
‘This big hi-tech thing’: gender and the Internet at home in the 1990s.

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Abstract

This paper provides a snapshot of the relationship between the Internet and gender in the early days of home Internet connections in Australia. Based as it is on one of the first qualitative studies of home use of the Internet and what appears to be the earliest Australian study of home use of the Internet, it helps to fill a gap in the history of the Internet in Australia. It draws from 76 in-depth interviews conducted in 1998 with members of 19 household families who had a home Internet connection. At the time of the research, there were a variety of stories in circulation regarding the relationship between the Internet and gender. The analysis presented in this paper presents a more nuanced picture of this relationship in the early days of domestic Internet connections. Rather than just comparing the different experiences of males and females, it looks at how gender was constituted in the meanings users invested in particular uses or non-uses of the Internet at home, and in particular, in the idea of technical mastery.

Introduction

By the mid 1990s, there was much speculative writing on the supposed implications of the Internet, but there had been little empirical research on what the Internet actually meant in use, to different types of users (Goggin 2004). 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).
This paper provides an historical snapshot of the relationship between the Internet and gender in everyday home use, at a time when the Internet and the world wide web were new phenomena. It is based on unpublished data collected from 76 interviews with members of 19 household families in Canberra, Australia with a home Internet connection. These interviews took place at a time when to have a home Internet connection was to be an early adopter of new technology. In February 1996, an estimated 262,000 people used the Internet from home (ABS 1996). By 1998, 14% of Australian households had a home Internet connection and I observed in the course of my research that it was not uncommon for people who had never used the Internet to express reluctance about doing so for fear of 'breaking it'. The Internet in 1998 was very different from the Internet in 2011. Connections were dial-up which meant that unless a new phone line was put in, using the Internet blocked use of the phone. Speeds of 28.8 kb/s were the norm, compared to current speeds of at least 15,000 kb/s for most connections (ABS 2011). The main uses of the Internet were for email and looking at web pages with people also using chat rooms and the instant messaging program, ICQ, to engage in real-time communication (Lally 2002, Waller 2001). Unless you sent them a picture, the people with whom you chatted online usually had no idea of what you looked like and no way of finding out. There was no Google, no Skype, no PayPal, Wikipedia, Youtube, Twitter or Facebook and the word ‘blog’ was not yet in common use.
This paper draws on traditions of science and technology studies (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2008) and cultural studies on the use of technology (Silverstone 2001, Lally 2002, Bakardjieva 2005) to explore how gender was constituted in meanings invested in use and non-use of the Internet. Although the relationship between gender and the Internet was a subject of ‘early preoccupation’ (Goggin 2004: 4), this paper helps to fill a gap in the history of the relationship between gender and the Internet in the mid 1990s in Australia. The results of this detailed empirical analysis acts as a counter to the speculative stories about the relationship between the Internet and gender that were in circulation in the 1990s, and which have been perpetuated in some later research (Green 2010, Gregg 2006, Helsper 2010). Drawing on Butler’s conceptualization of gender as performance, and using data from household interviews conducted in 1998, it tells stories (Haraway 1991) that give a more nuanced picture of the relationship between the Internet and gender. These illustrate Internet use being integrated into the existing order of gender relations, use of the Internet destabilizing the existing gender relations, and the meanings invested in ownership and control of the Internet. The idea that early male Internet users were actually masters of the technology is put under scrutiny. The stories provide evidence to suggest that some males felt under pressure to discursively position themselves as such because of the strength of the association between technical mastery and masculinity in the mid 1990s (Bromseth and Sunden 2011).

The analysis in this paper has resonance with Bakardjieva’s (2005) work on the everyday use of the Internet in Canada conducted in the early 2000s and Lally’s
(2002) work on home use of the computer in Australia in the mid 1990s. These were also based on home interviews and drew similar conclusions about the relationship between gender and the Internet (Bakardjieva 2005) or the computer (Lally 2002). However, while gender was mentioned almost incidentally in Bakardjieva’s work, it is the focus of this paper. Lally’s field work was undertaken in 1996 and 1997, a time when many of her research participants were uninterested in the Internet. She comments that just a year or two later, that is, when the research presented in this paper was undertaken, this situation had changed.

Even so, in 1998, the Internet was new to almost everybody outside professional research fields (Clarke 2004); male, female, young and old. However, even in 1998, there were clear differences in Internet access rates according to age, sex and level of education (ABS 1998). Those aged 18-24 were more than twice as likely to have accessed the Internet than those aged 45-54 years (58% of 18-24 year olds compared to 27% of 45-54 years). Access to the Internet was also correlated with level of educational attainment. Almost three quarters (72%) of those with a bachelor degree had accessed the Internet compared to one quarter (25%) of those with a trade or other certificate. Differences by sex were less marked as 35% of males had accessed the Internet compared to 28% of females. In 1998, there was not a cohort of children who had grown up using the Internet and so the idea of ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001) had not gained currency. Instead of a presumed distinction between the generations in terms of use of the Internet, much focus was on distinctions between the sexes.
Internationally, there were a variety of academic and popular stories in circulation about the relationship between the Internet and gender. Some commentators considered that the Internet made gender irrelevant (Rheingold 1994, Stone 1997). For example, Allucquére Rosanne Stone used the true story of the New York psychiatrist Sanford Ellis and his online persona Joan to argue that there may not be a physical reality behind an Internet persona. In contrast, feminists argued that particular gender relations are inscribed in technologies (Rakow 1988; Altman 1990; Wajcman 1991; Cockburn 1994; Weber 1999) with the Internet itself seen as gendered. Supposing specific characteristics of women and the Internet, ‘cyberfeminists’ like Sadie Plant (1996) drew parallels between the Internet’s weaving and weblike structure and females, characterising the Internet as something that was intrinsically suited to women and hence would be appropriated by women to overcome global subordination of women by men. More commonly, feminist theorists of gender and technology considered that the Internet had relations of male domination inscribed in its production and use with the consequence that women were denied access or scared of it (see for example Kramarae 1988; Herring, Johnson et al. 1995; Spender 1995). Spender (1995) and Herring, Johnson et al. (1995) went so far as to suggest that men had some sort of patriarchal investment in maintaining control of the Internet by keeping women in the dark about how to use it. There was a large body of literature on gender and technology (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993; Livingstone 1994; Wheelock 1994; Berg 1996) 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). Empirical studies of domestic use of the telephone and
the computer tended to fulfil these ‘gender expectations’ (Gray 1995) reporting only on observed differences between men and women. A typical finding was that men used information and communication technologies for functional purposes and women used them for communicative purposes (see Rakow 1988; Moyal 1992; Livingstone 1994; Wheelock 1994). Singh’s (2001) study of women’s Internet use concluded that women were comfortable with the Internet as a tool for activities, but uncomfortable with the idea of it as a technology to play with or master.

While it is of course important to document inequalities that exist between women and men, there was a fundamental issue with this type of analysis. In focusing only on those observed differences that maintained traditional ideas of gender, the studies themselves participated in maintaining and extending a particular version of gender, reifying it as a stable category with particular properties. Even more recent scholarship (for example, Gregg 2006, Green 2010, Helsper 2010) draws on these mid-1990s studies, either citing reported differences between male and female use and skills involving the Internet or perpetuating the tradition of exploring differences between men and women in use of the Internet.

The historical snapshot presented in this paper reveals a more nuanced picture of the relationship between the Internet and gender in Australia in the late 1990s. Drawing from symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), examples from the Canberra study are used to demonstrate that people’s relationship with the Internet could only be understood in terms of the meanings that people invested
in particular uses or non-uses. Rather than understanding these meanings as
patterned or predictable by gender, the reverse is assumed, that is, people
perform gender by imbuing aspects of the Internet with particular meanings.
This understanding of how gender is constituted draws from Butler (1990). As
shown by Denzin (2001), the symbolic interactionist notion of agency and self-
interaction complement Butler’s characterization of gender as performative.
However, whereas Butler focused on surface performances of the body, this
understanding of gender refers to a whole set of dispositions and values, akin to
Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus. So in contrast to Butler, who is concerned
to show the meaningless of the performance, the concern in this paper is with
those performances that were 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 and it is
evident from this paper that these have changed in relation to use of the Internet.

The exceptions to gender expectations described in this paper are important in
that it was exceptions like these that helped subvert the dominant meanings of
gender in relation to use of the Internet, and conversely, gendered understandings of the Internet. Hence, the stories in this paper are chosen to
illustrate how the Internet was used in performances of masculinity that
maintained traditional gender relations, as well as how it was used to disrupt
traditional gender relations, and how it was used in families with non-traditional
gender relations. It should be noted that the isolation of gender in this is an
analytic construct. In practice, it is extremely difficult to separate performances
of gender from performances of class (Skeggs 1997).
The household families

A total of 76 semi-structured interviews were conducted in 1998 with members of 19 Canberra household families who had a home Internet connection. I interviewed each assembled household family in their home and returned two weeks later to interview members individually. In the meantime I had left a record of Internet use for each member to fill out each time they logged on to the Internet. The interviews included investigation of the place of the Internet in the narrative of daily life, attitudes to technology in general, use of the Internet and the meanings invested in use (or non-use) of the Internet. The households in the study were not representative of Canberra, or anywhere else. The families were selected to reflect a range of socio-economic status and the diversity of social relationships that constituted families in Australia at the time (ABS 1997). Fourteen of the household families consisted of a mother, a father and at least one child, three household families consisted of a mother (two of whom identified as lesbian) and child, one consisted of a father and child, and one consisted of a father and son, and the father's new female partner. Each assembled household family was interviewed in their home and the members were also interviewed individually. Individuals were described as presenting as culturally middle class or culturally working class on the basis of personal style, manner of speaking and the style of the house and its contents (Bourdieu 1984; Skeggs 1997). Unavoidably, the researchers own class position is part of the ‘mediating sociological apparatus’ (Frow 1995) and in this case, the researcher’s interpretations were filtered through a middle-class perspective.
Assumptions that the home was a site of leisure for men and a site of work for women underpinned explanations of observed differences between men and women’s use of technology in the home. In Australia in the mid 1990s, this domestic division of labour was typical (Baxter and Bittman 1995). In this paper, household gender relations where the male was the symbolic head of the household and the woman was responsible for housework and childcare will be referred to as traditional (Baxter 1993). Deliberately included in this study were families that did not conform to traditional gender relations in terms of the domestic division of labour. This was in order to enable greater insight into the relationship between gender and the Internet. Less than half of the households chosen conformed to traditional gender relations. In four of the 16 study households where a father was present, the father worked from home. In six of the 15 study 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.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms given to each participant. Rather than interpret the data through the lens of gender expectations, the analysis took a grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This meant that exceptions were visible, and, as will be discussed, these exceptions to gender expectations were critical as seeds of change in regard to understandings of gender in relation to the Internet.

The first two stories support Silverstone’s (1991) contention that new technologies tend to be integrated into existing patterns of social relations
within the household, including the existing order of gender relations. The third story shows that this was not, however, the inevitable relationship between gender and the Internet, as Kim’s use destabilised what had been traditional gender relations. The common thread in these three stories is the meaning given to the Internet as a site for exhibiting technical mastery, ownership or control. In each the father used either technical mastery or control of the Internet as a resource in his performance of masculinity, in order to symbolically or actually bolster his position as male head of the household. However, this was not the case in all households, or even all households with traditional gender relations. Fear of the Internet is shown to be produced in specific circumstances rather than an essential property of femininity and the final summary snapshots show that in general, the meanings invested in ownership and control of the Internet were not related to gender.

**Gendered meanings: Technical mastery and technophobia**

As using the Internet becomes naturalised, it can be difficult to remember ever learning the technical skills required to access the Internet. In addition, since the advent of user-friendly Web 2.0 technologies, only very basic skills are needed to create a blog, download songs or participate in real-time social exchanges. For example, in 2009 more than half of Australian Internet users downloaded or listened to music online (Ewing and Thomas 2010). In 1998, however, these types of activities presented something of a technical challenge. In much of the literature on gender and technology, technical mastery of information and communication technologies had been understood as an aspect of masculinity
(for example, Singh 2001; Wajcman 1991; Wheelock 1994; Cockburn and Ormrod 1993) used to reinforce the hierarchy in traditional gender relations.

The following story from the Canberra study provides an example of this. Don Ruyton did not actually have Internet skills but tried to appropriate the benefits through various tactics. He constructed himself as having technical mastery of the Internet and his wife, Pauline, to some extent colluded with this, so as not to destabilise the performance of traditional gender relations in the household.

Don and Pauline lived in an expensive house with their two daughters. They had low levels of educational attainment and displayed working-class cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) in their personal style, and the style of their house. Don was often away from home driving his transport; when at home, he would potter in his shed. Pauline worked part-time in a service industry and also typed Don’s business correspondence. In addition, Pauline did all the household chores. In the interviews, they only ever referred to each other as ‘my wife’ and ‘my husband.’ Pauline exhibited a soft femininity in appearance and demeanour and, in the interviews, she was extremely friendly and anxious to please. In contrast, Don employed various tactics during the interview in order to present himself as being the head of the household. This included representing himself as having control over the Internet even though, as the following exchange shows, he had very little understanding of the Internet. The context for this extract of dialogue is that his daughter 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 else 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 ‘dialed 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 easily learn how to do different things on the Internet but ‘I’ve got better things to do’. In addition, he was at pains to 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 his daughter) how to install a game. The effect was that even though he couldn’t use the Internet, Don was able to appropriate technical mastery to maintain his symbolic position as head of the household.

Just as there was a 1990s literature associating technical mastery with males or masculinity, there was a 1990s literature associating technical incompetence
with females or femininity (Cockburn 1994; Turkle 1995). Hence many early studies of gender and technology highlighted the observations that women's technological skills and their confidence in their skills were less than men's. Some commentators explicitly associated technophobia with women, considering that women exhibited technophobia as a way of enlisting femininity as a tradeable resource (Cockburn 1994). In the Canberra study, the only women who said that they were actually scared of the computers or the Internet were the Holcrofts. As the following discussion shows, this seemed to be an effect of the way that Andy Holcroft 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 Lyn 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.'
Andy completely controlled access to the Internet, refusing to divulge the password and monopolising the computer. As a result, 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 came 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 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. In an extension of the traditional gender relations that existed in the home, Andy was the only one who knew the password and knew how to use the Internet. Lyn appeared to accept her husband’s control of the Internet and his refusal to show her or her daughters how to use it even though this situation compounded her fear and
anxiety about using the Internet and meant that she was unable to acquire the
technical skills necessary to access the Internet. The trade-off was perhaps that
traditional gender relations in the home were not disrupted.

As mentioned, Cockburn interpreted technical incompetence, when associated
with female bodies, as an integral aspect of Western femininity. However,
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 hi-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 - Father)

In the case of Kim Sampson, her use of the Internet destabilised what had been
traditional gender relations. Kim Sampson learned web design skills via the
Internet, transforming herself from a ‘bored housewife’ (her words) to a web
designer starting her own business.

Kim, aged 38, was married to Trevor, aged 37, and they had three children: aged
11, 8 and 6. Kim had previously trained as a cook but was now at home.
Although Trevor worked two jobs, as a mechanic and a barman, the annual
family income was very low, in the $24000-$38000 bracket. Kim did all of the
housework and did not tend to go out whereas Trevor was out most nights either
playing sport or working. They lived in a very modest house in an outer
suburban area of Canberra and presented as culturally working class.
In the interviews, Kim spoke quickly but hesitantly as if she was not confident that she was using words correctly. She had recently learned how to use the Internet, and, in particular, had been taught by fellow users how to design web pages. The acquisition of these technical skills had increased her self-esteem and transformed her sense 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’

When she was at home minding the children the Internet was, in Kim's words, her ‘only link to the outside world’. Bored by being at home all day, Kim 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 lived interstate. Kim's new-found skills, acquired via the Internet, offered the potential for financial independence. In addition, using the Internet had been a personally empowering experience. She had booked an overseas trip to meet some of the people whom she had met online. A year earlier, she said she would not even have contemplated travelling overseas by herself. She considered that these changes enabled by the Internet were positive:

‘I wouldn't go back to the way I was... if you know what I mean’.
From thinking of herself as a ‘dumb’ housewife, Kim now thought of herself as a web designer with the potential to earn her own money from home. Unsurprisingly, Trevor’s symbolic position as head of the household was threatened by Kim’s skills in web page development. Trevor wanted to design a web page. However, he had no interest in the content of the web page. He just needed to prove to himself that he could do it.

Trevor had the ICQ nickname of Toolman which he explained was due to the fact that he is a mechanic. He talked about the Internet as an arena where he could 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. The Internet was 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 planned to have a home page but had no ideas yet about the content. The content was secondary to meeting the technical challenge involved in creating a home page. Trevor’s main motivation for the homepage was for personal achievement; he did not care if people looked at it or not:

Interviewer: 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)*

Interviewer: 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

Interviewer: 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’s concern with technical mastery of web page design can be read as an attempt to restabilise the gender hierarchy in the household. In the examples of both Don and Trevor, the Internet was a site where it was important to exhibit technical mastery as this was associated with masculinity and maintaining the gender hierarchy in the household. However, this understanding of the Internet as something to be mastered was only observed in culturally working class households with traditional gender relations.

Moreover, in contradiction to ‘gender expectations’, an explicit valuing of technical mastery was not the exclusive preserve of males. This may seem unsurprising now. However, as Bromseth and Sunden (2011) point out, in the 1990s, the link between technological competence and masculinity was so naturalised, it was almost impossible to think beyond this. This is why the Geek Girl slogan that “Grrrls need modems” was so subversive when it appeared in the
mid 1990s . (www.geekgirl.com.au). Diana Garling, aged 17 valued technical skills for their own sake. She described herself: ‘I’m a wannabe computer nerd... I would love to know everything about computers’. At the time, the term ‘nerd’ was unequivocally associated with masculinity (Kendall 2000). In the same way that a man’s fear of the Internet was culturally unintelligible in terms of then dominant understandings of gender and technology, so was a girl’s aspirations for technical mastery. This female performance of the desire for technical mastery is an example of the articulation of a version of gender that subverted traditional gender relations, whether or not this was intentional. It showed that there was nothing stable about the relationship between gender and the Internet and foreshadowed the possibility of change.

Moreover, as the following summary snapshots show, meanings invested in ownership and control of the Internet were generally not related to gender.

**Non gendered meanings: ‘Ownership’ of the Internet connection**

In 1998 the location of the computer used to access the Internet was critical in terms of whether use was a private or public activity and in terms of ‘ownership’ of the Internet. In most households, the physical configuration of the modem meant that only one person could access the Internet at any one time. In a few families there was a clear-cut hierarchy of use according to the user. However, 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.

**Non gendered meanings: Control of the Net**

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 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. With the exceptions detailed above, 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, two of the fathers in the study were extremely proud of the fact that their daughters were self-taught ‘webmasters’, ‘webmaster’ being the term used by these fathers to describe the fact that their daughters designed and maintained complex web pages. Both male and female participants referred to the satisfaction and personal achievement involved in learning how to do something on the Internet and female participants were just as likely to be self-taught as males.

**Conclusion**

In the early times of home use of the Internet, the relationship between gender and technology was more complex than the stories circulating at the time would suggest. This paper has demonstrated that people’s relationship with the Internet at home in the late 1990s can only be understood in terms of the meanings that people invested in particular uses, or non-uses. It has described some cases of men performing masculinity through interpreting the Internet as a site over which they had technical mastery or control. This understanding of the Internet as something to be mastered was only observed in culturally working class households with traditional gender relations and it was not observed in all households with traditional gender relations. Moreover, it was not exclusively males who were interested in technical mastery and most males in the study did not associate proficiency in use of the Internet with the idea of technical mastery.

Given that by 2009, basically equivalent proportions of males and females accessed the Internet in Australia (Ewing and Thomas, 2010), it is now probably
more appropriate to explore the relationship between gender and the Internet in terms of the meanings around the use of specific Internet technologies such as email, social networking sites and massively multiplayer online games. More recently, scholars have been doing just this (for example Royse et al 2007, Kim 2009 on games, Bakardjieva (2011) and White (2011) on shopping sites and Kendall (2011) on commercial online communities.

The stories in this paper are as much about gender as they are about the Internet. Our dominant understandings of each have changed over the intervening years. The idea of technical mastery of the Internet no longer has resonance with respect to the everyday use of the Internet and being proficient in using the Internet for everyday purposes is no longer understood in terms of gender.

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