Survey on how Australian journalists use the Internet

By Jenni Metcalfe and Toss Gascoigne

Abstract

How has the Internet changed the life of working journalists in Australia? This paper summarises a national survey of Australian journalists, and describes how different sections of the media make use of the Internet. How does the Internet rank as a source of information for journalists? Have the sources of information changed over the last five years? What are the best things and the worst things using the Internet as a source of information? How long did it take you to learn to use it efficiently?

Introduction

The Internet has become a prime means of communication, especially amongst scientific interests, in the last 10 years. Clearly this has implications for journalists and journalism. Given the wealth of information available on the Internet, it is also likely that the Internet would be a key source of information for journalists. Deakin University journalism lecturer, Mandy Oakam (1998) says:

> By definition all journalism is investigative and therefore by definition all journalism requires research in some form… The biggest restraint for journalists doing research in the 1990s is *time*… Research has to be done "on the run". The good news is that the advent of the Internet and the host of electronic sources now available can assist the journalist in a hurry if they know where to look and how to look.

However, previous research (Quinn, 1997) indicates that the uptake of computer-assisted reporting (CAR) in Australia is relatively slow. For example, a 1997 survey showed that less than half the journalists in the large papers had Internet access. Only one third of Australian journalists accessed the web at least once a week. In regional areas this was even lower with less than 8 percent of journalists accessing the web at least once a week. The numbers were even lower for the use of email. A more recent 1999 survey showed similar results.

Quinn's surveys indicated showed that science and technology journalists often led the way in their use of the Internet. "Older hands" at journalism were also slower to see the value of the Internet and many had not bothered to learn or use it.

The aim of our study was to further assess the use of the Internet by Australian journalists, and to specifically compare the use of the Internet by science journalists compared to other journalists.

Methodology

We constructed a two-page survey (see Appendix One) to include both closed questions with four options and open questions. This survey was distributed to media through:

- Direct email to 125 journalists on a list (most of these journalists were interested in science-based topics)
- Fax to all 1090 media outlets across Australia (using the MediaWire NewsNet service)
- Distribution to the media boxes in the Federal Parliament's Press Gallery

It was important to contact journalists by other means as well as email, to avoid a likely skewing of results.

Response to survey

Respondents

Completed survey forms were received from 133 respondents. The majority of these responses (76) were received via fax rather than as a web (47) or email submission (10).

Sixty-five respondents listed their gender as male, 65 as female, and three individuals did not complete the gender item. Figure 1 presents the distribution of respondents across various age groups. Significantly more women than men occupied the under 35 year age categories while more men occupied the 36-55 year categories. Interestingly, most (76 percent) of the respondents were younger than 45 years.
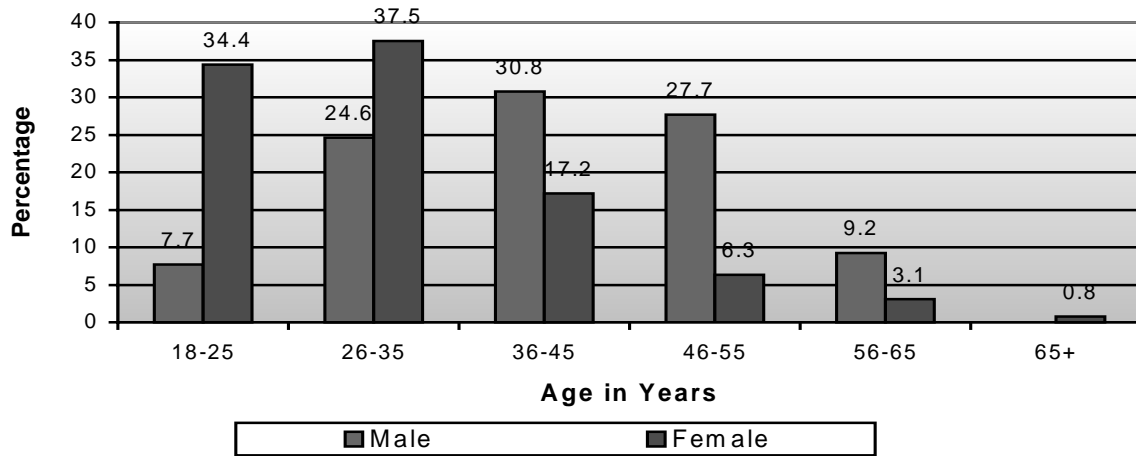

Figure 1. Proportion of respondents in various age categories.

The majority of respondents reported finding out about the survey through a fax or direct email notification. Figure 2 presents the distribution of responses to the question on how respondents found out about the survey. Most of these in the "other" category indicated they had found out about the survey through the Federal Parliament Press Gallery boxes.

The majority of respondents indicated they were from New South Wales (34.7 percent), followed by Queensland (21.5 percent) and Victoria (14.9 percent) and the ACT (14.9 percent).
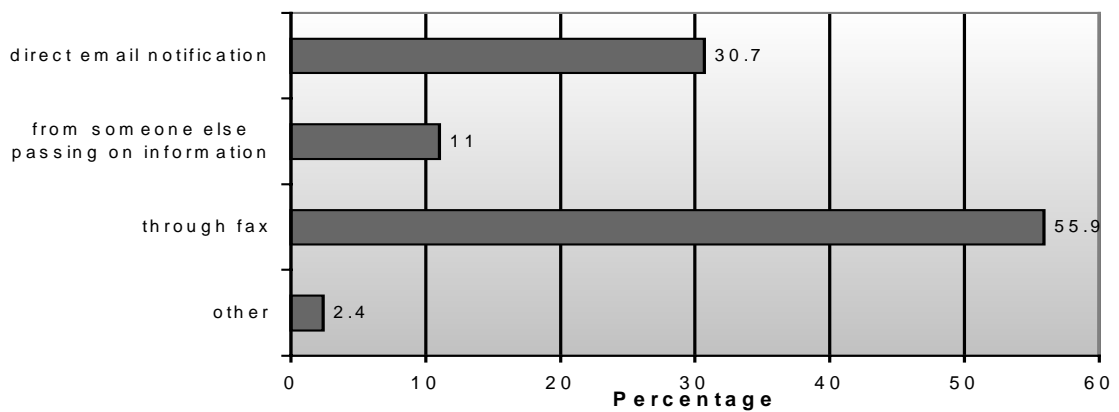

Figure 2.. Various avenues of respondents finding out about the survey.

Role of journalist
Respondents from a range of professional roles completed the survey form. The distribution of respondents over various professional roles is presented in Figure 3 below.
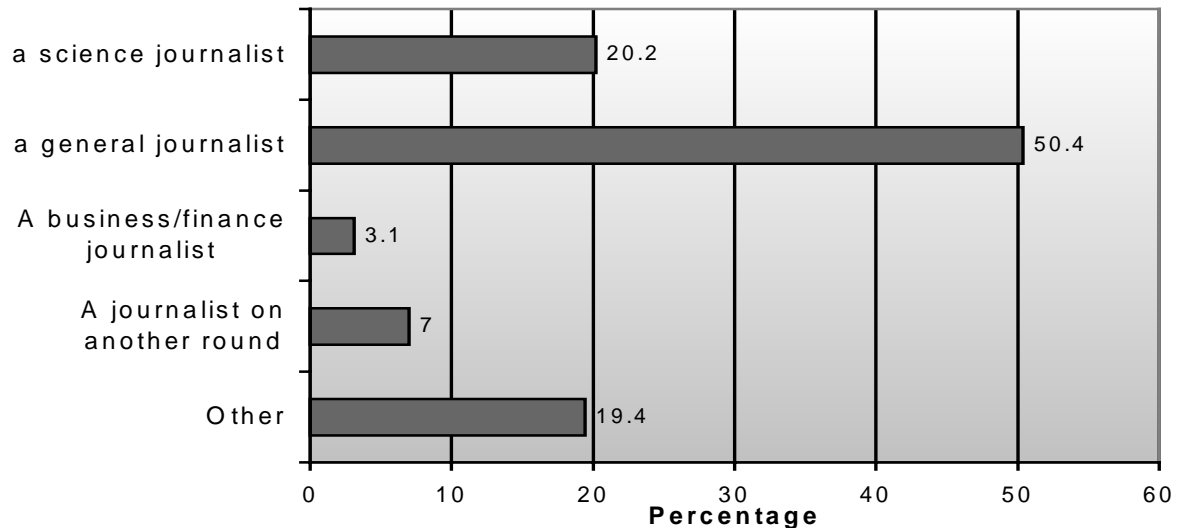
Figure 3. Proportion of respondents in various journalist roles.

In addition to indicating one of the four categories nominated in the survey, respondents could also describe any alternative role that they occupied. Thirty-two respondents listed alternative professional roles that included being:

- An editor, chief of staff or news producer/editor (9)
- Political/current affairs/investigative journalist (6)
- A journalist on another round – rural, medical (3)
- Part-time journalist (3)

To investigate potential differences between science journalists and others several procedures were adopted. First, respondents nominating professional categories other than science, general business/finance or "journalist on another round" were categorised into one of these four groups in as meaningful a manner as possible. For example, "editor/journalist" was listed in the general journalist category. This categorising of "other" responses resulted in the distribution of respondents across journalist groups as presented in Figure 4 below.
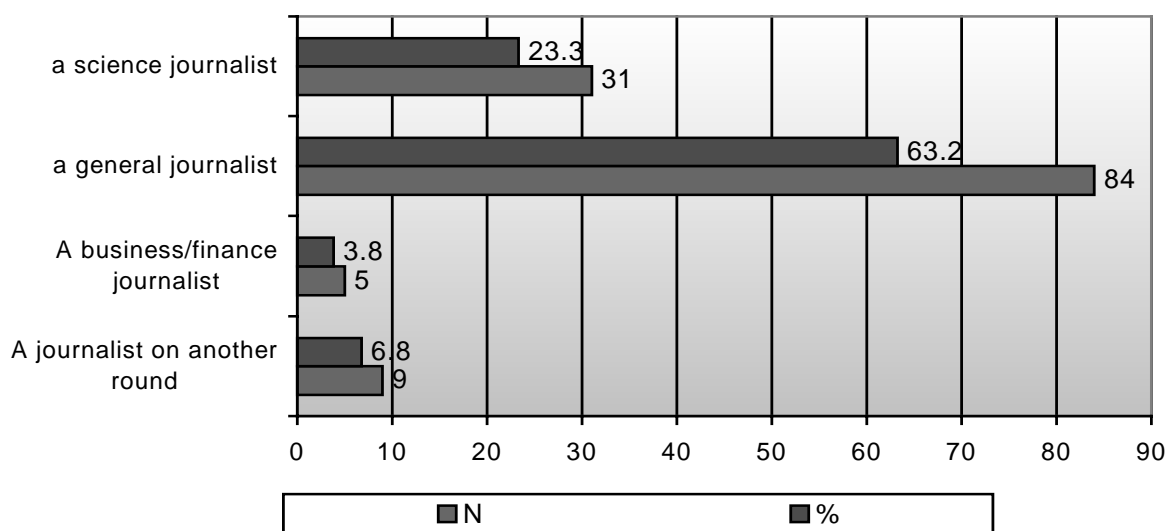

Figure 4. Number and percentage of re-categorised respondents in the four major journalist' roles.

Media outlets represented

Respondents were asked to nominate their professional affiliation in terms of the sort of media outlet they represented. Again, respondents were able to list any affiliation not nominated on the survey form. These results are described in Figure 5.

Again, there was a high response to the "Other" category, especially from:
- Online or web-based journalists (9)
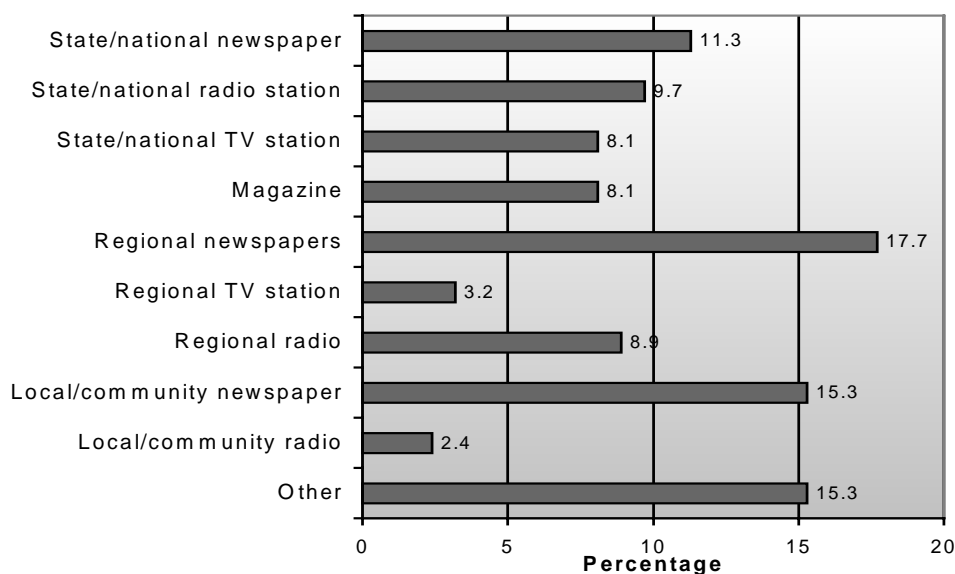- Freelance journalists (5)

Figure 5. Proportion of respondents listing various professional affiliations.

Access to Internet at work

Respondents were asked whether they had access to the Internet and WWW while at work. The vast majority (95.4 percent) reported having access to the Internet at work. Similarly, most respondents (90.8 percent) had a work-based email address. For most respondents (73 percent) Internet access was through their own computer rather than just a central computer, though a surprising 27 percent still had to use a centrally-based computer rather than their own. There were no significant differences between genders and age groups with regard access to the Internet or email addresses.

When asked how often the Internet was used, the majority of respondents (84 percent) said it was used consistently (the highest rating), with only 2.5 percent indicating they never used the Internet. Science journalists were tended to be more likely to use the Internet than general journalists.

Source of story ideas and information

Respondents were asked were they got information and ideas for the stories they covered. Their responses are indicated in Figure 6. As can be seen, personal contacts are still the major source of information for journalists, followed by media releases and talking to experts. However, 28 percent of respondents also indicated consistent use of the Internet.

Additional sources of information or ideas that were listed by respondents included own ideas, experience and interests, scientific and medical journals, and workshops and conferences.
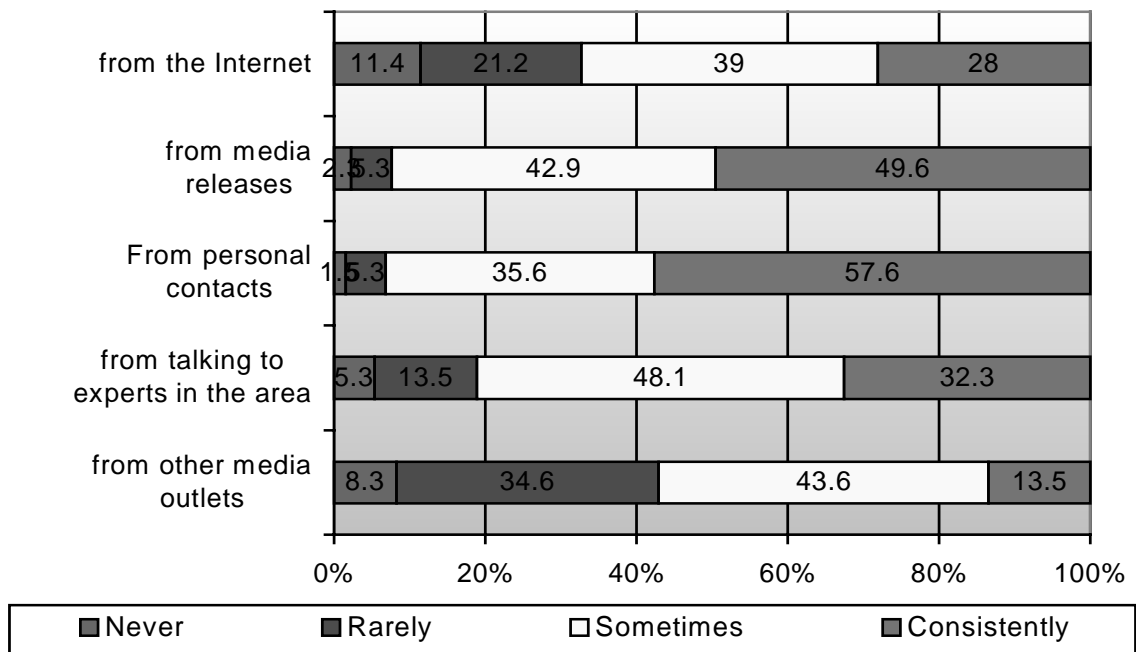
Source	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Consistently
from the Internet	11.4	21.2	39	28
from media releases	2.5	5.3	42.9	49.6
From personal contacts	1.5	5.3	35.6	57.6
from talking to experts in the area	5.3	13.5	48.1	32.3
from other media outlets	8.3	34.6	43.6	13.5

Figure 6. Respondents degree of relying on various sources of information.

Differences between the four journalist groups were also investigated by calculation of mean scored on each of the items rated above, and the results are shown in Figure 7.
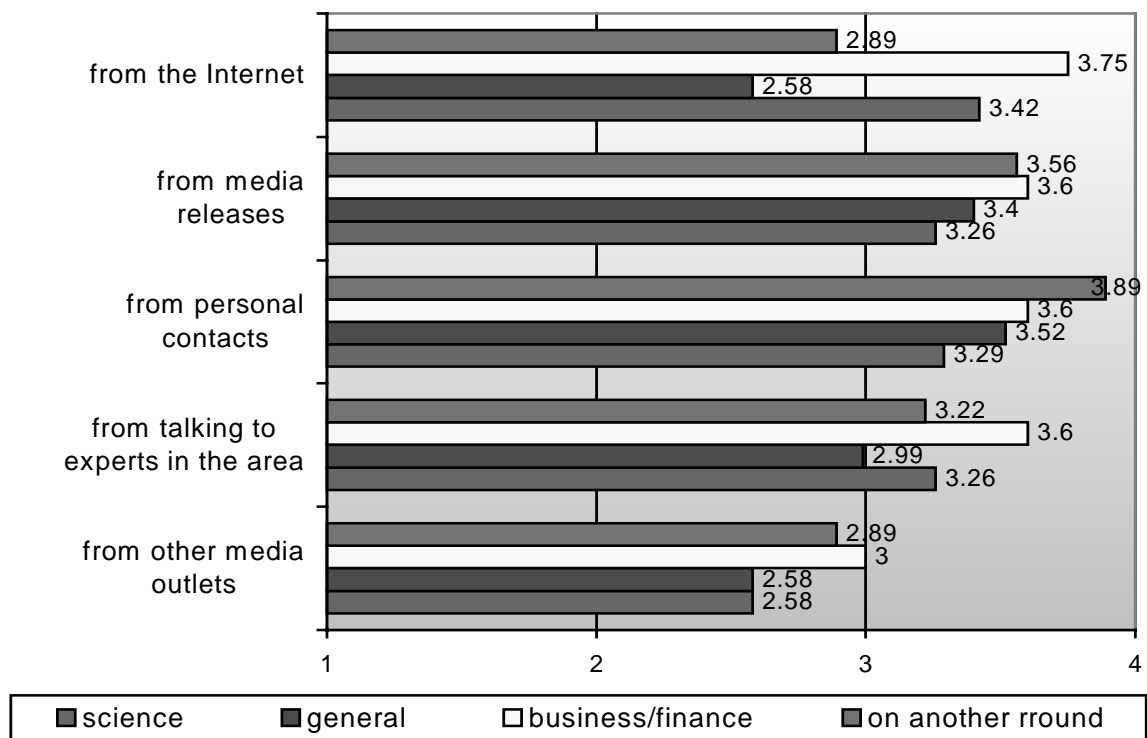

Source	science	general	business/finance	on another rround
from the Internet	2.89	3.75	2.58	3.42
from media releases	3.56	3.6	3.4	3.26
from personal contacts	3.89	3.6	3.52	3.29
from talking to experts in the area	3.22	3.6	2.99	3.26
from other media outlets	2.89	3	2.58	2.58

Figure 7. Mean information source scores for various groups of journalists.

This analysis indicated significant differences between respondents' source of information on only the Internet item. Science journalists relied on the Internet as a source of information significantly more than general journalists ($F = 7.8$, $p < .001$). (*Note.* Even though the mean score for business/finance journalists is high the small number of journalists in this group meant that the differences were not significant).

In another related question, respondents were asked why they used the Internet. As shown in Figure 8, the most consistent reason for using the Internet was "to find information about story topics". The second most common reason was "to access Internet-based media releases".

When comparing science journalists with other journalists, there were significant differences (F=3.4, p<.05) between these groups with science journalists more likely to use the Internet than journalists on other rounds or general journalists (see Figure 9.)

Significant differences were found between the groups on each item describing the use of the Internet. Science journalists were more inclined to use the Internet than general journalists for each of the purposes listed. In addition, business/finance journalists were more inclined to use the Internet for finding photographs and graphs than general and other round journalists.
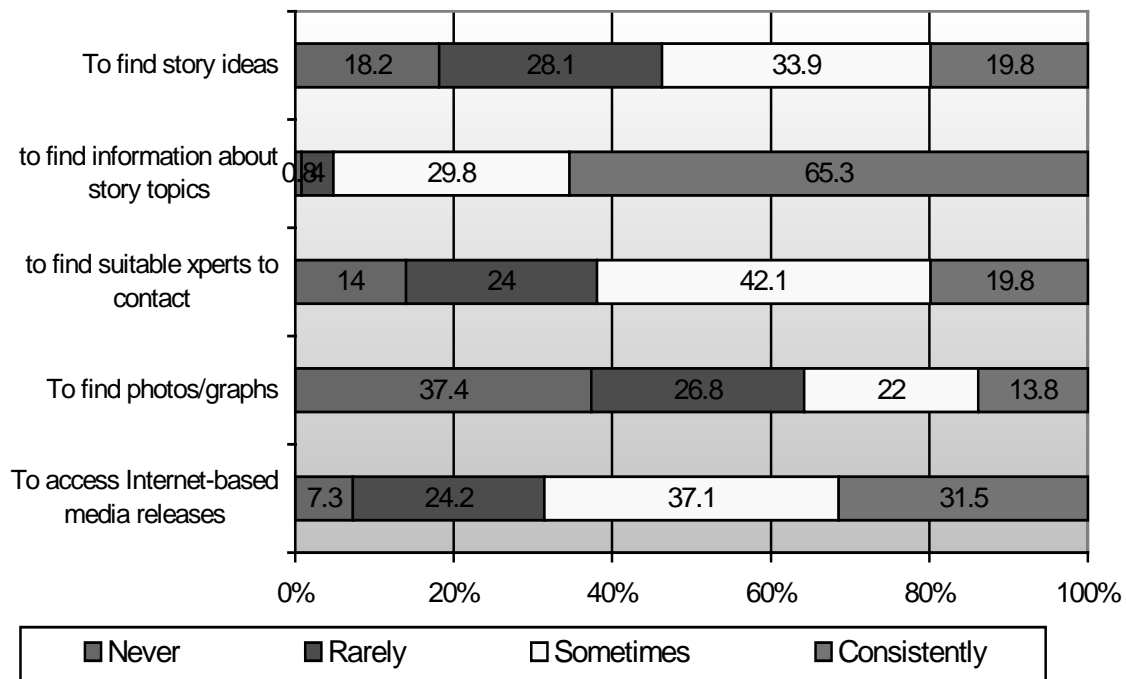

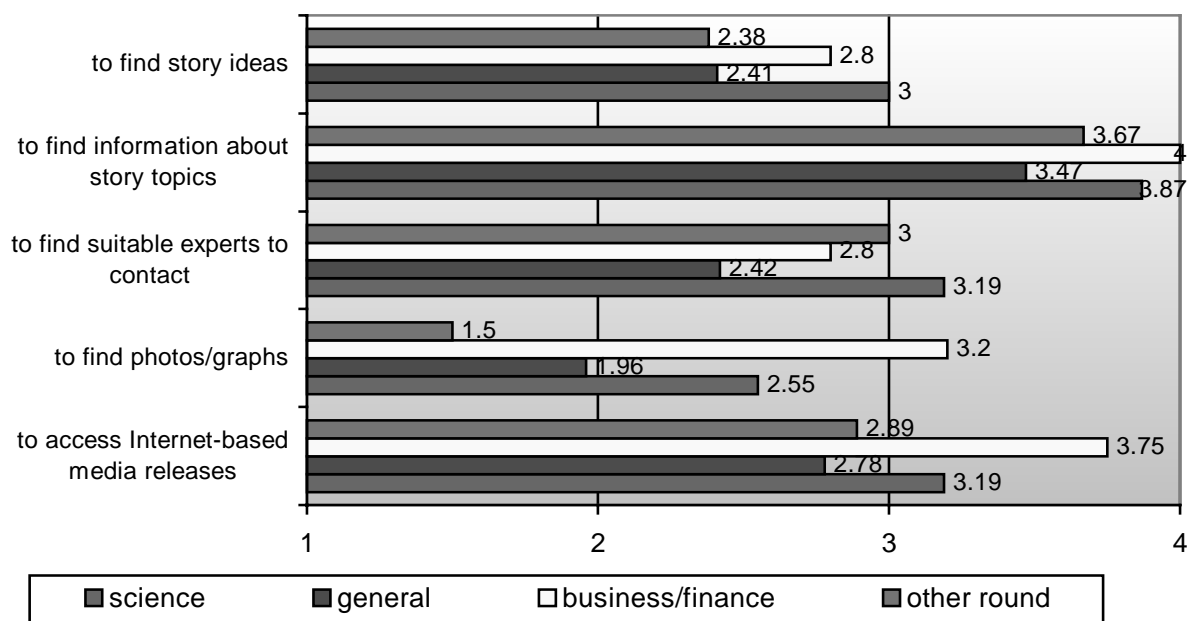*Figure 8. Respondents' reasons for using of the Internet.*

Figure 9. Mean scores for journalists' categories on use of Internet items.

When respondents were asked if they would use an Internet site for science media releases or stories if such site were available, the majority stated either "sometimes" (47.7 percent) or "consistently" (28.1 percent). Only 7.8 percent of respondents said they would "never" access such a site. Science journalists were significantly more inclined than other journalists to find such a site useful, as indicated by Figure 10.

Respondents noted a number of existing Internet sites as being useful in their work. These are summarised in rank order in Table 1.
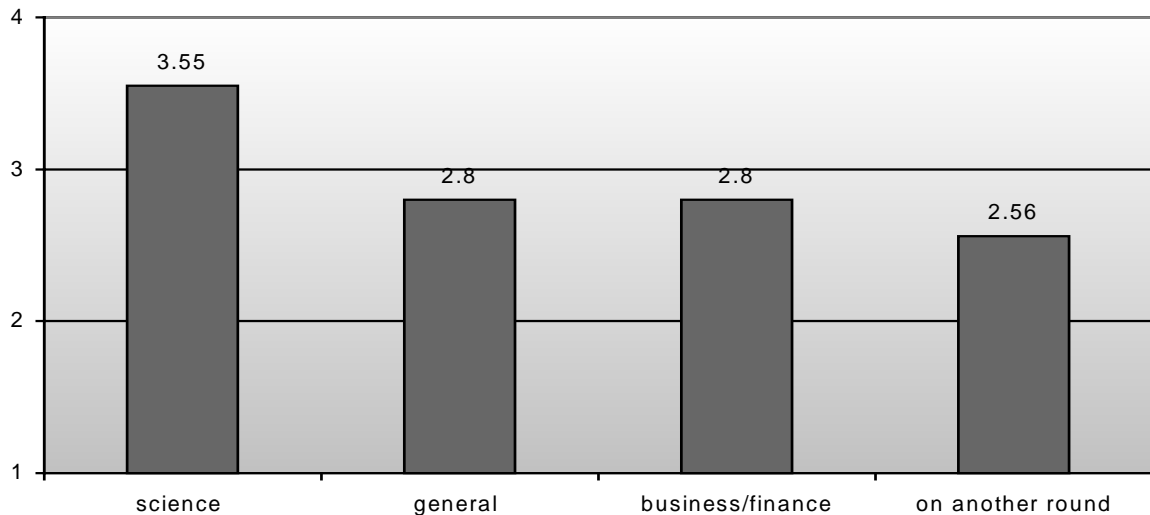

Figure 10. Journalist groups mean scores on intention to the Internet for access science media releases/stories.

Sites	NO.
Federal and State Government sites (eg. state government sites, consumer affairs, etc)	37
ABC sites	33
TV sites (eg. ABC, CNN, ninemsn, SBS, CBS, etc)	18
Google	15
Press sites (eg. theage.com.au, smh.com.au)	15
News sites (eg. news.com.au; newstext.com.au; newswise.com)	13
Science sites (New scientist press site, scinews.com; science online; the scientist.com)	11
CSIRO	10
University sites (eg. edu.au sites)	9
Eurekalert	8
Media sites (eg. radio,	7
Yahoo	7
Nature sites (eg. nature.com)	6
Weather sites (eg bureau of meterology)	6
White pages/Yellow pages	5
Parliament sites – (eg. Hansard)	5
Rural sites (eg. Thefarmshed.com)	5
AAP Media net	4
Altavista	4
Anzwers	4
BBC	4
Sports sites (eg. Ababasketball.com.au; NRL, AFL, cricket sites)	3
Commonwealth securities, Australian securities, investment commission	2
djinteractive.com	2
Corporate and tourism sites	2
Local council sites	2
Hotmail	2

Sites	NO.
Legal search sites	1
NSW Police	1
Medical sites	1
Thedrudgereport.com	1
Motoring information sources	1
Mining industry sites	1

Table 1.Existing useful Internet sites

Changes in sources of information

When respondents were asked whether their sources of information had changed in the past five years, most noted that this had "sometimes" been the case (see Figure 11). There was a weak but significant correlation between change and age (r=.18, p < .05), suggesting that journalists became increasingly likely to change their sources of information with age. This might reflect the relatively "young" (less than 45 years) age of respondents and the fact that older respondents are more likely to have been in journalism for a longer period of time. There were no significant gender differences, nor were there significant differences between science journalists and other journalists.
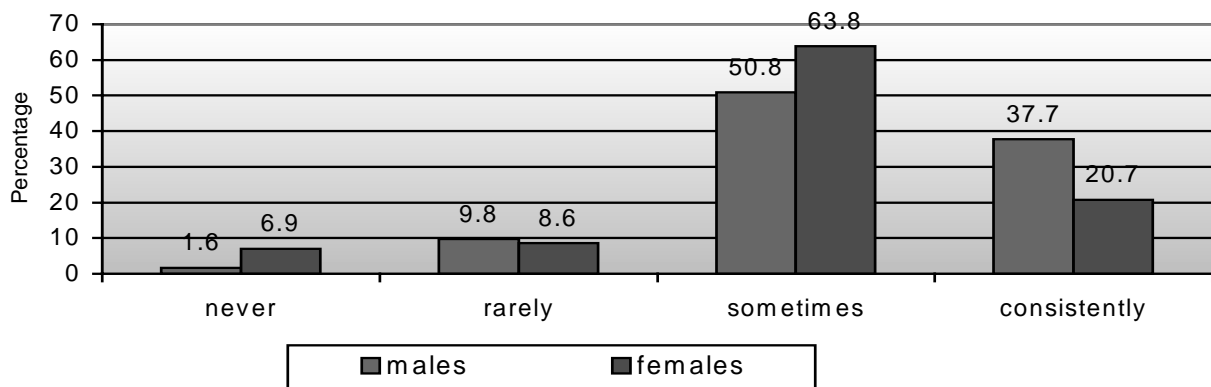
Figure 11. Proportion of men and women reporting degrees of change in their sources of information.

Best and Worst things about the Internet

Respondents were asked to list the best thing about the Internet. Table 2 summarises and rank orders respondents' comments. Clearly, the majority of comments described the quick and easy access to the Internet and its incredible wealth of information available to the individual. Other comments revolved around the transfer of information and ability to readily contact others via email. A smaller number of comments related to the ease of downloading information that saved time and effort and avoided mistakes.

Comment	Frequency
Speed of access to a wide variety of up-to-date information available from my desk	86
Capacity for global communication and transfer of information via email	14
Ability to access contact details of others eg. experts in a specific field	6
Up-to-date stories delivered in text form that can we can copy / paste into our news system	6
Accessing images/photos	4
Sourcing sports scores	2
Freedom of information	1
I can read "The Age" on it	1
Search engines	1
ABC has it	1

Table 2..The best things about the Internet.

In a similar fashion respondents were asked to nominate the worst things about the Internet. A rank ordered summary of these comments is presented below in Table 3. It is worth noting that the most attractive aspect of the Internet was its speed and access to a wealth of information, and the most often voiced criticisms journalists make of the Internet concern slow responses, delays and breakdowns and unreliable technology and information. Similarly the need to wade through the irrelevant information and learning the skills of searching to avoid the junk was regarded as a disadvantage of the Internet.

Comment	Frequency
Slow responses, ISP delays and computer technical failure/crash	26
Accuracy / reliability of information	22
Too much information to sort through, lots of useless information, easy to get sidetracked etc	21
Developing the research skills to conduct well defined searches and finding the right sites, knowing where to look for information, navigating the net, getting the right search engines	18
Intrusive advertising and Email, junk mail, concerns about security eg. viruses	12
Time consuming	5
Poorly designed web pages & delays in updating material	4
Too much of an USA influence	3
Charging for information or only providing access to members	2
Concerns about eyesight, "sends you blind"	2
"Nothing, it's all a matter of how you use it"	1
"Couldn't work without it- am I dependent"?	1

Table 9. The worst things about the Internet.

Discussion and conclusions

The response to the survey showed a high response from journalists on a science round compared to their actual numbers in the media community. The number of faxed responses indicates that the response to this survey has not been skewed by emailing journalists (who obviously have Internet access) about the survey. The high response from regional or local journalists, particularly from newspapers, may reflect the greater time these journalists have to respond to such a survey given the world events in September 2001.

Our survey indicates that usage of the Internet as a tool has increased in the past two years when compared with similar telephone surveys conducted by Quinn (1997, 1999). A majority of our survey respondents also indicated a change in their information sources in the past five years. Such an increase could be due to an increase in personal access to the Internet at the work place for journalists (anecdotal evidence indicates this was a problem in the past). It could also be due to a greater recognition by journalists of the benefits of the Internet, in particular, the ease of access to a breadth of information.

Journalists appear to particularly like the Internet for finding information about stories, and to a lesser extent for accessing Internet-based media releases. As reported by Quinn in his earlier surveys, science journalists still appear to be leading the way in all their uses of the Internet. Science journalists are more likely than other journalists to get their information or story ideas from Internet compared to media releases, personal contacts, experts in the area or from other media outlets.

There was general support for a website in Australia that had science stories on it. Science journalists were particularly keen on this idea.

Journalists currently appear to use government sites, ABC sites and other news media sites the most frequently. Science-based sites like those from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research

Organisation (Australia's premier research organisation with more than 6,000 employees) and Universities were used less often.

Despite the perceived benefits of the use of the Internet related to speed of access and wealth of information available, many Australian journalists appear to be ambivalent about its use citing the same benefits as potential problems. Technology failures and slow responses are still perceived to be the worst thing about the Internet, and some journalists are skeptical of the accuracy and reliability of the information: "all the crap sites with lousy half-baked information posted by nutters". The very wealth of information means that some journalists find it difficult to find what they are specifically looking for, and can get side-tracked relatively easily.

However, it does appear that the Internet is becoming an increasingly valuable tool for Australian journalists, particularly in finding out information about story ideas they already have. Except for science journalists, the Internet is not used as a key source for story ideas with most still relying on personal contacts and faxed media releases.

References

Oakham, Mandy (1998), Introduction to research, Topic 1, *Research for writers*, Study Guide, Deakin University
Quinn, Stephen (1998), Using the Internet to improve the newsgathering process, *PANPA Bulletin*, Issue 69, pacific Area Newspaper Publishers' Association

Acknowledgements

The authors

Jenni Metcalfe is a partner in a Brisbane-based company Econnect. She specialises in science and environmental communication, and has formal qualifications in science and journalism. She is joint author of a number of papers on science communication issues with Toss Gascoigne, including the papers "Scientists commercialising their Research" and "Incentives and Impediments to Scientists communicating through the Media."

Toss Gascoigne is Executive Director of the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies, a group representing the political interests of 60,000 Australian scientists and technologists. With his colleague Jenni Metcalfe, he has run workshops to improve the media and presentation skills of scientists for eight years; and surveyed Australia's activities in the public communication of science and technology for the PCST 3 Conference in Montreal.

Appendix One: Survey on how Australian journalists use the Internet

Jenni Metcalfe (a consultant specialising in science communication) and Toss Gascoigne (Executive Director of the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies) are conducting a survey on how Australian journalists use the Internet. The results from this survey will be analysed and collated and made readily available.

This survey should only take you about 5-10 minutes to complete. You can also complete this survey over the web, http://www.econnect.com.au/mediasurvey.htm

Please complete this survey by Friday September 28.

A PRIZE OF A MIXED DOZEN BOTTLES OF HIGH QUALITY WINE WILL BE GIVEN TO ONE SURVEY RESPONDENT CHOSEN AT RANDOM.

Please fax responses to 07 3846 7144 or email to jenni@econnect.com.au or submit using the web. Please feel free to pass this survey on to other journalists.

Please use the following scale to answer the following 5 questions:

1	2	3	4
Never	*Rarely*	*Sometimes*	*Consistently*

1) Where do you currently get your information and ideas for the stories you cover? *(circle the appropriate number)*

		1	2	3	4
(a)	from the Internet	1	2	3	4
(b)	from media releases	1	2	3	4
(c)	from personal contacts	1	2	3	4
(d)	from talking to experts in the area	1	2	3	4
(e)	from other media outlets	1	2	3	4
(f)	Other: _____				

2) How often do you use the Internet? 1 2 3 4

(If you have listed "1" Never, please skip the following 7 questions and go to question 9)

3) Why do you use the Internet in your role as a journalist?

		1	2	3	4
(a)	To find story ideas	1	2	3	4
(b)	To find information about story topics	1	2	3	4
(c)	To find suitable experts to contact	1	2	3	4
(d)	To find photos/graphs	1	2	3	4
(e)	To access Internet-based media releases	1	2	3	4
(f)	Other: _____	1	2	3	4

4) Have your sources of information changed in the past five years? 1 2 3 4

5) If you had access to an Internet site for science media releases/stories,

would you use it? 1 2 3 4

Please provide brief written answers to the following questions:

6)   Which Internet addresses do you find most useful?

_____

_____

_____

7)   What is the best thing about the Internet?

_____

_____

8)   What is the worst thing about the Internet?

_____

_____

9)   **(For those that answered "1" never to question 2)** Why haven't you used the Internet?

_____

_____

We need information on your background for survey analysis, please tick one box per question

1. Are you filling in this form as:
- ❏ a science journalist
- ❏ a general journalist
- ❏ a business/finance journalist
- ❏ a journalist on another round
- ❏ Other: please describe _____

2. Please indicate if you are from a:
- ❏ State/national newspaper
- ❏ State/national radio station
- ❏ State/national TV station
- ❏ Magazine
- ❏ Regional newspaper
- ❏ Region TV station
- ❏ Regional radio
- ❏ Local/community newspaper
- ❏ Local/community radio
- ❏ Other (please describe): _____

3. What is your postcode: _____

4. Your gender:
- ❏ Male   ❏ Female

5. Your age:
- ❏ 18-25   ❏ 26-35

- ❏ 36-45   ❏ 46-55
- ❏ 56-65   ❏ >65

6. How did you find out about this survey?
- ❏ direct email notification
- ❏ from someone else passing on the information
- ❏ through fax
- ❏ Other (please describe): _____

7. Do you have access to the Internet/WWW at work?
- ❏ Yes   ❏ No

If yes, is this through
- ❏ Your own computer   ❏ Central computer/s

8. Do you have a work-based email address?
- ❏ Yes   ❏