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Going online on behalf of others: an investigation of 'proxy' internet consumers

Report

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An investigation of ‘proxy’ internet consumers

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Executive Summary

Characteristics of proxy internet users and those they help

A range of Australians find themselves acting as ‘proxy internet users’ – i.e. using online services and applications on behalf of other adults who otherwise make limited use of the internet.

It is rare for those adults being supported by proxies to be absolute non-users of the internet. Apart from extreme cases of physical/intellectual incapacity, most people covered by our research were making some use of the internet, if only through smartphones and Apps.

Proxy internet assistance often takes place within families – notably elderly parents being helped by their adult sons and daughters.

Other proxy users include people acting in a professional capacity – for example carers, social workers and other public-facing professionals who assist clients with specific online tasks.

Common ‘proxy’ internet activities

Proxy internet users are most commonly involved with what are perceived as important and/or ‘risky’ online activities – e.g. relating to banking, personal finances and purchasing goods.

These activities tend to involve online interactions with organisations and institutions, often with some form of financial and/or official consequences.

We found less evidence of people relying on proxy users for what were considered more personal and informal internet activities.

The nature of proxy internet support

Proxy use of the internet tends to be episodic rather than continuous. Few proxy users reported using the internet on behalf of someone else on a daily rather than weekly or monthly basis.

There is a tendency for proxy users to direct rather than simply support these uses of the internet. Proxies often are actively using the internet *for* someone else, rather than collaboratively using the internet *with* someone else.

In some instances, proxies were using the internet independently of the person they are helping – e.g. using online services and applications under the guise of that person but without their direct involvement.

As a result, many adults remain reliant on their proxies for important aspects of internet use. Only a minority of people appeared to be learning from their proxies, gaining internet skills and developing as autonomous users.

Reasons and motivations for being a proxy internet user

Proxy users are most commonly motivated by a sense of obligation towards the person that they help with the internet. While some proxy users report a sense of satisfaction and improve their own expertise, the most common motivation is of 'doing one's duty'.

Offering assistance with the internet is usually entwined with familial and/or professional commitments. Family and work contexts therefore tend to shape the nature of proxy internet use and the interactions around it.

Proxy internet use tends to be part of broader arrangements of support/care between adults. Proxies are often also helping people in other aspects of everyday life besides the internet.

Factors that enable and limit proxy internet use

Most people consider their role as proxies to be relatively unproblematic. The most commonly raised concerns relate to having sufficient time to help. We found relatively few concerns over financial costs or technical capacity.

Tensions can arise when online activities are felt to be inappropriate by proxies and/or the people that they help. These include activities that might be perceived as personally sensitive or exceeding the boundaries of the relationship between proxies and those they help.

Recommendations for supporting proxy internet use

There is little evidence of proxy internet users feeling unsupported or substantially inconvenienced in their actions. By and large this is a part of everyday life that people are prepared to simply 'get on with'.

However, despite this lack of concern, a number of issues are raised by our research that merit attention from communications stakeholders.

#1. Providing accurate information about the consequences of 'family' proxy internet use

People often use the internet on behalf of family members, with all parties having limited knowledge of the implications of their actions. These issues relate to implications for proxy users and the family members that they help.

Areas of potential clarification include:

- Legal implications of using government, taxation and other official services using someone else's account.
- Consumer rights and protection when transactions are carried out online by one person using another's banking details.
- Liability when enacting banking and other financial decisions online for another person.
- Possible implications for all parties when using the internet to access copyrighted material.
- Issues surrounding privacy and disclosure of personal information.

- Issues relating to Australian internet users performing these activities for people in other countries/ with institutions in other countries.

#2. Improved support for ‘professional’ proxy users

A range of people in professional roles make use of the internet on behalf of clients/customers that they support in the course of their work. Our research suggests that these activities are often not recognized formally in job descriptions and work protocols. Relevant organizations can therefore make efforts to:

- Recognize proxy internet use as a formal part of some professional roles – for example, for care home workers, social workers and others working in support/caring/advisory roles.
- Ensure that workplaces have explicit policies and procedures relating to instances of proxy use – for example, acceptable use policies.
- Ensuring computer and internet provision in workplaces that can be used by professionals and clients/customers.

#3. Improving the design of websites and online services to support proxy internet use

Websites can be better designed to accommodate open and secure proxy use. In terms of improving website security, steps might be taken to address the fact that some people are making (potentially) fraudulent use of log-ins, passwords and personal accounts. In terms of improving website ease-of-use, steps might be taken to help proxy users make use of unfamiliar finance-related websites and applications. These issues point to the following recommendations:

- Websites should be designed to allow people to log on as an authorized ‘proxy user’ who is recognized as acting on behalf of a named other.
- Websites and online services should be designed to include ‘dummy’/‘safe’ spaces. This would allow proxies to gain familiarity with services and systems without the fear of making costly financial mistakes. This is especially pertinent where proxy users are executing online financial decisions on behalf of someone else.

#4. The development of software for proxy users

A number of suggestions were made by participants in our research for easy-to-use software applications and software design features that might support proxy use of the internet. These included:

- The ability for proxies to record/evidence what they had done online on behalf of someone else.
- The ability for people who are being supported by proxies to record/evidence what they have previously attempted to do online (thereby helping the proxy make sense of the issues/problems they are assisting with).
- For those proxies helping others at a distance, the development of simple software that allows them to have a shared view of the device/operating system of the person they are helping.

#5. Suggestions for adult education and training

A few issues arise from our research that relate to education and training. These included suggestions for improving the effectiveness of basic computer skills courses for people reliant on proxy support. In addition, some 'family' proxies indicated an interest in being trained to work with older adults. This suggests the following would be useful:

- The development of adult education courses specifically for novice computer users and their proxies to take together.
- Targeting basic computer courses at existing groups/networks of non-users, rather than working with classes of individual adult learners. For example, group courses might be run for residents of the same care home, members of the same church or community centre.
- The development of adult education courses to help family members 'work with' older adults and/or other vulnerable groups that they are supporting.

#6. Increasing the diversity of proxy internet use and proxy internet users

Finally, our research highlights areas where proxy internet use might be broadened – both in terms of the people who act as proxies, and the nature of the online activities that they support. Responsibility for promoting such changes is unlikely to fall to one specific agency or sector. Rather these are issues that need to be developed across the communications and public sectors.

- Encouraging proxy internet users to take on a more pedagogic and enabling role in their internet help – broadening activities from essential and/or significant 'economic' activities to different social, cultural and individually-orientated internet uses.
- Encouraging more people to volunteer their assistance with helping others with internet use – especially with adults outside of family and professional networks. Assisting others with internet use could be promoted as a valuable form of neighbourhood and community volunteering.

Background and literature review

The continued importance of digital inequalities

There is a clear need to continue to develop current understandings of ‘digital inequality’ – i.e. differences and disadvantages in the ways in which individuals access, use and benefit from the internet. While a large majority of Australian adults has *some* form of access to the internet, significant ‘divides’ remain in terms of how, when and why people go online. In particular, the problem of ‘non-users’ and ‘low users’ persists, suggesting that inequalities in engagement are an ongoing feature rather than temporary phase of the ‘diffusion’ of internet technology across the population. In short, it seems that there is an enduring pattern of some people making less use of the internet than others, often to their disadvantage. Developing a good understanding of this issue (and possible ways of addressing it) should be considered a priority for researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders in the communications sector.

The persistence of internet non-use has been well documented over the past decade or so. For example, it has long been reported that substantial proportions of adults in industrialized countries such as Australia make no use of the internet, and that non-use remains associated with factors such as age, income, socio-economic status and educational background (e.g. Reisdorf & Groselj 2014). While inadequate access to devices and connectivity continue to restrict some individuals, we know that internet non-use corresponds with a range of non-technical issues. These include issues relating to physical and mental health, low levels of literacy and lack of other skills, restrictions of time, finances, motivation, interest and/or perceived need. As such, non-users of the internet have been characterised in previous studies as ranging from those who could be characterised as ‘incapable refusers’ through to those who might be described as ‘price sensitive pragmatists’ (Verdegem & Verhoest 2009).

Regardless of their varying circumstances, non-users of the internet find themselves at an increasing disadvantage in a ‘digital age’ where employment, purchasing goods and services, engaging with government and public services, entertainment and leisure are all increasingly online in nature and form. In this sense, there have been growing concerns over how non-users are able to ‘get by’ in an internet-orientated world, and an increasing urgency to work to reduce the vulnerability of such groups.

Internet (non)use – the importance of social context and social contacts

One of the main issues to emerge from research into digital inequalities over the past decade is the understanding that internet use is not dependent simply on having functional access to the internet – what is sometimes still referred to as being a ‘have’ or a ‘have not’. An individual can have ‘access’ to the requisite material aspects of the internet (e.g. computers, routers, cables) yet remain firmly someone who makes no use of online applications and services. In this sense, lack of internet use is most usefully understood as primarily a social rather than technical issue.

One of the key issues underpinning internet (non) use is social context – i.e. aspects of people's everyday lives and circumstances that prevent them from making the best use of internet technologies and/or gain from engagement with such technology. As Geniets and Eynon (2011, p.6) observe:

“Internet use is influenced and shaped by other things that are going on in people's lives, their interests, their networks, their uses of other media and everyday constraints such as time”.

Recent research has highlighted, for example, the tendency for older adults to make limited/no use of the internet. This is clearly associated with different 'stages of life' associated with old age – e.g. shifts in domestic and employment situations, changing family dynamics, available time and social relations (van Deursen and Helsper 2015). As the example of older adults illustrates, individuals can become non-users of the internet at different stages of life due to 'forced exclusion' (i.e. stopping due to external factors) and/or through 'intrinsic motivation' (i.e. giving up through choice, or lack of interest) [Helsper & Reisdorf 2013]. People's changing social contexts and life circumstances therefore play an important part in determining how they move in and out of internet use throughout their lifetime (Green *et al.* 2011).

Another key issue raised by recent studies of internet (non) use is the significance of social support. Studies of media consumption highlight the fact that using the internet is rarely, if ever, a wholly individual act. Instead, most people's internet use is reliant on their social networks, whether for practical advice and guidance, or simply emotional support (Stewart 2007). Sustained internet use therefore tends to be supported by what social scientists often refer to as 'social capital' – i.e. the connections and networks that people have with others, and the support and assistance that can be accessed through these connections. In this sense, some individuals' internet access and use is reliant on help and resources provided through their 'weak ties', such as work colleagues or neighbours. Others might rely on their 'strong ties' with well resourced and knowledgeable others, such as close friends and family members (Mariën & Van Audenhove 2010). Either way, the prevalence of technology resources and skills in an individual's social network is clearly an important aspect of how they engage with the internet.

The significance of 'proxy' internet use

These issues are brought together in the focus for the present research – i.e. 'proxy' internet use. In short, this relates to situations where an individual might *not* directly use the internet themselves, but instead rely on informal 'proxy' users – i.e. other people in their social networks that go online on their behalf.

There are a number of different social groups that might rely on others to use the internet on their behalf. These include older adults, persons with low levels of literacy/numeracy, persons with long-term illness, and persons with mental/physical disability. We also need to consider groups in institutionalized contexts where "internet access can be unreliable, spasmodic or non-existent" (Hancock 2010, p.3). These might include, for example, adults on active service in the armed forces, and incarcerated persons in prisons and secure hospitals (see, for example, Reisdorf & Jewkes 2016). Conversely, there is a variety of 'significant others' that are likely to be going online on behalf of other adults. These might include 'strong ties' such as family members, carers and close friends, as

well as 'weaker ties' such as neighbours, work colleagues, and technology-related community actors (e.g. librarians, local IT vendors). All told, a wide range of people might well be involved in proxy internet use – either as a proxy user or someone dependent on such a proxy user.

This form of internet (non) use has been hinted at by a few research projects over the past decade or so. For example, our own research on UK adults' use of the internet at the beginning of the 2000s pointed to a trend for people who presented themselves as internet 'non users' to often be gaining contact with the internet through others, albeit "in rather superficial and heavily mediated forms" (Selwyn *et al.* 2005, p.18). As our research observed:

"This notion of being in close proximity to the internet without actually using it was a repeated experience for [some] non-users. It was common for non-users to have a range of social contacts who were internet users, and sometimes called upon as proxy sources of computer use. Parents, children, relatives, work colleagues and friends were all cited [...] as such 'surrogate' users of the internet – performing a range of functions from sending emails to planning and booking holidays" (Selwyn et al. 2005, p.19).

The role of 'intermediaries' and 'local experts' in some adults' engagement with the internet and other information technologies was also noted in UK research by Stewart (2007). Similarly, research in Sweden and the UK confirmed what was described as "proxy-use through social networks" (Reisdorf *et al.* 2012, p.22). Most often this took the form of family and friends searching for information, sending emails or purchasing goods online. Studies during the 2010s also seem to confirm the persistence of proxy internet use into the 2010s. For example, while Dolničar *et al.* (2013) found 29 per cent of respondents in their survey of Slovenian adults to be not using the internet, over 40 per cent of these reported making use of internet intermediaries. Significantly, reliance on proxy internet users was found in this study to vary according to educational background as well as contact with children and grandchildren.

Aside from this handful of general studies, proxy internet use has been most prominently noted in studies of online health-related information seeking. This research has identified the tendency for internet users to look for information related to the health conditions of others. For example, the authoritative 'Pew Internet & American Life' project found that around half of US internet users who go online for health information had performed their most recent search on behalf of someone else. Another US survey by Cutrona *et al.* (2015) found two-thirds of respondents to be 'surrogate seekers' – i.e. "those who seek health information for others". Interestingly, this research suggests that such "surrogate-seeking" (Sadasivam *et al.* 2012) is often performed "without necessarily being asked to do so" (Abrahamson & Fisher 2007). In this sense, people without their own internet access have been found to be users of online health information. For example, Massey (2016) found one-in-ten of their survey respondents who had never used the internet nevertheless indicated that the internet was their primary source of health information. Other studies have estimated that as one-in-five internet non-users have family or friends search for health information online (Ayantunde *et al.* 2007).

Developing better understandings of proxy internet use

To date, then, little work has been carried out in developing understandings of this aspect of internet consumption. While health information is an obvious topic of proxy internet support, there are many other online practices and processes that might also attract similar levels of mediation. In this sense, Ellen Helsper (2012) points to a number of areas of ‘digital engagement’ where proxy users might be increasingly relied upon – i.e.:

- *Individual* engagement – online entertainment, leisure;
- *Social* engagement – online communication, networking, civic engagement.
- *Cultural* engagement – online news, cultural participation;
- *Economic* engagement – online learning, shopping, services;

As the scope of these areas implies, having someone make use of the internet on your behalf is clearly an important element of some people’s ability to engage and participate in modern society. As Green *et al.* (2011) put it, “for the most part, the internet is no longer seen as an elite technology but has become a necessity: a mundane, essential part of daily living”. In short, as Pearce and Rice (2013, p.721) conclude, “the internet can have notable implications for the social and economic lives of those fortunate to have access to it”. Thus while those adults who rely on proxy users are able to accrue some benefits they are clearly experiencing a different form of internet use, the nature and consequences of which demand further investigation.

On one hand, then, we need to develop better understandings of **the nature and form of proxy internet use**. We know from previous research that people’s internet use relies on different forms of resourcing – what Mendonça *et al.* (2015) helpfully distinguish as: access to assets (devices and infrastructures); basic skills (low level know-how in operating technology); and complex capabilities (higher level digital literacy, proactive/interactive uses). This raises questions over how these different forms of resourcing are being mediated by proxy users. For example, to what extent are proxy users providing what Chu (2010) describes as ‘tangible support’ (i.e. instructions, shared and mediated use, infrastructure), and to what extent are they also involved in providing ‘emotional support’ (i.e. encouragement and persuasion)? What are the social dynamics of the relationships between proxy users and those who they help, and how are these sustained and developed over time? We also need to know more about the capabilities, experiences and needs of proxy users. For example, what common issues do proxy users face (e.g. shortfalls in knowledge, time and/or resourcing)? How do they currently deal with these problems, and how might communications market stakeholders provide support for them?

Better understandings can also be developed of **the benefits of proxy internet use**. Of course, someone who does not otherwise make use of the internet is likely to be advantaged through being helped by a proxy internet user – not least in terms of being supported to live their day-to-day lives, experience everyday pleasures and to participate in contemporary society. This raises questions over the specific ways in which the availability, accessibility and affordability of internet and online services are being enhanced. How are communications issues affected, such as quality of service; development of skills and literacy; privacy; online security and consumer rights? In addition, using the internet on behalf of others is likely to have benefits for the internet proxy themselves – for example, a sense of social contribution, enhancing technical and social skills, and so on.

However, we also need to develop better understandings of the **possible limitations and/or disadvantages of proxy internet use**. For example, we know that digital technology uses tend “reinforce and replicate existing social inequalities; with those who are better off and better educated being more likely to use and benefit from the internet” (Geniets & Eynon 2011, p.10). Similarly, relying on proxy users could delay and/or deter non-users from starting to use the internet fully for themselves. As Reisdorf *et al.* (2012, p.24) observe, while it is usually assumed that any exposure to internet use will encourage non-users to go online themselves, “social networks can also have the opposite effect and prevent non-users from learning how to use the internet, as it is more convenient to stay a proxy-user instead”.

It has also been suggested that the “quality and fidelity” of online information that is passed on through intermediaries might be compromised (Cutrona *et al.* 2015). Questions also remain over how proxy interactions with the internet might vary according to the different relationships between user and non-user – e.g. in terms of strong ties and weak ties, and intergenerational relationships. Above all, is the concern that proxy users might be more likely to engage in restricted forms of internet use – for example, avoiding what might be considered to be ‘personally involved’ activities and engaging only in ‘functional’ uses. As Helsper (2011, p.6) suggests:

“It is likely that this use by proxy is restricted to those activities that are clear cut and instrumental, such as looking up facts and practical information or buying products or services, when it comes to the activities further up the ladder such as civic engagement, use by proxy is unlikely since they require personal involvement”.

Research questions

As these latter issues suggest, the topic of ‘proxy’ internet use is an important and complicated element of making full sense of internet use in contemporary society. These are an overlooked group of communications consumers and there is a clear need to develop better understandings of the prevalence of this form of internet use, as well as the experiences and needs of ‘proxy’ internet users and those individuals who depend on their assistance. As such, this report will now go on to address the following areas of questioning:

- Who proxy internet users are (their relationships with the people they assist; technology expertise, social networks *etc.*);
- The internet activities that are conducted on behalf of others;
- Reasons and motivations for acting as a proxy internet user;
- Enablers and/or barriers faced by proxy internet users in providing effective assistance;
- How these proxy internet users might be supported (e.g. resources; training; support networks).

Methodology

The remainder of this report draws upon two phases of data collection. However (for reasons that will be explained shortly), the bulk of analysis stems from in-depth individual interviews with proxy internet users across Australia.

Initially the project set out to map patterns of proxy internet consumption through an **online survey** of self-identified respondents resident throughout Australia. This was intended to provide a detailed quantitative picture of how different groups of people were engaged in making use of the internet and online services on behalf of others. The survey was publicised widely and repeatedly from September to December 2015 in the expectation of achieving a self-selecting sample of 501 respondents (or more). After four months, the survey achieved a response of only 87 respondents – insufficient for any in-depth analysis of patterns and trends.

This low response is explained by two findings that emerged from our subsequent qualitative research. In short, complete non-contact with the internet seems to be increasingly rare amongst Australian adults. Most people who even five years ago might have been classed as absolute ‘non-users’ are now more likely to access rudimentary internet services (often through restricted smartphone access). Thus our publicising of the survey in the terms of respondents who supported others “who do not use the internet” failed to relate properly to the complex nature of contemporary internet exclusion.

Secondly, while many Australians do act as proxy internet users, we find this not to be something that people readily self-identify as. As shall be discussed in subsequent sections of this report, proxy internet use is simply a task that people carry out amidst many other aspects of their family/professional lives. In retrospect, our first phase of research suffered from attempting to generate survey responses on a topic that many people do not strongly associate with.

That said, the relatively small number of survey responses were useful in informing the subsequent phase of investigation and descriptive statistics from the survey have been included in Appendix B. Yet it should be noted that these data are in no way generalizable to broader trends and patterning. In order to make better sense of what is clearly a complicated aspect of contemporary internet use we drew more heavily than initially intended on our second phase of qualitative research.

This consisted of **in-depth narrative interviews** with 36 proxy internet users (see Appendix A for details of each individual). These were initially identified from the survey respondents, with additional interviewees contacted through snowball sampling. This phase of data collection proved far more successful in generating insights into the nature of proxy internet consumption for different consumer groups. In particular, this more exploratory approach to data collection was able to detail the complexities of people’s proxy internet arrangements; underlying reasons and motivations as well as barriers and/or enablers experienced by proxy users in providing effective assistance. Thus while we are unable to provide an authoritative account of the prevalence and patterning of proxy internet use, this report *is* able to unpack what is a largely unspoken aspect of how the internet is consumed by many Australians.

Results

Characteristics of proxy internet users and those who they support

Despite their reticence to identify as ‘proxy users’, our research found a diversity of Australians using online services and applications on behalf of other adults who otherwise made limited use of the internet. Our interviews covered proxy internet users aged between 21 to 86 years from a variety of occupational and social backgrounds. That said, it was notable that respondents to our initial survey (albeit self-selecting) were predominantly employed individuals aged between 30 to 59 years and often with university-level education. It was also notable that the majority of survey and interview respondents were women. As might be expected, all these individuals reported themselves to be relatively competent and confident computer users, making frequent use of the internet in their own lives. As one interviewee put it, *“I’m probably pretty cluey”* (Sofia). These were people able to work around basic computer-related problems they encountered through a combination of Google searches, YouTube videos, friends and colleagues, and having confidence to *“rely on trial and error”* (George).

In contrast, these were abilities not shared by the people who were being supported by proxy users. Interestingly, it was rare for those adults being supported by proxies to be absolute non-users of the internet. Apart from extreme cases of physical/intellectual incapacity or severe social exclusion, most people covered by our research were making some use of the internet, if only very limited engagement through smartphones, tablets and Apps. As such, most people being helped by proxy users were described as ‘limited’ users of the internet rather than ‘non’ users. For example, it was common for the people being supported by proxy users to be making basic use of smartphones or tablets for themselves. Some people were occasional users of email and a few preferred websites, but not engaging with any other online applications and services. Some were retirees who had previously used the internet when working and/or taken some form of computer training in the past. Yet while not internet ‘non-users’ *per se*, the nature of their actual use and competence was very limited in its scope and outcomes. As one interviewee recounted:

My mum’s has Facebook and she thinks that Google has the answers to absolutely everything ... but she’s not really online (Aurelie)

Two distinct forms of proxy use were evident in our survey and interview data. First, proxy internet assistance was reported to most often take place within families, notably elderly parents being helped by their adult sons/daughters. That said, our interviews encompassed various permutations of intra-family support. This included mothers using the internet on behalf of sons and daughters with disability; retired husbands using on behalf of their spouses; middle-aged adults being supported by siblings and spouses. A second distinct set of proxy users was people acting in a professional capacity. This included carers, social workers, tutors, advisors, mentors, care home workers, nurses and other public-facing professionals whose jobs involved assisting clients with specific online tasks. As will be explored in subsequent sections, these professional and family proxy arrangements did share some commonalities, but often differed in their nature and implications.

Types of online activities being conducted on behalf of others

We found surprisingly little evidence of people relying on proxy users for what might be classed as informal and personal uses of the internet. It seemed that most people being supported by proxies were finding ways of making low-level use of email and Facebook if they so wished. A few proxies reported “*sourcing information*” (Natasha) relating to health, illness and other life issues. Yet in contrast to previous research, searching for health-related information or facilitating personal communications with family and friends were not prevalent activities for most of interviewees. Instead, we found proxy internet users to be most commonly involved with what were perceived as ‘important’ and/or ‘risky’ online activities

Often these ‘important’ activities involved interacting online with organisations. A recurrent activity was proxies helping deal with ‘formal’ online interactions with institutions and organisations. This was certainly the case with ‘professional’ proxies whose jobs involved using the internet on behalf of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. One social worker described using the internet to help recent migrants access employment services. These individuals relied on this support to engage with unfamiliar services, making sense of different terminology, protocols of use and so on. As such, this proxy saw himself as assisting migrants engage with the internet “*in an Australian context ... it might well be different to them if they’re coming from Syria or Libya or wherever they come from*” (Aarav). Another interviewee working with international university students also framed her proxy use in terms of ‘interpreting’ the ‘Australian internet’ (Jocelyn). Similarly, a mental-health nurse described using the internet on behalf of her patients: “*when people aren’t well enough, sometimes it’s harder for them to navigate through the systems*” (Janet).

Perhaps the most prevalent form of these online activities was using the internet for finance-related purposes (what was categorised earlier in this report as ‘economic’ outcomes). These included online banking, personal finances (such as superannuation and taxation), paying household bills, insurance, purchasing goods, booking tickets and selling items online. These activities tended to entail online interactions with some form of financial and/or official consequences. Commonly, these online interactions related to organisations such as banks, large online retailers, telecommunications providers, utilities companies and government services.

Our interviews highlighted a diversity of economic activities that people deemed ‘important’ – ranging from the relatively low-risk management of shopping coupons and customer loyalty schemes, to more significant share dealing and overseas bank transactions involving tens of thousands of dollars. Regardless of the amounts of money involved, proxies were often involved in a succession of specific economic activities:

She asks me to find contact numbers of particular organisations on the internet. She would ask me to make bookings for her for flights. She asks me to research things for her, whether it’s a particular shop she wants to access. Sometimes she asks me to buy gift vouchers on her behalf for other people online. (Anne)

As this quotation implies, proxies were often involved in a considerable amount of preparatory research and planning preceding any actual purchase or transaction. There was a sense of proxy users acting as brokers for activities such as banking, shopping, travel and general financial

management. One interviewee described acting as *de facto* travel agent for her mother living in Sweden:

I will make arrangements for her, I will book her airline tickets, I will let her know what the options are in respect to hotels. And that also is not necessarily if we're meeting up together, it's also if she's just thinking of going on a trip herself. And often it will spring from conversations. For instance, a few months ago she was thinking of travelling to Wales and it was, "Now what do you think? Will I do this? Will I be up for it?" And I had a look at the travel schedule and looked up the hotel, which I thought looked rather dodgy. So I told her about that. She would never buy things herself online. (Anika)

Tellingly, our interviews suggested that these activities were often being conducted via the internet at the behest of the proxy user rather than the person they were supporting. Using the internet for these activities was seen as convenient and/or familiar for the proxy users. As one adult daughter justified online banking on behalf of her mother: "*it's easy for me ... she doesn't understand it at all*" (Aurelie). For another interviewee, having taken on the responsibility of arranging her elderly father's bill-paying it made sense to do this online:

Originally it was because he didn't know how to [pay bills] at all. He knew that bills had to be paid and he originally brought them up for me after mum died because she used to BPay everything over the phone and he brought them up and said, "Well I've got to pay these now. How do I do them and how do I set these up and how do I transfer these things across?". And of course, my first reaction was, "Well we'll just do it online." And so, went through with him actually getting log-ins in his name and organising how to do that. I did it for him and then it was a case of 'Okay, I'm just going to have to sit here and do it'. (Claire)

Many of these activities required the transfer of money between proxies and the people they were supporting. Arrangements varied from the proxy paying from their own online accounts (most commonly bank accounts, but in a few instances prepaid debit cards and PayPal accounts) and being later reimbursed, through to the proxy directly using the other person's finances. Some proxies were managing and using a range of accounts in the name of the person that they were supporting. This included bank and credit cards, as well as accounts relating to government services, customer loyalty schemes and frequent flyer accounts. Some proxies had set up additional bank accounts in the individual's name which were used specifically for online purchases: "*It's as safe as I can make it. I don't have any worries and there's not a great amount of money – it's not her primary account that I've got access to*" (Ivy). As another interviewee described how she conducted online transactions for her son with intellectual disability:

He's got two cards. CommBank believes he holds both of them and that's not true. His father's got one and I've got one. But we meet up with him every Saturday. One of us meets up with him every Saturday and he comes with his budget, his planner for the week. So what's happening during the week is associated with what he's going to spend... I'll hold the card ... we've got two – and one of them we use to purchase online. (Anita)

As previous examples suggest, what was considered sufficiently significant to merit such support varied according to different people's circumstances and life-styles. One interviewee's father considered Gumtree and eBay as his two sole '*important*' activities (Frans). Another middle-aged

interviewee used the internet on behalf of her sister – a young mother without access to a computer who had recently fallen ill. This proxy was primarily using the internet for the maintenance of child-related services and accounts as well as purchasing items relating to her sister's cancer – as she put it: *"Looking at anything from sorting out zoo membership ... to researching respite accommodation and looking for wigs"* (Lucy).

Alongside these activities were proxy uses of the internet related to not paying money, especially the distribution of online entertainment content. Some interviewees were careful to frame this as sharing *"new legally downloaded content"* (Bill). Yet more often this was recounted as illicitly downloaded film, television programs and music. One interviewee described a routine of finding and downloading Urdu and Tamil language films onto USB sticks to send to his father to watch in India (Vihaan). Another talked of streaming sites to help his father-in-law *"occasionally watch online movies in China"* (Delun). In a similar manner to proxy users acting as surrogate travel agents and bank tellers, these individuals were acting as procurers and providers of entertainment material. As one interviewee put it, *"it's almost like I'm her dealer, I'm her torrent dealer"* (Aurelie). As this proxy elaborated:

My mother likes watching movies and sometimes she asks me to find a film for her. She'll tell me, "I'd like to watch this movie. Can you find it on Google?" That's typically the question: "Can you find it on Google?" Sometimes I can find it but other times I'll tell her, "I can't find that one but I can find you something else." ... I don't think she completely understands what torrent downloading is. [But] she understands the notion of pirating. ... we have pirates in our family way back and so she says, "You know, we're just following in our ancestors' footsteps in the virtual world". (Aurelie)

The perceived unimportance of people's proxy internet use

As mentioned earlier, most people did not place particular emphasis on their proxy internet use for others. Being a proxy internet user was rarely a major identifying characteristic for the people that we interviewed. Instead, it was described as an incidental part of day-to-day activities. Indeed, using the internet was often one of a host of supportive tasks that people carried out for the same person. Thus many of the proxy internet activities just described were rationalised as simply part of a variety of household, domestic and logistical tasks that people carried out for others – just one of *"the many things [my mother] needs to do to manage a week"....* (Maria)

Some proxies did report a sense of satisfaction in supporting another person's use of the internet. The internet was an undertaking where they felt they could *"give people a little bit of joy in their day that gives me pleasure too, and yeah it doesn't cost me anything"* (Ivy); *"I think I'm a fixer. I just want to see people happy"* (Charles). A few proxies also reported broadening their technical understandings and competencies in the course of helping others: *"It's given me more confidence about understanding various things"* (Wendy). Some family proxies reckoned that their internet assistance had helped build connections with relatives that they otherwise had little in common with – *"it helps me to understand what's happening with her and, you know, I feel like I want to help her too"* (Lucy). Yet for the most part, we found people's proxy use to be driven primarily by a sense of obligation:

We're a very close family, so anything that he needs or is not sure about we all kind of step in. ... I jump in there – I think it's maybe just the relationship. I've just become the default. (Kylie)

He knows what he's doing [BUT] he's a bit lazy, just like all parents, they don't want to do it, because if they paid for you to go to school, you can do it. That's what I get. (Loretta)

[Laughs] Oh just the sense of doing the right thing I think. (Joe)

I was the only one willing to do it [laughs], in terms of it's quite time consuming. (Maria)

There's not many other people that they could ask. (Gail)

In part, these feelings of proxy use being an incidental and moderately inconvenient activity, stemmed from the episodic (rather than continuous) nature of most people's proxy internet duties. Indeed, our survey suggested that using the internet on behalf of someone else tended to take place on a weekly or monthly basis. Where proxy use was more frequent, it tended to be part of regular routines that involved more than internet use. As one daughter described her daily routine of engaging with her elderly mother: *"I usually drop by most days after work or I handle things most days, and one of the things we do is nearly always bring out the iPad"* (Maria). For the most part, however, the nature of the activities meant that proxy uses of the internet were distinct and specific occasions. For some interviewees, therefore, proxy use was *"kind of sporadic"* (Donna). As other interviewees related:

It depends ... I'd say, you know, sometimes it can be two times in a week; sometimes it won't be for months. It just depends. (Paul)

There's sort of different modes of interaction, so she'll almost book a time with me if she needs to, like, transfer money between the UK and here, not that it's huge amounts of money, but she has a bank account still in the UK, so she'll book a time, "You need to come over and do this", so that's the kind of almost formal internet moment. And then sort of to say if I'm in work or any evening, she might ring and say, "I'm trying to buy clothes on this website. Can you check it out?" or, "Can you do this? It broke and I'm not sure if it's the website or me". And so that would be almost a more informal kind of thing ... She normally books things in and, "Sofia you've got to come over for the evening. You have to stay over and you help me" when my daughter's gone to sleep and things like this, so she books out a whole evening for banking and things like that. (Sofia)

Roles that proxy users play in supporting other people's internet use

These arrangements led to a variety of different forms of internet engagement. Our interviewees differed in terms of what was being done with the internet, who was involved, and issues of control and autonomy. Many of our interviewees' usage arrangements could be distinguished in terms of using the internet collaboratively *with* the person being supported, as opposed to using the internet in a more directed manner *for* the person being supported. In some instances, proxies were using the internet *as* their helped person – i.e. completely independently of the individual they were

helping. This often involved using online services and applications under the guise of that person but without their direct involvement.

Often the more collaborative arrangements involved simple activities such as searching for information or performing routine and repetitive procedures. As one interviewee put it, *“I help her structurally”* (Eric). However, the majority of people reported their proxy use as a one-sided process, with the proxy directing rather than scaffolding the person to engage with the online activities themselves. In a few cases, the person being supported could be said to be making some use themselves, for example:

A lot of what we’re doing now is he’s actually doing it, but I’m sitting there doing it with him, because he is still very afraid of anything that’s to do with it. (Claire)

I just tell them literally verbatim, type this word in to Google, these exact words and then tell me when you’ve done it. (Eric)

Yet in most cases these interactions had diminished into ‘collaborations’ that involved the proxy using the technology on the part of the other person, regardless of their intentions to provide step-by-step instruction or tuition:

From time to time sit there and pay the bills in front of her. ...But, she’s got no interest in that, she – she’s got no interest in the mechanics of all of that. All she wants to hear is, “That’s paid now” and she says – she says, “oh good I’ll write the date on the bill that’s paid.” ... But, she’s got no interest in the mechanics of it. (Ivy)

Something like a bill, she’ll say she wants to know if an amount’s been taken, direct debited. It’s impossible to tell her how to do this over the phone, so I will have to drive and go see here and – and sit with her and show her how to do that. ... I’m actually going step by step, like “This is how you log in. These are the places you want to be looking at”. I do it every single time and it’s just the same. She calls me, “Aurelie, I don’t know what to do. Can you do it? Can you show me?” ... I just do it. Most of the time I try to teach her but it’s gotten to the point where I know I’ll be teaching her but she’s not taking it in or something’s going on. ... She’s really slow. I’ll say, “Put your password in,” and then she’ll be really slow at typing and then I’ll get a bit impatient so I just do it myself. But I think she prefers it if I do it ‘cause she’s scared to press the wrong thing. She seems to think that if she goes in there she might delete all her money from her bank, no matter how much I tell her that’s not possible. (Aurelie)

These collaborative arrangements often had developed into situations where the proxy would simply perform the online actions in their own time and present the other person with evidence of the results. Sometimes these were handed over in hard copy (print-outs of forms and statements) or else emailed screenshots and links. In all these forms, the proxy was the only person engaging with the internet:

I’ve tried pretty hard, to get her to sort of have a go herself, but she’s not comfortable with it at all (Joe)

Maybe I should really teach her how to do that, that stuff, but at the moment it's kind of easier for me just to do it for them (Anne)

She doesn't use the internet. But, she understands enough to know what I'm doing. She asked questions to begin with and now she's au fait with it all so long as I do it.... she wishes that she was younger and could learn how to use it [but] she's kind of got to an age now where she's too old to take it all in. (Ivy)

The tendency to take control was prevalent throughout our interviews with 'family' and 'professional' proxies. As one nurse described, assisting patients with using the internet usually this took the form of taking over and directly using the internet for them: *"we would sit with them and assist them with the internet. But most of the time it's just sort of us doing it for them"* (Janet). Similarly, as an adult education tutor described an 'older gentleman' student whom he was repeatedly helping with the internet: *"he relies on me more as a PA when actually I'm supposed to be teaching him"* (Bernard).

Extending this notion of the 'proxy-as-PA', some interviewees had taken it on themselves to make pre-emptive use of the internet – in other words, anticipating what the person being supported might require or be interested in. This was the case with family proxies who knew the relative that they were supporting:

I might send her links to things I want her to read (Eric)

Often I will go and kind of hunt out information for her. She will talk about the things she's thinking about. And then I will in my own time over the next few days look up the information and so on and so forth. [I will] then either e-mail her the information or actually tell her about it. (Anika)

As these various arrangements suggest, proxies played an important role in framing the internet 'use' of the people they were supporting. Often the actual internet use took place through devices belonging to and/or set up by the proxy. Proxies were prime mediators of information about the internet for the people they were helping. This mediating role was evident in the activities that some proxies would introduce to the people they were supporting in efforts to develop their interest in using the internet – *"I identify what I think they would be interested in something and then kind of push them to that"* (George). One proxy reported her success in introducing her 92 year old mother to online animal videos:

One thing she now really likes is the YouTube videos on cats and dogs. Because she really likes cats. Most of those things are pretty cute, they have kittens and puppies and stuff like that and – and she's an animal lover. (Ivy)

Another interviewee recounted the 'breakthrough' of introducing his father to online gambling:

Q: what would you say was your biggest success?

Teaching him how to use online gambling. I mean it sounds terrible but he would actually ring up and put all of his bets on over the phone and stuff [laughs]. I was like, "Listen, I'm going to show you something amazing. You can do it all without having to speak to anybody and it takes half the time." (Paul)

A few interviewees did consider their actions to have advanced the person they were helping towards more autonomous forms of internet use. As one interviewee put it succinctly: *“the more I’ve helped the less I’ve had to help her”* (Eric). This took the form of the individual gaining familiarity with a limited number of simple online tasks that they then took over for themselves. The proxy then was on hand for any other tasks – *“a bit of a sort of boosting system”* (Max):

So they now know pretty basic things, like, booking airline tickets and a couple of things they’ve done regularly, but I need to help them with [other] stuff. (George)

Unfortunately, such examples of successful tutoring and development were rare, and usually attributed to substantial patience and an enjoyment of teaching/tutoring. As one interviewee put it, *“I’ve got a really good working relationship with my parents”* (Charles). In most instances, however, the role of the proxy was described in more constraining terms with the individuals being supported not developing into autonomous internet users. As a result, many people remained reliant on their proxies for important aspects of internet use.

This limiting effect was also evident in the tendency for some proxies to steer people away from aspects of the internet that they themselves did not consider appropriate. Often this reflected the proxies’ own concerns over safety. In this sense, proxies could be said to be shaping the internet use in their own image. For example, one interviewee described how she limited her proxy use to *“tried and tested services that I’ve accessed. I can feel a bit reluctant if I’m ordering something from, for example, a seller that doesn’t use BPay. I’d also actually be quite reluctant to use a telephone company’s services, because I would think that they have an agenda”* (Anika). The forms of internet use that proxies were prepared to introduce people to were also guided by considerations of personal convenience. Many of the ‘family’ proxies who were supporting elderly parents had initiated the use of online banking and online payment of bills to ease their caring responsibilities:

[Mother’s use of] finances online is more me pushing ...because I don’t want to go to the bank every other day or go to the financial institutions or have to- the calling in. The collections you have to make are out of hours, so it’s easier to do it online. (Maria)

So, [mother’s use of] NetBank grew from me having to actually drive her to the post office to then I would go in and pay it at the counter to, “I haven’t got time for this, I’ll pay it on the internet when I get home,” you know. (Ivy)

The dynamics and anxieties of proxy internet use

Proxy internet use was clearly a dutiful (rather than pleasurable) aspect of most people’s lives. One interviewee summed up what he gained from acting as a proxy as: *“Frustration and grey hair. I don’t know [laugh] ... look I do find it a trying experience”* (Paul). Others also relayed the specific frustrations of repeating activities without the individual developing any understanding or interest:

I get really frustrated, even though I know that she’s really trying her best to understand, it’s just it doesn’t come naturally to her and it doesn’t come easily to her. And so she’s sort of stuck on certain things that she just can’t wrap her head around ... there’s nothing I can tell her that ... if I show her how to do the same thing over and over for me it’s like “I just showed you, now I have to spend another hour of my time showing you the same thing”. (Donna)

None of our interviewees reported their proxy use as incurring unreasonable financial costs or particular technical difficulties. The main practical limitation for most people was the additional time that was incurred when carrying out online activities. For example:

I don't have lots of time and it's ... she seems to pick moments when I have deadlines as well to meet at work and then I know – and this is the guilt thing, right? I'll ask her, "Can it wait?" and she'll say, "Yes, but you know I'm going away in a few days and I'd really like to get it done," and she puts on this voice. So it takes a lot of time for me. (Aurelie)

As this quotation implies, people's specific frustrations were entwined with the broader relationships that the proxy use was based around. This was particularly apparent in terms of family dynamics. It was also apparent in concerns over what was appropriate in terms of professional roles and responsibilities. These issues were reflected in a range of unanticipated sensitivities that had emerged as people's proxy uses had developed. For example, one recurring theme in some people's dealings with parents was the various ways that internet use relates to issues of sex and relationships. These included being commandeered to search for long-lost romantic partners – "she did actually try to get me to look up her old boyfriend. She was, "he was from Switzerland..." and she seems to think that if you put a person's name into Google you'll find out automatically where that person, even though it was like 55 years ago" (Aurelie). More sensitively, perhaps, other interviewees recounted having to work around the consequences of their parents' possible use of online pornography.

I think the time that the Safari thing happened, I think he was accessing some dodgy porn site ... I don't think it was anything particularly dodgy but I just think that because it was probably a porn site he was probably, you know, he was worried that they were going to say he was visiting porn. ... You know, "Oh, it just crashed for no reason. I was on the, you know, weather website." Well, maybe, but generally it's something that, you know, a kernel failure or something that causes your computer to crash and that's generally something serious. ... And Dad was like, "What do we do? Do we change our number?" They kind of panic, they don't understand. And I think part of the panic that he had around it was guilt around the sites he was accessing. (Paul)

Proxy use of the internet brought up a number of unexpected tensions between family members. Another interviewee recounted having to deal with her mother's lifelong concealment of her actual age when setting up access to her online banking.

My mother has always historically had an issue about giving her correct date of birth and so she obfuscates about her date of birth. So all of her life she set up when last in Australia in '92 had a date of birth that was a few years in advance. Which you can't do online. And so often arrangements that have previously been offline have come online. So I have to work out what the real date of birth is and re-set everything up. The online banking is a particular problem with that. (Sofia)

Indeed, many of the sensitivities around proxy internet use related to becoming involved closely with another's financial affairs. For staff working as professional proxies this was usually something that was deliberately avoided. As a mental health nurse contended, "they're quite unwell and they might think that we're taking their money or, you know, we can be accused of anything. So we just don't

do that stuff” (Janet). However, it seemed less easy for family proxies to establish such clear boundaries. Instead, many of the finance-related limits to the family proxy activities were dictated by the person being supported. In particular, some older adults remained adamant about not using the internet for specific financial activities:

He’s terrified of making a mistake that will compromise his financial future (Claire)

They’ve just heard about too many issues of online fraud ... So they’re just dead against anything to do with money or whatever else on-online (Frans)

Some family proxies did feel able to steer away from assisting with activities and actions that they felt transgressed into uncomfortable life domains. Sometimes these uses related to differences in moral or political opinions. One interviewee described her refusal to post political messages on social media for her mother: *“I won’t do anything I disagree with. She often gets me to try and tweet things ... and I politically disagree with her about some things. She’s very for the Greens and so I refuse to do anything supporting the Greens”* (Sofia). Another significant area of concern was activities with legal consequences and legally-binding ramifications. As the same interviewee put it, *“I won’t do things that I think that are un-come-back-able from”* (Sofia). One recurring area of contention in this sense was investments, shares and property dealings that proxies considered required professional legal advice and input:

I will take on things that I think I’m able to do properly, but if it’s a serious legal thing that I just don’t have the capacity to understand I recognise you need to get legal advice. I will tell her – I’ll go with her and I’ll even set up the meeting if that’s necessary, but I would not touch that kind of thing. (Aureilie)

These anxieties also impinged occasionally on the actions of professional proxies who found themselves being asked by a client to engage in online activities that they considered intrusive or legally sensitive. One basic skills tutor, for example, recalled having to refuse to help a student find images online:

She asked me to help her search for images related to a property dispute and, you know, I don’t really want to get involved in a personal dispute. Having said that, I’m happy to teach people the tools. So, you know, whatever she was going to do with that information that’s sort of up to her but as long as it doesn’t involve me. That’s a major concern. Not that I don’t want to be helpful but you know what I mean?” (Bernard)

Supporting proxy internet use

We found little evidence of proxy internet users feeling particularly unsupported or unduly inconvenienced in their actions. By and large this was a part of everyday life that people were prepared to ‘get on with’. As one interviewee put it, *“I’m quite happy going along, doing what I’m doing”* (Maureen). Yet despite this lack of concern, a number of issues were raised by our research that merit further attention.

The first issue related to how well-informed ‘family’ proxy internet users were about the implications and consequences of their actions. This relates both to implications for proxy users and the family members that they help. Throughout our interviews, it was notable that many people

who were using the internet on behalf of family members had limited knowledge of the implications of their actions. Some interviewees acknowledged the ill-advised nature of some activities, such as keeping lists of usernames and passwords: *“the banks, are set up [with] quite complex structures in terms of a Google document with all her passwords which is deeply unsafe”* (Sofia). The complex arrangements that many proxies had established were also recognized as a risk:

That’s the only thing that gives me palpitations ... if I keel over ... how will they know what I’ve been doing? How will they get their money through? If I’m not there to do it, it’s quite a convoluted process so I’m not sure my husband or son would be able to work out what it is I actually do. It’s not just case of logging on and doing it. It involves 4 digit numbers, transferring from an account to an exchange company and then into their bank. It takes a long time and only I know that I’m doing it. I think my husband is aware that it’s something I do at the beginning of each month, but my parents would be in trouble if I wasn’t there to do it. (Gail)

Other family proxies raised the issue of the possible personal liability of their actions. For example, a few interviewees expressed concerns over using the online accounts of the person they were supporting – acting in their name or as one interviewee put it, *“online pretending that I’m him and just lying about it”* (Claire). While some expressed concerns over their lack of certainty, many were less worried – especially in terms of consumer rights, inappropriate use of copyrighted material, privacy and protection. For most people, the trust inherent in their family relationships precluded these concerns:

I’ve got no issue taking their credit card [online] because obviously they’re family, you know, I’m not going to rip them off, I guess. I’m okay with that. (George)

I have to log in and they tell me their (banking) ID and password and I log in to just check some information. I do that for them ... Occasionally, they just say go and do it and they provide me with a signature, just do it.

Q: Are you comfortable with that?

Yeah fine, they are my family. ... it’s definitely hearts before head for me. (Delun)

Second, were concerns raised by people in professional roles who were making use of the internet on behalf of clients/customers that they supported in the course of their work. All the ‘professional proxy’ interviewees suggested that these activities were not recognized formally in job descriptions or work protocols, but had been entered into on an *ad hoc* and presumed basis. One mental health nurse described of the possible risks of helping her patients with their internet use, reasoning that the ‘rules’ that she followed were implicit and ‘unwritten’ rather than any formal protocol on the part of her employers:

I mean, we can be involved in anybody’s delusion at any time [laughs], but you know, that’s – that’s why we’ve got the unwritten rules around what we will and won’t do around the internet and how to support people around that. So, you know, we don’t put ourselves in that position. (Janet).

This lack of formal clarification was echoed by another nurse reflecting on her reluctance at helping patients with their internet use:

I would want some sort of guarantee that [patients] weren't going to be able to come back and sue me or find issue and put in a complaint into the Complaints Commission or somewhere like that. I would want some sort of guarantee that that couldn't come back and bite me. (Ivy)

Other issues related by 'professional' proxy users were more prosaic. These included formal recognition of proxy internet use in their workload and job descriptions, as well as improved workplace computer and internet resources that they could use with clients/customers. As one interviewee reasoned in terms of the Aged Care sector:

[Technology] has not been a problem necessarily in the past 'cause not many people have been using that, but I would expect that we will be seeing people in aged care facilities in another 10 years people who are very familiar with the internet. These facilities have got to be able to cope with that, not just "Oh we'll provide access". They're going to have to provide a lot more than just access. (Peter)

Besides from these specific family and professional issues, a number of other general issues were also raised throughout the interviews. One set of suggestions related to the design of websites and online services that proxy users found themselves using when helping others online. One prosaic issue was logging on to websites using personal account details, log-ins and passwords of the person that was being supported. While all the proxy users we interviewed were prepared to do this, a few questioned whether this might be carried out in more open and secure manner. For example, it was suggested that websites and online services might be designed to allow people to log-on as authorized 'proxy users' who were recognized as acting on behalf of the named other.

Another suggestion related to improving proxies' ease-of-use of unfamiliar websites – for example, online banking systems that were not their own personal bank. The suggestion was made that such websites and online services might be designed to include 'dummy' or 'safe' spaces. This would allow proxies to gain familiarity with services and systems without the fear of making costly financial mistakes:

It'd be nice to have some safe places where you could try things out without fear of consequences. Banks could have dummy run accounts where you could do transactions but not for real. Or simple versions of systems to get your confidence up, before going onto the real things. (Gail)

What might be good is a dummy website and I'll show them how to operate a bank account or show them how to operate internet banking transaction for example ... A dummy site which does not do any transaction but it gives them real life kind of simulated environment. (Aarav)

A number of suggestions were made by interviewees for easy-to-use software applications and software design features that might support proxy use of the internet. While some of these were not easily achievable (or perhaps even technically feasible), often these suggestions revealed particular issues and tensions that existed around proxy internet use. For example, one clear area of discomfort and tension for some proxy users was helping others use the internet at a distance,

especially over the telephone. Interviewees talked of the ‘*frustrating*’ and ‘*excruciating*’ (Paul) process of trying to blindly direct the other person from a distance:

Often she gets confused, “Well, which screen am I in?” And, you know, I’m on the phone, I said, “I can’t tell what you’re in.” Especially when I’m, I’m not, well, not familiar with the actual, the actual trading platform because I’d never actually used it myself. I’ve got to imagine what, what they would actually have. (Eric)

Suggestions in this respect included options to share access to the other’s desktop or screen, either as a passive viewer or with the ability to actively take control. Another area of concern related to being able to gather evidence of online activities and actions. As recounted earlier, some proxies were retaining paper-based evidence of their activities as a safeguard for possible questions or disputes in the future. This was particularly the case with regards to financial procedures, where some family members were careful to print out statements, send emails describing their actions and generally account for their actions. As one interviewee described:

It’s stupid, but I don’t want them getting dementia and then me being accused of trying to swindle them of their money. So I make sure that I always send them an email straight after saying ‘As agreed I have just transferred your money over. Hopefully it’ll be with you on a couple of weeks’. (Janet).

This led to suggestions for the ability to digitally record everything that was done online by a proxy:

I wouldn’t like anyone to be able to come back and say, “Oh Ivy took \$500 out of Mum’s bank account and there’s no accounting for it.” ... She’s not demented, but being 92, her memory’s not as sharp as it used to be. So, she will say, “Oh I thought there was so-and-so dollars in there.” A couple of months ago my brother asked me questions about the account that I’ve got and how it works and all that sort of stuff. And I just kind of got the feeling that I needed to be a little bit more transparent. (Ivy)

Finally, a number of issues arose from our interviews relating to education and training. These included suggestions for improving the effectiveness of basic computer skills courses for people reliant on proxy support. Here it was suggested that adult education courses might be developed specifically for novice computer users to take together with their proxies – thereby giving the pairs a shared set of skills and knowledge that could be drawn upon when making use of the internet together. It was notable that many of the people being supported by proxies had taken basic computer courses in the past, but with little lasting effect. Skills had been forgotten and courses were felt not to provide people with the sense of ‘*independence [and] creativity*’ (Donna) required to be an autonomous and confident internet user. Thus it was also suggested that basic computer courses might be provided for existing groups and networks of non-users, rather than working with individual adult learners who might opt to enrol in a class. For example, it was suggested that group courses might be run for residents of the same care home, members of the same church or community centre. Other issues related to the difficulties that some proxies found in having to ‘work with’ older adults and/or other vulnerable groups that they are supporting. For example, some family proxies indicated an interest in being trained in the pedagogic and social skills required to support and/or teach older adults – acknowledging that they perhaps lacked the necessary “*patience of saints*” (Paul).

Conclusions

This report has confirmed proxy use as a means by which some Australians are consuming the internet and online services. This highlights the need for communications stakeholders to recognise that not every person engaging with online applications and services is a direct ‘user’ of the internet. Instead, some people are reliant on mediated internet use through surrogates. While it is beyond the scope of this project to gauge the full extent of proxy use in Australia, proxy use is clearly prevalent in the way that some older adults engage with online services with the support of their families. In addition, proxy use of the internet also seems to be taken on increasingly by some professionals working with vulnerable or marginalised adults.

Our qualitative research has pointed to a number of characteristics of proxy internet use that merit further consideration:

- Most proxies are not simply passive helpers that support people to do what they wish on the internet. Instead, proxies are significant interpreters of the internet – enabling but also limiting online opportunities. In this sense, proxy users can be described as ‘brokers’ (Katz & Gonzalez 2016) of what they consider to be relevant and appropriate online content and services.
- Proxies are often not scaffolding the individuals that they support to become autonomous internet users. Instead, many people remain reliant on their proxies, with internet ‘use’ often declining into non-collaborative activities.
- Many proxies in our research had ‘strong ties’ with the people they were helping – these were often trusted family members who were involved in other (offline) aspects of helping and supporting. There is a strong inter-generational aspect to family proxy support.
- The only ‘weak tie’ proxies we found were professionals who were incorporating online activities into their assistance of clients/customers. In comparison to earlier studies of internet use, we found few instances of ‘warm experts’ from neighbourhood, community and local sources.
- Proxy use of the internet appears to focus primarily on ‘official’ online activities and interactions rather than more personal and intimate uses. The emphasis was on what could be classed as ‘functional uses’ rather than ‘personally involved activities’ (Helpser 2012). Proxies were mainly involved in online activities that were perceived to include an element of importance and/or risk.
- In particular, proxy use often centred around the ‘economic’ sphere of online engagement – e.g. shopping, banking, bill paying and financial management. There was less evidence of proxies being involved in ‘cultural’ engagement (e.g. news, cultural participation); social engagement (e.g. communication, networking, civic engagement); or individual engagement (e.g. entertainment, leisure).

Of course, these findings are set against the limitations of our research. This study was focused on the accounts of proxy users rather than the people that they were supporting. While a more complicated undertaking in terms of research ethics, there is clear need to explore further the

experiences of internet consumers who are reliant on others. More work is also required on marginalized social groups. Our interview sample included proxies who were working with some marginalized and vulnerable groups, but we were unable to include other specific groups of likely 'limited' users – in particular, indigenous, homeless and prison populations. Our difficulties in reaching out to these groups points to the need for embedded, longer-term research with these particular populations. These are not easily accessible by a 'one off' research study. As correspondence with an indigenous community officer in the survey promotion phases of the project:

We have heard of older people having money stolen from their internet banking accounts by their younger and more net-savvy proxies. This is rarely reported, as the older people do not want to get younger people into trouble – if the offender/s ended up being charged or punished in some way, the older people would be blamed, and possibly be targeted for payback – which could involve being physically assaulted by the offending proxy's family. In this region, cultural factors have a huge impact on the ways the internet is used. It's fascinating, and new issues keep cropping up. [But] very difficult to research without having local connections in remote communities.

Finally, it is also worth noting our inability to explore properly the possible gendered nature of proxy use – in particular the suggestion from our survey responses that proxy users are more likely to be women.

These limitations notwithstanding, there is much in our study that chimes with recent studies of internet use in everyday life. Certainly, our findings confirm the importance of social context in making sense of how marginalised people are able to gain access to the internet. All of the people being supported in our study were drawing upon social networks and relationships – what is often referred to as social capital. Often this was drawn upon from families, or from services that were being used regularly. The importance of family-based social capital is also consistent with recent communications research. For example, our finding of family proxies tending towards significant 'economic' related uses of the internet also chimes with recent research on intra-familial computer use in marginalised US communities, where it was also found that "families tend to collectively engage around media that is associated with 'risk'" (Katz & Gonzalez 2016, n.p.). This reflects the fact that the internet is no longer merely a hobby or a leisure pursuit, but a conduit through which official interactions are now expected to take place.

Our research also adds to recent acknowledgements of the increasing complexity of digital inequality and the 'digital divide'. In particular, our research highlights the inappropriateness of characterising internet 'have nots' as those who make absolutely no use of the internet. While absolute non-users still exist, most of the people being supported by proxies in our study were more accurately described as having limited or 'constrained' engagement with the internet. Thus our research points to the need to pay more attention to individuals who might appear to be 'connected' but actually make little/no agentic use of the internet themselves.

As such, there are a number of ways in which our study can be taken forward. On one hand, we would not conclude that there is any imperative for formal policy-making or official intervention into this area of internet consumption. Relying on a proxy user (especially within families) is clearly an informal way that some marginalised people 'get by' with the daily lives, much as with other aspects

of their lives which are also reliant on help and support from others. Thus, while proxy use certainly needs to be better recognised in discussions of communications and media consumption, it does not require specific official intervention.

That said, there are perhaps ways in which communications stakeholders might act to support and encourage more empowering and effective forms of proxy internet use. Proxy users can clearly be better supported in overcoming some of the difficulties they encounter when using online services and applications for others. Proxy users might be supported to extend the range of their internet uses for others – broadening activities beyond economic uses to include social, cultural and individual spheres. Proxy users might be supported to develop a more pedagogic and nurturing style of use that is more likely to lead to cultural participation, civic engagement and other empowering internet uses. People who are currently not acting as proxies might be encouraged to volunteer to assist with internet use in their local communities. Specific suggestions along these lines are outlined in the final ‘Recommendations’ section of this report.

Recommendations

On the basis of our research, we would point to the following six areas of potential future work:

#1. Providing accurate information about the consequences of ‘family’ proxy internet use

People often use the internet on behalf of family members, with all parties having limited knowledge of the implications of their actions. These issues relate to implications for proxy users and the family members that they help. Areas of potential clarification include:

- Legal implications of using government, taxation and other official services using someone else’s account.
- Consumer rights and protection when transactions are carried out online by one person using another’s banking details.
- Liability when enacting banking and other financial decisions online for another person.
- Possible implications for all parties when using the internet to access copyrighted material.
- Issues surrounding privacy and disclosure of personal information.
- Issues relating to Australian internet users performing these activities for people in other countries or with institutions in other countries.

#2. Improved support for ‘professional’ proxy users

A range of people in professional roles make use of the internet on behalf of clients/customers that they support in the course of their work. Our research suggests that these activities are often not recognized formally in job descriptions and work protocols. Relevant organizations can therefore make efforts to:

- Recognize proxy internet use as a formal part of some professional roles – for example, for care home workers, social workers and others working in support/caring/advisory roles.
- Ensure that workplaces have explicit policies and procedures relating to instances of proxy use – for example, acceptable use policies.
- Ensuring computer and internet provision in workplaces that can be used by professionals and clients/customers.

#3. Improving the design of websites and online services to support proxy internet use

Websites can be better designed to accommodate open and secure proxy use. In terms of improving website security, steps might be taken to address the fact that some people are making (potentially) fraudulent use of log-ins, passwords and personal accounts. In terms of improving website ease-of-use, steps might be taken to help proxy users make use of unfamiliar finance-related websites and applications. These issues point to the following recommendations:

- Websites should be designed to allow people to log on as an authorized ‘proxy user’ who is recognized as acting on behalf of a named other.

- Websites and online services should incorporate carefully designed ‘safe’ practice spaces. This would allow proxies to gain familiarity with services and systems without the fear of making costly financial mistakes. This is especially pertinent where proxy users are executing online financial decisions on behalf of someone else.

#4. The development of software for proxy users

A number of suggestions were made by participants in our research for easy-to-use software applications and software design features that might support proxy use of the internet. These included:

- The ability for proxies to record/evidence what they had done online on behalf of someone else.
- The ability for people who are being supported by proxies to record/evidence what they have previously attempted to do online (thereby helping the proxy make sense of the issues/problems they are assisting with).
- For those proxies helping others at a distance, the development of simple software that allows them to have a shared view of the device/operating system of the person they are helping.

#5. Suggestions for adult education & training

A few issues arise from our research that relate to education and training. These included suggestions for improving the effectiveness of basic computer skills courses for people reliant on proxy support. In addition, some ‘family’ proxies indicated an interest in being trained to work with older adults. This suggests:

- The development of adult education courses specifically for novice computer users and their proxies to take together.
- Targeting basic computer courses at existing groups/networks of non-users, rather than working with classes of individual adult learners. For example, group courses might be run for residents of the same care home, members of the same church or community centre.
- The development of adult education courses to help family members ‘work with’ older adults and/or other vulnerable groups that they are supporting.

#6. Increasing the diversity of proxy internet use and proxy internet users

Finally, our research has highlighted areas where proxy internet use might be broadened – both in terms of the people who act as proxies, and the nature of the online activities that they support. Responsibility for promoting such changes is unlikely to fall to one specific agency or sector. Rather these are issues that need to be developed across the communications and public sectors.

- Encouraging proxy internet users to take on a more pedagogic and enabling role in their internet help – broadening activities from essential and/or significant ‘economic’ activities to different social, cultural and individually-orientated internet uses.
- Encouraging more people to volunteer their assistance with helping others with internet use – especially with adults outside of family and professional networks. Assistance with internet use could be promoted as a valuable form of neighbourhood and community volunteering.

Appendix

Appendix A – details of interviewees

			Occupation/background	Characteristics of the person being supported
Aarav	M	41-50	Mentor for asylum seekers	Asylum seekers
Alex	M	61-70	Retired	Wife, retired (early 60s)
Alfred	M	51-60	Community worker	Local people in neighbourhood – set up a local PC drop-in centre
Anika	F	41-50	Librarian	Mother in Sweden (early 80s)
Anne	F	31-40	Law firm (trainer)	Mother (mid 60s)
Antia	F	51-60	Manager/ executive for National Relay Centre	Son (late 30s) with downs syndrome and hearing impaired
Aurelie	F	41-50	Researcher	Mother, Mauritian, now living in Australia (mid 70s)
Bernard	M	41-50	Drug and rehab worker	Drug and rehab clients
Bill	M	41-50	Public servant	Wife (late 30s)
Charles	M	31-40	Jeweller	Dad (late 60s)
Claire	F	51-60	Librarian	Intellectually disabled daughter (20s), and father (mid 80s)
Delun	M	31-40	Market researcher	Parents-in-law, one in China and one in Australia (late 60s)
Donna	F	21-30	Public Health	Mother in Toronto (late 60s)
Eric	M	31-40	Financial sector worker	Mother (early 70s)
Frans	M	31-40	Community services	Father (mid 60s)
Gail	F	41-50	Administrator	Mother/Father (in 80s)
George	M	31-40	Office administrator	Parents (late 60s)
Herman	M	41-50	National hardware and software support manager	Mother (mid 70d)
Ivy	F	51-60	Nurse	Mother (early 90s)
Janet	F	41-50	Mental Health nurse	Patients
Jocelyn	F	31-40	Careers counsellor	International students
Joe	M	41-50	Construction worker	Mother (mid 70s)
Karen	F	41-50	Payroll coordinator (large international company)	Father (late 60s)
Kylie	F	41-50	Careers Advisor	Father (mid 70s)
Lucy	F	41-50	Admin/officer worker	Sister (mid 50s)
Maria	F	51-60	Web accounts/ education sector	Mother (late 70s)
Max	M	31-40	Digital producer	Mother-in-law (mid 70s)
Natasha	F	41-50	Carer	Son (19 years) intellectually disabled
Nicole	F	31-40	Teacher	Father (mid 70s)
Paul	M	41-50	Receptionist/Administrator	Father, living interstate (mid 70s)
Peter	M	41-50	IT (IBM)	Father living in US (late 90s)
Phillip	M	61-70	Retired teacher	Wife with long term illness (mid 60s)
Sofia	F	31-40	Charity administrator	Mother (in 70s)
Susan	F	61-70	Retired teacher	Sister (in 60s)
Vihaan	M	31-40	E-Learning developer	Father, living in India (early 70s)
Wendy	F	61-70	Retired	Voluntary work as a mentor for small business owners (30-40s)

Appendix B – results from online survey

Table one. Characteristics of survey respondents (proxy users)

	n	percentage
Male	16	21
Female	60	79
18 to 29 years	18	23
30 to 49 years	37	48
50 to 64 years	17	22
65 years and over	5	6
Large town or city (with population 100,000 or more)	45	58
Town or city (with population between 1,000 to 99,999)	24	31
Small town or settlement (with population between 200 to 999)	5	6
Rural location/ settlement (less than 200 people)	3	4
Beginner	2	3
Intermediate	17	22
Advanced	43	56
Expert	15	19
Family member	57	80
Friend	6	8
Neighbour	1	1
Work colleague	0	0
Someone that you act as a carer for	0	0
Professional capacity (i.e. you deal with them as part of your job)	5	7
Other	2	3
Finished high school (i.e. completed grade 12)	10	17
Finished university (i.e. bachelors degree)	48	80
Left school before completing grade 12	3	5
Currently employed	44	73
Currently self-employed	4	7
Currently not employed	12	20
Looking after home	2	17
Sick	1	8
Retired	5	42
Unemployed/ looking for work	2	17
Student	2	17
English only	46	77
English plus another language	15	23

Table two. Characteristics of individuals being supported by proxy users

	n	percentage
Male	28	39
Female	43	61
18 to 29 years	3	4
30 to 49 years	5	7
50 to 64 years	15	21
65 years and over	49	68
Lives in the same locale	44	63
Doesn't live in the same locale	26	37
Help them with other tasks (non internet related)	40	56
Only help them with the internet	31	44
Without your help, do you think that this person would find another way of using the internet? YES	33	46
Without your help, do you think that this person would find another way of using the internet? NO	38	54

Survey item: Which of the following issues affect this person's ability to use the internet themselves? (select any that apply)

Answer	n	Percentage
Poor quality of connectivity in their area (e.g. poor broadband coverage, unreliable power supply)	3	4
Sceptical attitudes about the benefits of technology	24	34
Difficulties learning to use new technologies	52	73
Financial cost of purchasing technology/ paying for internet access	13	18
Has difficulties with reading, writing and/or numbers	5	7
Currently in an institution with no internet (e.g. prison/ hospital)	2	3
Other issue not listed (please describe)	12	17
Physical or health condition that makes it difficult or challenging to use technology	10	14

Survey item: How often do you use the internet on behalf of this person?

Answer	n	Percentage
On three or more days a week	3	5
On two days a week	5	8
On one day a week	12	19
At least once a month	17	27
Quite often, but not regularly	12	19
Just a few times	14	22
One-off activity	1	2

Survey item: What are the main things that you do for this person on the internet?

Answer	n	Percentage
Looking for information about entertainment/leisure/sports	24	39
Looking for information about health or medical topics	14	23
Looking for information about employment/job-seeking	4	7
Looking for information relating to learning/ education	11	18
Finding other Information (please describe)	36	59

Survey item: What are the main things that you do for this person on the internet?

Answer	n	Percentage
Communicating with family/friends	31	53
Communicating with public officials/organisations (e.g. council, Centrelink)	30	51
Communicating with commercial companies/ private organisations	29	49
Checking social networks (e.g. Facebook)	15	25
Watching video/ listening to audio recordings	11	19
Finding out about news and current affairs	21	36

Survey item: What are the main things that you do for this person on the internet?

Answer	n	Percentage
Researching items to purchase	42	71
Actually paying for and purchasing items online	29	49
Buying/selling items on an auction site (e.g. eBay)	10	17
Paying bills	17	29
Managing bank accounts/ finances	21	36
Printing off tickets, receipts, letters	25	42

Survey item: In what ways do you think this person benefits from you using the internet for them?

Answer	n	Percentage
They get to use the internet as much as they would like	14	22
They don't have to worry about the financial cost of using the internet	16	25
They get to achieve what they want to from using the internet	42	67
They get a better idea of what they can do online	27	43
They get a better level of online privacy	8	13
They get a better level of online security (e.g. passwords, viruses, protection of personal data)	15	24
They get a better level of online consumer rights	7	11
Other (please specify)	18	29

Survey item: What made you start to help this person with the internet?

Answer	n	Percentage
I like to help people	25	40
I had time to spare	9	15
I wanted to make friends	0	0
Use my existing skills	26	42
Part of my philosophy of life	12	19
Part of my religious beliefs	0	0
No-one else to do it	27	44
Connected with my hobby/interest	3	5
Help me in my career	2	3
Felt that I couldn't say no	22	35
Had received similar help myself in the past	3	5
Other (please specify)	19	31

Survey item: What have been the personal benefits of helping this person with the internet?

Answer	n	Percentage
Get satisfaction from seeing the results	32	54
I really enjoy it	12	20
It gives me a sense of personal achievement	9	15
It gives me a chance to do things that I am good at	11	19
It gets me out of myself	2	3
It gives me more confidence	3	5
Makes me a less selfish person	9	15
It makes me feel needed	8	14
Other (please specify)	22	37
Develop new internet skills or knowledge	8	14

Survey item: What concerns do you have in helping this person with the internet?

Answer	n	Percentage
Having enough time	31	57
Worried about risks/liability	3	6
Having the right skills/experience	8	15
Financial costs/ getting out of pocket	0	0
Feel that they are missing out by not using the internet themselves	25	46

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Going online on behalf of others

An investigation of 'proxy' internet consumers