

# Media and Communications in Australian Families

Lesley Osborne and Sarah Jean discuss the results of recent research into media use among children and young people.

In 2006-2007 the Australian Media and Communications Authority (ACMA) was funded to investigate the 'long-term psychological effect of the media on children, families and society'. This was an opportunity to review the current state of knowledge about the long term influences of various media on children and families, in a range of academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology and epidemiology, and to undertake a national survey of children's use of electronic media and communications. This primary research allows comparisons with 1995 data to provide a snapshot of changes in the family media environment since the mid nineties and in parents' attitudes towards and management of children's media and communications activities. Both studies are reported in *Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007 (MCAF)*.<sup>1</sup>

Together they provide a foundation for understanding the place of media and communications in the lives of children and young people today, particularly the importance of digital media, which is an essential input to policy development in areas such as children's television, cybersafety and mobile content. The research has also been drawn on more widely as an accurate and up-to-date reference by industry, government and academia.

## What does the research tell us?

Young people have a wide choice of media platforms and communications services and those choices continue to develop and expand. They are high users of these technologies, but at the same time they show different patterns of media use and interests in media activities depending on their age and gender, as illustrated in the research findings presented below.

The MCAF research comprised a nationally representative study of 751 Australian families, including a telephone survey with parents and time-use diaries completed by 1,003 young people aged 8-17 years. The study was conducted by Urbis for ACMA between March and June 2007.

## Technology-rich family households

In mid-2007, most Australian families with young people aged 8-17 years had access to a wide array of electronic media and communications technologies at home. Few

family households were without access to mainstream technologies such as television, computers, DVD players, mobile phones, and the internet. Other technologies such as video games devices, portable music players, broadband internet, subscription television, and DVD recorders were also adopted by families to varying degrees.

Ninety-one per cent of families in the study had an internet connection, and 76 per cent had broadband internet. This was considerably higher than the levels of internet and broadband penetration across all Australian households.<sup>2</sup>

The box below shows the penetration of electronic media and communications equipment in Australian family households.

### Penetration of electronic media and communications equipment in family households, 2007

| About 90%+ of homes |     | Between 48% and 83% of homes |     | Less than 33% of homes |     |
|---------------------|-----|------------------------------|-----|------------------------|-----|
| Television          | 99% | Any games device             | 83% | Digital free TV        | 32% |
| Computer/laptop     | 98% | Game console                 | 77% | Subscription TV        | 32% |
| DVD player          | 97% | Portable MP3/4 player        | 76% | Portable DVD player    | 27% |
| Mobile phone        | 97% | Broadband internet           | 76% | DVD recorder           | 23% |
| Internet            | 91% | Mobile phone (advanced)      | 56% | Portable MP4 player    | 17% |
| VCR                 | 89% | Hand-held games device       | 48% | Hard-drive recorder    | 13% |

Source: Parent survey (n=751)

## Media use by young people

Young people in the study completed a detailed three-day time-use diary to record their daily activities. The results show that electronic media and communications activities play a substantial part in the day-to-day lives of 8-17 year olds.

Both boys and girls aged 8-17 years spent about half of their aggregate discretionary time<sup>3</sup> in activities such as watching television, using the internet, playing video or computer games, listening to music, watching DVDs, and using a mobile phone (an average four hours and 49 minutes per day on these activities for 8-17 year olds). The time remaining involved them in other non-electronic media activities, which remain very popular, particularly with younger children. In company children prefer physical activities, hanging out/veging out, and general activities involving toys, pets and musical instruments. Media is more important as a

solo pursuit, especially television, listening to recorded music and gaming.

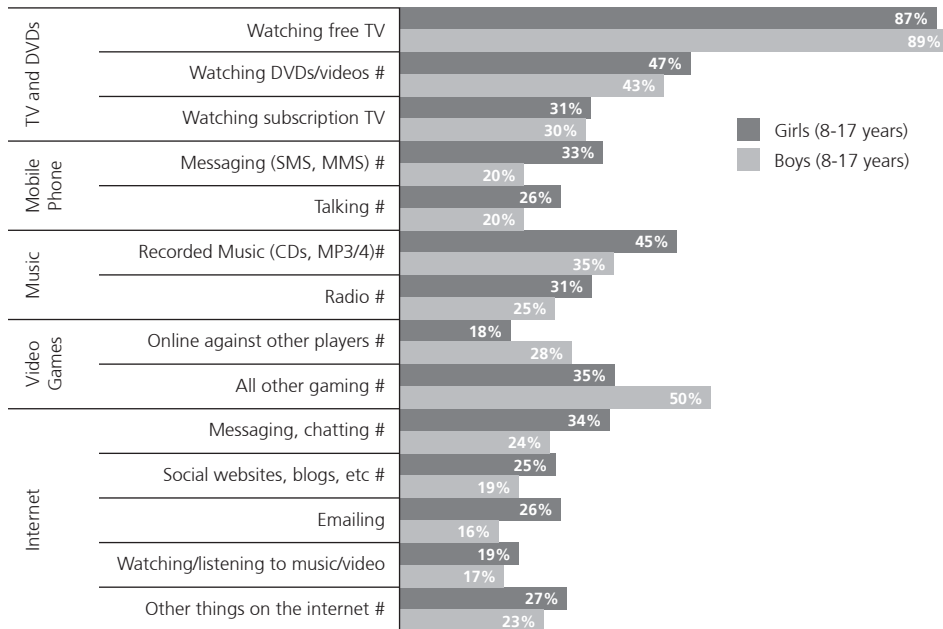
How young people spent their discretionary time was strongly related to their age. Fifteen-17 year olds spent a greater proportion of this time using electronic media and communications activities (56 per cent) compared with 12-14 year olds (51 per cent), and 8-11 year olds (41 per cent). In general, the proportion of time spent involved with electronic media and communications activities increased with age, and non-media activities decreased with age.

Boys and girls showed significantly different preferences for certain individual media activities. These were reflected in their different levels of participation and the amount of time they spent doing certain activities.

In order of priority, boys spent most of their discretionary time watching television (an average of one hour and 58 minutes per day), followed by playing video or computer games (55 minutes), using the internet (42 minutes), listening to music (30 minutes), watching DVDs (24 minutes), and using a mobile phone (13 minutes).

Girls spent most of their discretionary time also watching television (an average of one hour and fifty minutes per day), followed by using the internet (53 minutes), listening to music (40 minutes), and playing video or computer games, watching DVDs, and using a mobile phone (23-24 minutes each).

Girls were significantly more likely to participate in social activities than boys. These activities included using a mobile phone to text and talk, and online messaging, visiting social networking sites, and emailing. More boys than girls played video or computer games, including games against other players online (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Proportion of young people whose diaries showed each activity by gender, 2007**

Source: Diary (n= 1,003 young people; n=522 boys; n=478 girls)

# denotes significant gender difference at p<0.05

### Watching television

More young people watched television (94 per cent) than participated in any other electronic media activity in the study. Television viewing was also the most time consuming activity (an average of one hour and 54 minutes per day).

Boys watched an average 20 minutes less television per day in 2007 than they did in 1995 (an average 2 hours 18 minutes for boys—ABA 1996; one hour 58 minutes in 2007). Girls maintained their level of television viewing since 1995 (one hour and 52 minutes per day in 1995; one hour 50 minutes in 2007).

The amount of time spent watching television was largely consistent across the different age groups with 8-11 year olds spending an average 1 hour and 54 minutes per day watching free-to-air and subscription television, and 12-14 year olds and 15-17 year olds spending 1 hour and 55 minutes. However, 8-11 year olds watched more subscription television (an average 31 minutes per day) compared with the two older age groups (25 minutes for 12-14 year olds, 21 minutes for 15-17 year olds).

### Use of mobile phones

Parents reported that just over half of young people in the study (54 per cent) had their own mobile phone. More girls (63 per cent) than boys (46 per cent) had their own mobile and ownership was highest amongst teenage girls. For 15-17 year olds, 99 per cent of girls compared with 80 per cent of boys had their own mobile phone. Girls were also more likely to be mobile phone owners in the younger age groups. Eighty-one per cent of girls and 70 per cent of boys aged 12-14 years, and 22 per cent of girls and 15

per cent of boys aged 8-11 years owned a mobile phone.

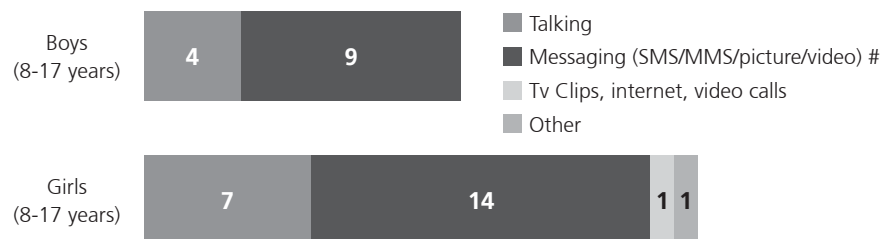
Reflecting higher mobile phone ownership, girls spent significantly more time per day using a mobile phone than boys (an average 23 minutes girls, 13 minutes boys) (Figure 2).

Mobile phone use also increased with age from 16 per cent of eight year olds to 90 per cent of 17 year olds. Average time spent using a mobile phone reflected this with 8-11 year olds using a mobile for an average of three minutes per day, those aged 12-14 years for 19 minutes, and 15-17 year olds for 43 minutes.

Findings indicate that starting high school may be the time for acquiring a mobile phone; 82 per cent of 8-11 year olds did not own a mobile compared with 25 per cent for 12-14 years, and 10 per cent for 15-17 years.

### Use of the internet

Seventy-four per cent of 8-17 year olds recorded time spent on internet activities over the three diary days of the study. Young people spent an average of one hour and 17 minutes per day using the internet.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2: Average time spent per day using a mobile phone by gender, 2007**

Source: Diary: (n=522 boys; n=478 girls)

# denotes significant gender difference at p<0.05

Time spent online increased significantly with age from an average 30 minutes per day for 8-11 year olds, to one hour and 32 minutes for 12-14 year olds, and two hours and 24 minutes for 15-17 year olds (Figure 3). Gender did not influence the overall amount of time that young people spent online.

Boys and girls allocated their online time differently between individual activities. Girls spent significantly more time per day than boys engaged in online communications activities as a group of activities (an average 38 minutes girls, 28 minutes boys). Online communications activities include messaging or chatting, using social websites, and emailing.

Boys spent significantly more time than girls playing games against other players online (an average 22 minutes per day for boys, 8 minutes girls).

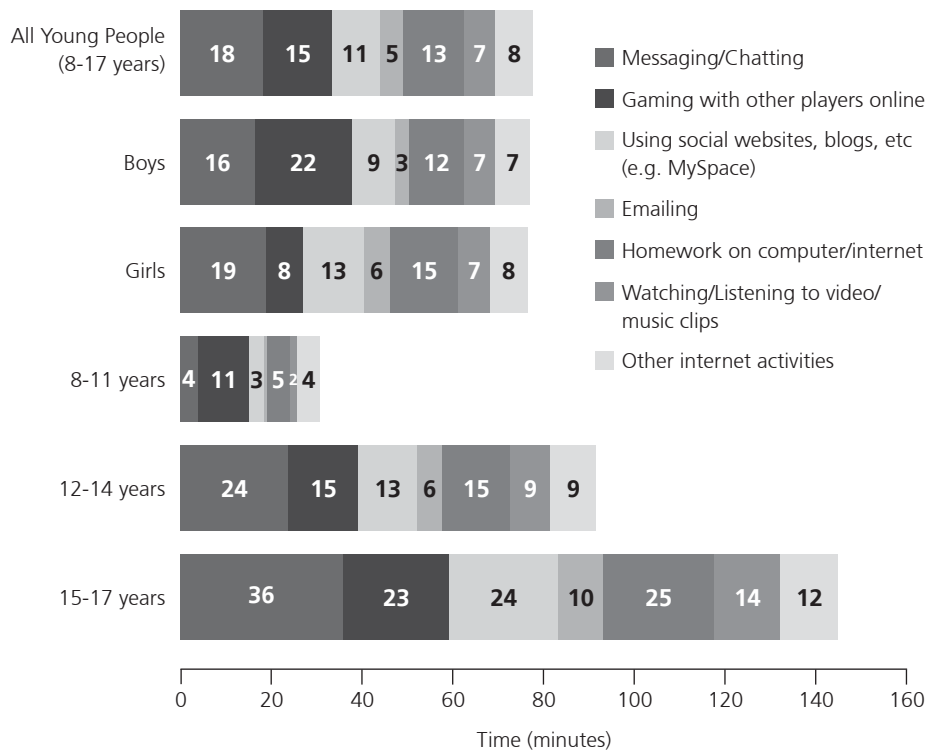
### Activities alone and with others, and at home and away

Children and young people largely spend their internet time alone (72 per cent). The remainder of the time it is a joint activity, more often with other young people than adults. Television is almost opposite to the internet in this regard – 65 per cent of time spent watching television/DVDs is spent watching with other people, who are just as likely to be adults as other young people.

Children and young people reported that they are at home for three-quarters or more of the time they spend on the internet, watching television/DVDs and playing video/computer games. The remaining time they spend on these activities takes place at friend's houses, school and elsewhere outside of their family home. Within the home, internet time was evenly divided between communal spaces (48%) and private spaces (52% – a bedroom or another private room).

### Social networking and authoring of web content by young people

Engagement with online social networking services was an important communication and creative activity evident in the study. A majority of internet time for young people aged 8-17 years (64 per cent, or an average 49 minutes per day) was spent visiting social networking websites, and doing other



**Figure 3: Average time spent per day on internet activities by young people, by age and gender, 2007**

Source: Diary (n=1,003 young people)

online communications activities. This comprised messaging or chatting (18 minutes), gaming online against other players (15 minutes), using social websites (11 minutes) and emailing (five minutes).

These kinds of activities were more significant for older teens. During the three diary days, almost half of those aged 15-17 years messaged or chatted online (48 per cent), followed by visiting social networking sites (44 per cent), emailing (37 per cent), and playing games against other players online (37 per cent).

### Authoring of web content

Forty-two per cent of 8-17 year olds had their own material online at the time of the study, including 39 per cent who had either a personal profile on a user-generated social networking website like MySpace (34 per cent), their own website (13 per cent) and/or a stand-alone blog (7 per cent) (Figure 4).

More girls aged 8-17 years (47 per cent), than boys (38 per cent) had authored their own material to post online. Girls were also more likely to have a profile on a social networking website (41 per cent girls, 27 per cent boys).

Participation in social networking and online authorship was also strongly associated with age. Online authorship increased steadily from three per cent at eight years of age, up to 72 per cent at 14 years where it then stabilised. Similarly, having a profile on a social networking website was rare among primary-school aged children, ranging from

one per cent of eight year olds to 28 per cent of 12 year olds. Among young people of high-school age this increased markedly from 46 per cent of 13 year olds up to 66 per cent of 17 year olds having a social networking profile.

Overall, teenage girls were the most likely sub-group to be involved in online authorship. Eighty per cent of 14-17 year old girls had some form of online authorship and 72 per cent had a profile on a user-generated social networking service.

Among 14-17 year old boys, 65 per cent had authored web content and 52 per cent had a profile on a social networking website.

### Parents' see benefits in media and communications

The majority of parents feel that their children receive some or many benefits from participating in electronic media and communications activities (Figure 5). This is particularly the case with the internet where 53 per cent of parents identify many benefits for their child.

Despite the fact that the internet causes more parents concern than other media and communication activities, its educational benefits, in areas of researching, homework, skills development and media literacy, made it the clear leader in perceived benefits. Television and mobile phones were also valued for educational benefits, and security and parental peace of mind, respectively.

### Conclusions

*Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007* provides a wealth of information about the way children and young people spend their time and the role of media and communications technologies in their lives. Comparisons with 1995 paint a picture of both continuity and change within a technology rich environment for young people. Children still like to engage in non-media related activities, especially younger children, and non-media activities take up half of children's discretionary time, as they did in 1995. At the same time, some media activities have also maintained or increased in significance.

Television maintains its dominance as the most time consuming activity for children and young people, albeit at slightly lower levels than in 1995. Its importance as an experience shared with families and friends,

**Table 1: Activities at home and away, 2007**

|                  | Internet**                | TV/DVDs | Gaming* | Mobiles | Music/radio |
|------------------|---------------------------|---------|---------|---------|-------------|
| Total minutes    | 23,385                    | 103,650 | 29,655  | 13,425  | 26,325      |
| At home          | private room <sup>1</sup> | 52%     | 32%     | 51%     |             |
|                  | shared room <sup>2</sup>  | 48%     | 65%     | 42%     | 49%         |
|                  | subtotal                  | 76%     | 78%     | 80%     |             |
| Outside the home | 22%                       | 24%     | 20%     | 51%     | 46%         |

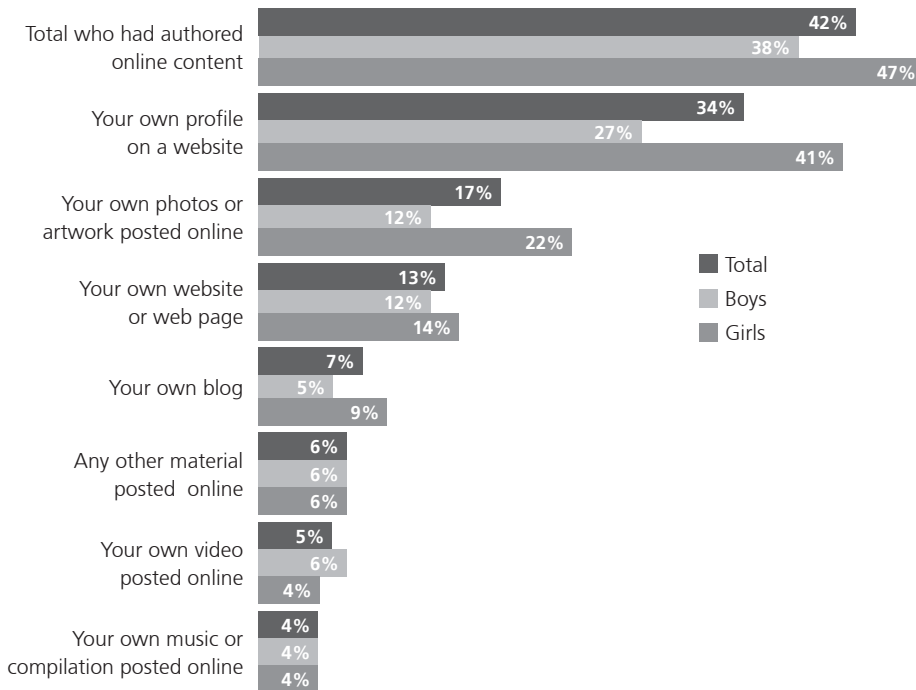
NOTE: This table should be read column by column. For example, of 103,650 sampled minutes spent watching television or DVDs, 32% of this time was spent behind closed doors at home, 65% was spent in shared spaces at home and 22% outside the home. These percentages add to more than 100%, as 'location' categories were not exclusive (to allow young people to move between spaces in the one time block).

<sup>1</sup> Own bedroom, brother/sister's bedroom or other private room

<sup>2</sup> Communal/ shared space at home, e.g. living room

\* Includes online gaming against other players. \*\*Excludes online gaming against other players.

Source: Diary



**Figure 4: Participation by young people in authoring of web content by gender, 2007**

Q: Do you currently have ...? (fill in as many circles as you need)

Source: Day 4 diary question (n=1,055 young people)

points to its continuing contribution to social interaction and shared cultural experience. The specific destination for children provided by children's multi-channels are reflected in higher levels of television viewing by children in subscription homes, especially by younger children, although, overall, children spend more time watching free-to-air television than any other activity.

The new insight from this research is the increasing engagement of children with converged digital media. Many of the technologies now used by young people – the internet, email, instant messaging, social

networking, video sharing, and portable music players – were not present in the home a decade ago. With older teenagers, time spent online closely matches television viewing. This engagement is likely to increase, given parents' positive orientation towards the learning and educational benefits of the internet and the high adoption of broadband in households with school age children. This is despite the difficulty experienced by some parents in managing their children's internet use.

Evidence about the importance of online communications to young people, and in

particular teenagers' participation in social networking, online gaming and messaging/chatting has highlighted the range of potential risks specifically associated with these activities. Ensuring that children and young people have a positive experience online, will be increasingly important for parents, educators and policy makers in the future. *Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007* has provided ACMA with a foundation for further research into the role of the internet in the lives of young people. ACMA has already built on the data about internet use to design qualitative research on young people and social networking which will inform targeted communications about online safety.

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#### References

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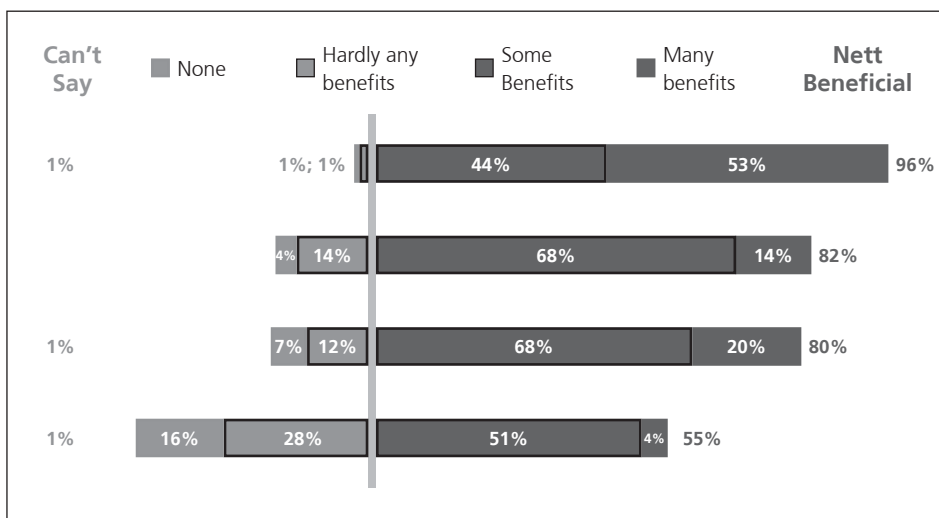
#### Endnotes

1 *Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007* was published in December 2007 and is available on the ACMA website at [www.acma.gov.au/mediareports](http://www.acma.gov.au/mediareports)

2 The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007) reported that 64 per cent of occupied private dwellings in Australia had the internet. Forty-three per cent had a broadband connection.

3 **Aggregate discretionary time** is calculated by adding the time spent on individual leisure activities together. It includes double or triple counting of time periods during which multiple activities may have been undertaken. Aggregate discretionary time includes time spent doing homework.

4 Average amount of time spent using the internet per day includes doing homework on the computer or internet, and is averaged across all young people in the sample whether or not they used the internet.



**Figure 5: Perceived Benefit From Child's Use Of Media/Communications, 2007 (N=Valid Sample Only)**

Q: '...can you tell me how BENEFICIAL you feel each of the following is for your child The first one [...] - would you say that s/he gets 'many' benefits from this, 'some benefits', 'hardly any' or 'none'.