967) criteria that a theory needs to fit the data, be intelligible without specialist knowledge, be general and allow the user partial control over the situation under study.

In this thesis, I have extended this mode of conceptualisation to gender, class and generation but my main focus has been on the intersection of the performance of the Internet with the performance of family and the performance of self. My analysis of peoples' stories about their everyday use of the Internet shows that the nature of the intersection is complex and cannot be predicted by looking at characteristics of the Internet, the family or the self in isolation.

There are two types of findings in this thesis: empirical information which contributes directly to practical knowledge about the Internet, the family or the self; and theoretical contributions, either to existing theory or new ways of conceptualising the data. In addition, although I took the approach of grounded theory rather than set out to test a specific hypothesis, this has not stopped me from assessing the usefulness of existing theories for explaining the data. I will outline the contributions that this research has made to various areas of study, including the more practical findings.

The research contributes to general studies on consumption, as an empirical case study and in terms of providing a way of conceptualising objects of consumption. My conceptualisation of domestic consumption of the Internet as comprising mutually constitutive performances of the self, the family and the Internet meets Warde's (1996) suggested criteria for a theory of consumption in that it combines the consumer-led approaches outlined in chapter 3. These included consumption as a way of performing the self, as a way of marking attachment to social groups, as a way of accumulating resources or capital, and as a way of ensuring participation in social activities. As my analysis shows, it accounts for the behaviour of the user and the process of negotiating meanings. I have demonstrated how consumption of the Internet can be used to invest meaning in notions of family as well as self. However, my model of domestic consumption of the Internet it is not solely a consumer-led conception of consumption. In particular, I have used Silverstone's (1996) model of the design/domestication interface as a starting point for conceptualising the performance of the Internet in domestic consumption, comprising the social, the technical and the narrated. In so doing, I pay explicit attention to production aspects in the form of commercial stories that turn an object for consumption into a commodity. However, I have argued that commercial stories about the Internet were ill-defined at the time that I conducted my research because Internet access had only just become available. I contend that the non-material nature of Internet access meant that it became commercially available before it was commodified with a clearly identifiable target market. I have also demonstrated the influence of non-commercial stories in the decision to connect and in the meanings given to, and use made of, the Internet. Hence, my analysis includes some attention to aspects of production.

Although I started this thesis with a disclaimer about observing clear patterns, in fact there are some general conclusions that I have reached regarding the nature of the intersecting performances of the Internet with the family and the self. I discuss these in terms of the research questions outlined in the introduction. As explained there, I framed these research questions in terms of performance only after concluding that the Internet, the family and the self were performative. I repeat each research question here, situating relevant findings against some of the larger issues alluded to in the introduction.

- **How is the Internet performed in different households?**

The Internet is not a stable entity with particular characteristics that can be identified in each household with Internet access. The Internet's performance varies within and between households in complex and contradictory ways. Drawing on Latour (1993), I have shown that the Internet can be characterised as a network of practice comprised of the technical, the social and the narrated. In other words, key constitutive elements of the performance of the Internet in the household are the physical configuration of the technology, the stories and meanings given to it within the household, and the level and type of engagement with the technology.

I have shown how aspects of the physical configuration such as the number of computers in the household with Internet access, the capability of the computer, the location of the Internet access point(s), the access plan, the speed of the modem, the length of time that the Internet had been connected and whether or not there is a separate phone line, all participate in constituting and revealing social relations in the household. I have shown how this technical aspect is fully social. People have choices about the physical configuration of the Internet in their home rather than its physical presence being determined by some technological imperative.

In analysing social aspects of the performance of the Internet in the household, I have drawn on Silverstone's (1992;1996) model of appropriation. However, I observed a range of levels of incorporation of the Internet and a variety of



relationships with the Internet. For example, although they had purchased access to the Internet, members of some households seemed to want to keep the Internet peripheral to the daily life of the household. It was also common for individual family members to have their own particular relationship with the Internet. In addition, whereas Silverstone regards appropriation as fundamentally a conservative process where the technology is tamed by the household, I found that this was not inevitable. In two of the households, the relationship between the household and the Internet had been one where the Internet was perceived as being in control.

People perceived the effect of the Internet on the family either in terms of the activities which it displaced or in terms of social relations of the household family. It seemed that Internet use displaced television watching in those families where previously a lot of television had been watched. People were unwilling to admit dependence on the Internet and tended to downplay effects. However, no one in the study could be conceived of as a passive victim of technology. The case where the husband left the family because of his wife's use of the Internet was more a function of the husband's attitude to the Internet than an effect of the technology per se.

One cannot necessarily gauge how people use the Internet from how they talk about the Internet. I observed three different constructions of the Internet which were not mutually exclusive. These were the Internet as a tool, the Internet as entertainment and the Internet as a link to the outside world. These meanings did not map on to different types of use, and non-use also participated in the construction of the Internet. I have shown how stories about the Internet are an integral part of the performance of the Internet in the household, helping to constitute the relationship between the household and the Internet and influencing the consumption of the Internet.

The more common stories about the Internet were stories about the type of people who use the Internet (often referred to as 'weirdos'), the merits or otherwise of using the Internet, and the cost of the Internet. Stories about the cost of the Internet were contradictory and not necessarily related to actual cost. Stories about the merits or otherwise tended to be related to the perceived

value of Internet use compared to the perceived value of the activity displaced by Internet. In general, the Internet was perceived as a more worthwhile activity than watching television. However, while for some people the Internet was a valued form of communication, others pathologised Internet use, considering that it displaced normal interactions with other people.

This research contributes to debates in STS about the nature of the relationship between technology and users. I have demonstrated that the performance of the Internet participates in constituting social relations in the household, participates in revealing social relations in the household and in constituting the relationship between the household and the Internet. This relationship is not stable but changes over time. For example, the relationship is likely to change as family members become more familiar with using the Internet and as children grow older. The technical performance of the Internet is also changing as, for example, high speed connections become available. It is also likely that the stories in circulation have changed and that commercial and government stories about the Internet are now more significant than they were when the fieldwork was conducted.

I suggest that the conceptualisation of the performance of the Internet as comprised of the technical, the social and the narrated allows a more nuanced account than previous accounts of the domestic consumption of information and communication technologies. It seems that this model could be a useful starting point for investigating the performance of the Internet in other settings, such as the workplace or school. It could also be extended to investigations of the consumption of other technologies.

- **What are the implications of a home Internet connection for the performance of self?**

The Internet participates in the performance of self. At the same time the meanings given to use (or non-use) participate in the performance of the Internet. In other words, the relationship between the self and the Internet is an ongoing process which is mutually constitutive.

People's use (and non-use) of the Internet can only be understood in terms of the meanings that people invest in particular uses or non-uses. These meanings are not essential properties but are negotiated through interactions between a person and the Internet within a particular social context. They depend on the discursive position that the user inhabits. In other words, the nature of, and meanings given to this use constitutes part of the performance of self.

Enlisting Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, I have demonstrated that aspects of use or non-use of the Internet have different currency depending on the particular social world in which the user is operating. For example, I demonstrated that home pages and technical skills were invested with different meanings in particular social contexts. It seems that, for both men and women, Internet skills were a valued form of working-class cultural capital that could be converted into either symbolic or social capital. Hence, for people who valued culturally working-class performances, Internet skills were also a source of personal self-esteem.

The data did not support the idea that the Internet is causing social isolation. Those who were logged on for extensive periods of time tended to be communicating online, either via emails, chat or ICQ, or working on their home page. Meeting people through chat rooms is a way of acquiring online social capital. Chat is perhaps a prime example of Giddens' (1992) 'pure relationship' or Castell's (1998b) idea of new forms of sociability constructed on the basis of the actual experience of the relationship rather than following norms for relationships. There are not established norms for chat and the relationship exists only as long as it is good for both parties. As soon as one party tires of chatting with a particular person, they can choose to end the communications with no untoward consequences.

Those in the study who had home pages were either children or working class adults. All used the home page to express their political or cultural point of view. This type of performance of self via a personal home page seems to be linked to a lack of political and cultural power offline. Hence, these home pages

may be seen as a means of performing a self that has no public voice other than on the Internet.

Whereas chat rooms and home pages were valued sources of cultural and social capital for working-class adults and children, chat rooms and home pages were classified by middle-class adults (who thereby classified or performed themselves as middle-class) as something to distance oneself from.

The significance of the Internet as a resource for the performance of self was not necessarily related to the amount of time logged on. For some people who logged on for just a few minutes a day to check emails, the Internet had enormous significance. Conversely, I have also shown that the Internet could have no symbolic significance despite crucial functional significance.

The Internet is a new resource in the performance of self and is used by some people to overcome constraints on their desired performance of self. Some people consider that use of the Internet is personally empowering: they can be more 'themselves' online as they are able to find an environment where their desired performance of self is valued. Contrary to Castells' (1998a) suggestion that families are 'more than ever the providers of psychological security', it seems that the Internet is being used by some people to find communities of like-minded people who provide emotional and psychological support. I would suggest that these types of communities have always existed. The Internet is just a new way of facilitating involvement, especially for those who are largely confined to the home through a disability, childcare responsibilities or age. Those communities that were apparent from the study did not bear any strong resemblance to the tribes envisaged by Castells (1998a) and Maffesoli (1996). They did not have the obsession with the present alluded to by Maffesoli. For example, the community in which Jenny Nicholls participated was obsessed with a rock star who has been dead for more than twenty years. These communities did not have the political nature of Castells' 'tribes' either. This finding does not disprove Maffesoli's or Castells' ideas about 'tribes'. A different kind of study, probably one that draws its sample from online communities, would be needed to capture the emergence of any such tribes.

My interpretation of the data is that, rather than the Internet enabling a new reflexive project of self, free of the constraints of social context, the way in which people enlist the Internet in their performance of self can be related in complex ways to their offline social context. Use is associated with, but not determined by, context. In the study, everyone's online performance was an extension of their offline performance. However, the type of online performance (for example in a home page or a chat room) was constrained by the cultural and technical resources available to the author offline. This does not suggest that all online performances are extensions of offline performances but it does challenge the notion that Internet users have complete freedom to experiment with different online identities.

Although individuals may exercise choice in using the Internet, they do not necessarily have complete control over the process or effects of using the Internet. For example, I have shown how **Kim** Sampson's use of the Internet completely transformed her performance of self from bored housewife with low self-esteem to busy, gregarious web-designer. It seems that there was also a time when the Internet dictated **Kim's** performance of self. This example could be seen as a case of addiction to the Internet. However, the definition of what constitutes Internet addiction is not straightforward. The data revealed that whether or not a person considers that they (or someone else) are addicted to the Internet, or whether they consider it to be a problem, does not depend on the amount of time spent on the Internet. It depends upon whether the time spent on the Internet is perceived as a legitimate use of time and whether or not the person considers that s/he is in control of their Internet use or that the Internet is dictating their performance of self. From the Canberra study, it is impossible to make any sort of generalisation about the sort of person who considered that extensive Internet use was legitimate. However it shows that in any quantitative study about Internet use, care needs to be taken in defining or interpreting 'addiction'. Judgements about frequency of use are completely subjective and there are not yet any general agreed benchmarks as to what constitutes Internet addiction.

- **What are the implications of a home Internet connection for the performance of family?**

The research debunks some of the speculation about the involvement of the Internet in family relationships. It also contributes to debates about the changing nature of the family, including the parent/child relationship.

Rather than giving any specific sociological meaning to the term 'family', I have used the term to refer to the way that groups of individuals who understand themselves as forming a family enact that understanding in their daily life. I have argued that the family is performative, and has meaning and substance through those practices which are understood to perform the family.

I have argued that, rather than destroying the family, the Internet participates in constituting social relations within the household and vice versa. The way in which the Internet is used in a particular household is partially an effect of the household's performance of the family. At the same time, the way in which the Internet is used helps to constitute the performance of family. Characterising the performance of family in terms of dimensions drawn from Cohler and Grunebaum (1981), I have shown that the relationship between the Internet and the family is mutually constitutive with regard to each dimension. Some families have incorporated the Internet into their existing routines, while in other households the presence of the Internet has led to a radically difference performance of a dimension of family in that household. In most households, these possibilities intersect with regard to different dimensions of the performance of family in complex and unpredictable ways.

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. Any appearance of stability masks the complex daily negotiations that maintain a particular version of family.

### ***Nature of performance of family***

Although the Internet provides literally a connection that extends beyond the household, in some ways its use symbolised a retreat into the household. For example, some parents considered that their children were spending more time

at home because of the Internet. The nature of family activities did not necessarily predict the nature of the household family's Internet consumption. For example, in a family that generally did things separately, the Internet may be used to perform family closeness (and vice versa). In some families, the Internet was the only common point of interest between family members and so facilitated a closer relationship. The Internet was used by both parents and children to express autonomy within the household family. For children in particular, having a private email account could be of considerable importance.

Use of the Internet in family households can not be characterised simply in terms of its effect on particular families. For example, I suggest that the negotiations and conflict involving the Internet that occur in the home are not an effect of family relationships or the Internet. Rather, they are themselves constitutive of the performance of family and the performance of the Internet. It was difficult for me as a visiting researcher to get a sense of the level of conflict occurring with regard to the home Internet connection. However, it seemed that some level of conflict about the use of the Internet occurred in most families and not just a particular type of family. Conflict around the Internet stopping incoming phone calls was a recurring issue, and for some families, not having a separate phone line was the most negative aspect of the Internet. Given that telephone companies now offer services whereby a voice mail message can be left while someone is using the Internet, this type of conflict may be less common now. However, family members were not passive victims of the technology. They and the Internet were actors in both the nature of the conflict and its resolution. The intersection constituted the performance of family in the household at any time.

### ***Parent-child relationship***

In my research I included children as key social actors while also looking at the everyday practices, specifically those involving the Internet, which construct the child as other to an adult. Performances of parenting are part of these practices constituting the parent/child relationship.

Some commentators assume that children's Internet expertise will be greater than that of their parents. This combined with the fact that, without leaving home, children may be involved in interactive activities that extend beyond the home, has led to fears that parents will not be able to control their children's use of the Internet. The data indicates, however, that regardless of their level of expertise, parents are employing a range of strategies in order to exercise control over their children's use of the Internet and, in particular, what their children are accessing on the Internet. It does not support the view that the responsibility that parents have traditionally had for their children's development has been taken over by professionals (Frones 1994) and new media (Silva 1996) or that parents are no longer involved in passing down traditions (Thompson 1996).

Both of the styles of parenting identified by Brannen (1996) were evident in parents' attitude to control of their children's use of the Internet: providing explicit directives for children's behaviour and giving children the opportunity to exercise their own self-control. Parents' decisions about whether they were to control their children's Internet use through explicit rules or allow the children some self-control did not seem to be related to the Internet competence of the parents. Most parents claimed to trust their children but also exercised some form of directive control. Where explicit rules about Internet use existed, these were downplayed by parents, supporting Bittman and Pixley's (1997) contention that parents desire the friendship of children. However, because I did not examine exercise of parental control in relation to other aspects of the lives of children in the study, it is difficult to reach any conclusions about whether the Internet is involved in changing the nature of the parent/child relationship. Similarly, it is difficult to tell whether children's participation in negotiations surrounding the use of the Internet constituted new relations within the household (for example, Beck's (1997) notion of the democratisation of the family) or reproduced existing relations. It is clear, however, that in some cases new hierarchies were formed with respect to Internet use.

In some cases, parents had enlisted the technology itself to assist them to perform traditional parental authority through setting up the Internet to prevent



certain activities, via a secret password or through 'remote supervision'. Parents with some degree of Internet expertise could inspect the Internet cache to ensure that children had not accessed inappropriate content. I observed a tension here (as identified by Frones 1994) between parents' desire to perform as responsible parents and their desire to respect their children's rights to privacy. A compromise was to control a child's Internet access through 'hovering'; in other words, hanging around the user or physically coming in and out of the room in which the computer is located to keep an eye on what the child is doing on the Internet. This form of surveillance did not require any Internet expertise on the part of the parent and it seemed that parents were more comfortable with this form of control than with explicit rules.

Parents had different understandings of what is appropriate content for children to access and what 'old enough' meant in terms of a child being allowed to use the Internet on their own. It seems that, in general, the definitions of unacceptable behaviour on the Internet constitute the family as being at risk from the outside world. Parents did not acknowledge that the outside world might be at risk from their children; not one parent mentioned telling their children that it was unacceptable to abuse other people over the Internet.

### ***Understandings of family***

Beck (1995) and Giddens (1992) have argued that the family is decreasing in importance as individuals negotiate relationships that last only as long as there is mutual benefit. Furthermore, Giddens has suggested that people are experimenting with new social arrangements as 'traditional' family structures become less relevant. Rather than supporting the notion that the family is decreasing in importance, the data showed that that the Internet is involved in enabling new performances of family as well as maintaining existing performances of family, while some families used the Internet to reinforce boundaries between the household family and the outside world.

There were two examples in the study of the Internet facilitating the establishment of new 'extended families of choice' (Weeks, Donovan et al 1999) that were not based on biological or conjugal ties. An interesting area for future

research would be to investigate how widespread or lasting such new performances of family are.

More generally, people were using the Internet to maintain relationships with families of origin, to communicate with extended family or absent members of the immediate family, to track down relatives and access genealogical information. In some cases, email facilitated communication with minimum effort, whereas in others it enhanced and deepened the quality of the communication.

Some families used the home page as a way of performing an online version of the family. Internet skills aside, in the households studied, how and whether the online family was actually performed was related both to individual members' attitude to the Internet and understandings of the family. There were two types of family home page. There were those that were intended as an extension of email communication and were the result of the offline household family's collaboration. With this type of home page, the fact that anyone could access it was irrelevant. The second type of family home page was set up to express understandings of family, with strangers as the intended audience. For example, one mother had set up a home page as part of the 'Loving Mother's webring' espousing her views on parenting and domestic violence. A lesbian mother had set up a home page as a political act to try to create awareness of, and respect for, lesbian families.

Observations that some people's performances of the family are continuous with those of the past, while others transform prior ideas of the family, could indicate that we are at a point where new and old performances of the family coexist; or they could indicate that we are in a time of transition to new understandings of the family. Whatever the case, these new understandings of family are based on and include past performances of family, rather than representing something totally different in kind. Hence, although inconclusive, the research adds support to the idea that the present includes the past (Heelas 1996; Rose 1996; Adam 1996; Luke 1996); that we are not witnessing a break with what has gone before (Latour 1993).

## ***Gender***

I stated at the outset that my research is feminist in that I pay attention to issues of gender. The conclusion that I reached about gender is that it is not a stable category. I have drawn from Butler's (1990) theorisation of gender as performative. However, whereas Butler is concerned to show the meaninglessness of the performance and focuses on surface performances of the body, I am referring to a whole set of dispositions and values that are so meaningful to the performer as to become naturalised and regarded as an essential quality of the person. I have identified and engaged with three different senses in which gender is commonly referred to in feminist literature on gender and technology. The first is in terms of whether a technology is itself gendered; for example inscribed with particular gender relations in its production. The second is in terms of a technology's involvement in gender relations, that is, the social practices of men and women in relation to each other. The third is in terms of the use of a technology to perform gender identity in individual performances of masculinity and femininity.

My research has not provided any evidence supporting the idea that the Internet is inscribed with any particular gendered meanings (Kramarae 1988; Herring Johnson et al 1995; Spender 1995). No particular gender expectations (Gray 1995) were apparent either from people's stories about the Internet, their attitude to or use of the Internet. I have suggested that the notion of inscription becomes very complicated when applied to the Internet. Users consume both technology and content and the boundaries between producers and consumers are blurred. Furthermore, my conceptualisation of the Internet as a performance does not sit well with the idea of it being inscribed with gender.

I have critiqued studies of technology's involvement in gender relations (for example, Berg 1996; Cockburn and Ormrod 1993; Livingstone 1994; Wheelock 1994; Rakow 1988; Moyal 1992). Whereas studies of gender and technology typically report that technology is used to maintain traditional gender relations, I have argued that this is not inevitable. For example, there was a case in which the Internet was involved in transforming what had been traditional gender relations. The Internet was used by a woman confined to the house by childcare responsibilities as a way of gaining new skills with economic and labour market

value. In addition, more than half of the households in the Canberra study did not appear to conform to a traditional model of the domestic division of labour.

It is important to document inequalities that exist between men and women. However, I have suggested that studies that focus on observed differences that maintain traditional gender relations may not actually reveal the organisation of gender relations. Rather they may reproduce a particular version of gender. In other words, it is possible that those commentators who only 'notice' those practices which accord with their expectations, actually collude in perpetuating a particular version of gender. For example, I observed that men were using the Internet to maintain family ties, typically regarded as 'gender work' of women. In addition, contrary to claims that men wish to control the Internet and stop women from gaining expertise, in the Canberra study it was common for girls and women to be shown how to use the technology by males in the family. With one exception, husbands seemed to be extremely supportive of both their wives and their daughter's interests on the Internet. In those households where girls or women were the Internet experts, this type of engagement with the Internet was encouraged or at least supported by the father. In addition, female Internet users seemed to be just as likely to be self-taught as males. More research is needed before any conclusions can be drawn on the Internet's involvement in the transformation or maintenance of gender relations within the household. However, I suggest that it is politically important to pay attention to those cases that subvert traditional gender relations.

In terms of individual performances of masculinity and femininity, my findings did not accord with the literature (Cockburn 1994: Turkle 1995). I did not generally observe, for example, technical incompetence linked to a performance of femininity or men using the Internet as part of a performance of masculinity. My conclusion here is similar to that made with respect to technology and gender relations. I consider that in reporting on observed differences between men and women, and interpreting these in terms of dominant (conservative) understandings of what constitutes masculinity or femininity, the researcher

her/himself participates in maintaining and extending a particular version of gender, reifying it as a stable category with particular properties.

It seems that, in much of the literature on gender and technology, femininity is the label given to those performances which when associated with a female body help to reinforce dominant gender relations. Likewise masculinity is the label given to those performances which are not only associated with a male body but help to reproduce dominant gender relations. As performances which subvert dominant gender relations (for example, technical mastery associated with a female body) contradict 'gender expectations', the easiest way to account for them is to interpret them as exceptions. This means that such performances are rendered analytically invisible. I suggest that these performances are of critical importance as 'subversive repetitions' (Butler 1990), or exceptions that make possible the destabilisation of traditional gender relations.

Rather than assuming that gender difference exists and documenting how it is manifested, I suggest that future research needs to look at how people use consumption of the Internet to mark or play down gender, and under what sort of circumstances. I have demonstrated that people's use of the Internet can only be understood in terms of the meanings that people invest in particular uses or non-uses. Although it may seem that these meanings are patterned (or predictable) by class or gender, I have argued the opposite: people perform class and gender by investing aspects of the Internet with particular meanings. For example, I observed that only boys were involved in harassing people in chat rooms. I have suggested that this is a way of marking gender, given that this aggressive type of behaviour is a legitimated form of cultural capital in the field of hegemonic masculinity. Such behaviour can be a way for boys to gain social capital amongst their offline friends. I consider that to pursue the question of under what circumstances boys (or for that matter, girls) are likely to engage in this type of behaviour is a more fruitful avenue than to simply report it as a manifestation of socially constructed, but still effectively immutable, differences.

The above comments also apply to the treatment of generation and class. In practice, it is extremely difficult to separate performances of gender from both

performances of generation and performances of class. More empirical research is needed into how these performances intersect in the use of the Internet.

An interesting suggestion from the study is that the Internet is a new resource in the performances of gender, enabling some people to overcome constraints on desired performances. For example, females who did not possess embodied feminine cultural capital could inhabit online the discursive position of femininity. Similarly, males who did not possess embodied masculine cultural capital could inhabit online the discursive position of masculinity. In addition, although I did not come across any such cases in the Canberra study, it seems from the literature, (eg Stone 1997) that it is equally possible for male bodies to successfully inhabit the discursive position of femininity online and for female bodies to successfully inhabit the discursive position of masculinity online. It would be interesting to investigate whether the Internet is similarly a new resource in the desired performance of generation or class.

### **Policy implications**

The research has some implications for current policy, especially questions of access.

My research suggested that people do not use the Internet unless they value use. Hence, although people may have the option of accessing the Internet, whether people use the Internet, and in what way, depends on the meanings given to use. Some people have access to the Internet but do not use it, or particular aspects of it, because they do not value this use. The Australian Government is concerned to ensure that every Australian has access to, and does in fact access, the Internet. In identifying the narrated performance of the Internet, my study shows the importance of stories about the cost and desirability of the Internet in influencing decisions about connecting to, or using, the Internet. This suggests that the Government's strategy will be more effective if, in conjunction with making Internet access available, the Government communicates what it regards as the specific benefits of Internet access. The data also showed that it is possible that, although a household

may have an Internet connection, one person may control the Internet account, preventing other household members from having access.

The Australian Broadcasting Association has responsibility for regulating Internet content in Australia. It has recently produced online guides about the Internet including *What Every Family Should Know*, with suggested house rules for Internet use. These rules are all directed at protecting children from inappropriate content or unwelcome advances by strangers. I found that parents were employing various strategies to protect their children. However, there seems to be no acknowledgment by parents or in government publications that some children are themselves engaging in abusive behaviour over the Internet. This is an issue that could perhaps be addressed in this type of publication.

My research provides insights helpful in interpreting the results of some of the recent quantitative studies on aspects of use and non-use of the Internet. For example, it documents diversity of use and suggests that statistics on frequency of use are not an indicator of whether or not the Internet plays a significant part in someone's everyday life. The data also indicates that people who previously watched a lot of television prior to the Internet connection are transferring time spent watching television to time on the Internet.

### **Limitations of the study and areas for further research**

I have characterised my research as a 'view from somewhere'. The households in the study were chosen to capture diversity and are not representative of Canberra, or anywhere else. I have limited my investigation to household families with children and hence have no information on, for example, older people, people living alone or people living in remote areas. Even so, this thesis provides both empirical information and a way of conceptualising the relationship between the Internet and its users. In particular, the information in this thesis provides some of the necessary foundations on which to build further research on the use of the Internet.

Because the Canberra study is not representative, I have not captured the full diversity of experience and am not able to indicate the frequency of different

types of experience. Both of these aspects would be areas for further study, along with studies focussing on the use of the Internet outside the home; for example, at work, in educational settings, in libraries or cybercafes.

My focus was on people who did use the Internet. When I began this research, users were a minority and of particular interest. Now, as the Internet is more widely available, people who have never used the Internet, or have decided not to use it, are of particular interest in a country like Australia where the Government is directing significant funding and energy towards ensuring that all Australians have access to the Internet.

As I have demonstrated, this thesis helps fill various gaps in existing literature. However, in some ways the preliminary nature of my study makes these gaps even wider by highlighting the need for further research in a range of areas. I have referred to some of these areas already. Given that there are so few in-depth studies of use of the Internet that take into account the offline environment of the user, almost any area that I have touched on in the thesis would be suitable for further research.

Changes are often incremental. Because my study is basically a snapshot, it is likely that it underestimates the extent of change. A longitudinal study which studied families and individuals before and after connection and continued to revisit the same families after connection would be able to capture some of the incremental changes, of which people themselves may be unaware. Such a study would provide significant insights into implications of the Internet for broader social change. I have touched on some of these debates but have been unable to contribute anything conclusive. For example, in order to assess Maffesoli and Castell's claims about tribes, one would need to study offline behaviour as well as online interaction. As I have argued, online behaviour is associated with offline behaviour. As well as talking to people about their Internet use, I attempted to get an idea of people's online activities via the Record of Internet Use. Ideally one would actually track online activities. As I have shown, the meanings that people give to these activities is critical for making sense of them. Hence, such a study would need to be combined with extensive interviews with users. However, apart from being intrusive, it would



be difficult to conduct such a study without the study itself affecting how the Internet was used by the research subjects.

My study was of the Internet as it was available domestically in Canberra in 1997 and 1998. The nature of its performance will have changed over time in terms of its technical, social and narrated performances.

For example, in terms of its narrated performance, at the time of the research there was a common perception that online forms of communication are not valid forms of communication. It will be interesting to track how this perception changes as the Internet becomes more naturalised into people's lives. I have argued that the Internet was commercially available before Internet Service Providers had a clear target consumer in mind. This point could be more rigorously pursued via a study of Internet Service Providers and a history of domestic Internet access.

In terms of the social performance of the Internet, I have already flagged the need for more critical research into the gender and technology relation. Further research is also needed into how the Internet is implicated in performances of parenting and the quality of communication when using the Internet to maintain family ties.

It seems that the Internet has neither transformed society nor devastated family relationships. It has enabled new ways of negotiating family identity and negotiating self within the family. In turn, there are myriad different performances of the Internet as it is continually reinvented in use. As I write this, thousands of Australian family members are at home logged onto the Internet. The Internet is changing as are notions of the self and what we call the family. The performance of each intersects and creates new spaces from which we can emerge with new understandings.

## Appendix A: Questionnaire to parents



*Sociology Program  
Research School of Social Sciences  
The Australian National University*

### SURVEY OF HOUSEHOLD FAMILIES - ATTITUDES TOWARDS AND USE OF THE INTERNET

#### **Purpose of this survey**

This survey is part of a project examining attitudes towards the internet and the ways in which families and individual family members are using the internet at home. ***We are interested in hearing from people who have never used the internet as well as those who have.***

#### **Confidentiality**

This survey is strictly confidential. Respondents will remain anonymous. You can indicate a willingness to be involved in further research in the box provided on the last page of the questionnaire.

#### **Instructions for completion**

This survey is to be filled in by a parent. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete.

#### **Due date**

Once you have completed the questionnaire, please seal it in the envelope provided and return it by the date printed on the envelope.

#### **Assistance**

If you have any queries regarding this questionnaire, please contact Vivienne Waller at the Australian National University on 6249 4273 during business hours.



















## Appendix C: Composition of the case study families

Janice and Richard Cole  
Ivor (18)  
Natalie (16)  
Daniel (13)  
Helen (9)

Beryl and Reg Scott  
Alan (18)  
Cameron (15)  
Kin (13)

Fay Corso  
Samantha (16)

Sylvia and David Blackburn  
Oliver (17)  
Simon (15)

Russell Palermo  
Michael (15)

Iris and Rod Moser  
Adam (16)  
Neil (14)

Trisha and Bob Garling  
Diana (17)  
Karen (15)  
plus four intellectually disabled foster children,  
all aged under 8

Jill and Terry Blair  
Ken (13)  
Brad (12)  
Carol (10)  
Tony (6)  
Ricky (4)

Marlene and Noel Davis  
Anna (14)  
Roger (11)

Kim and Trevor Sampson  
Dylan (11)  
Kylie (8)  
Sue (6)

Elspeth Arlington  
Wayne (13)

Cecilia Hyslop  
Scott (9)

Paul Larkin  
Barbara (not mother)  
John (17)

Lyn and Andy Holcroft  
Olivia (17)  
Yasmin (15)

Marj and Geoff Riley  
Jim (17)  
Josh (13)

Brigid and Grant Nicholls  
Jenny (16)  
Alison (13)

Pauline and Don Ruyton  
Jane (13)

Vera Griffin  
Sebastian (18)  
Hilary (15)

Grace and Brian Gisborne  
Ansel (13)

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