Connected but not online: a snapshot of Generation Y in Australia

Stephen Quinn, Deakin University
Paul Bethell, Deakin University

Abstract Much has been written in the United States about Generation Y and its adoption of, and attitudes towards, media and digital communication technologies. But relatively little is known about this generation’s attitudes to these things in Australia. This paper provides a snapshot of media and technology use by year 2 and 3 public relations and journalism majors at Deakin University in Australia. It is based on a survey conducted in March 2006 at the university’s Waurn Ponds campus in Victoria. Because of the nature of the sample, it should be noted that this is a snapshot of one group of students. It is not possible to extrapolate these findings to other groups in other states or countries around the world. That is the role of further research. This survey does provide a revealing snapshot of one group of students at one place in time. All of the students studied have a mobile phone and all have fast access to the Internet at university. Almost all have access to the Internet at home (two thirds via broadband). But they spend far less time on the Internet compared with their counterparts in the United States. Almost all are avid consumers of broadcast news. They prefer the print forms of books and magazines. Yet they appear to be indifferent to the form of the newspaper they consume—print or online are equally acceptable.

Introduction

Almost all university students are members of Generation Y, that diverse group of people aged between 16 and 24 beloved of advertisers because they have high disposable incomes. In the United States Generation Y numbers about 32 million souls and they spend about $260,000 million a year. They influence others such as their friends and relatives in spending another $500,000 million. They are a diverse group in the United States—two in five describe themselves as originating from more than one race. And they are a ‘cash-wielding, get-it-while-it’s-hot group’ (Pohlig, 2003, p. 24).

Australia has about 4.8 million in this generation. Peter Sheehan, who has written Australia’s first book on marketing to this generation, notes its wide consumer power. They have high disposable incomes (teens alone spend $118 a
week, according to YouthScan, 2004), but they also exhibit significant influence on the spending habits of their Baby Boomer parents. Sheehan said Generation Y had become the Holy Grail for marketers because ‘the rest of the population look to them for what is hot and what is not’ (Sheehan, 2006). Research firm IBISWorld reported that Generation Y in Australia was spending most of its spare cash on mobile phones. This age group, which represented a quarter of the total population, contributed more than half of total spending on the fast-food and fashion markets (Anonymous, 2006, p. 37). Australian social researcher Dr Hugh Mackay said younger generations were herding together like never before, using new technologies such as SMS and email chat rooms to foster tight social bonds. ‘The most precious resource they have is each other. And they can’t get enough of each other,’ Mr Mackay told the Communities in Control conference in Melbourne in June 2004. ‘They are the most intensely tribal, herd-based generation of young Australians I’ve ever known’ (Mackay, 2004).

**Generation Y and media use**

Much has been written this century about Generation Y’s use and adoption of media and related digital technologies in the United States. People in the marketing and public relations fields have tended to assume that the scenarios described in American studies will unfold in similar ways in Australia. But relatively little has been written about these subjects in Australia, and almost nothing has appeared to describe university students’ adoption of media and related digital technologies. Yet universities should provide a wealth of material for PR practitioners interested in knowing more about Generation Y. This is the generation who, in less than half a decade after graduation, are the most likely to be working in relatively senior positions and, perhaps more importantly, buying large amounts of technology and consumer goods. They are the AB demographic of the future.

Early in 2005 Charles Sturt University in NSW surveyed its first-year cohort of undergraduate communications students during their first week on campus. The aim was to derive a snapshot of this generation and its use of media. This appears to be the first Australian study of university students and their adoption of media and related digital technologies in the new century. The university received 210 responses (162 women and 48 men, with an average age of 18). Academic David Cameron, who wrote about the survey, noted that this generation gap appeared to be ‘less about ideological or demographic differences’ and more about their ‘comfort and ability’ with the technologies of everyday living. Cameron distinguished between what the American writer Marc Prensky called ‘digital natives’ and an older generation who used the same technologies—mobile phones, digital cameras, email and the Internet—in a less intuitive or instinctive way. The latter group Prensky called ‘digital immigrants’ (2002).
Cameron noted that most students owned computers, and were confident using a range of software. These students used mobile phones and digital cameras and ‘lived on the Internet’. ‘They connect and maintain their relationships via mobile telephone, email and online chat. The Internet is their preferred source of information, and they can engage with multiple source of information at once.’ But Cameron concluded that they were not ‘digital natives’ compared with American students of the same age. ‘Some digital devices, for example MP3 players, are yet to achieve the high penetration in this group that we might expect. ‘There remains some resistance to online learning’ (Cameron, 2005). He implied that it would be foolish to translate research done in the United States to an Australian context. This leads us to a key question: What do we know about Generation Y’s use of media and digital technologies in Australia?

Much recent research from the United States suggests a revolution in Generation Y’s media use, including their adoption of online newspapers. Indeed, in 2005 we saw saturation media coverage of Rupert Murdoch’s Paulian conversion on the digital road to Damascus, better known as his April speech in Chicago to the American Society of Newspaper editors. During the speech the owner of the world’s biggest collection of newspapers called for a major change in the relationship his editors had with youth readers: ‘What is happening is, in short, a revolution in the way young people are accessing news. They don’t want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. They don’t want to rely on a God-like figure from above to tell them what’s important. And to carry the religion analogy a bit further, they certainly don’t want news presented as gospel. Instead, they want their news on demand, when it works for them. They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it’ (Murdoch, 2005). The media mogul put his money where his mouth was and had reportedly spent more than $2,200 million on dot-com sites by the end of 2005. ‘I’m not interested in buying more newspapers,’ he told analysts (Innovations newsletter 2005, p. 23). Certainly much research supports Murdoch’s claims about a move away from print to online forms of newspapers in the United States. Mike Smith, managing director of the Media Management Center at Northwestern University, has tracked newspaper readership by generation. In 2003 Generation Y made up 28 percent of America’s population, or about 80 million. By 2010 this generation would represent about 29 percent of the adult population. If newspapers failed to capture them by then, overall readership of newspapers would fall below 50 percent, Smith said, and newspapers would become a niche rather than mass media. ‘Some of them [newspapers], despite the very tough times, are still successful and unless they are really hurting, it’s hard for them to pay attention’ (Smith, 2004). Lewis Dvorkin, editor-in-chief for AOL’s news service, said changing lifestyles, increased hours at work and demands on people’s time had produced a change in news consumption for
many segments of the population. 'I don’t think ... people will come back to the old ways of consuming the news' (quoted in Brown, 2005, pp. 3-4).

But can we translate developments in the United States to an Australian context? Can we assume what happens in America will automatically apply in Australia? Let's take some examples: Four in five American households and 43 percent of British households have cable television, compared with only 23.7 percent of Australian households (Day, 2006, p. 14). Is it logical to make assumptions about television habits in Australia based on what has happened with a much different market structure in the US? Almost two-thirds of households in America have broadband Internet access, compared with 30 percent in Australia. In America broadband means fast access to the Internet, with average minimum speeds of three to five megabytes a second. In Australia the telecommunications companies label maximum speeds of 256 kilobytes a second as broadband. That is, they are describing as broadband a service that is 12 to 20 times slower than in America. Comparisons like this are illogical and flawed. The American market is much bigger, more diverse, and not as focused on capital cities as in Australia. Prices for cable TV and broadband subscriptions in the United States are a third of the cost for similar packages in Australia. For example, one of the authors paid $24 a month for three megabits a second broadband, and $23 a month for a cable TV package in the USA. Similar services in Australia cost three times those amounts.

Research by MyMetrix for America's Online Publishers' Association shows that American broadband users aged 18-34 spend 52 percent more time each week online compared with dial-up users (OPA, 2003). But we cannot assume the same situation will occur in Australia because broadband is limited in speed and only available in certain parts of cities. It is not available in some rural areas. Where broadband is available it is slower and more expensive. Of the 3 million Australians with broadband at home, only a third have broadband that is faster than 256 kilobytes a second. A KPMG report in 2005 calculated that only 6 percent of Australian households had broadband at higher than 1.5 megabytes a second (Alder 2005, p. 5). Little wonder The Australian Financial Review used the headline 'fraudband' in its front-page lead on 15 April 2006 describing the pathetic state of Australia's broadband development.

Australia's market segments are nowhere as well researched as they are in the US. So rather than make assumptions about how Australian students feel about the media and related digital technologies, based on reports describing their peers in the United States, it makes sense to go directly to the source. Once they are in the workforce, these people represent the desirable future AB demographic that Australia's media and marketing people are most keen to reach, which makes accurate information even more valuable. This paper set out to ask a group of Victorian media students about their adoption of technologies, and their use of media.
Methodology

During weeks four and five of semester one in March 2006 the authors distributed a paper-based survey to classes of their own or their colleagues’ students, with the request that students complete the survey in the class and return it at the end of the class. It was made clear that participation was voluntary, and that the survey would take about 5-8 minutes to complete. Not all students in year 2 or 3 attend classes consistently, so it was not possible to obtain completed surveys from all students. Of a total of 94 on-campus year 2 students, 49 completed a survey; 25 surveys were received from 48 on-campus students in year 3, giving a total of 74 completed surveys. This represented a completion rate of 52 percent, a more than acceptable result under most statistical systems. Data were hand coded and analysed in April and May 2006.

Findings

The first section of this account of our findings will describe the students and their media use. The second section will consider their adoption of technology. Students are more likely to be women rather than men—two in three respondents (68 percent) were female. The Cameron study of a larger cohort reported 77 percent as female. The vast bulk (95 percent) sat firmly in the age range for Generation Y: 71 percent were aged 16-20 and 24 percent were aged 21-24. Three in four lived within a 20 kilometre drive of the campus. Most students who hailed from the country lived in residences on campus, and only 8 percent said they travelled more than 81 kilometres to get to campus. By way of comparison, the Cameron study of Charles Sturt University students reported that half lived in Sydney and commuted. Almost all the Deakin students surveyed (88 percent) were doing the public relations or journalism major, or in some cases were undertaking both majors. The others were studying media, communications, arts/law or taking journalism units as an elective. Four of the 74 students surveyed came from overseas.

Two in three students surveyed said they received a daily newspaper at home, but only two of the 74 respondents said they bought a newspaper on campus. This latter figure is surprising given the marketing drive that both The Age and The Australian launched at universities in Victoria in February 2005. During orientation week both publications offered a scheme whereby students could buy a newspaper card that gave them access to papers for all weekdays of the academic year. For $15 students could pick up a free copy of The Age on campus during the week, and receive the Saturday edition at home. For $20 students could do the same with The Australian, and similarly have the Saturday edition home delivered. A worrying discovery from this survey was the fact that a third of students studying journalism and public relations admitted they did not read newspapers.

Perhaps as an indication of their AB demographic potential, The Age represented the highest number of mentions of newspapers read: Students listed it 29 times
out of the total of 57 mentions. The Herald Sun rated the second highest—15 out of 57 mentions. The local paper, the Geelong Advertiser, received seven mentions out of 57 mentions. Other papers listed, usually with one mention each, reflected where students came from: Ballarat Courier (two mentions), the Shepparton News, the Albury Border Mail and the Sunraysia Daily. Interestingly, The Australian rated only one out of the total of 57 mentions.

As well as not reading newspapers, this cohort of students also does not subscribe to magazines, though they do read them. Four in five students (82 percent) said they did not subscribe to magazines, yet almost all said they read magazines (presumably other people’s copies). Of the 80 magazines mentioned, women’s and gossip magazines received by far the highest number of mentions—more than half of the total: Cosmo (13 mentions), Cleo (10), Marie Clare (4), InStyle (3), the Australian Women’s Weekly (3), Famous (2), Who (2), New Weekly (2), ShopTillYouDrop (2) and Madison (2). The news weeklies Time and The Bulletin received only one mention each. Sport and leisure-focused publications made up the next largest group, though none received more than one mention.

In terms of broadcast media for news, the students avoided ABC radio but embraced ABC television. Only 16 percent said they listed to ABC radio. Most said they preferred to listen to commercial radio. But ABC television received the highest number of mentions to the question about their choices for television news: 40 out of 129, or 31 percent of total mentions. Channels 9 and 10 received almost the same number of mentions, 27 and 26 out of 129 (20 percent each). Channel 7 and SBS were next in terms of students’ choice for news: 14 and 13 out of 129 mentions (10 percent each). Overseas news programs rated four mentions, which was consistent with the number of overseas students in the survey group.

The students in this survey are definitely not using the Internet as much as their American counterparts. In a report for the Carnegie Corporation on young Americans’ changing news consumption habits, Merrill Brown found that 44 percent of respondents in his study went to the Internet for news at least once a day, compared with 19 percent who read a daily newspaper. Only 9 percent described newspapers as trustworthy, and only 8 percent found them useful. Asked to look forward three years, 39 percent of respondents said they expected to use the Internet more to learn about the news. But only 8 percent said they would use traditional newspapers more by the year 2008 (Brown, 2005). By comparison, almost four in five Deakin University students said they spent less than three hours a week online. This applies to their total time online, not just the amount of time spent with online news. This discovery contradicts many of the perceived expectations based on American research data for this age group. Only 18 percent of the group surveyed spent three or more hours online a week. Only one of the 74 students spent seven or more hours a week online,
and only 10 students said they were online three to six hours a week. Students are familiar with digital technology because of curriculum requirements. More than four in five (85 percent) said they had accessed an electronic database in the past month. This was probably because all year 2 students visited the library, where they learned about electronic databases, only a week before the survey was conducted.

The survey also asked whether students read or wrote blogs. A quarter of students said they read blogs and almost one in five wrote one (18 percent). That is, a generation with so much available technology in the form of mobile phones and broadband access to the Internet—remember, students have very fast free access at university, and two in three have broadband at home—appears not to be spending all that much time online. Put another way, three in four did not read blogs and four in five did not write them. Data in the latter case were expected to be distorted by the offer, in semester one of 2005, for year 2 Deakin journalism students to create and write a blog as part of their assessment in the unit. Yet only two of the 94 students in year 2 chose the blog option for their assessment. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported in July 2006 that 39 percent of American Internet users said they read blogs and one in 12 created blogs. But of the 12 million bloggers, more than half (54 percent) are aged under 30 (Lenhart 2006, pp. i-ii). It is difficult to compare the two nations because the Pew survey referred to the entire country while the Deakin survey related to specific age groups in one region of the country.

The survey results do suggest that students continue to read books, even if they are not reading newspapers. The authors asked students to list the three most recent books they had read, excluding text books or books required for university studies. This is a powerful way to detect if people read. The most lazy or casual of readers can remember the last book they read but only frequent readers can remember back three books. Try it yourself if you do not believe us. Of the students surveyed, seven in ten could remember three books, and another 13.5 percent could remember two. This suggests that the students surveyed are regular readers. The books they listed ranged widely from current fiction such as Angels and Demons to political biographies (Billy), classics and modern classics (Wuthering Heights, The Female Eunuch, To Kill a Mockingbird) on to novels, histories, books by CS Lewis and self-help texts.

**Conclusions**

This paper sought a snapshot of how students at a Victorian university approached technology and how they embraced media. It is useful to consider the typical survey respondent: a female, aged 16-20, doing a PR or journalism major who lives within 20 kilometres of campus. She has a mobile phone. She receives a daily newspaper at home, which is probably The Age. She reads women’s magazines but does not subscribe to them. She does not wake to radio news and
Indeed never listens to ABC radio. But she does watch TV news and prefers the ABC. She has access to broadband Internet access at university and at home but uses it less than three hours a week to access news web sites. She uses electronic databases. She does not write or read weblogs. She does read books.

So what can we conclude from these findings? What are the implications for those teaching media and communications, as well as for those involved with marketing and PR for this generation? Firstly, it seems clear that, in line with David Cameron’s study of Charles Sturt University students, the generation of ‘digital natives’ is not yet with us. In many ways, our survey finds a surprising streak of traditionalism in these Generation Y students’ media habits. Largely they rely still on newspapers and TV news for information, rather than the Internet. They read books and magazines and are not that interested in or engaged with the blogosphere. In short, there is no great evidence of a comprehensive generational shift here towards online news consumption.

With newspapers, it is interesting that the students surveyed are still loyal to traditional newprint. This could be partly due to the influence of their parents. Most students either live in residences on campus or at home. In the latter case parents pay for the daily newspaper at home. But though Rupert Murdoch detects ‘a revolution in the way young people are accessing news’, in the land of his birth at least the survey suggests that young people are continuing to be loyal and interested in the newspaper as a means of getting information. This is also reflected in the small amounts of time spent accessing news websites, despite students having Internet access at university and home. The survey finds comparatively high levels of readership of The Age newspaper, but suggests that The Age Online has little impact on them as consumers. Interestingly, The Age Online last year celebrated its tenth anniversary. Many of these students were aged between 6-10 when it began but they have not yet embraced it or other online news sites (including the ABC) as a major way of consuming their news. Online news has yet to become a way of life in the way that using a mobile phone obviously has.

The same situation applies to television news. Most students seem happy to fall in with watching the TV news when the free-to-air networks decide they should have it. There seems little evidence of a desire for television news-on-demand, though this may be a reflection on the limit to which it is available. A useful future survey question would be on whether the students have access to cable/satellite TV and whether this affects their TV news viewing habits. However, if we can assume that a quarter of those surveyed did have access to multi-channel television (which is the average for the nation), there is very little evidence from the survey that new channels such as Sky News Australia, BBC World or CNN have any real impact on their media consumption.
One very interesting finding of the survey was the fact that many students watched ABC TV news. This would seemingly provide some encouragement to the ABC which is often criticised for having almost no profile with young people (something which survey findings about ABC radio certainly seems to bear out). It would be interesting to speculate on whether an ABC 24-hour, news-on-demand, digital TV news channel would capture the attention of this generation in a way that existing cable and satellite channels do not.

And yet there are a few signs of generational change in media habits. Mobile phone use is universal. This has become a way of life for these students. The text and chat generation is here—but what of 3G? An interesting extra study might be to ask what these students use their mobiles for. For them to truly be called 'digital natives', it would be important to know how many use their phones (or have the capability of using them) to connect to the Internet and whether students take and send photos or video with them.

In addition, the survey findings on blog writing and reading do not quite fit into the conservative consumption pattern. Though the survey results for these students are below those of American students, they are perhaps surprisingly high. One in five students writes a blog and one in four reads them. This shows a greater penetration of a comparatively recent online phenomenon than for online news. More research would be useful to explore this further and to measure the trend in blog usage over the next decade. It is especially important to get a national picture of the Australian blogosphere, given that at mid 2006 the country produced about 750,000 blogs.

In conclusion, the survey suggests that though these students are starting to have more of the trappings of the ‘digital native’ (mobile phone, broadband Internet access at home), as yet there is no sign of a big shift in their traditional media consumption patterns (perhaps with the exception of a decisive shift away from radio listening, which anecdotally seems to be confined to car journeys for this cohort). It is striking that in comparison with the American experience Australians are still some years behind in their digital development. Two factors may contribute to this: almost certainly Australia’s slow broadband Internet speeds, and possibly the continuing dominance of free-to-air television. The Australian government’s recent discussion paper on changes in the media ownership laws does not seem set to herald a new multimedia age. Multi-channel, interactive digital television is still a long way off in Australia and certainly decades behind the USA and the UK. Five free-to-air television stations look set to dominate for some years. This survey suggests that these Generation Y students are not yet turning in big numbers to the Internet as an alternative, despite the high frequency of access to broadband.

What could be the reasons for this? It may be that easy Internet access has come to these students too late in life to dramatically change their media habits. Perhaps the key age for ready acceptance of new technology is earlier than the
16-20 age group which predominates in this survey group. It is noticeable that, in line with Cameron’s 2005 study, all students in this survey had a mobile phone. The mobile has become a way of life to them—but how recent is this phenomenon? If we went back five or 10 years, it is likely that things were very different. And so, just as this group of 16-20 year-olds has become a generation where mobile phones are completely ‘native’, it may well be that we are still awaiting the generation of complete ‘digital natives’ whose online use and consumption is much greater.

This generation is cautious about change and, as Mackay says, relies on group consensus. These students may be products of a group that changes slowly rather than rushes to embrace revolutions. Some further studies would be useful. It would be worth surveying successive generations to try to detect subtle changes and trends in media use. Will subsequent generations, growing up with fast online access, show greater changes in media consumption patterns? Perhaps as broadband speeds improve and online access increases over time, so consumption of news online will increase. It would be useful to know which online news websites students visit, and the extent to which they match or differ from their newspaper reading habits. It would also be useful to know more about students’ mobile phone use, as well as their ownership and use of other ‘digital native’ tools such as laptop computers, wireless Internet, MP3 players and whether podcasts are replacing radio consumption.

Over time, Generation Y will continue to provide material for research for all generations of academics.

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Authors

Dr Stephen Quinn is associate professor of journalism at Deakin University and the author of Conversations on Convergence (Peter Lang), published 2006.

Paul Bethell is a lecturer in journalism at Deakin University and formerly deputy editor of the BBC's News at Nine.