

The private lives of Generation Y

By Lani Blackman



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Almost 80 per cent of young Australians believe they have what it takes to be famous, according to a survey by networking service *FunkySexyCool* released in October 2006.

Social networking sites—such as MySpace and YouTube—have become very popular. These sites provide a forum for young people to promote themselves, and share their thoughts and experiences with like-minded young people—whether located next door or on the other side of the globe. But does this trend of self exposure mean that young people do not value privacy?

Young people's perceptions of privacy are being considered by the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) as it reviews Australian laws in this area. One of the ALRC's goals in developing recommendations for reform is to develop laws that meet the current and future needs of the whole of the Australian population. The existing *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) is largely based on a previous ALRC Inquiry, conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The current Inquiry is being conducted in a very different environment, where technology has greatly changed the way in which we hold and exchange information, governments have contracted out a wide range of services, and the threat of terrorism on Australian soil has placed security concerns high on the public agenda. The ALRC must consider whether expectations of privacy law have changed, and try to anticipate the population's future expectations of privacy law.

Some of the literature is now looking at our population in generational terms. The Baby Boomers who have had control for some time are entering their retirement years, and

Generation X has begun to move into positions of power. A new generation—Generation Y—is entering adulthood and having a profound effect upon business and technology. What does this mean for privacy?

Who is Generation Y?

Generational definitions are, by necessity, broad brushed generalisations. There always will be individuals who do not fit the stereotype merely because of the year in which they were born. However, generational definitions may be useful to gain a sense of the key social drivers and expectations across certain sections of the population.

Generations traditionally have been defined by intervals of time between the birth of a parent and birth of the offspring. However, social researchers today focus on cohorts of people born and shaped by a particular span of time, with demographical and sociological definitions. Doing social research in Australia, McCrindle Research has used Australian Bureau of Statistics' data to map birth rate rises and declines to mark distinct generational definitions. Social changes and trends affecting these cohorts provide context for the generational definition.

Baby Boomers have lived through, and been forced to adapt to, incredible change. The defining moment of the Baby Boomer generation is considered to be the Vietnam War, and the generation is clearly associated with hippies, free love and anti-government idealism. Being more affluent than preceding generations and making up a huge proportion of the population during the rise of consumerism, Baby Boomers were the first generation to have a huge impact on the consumer economy

with marketers catering to their lifestyles and spending habits. Boomers are continuing to have an effect even as they enter retirement, with new industries and companies appearing to help Boomers manage and spend their retirement savings.

Generation X is considered a much more pessimistic group. Growing up in a time where unemployment and high inflation were problematic, Generation X lacked the security that accompanied the Boomer years. The Vietnam War was a history lesson for Xers, but AIDS, nuclear threats and stock market crashes were realities. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Challenger space shuttle explosion are key events for Generation X. Xers have eschewed the more traditional family ties, putting off marriage and children until much later in life, and embracing single life, divorce, de facto relationships, single parent families and homosexuality as lifestyle norms. A strong 'who cares' attitude is said to pervade Generation X, and the generation has sometimes been referred to by older generations as 'slackers'.

Generation Y heralds a new and more optimistic and idealistic generation. Sometimes referred to as 'Millennials', the Net Generation, or the MySpace Generation, Generation Y lives and breathes the internet, email, instant messaging and mobile technologies that have revolutionised communications. Having experienced (either themselves or through their friends) split households and working parents, social networks of friends has become the

most important element of Yers lives, and they keep in touch constantly using technology. Generation Y lives in a global village, where you can communicate across the globe through a variety of instantaneous media, and is the most embracing, non-racist, non-gender biased generation yet. However, being the children of the affluent Baby Boomers, Yers are also the most comforted, sheltered, educated and supported generation yet. This adds to their optimism, high expectations and confidence they will achieve those expectations. Freedom of lifestyle is an important part of those expectations, and Yers will quickly move to take up other opportunities if the current ones do not meet their demands. Marketers are constantly having to reinvent their techniques to keep up with the fickle, but lucrative, Generation Y market. As they enter the workforce, employers are also grappling with how to recruit and retain Yers whose loyalty is very hard to buy.

Even with demographic information, it is difficult to draw straight lines distinguishing the generations. Younger members of the Baby Boomers will clearly identify with much of the description of Generation X, and older Yers will also feel drawn to some of the X factors. There are also lines of development that can be tracked from one generation to the next. For example, Generation Xers, as part of their move from traditional family relationships, developed the circle of friends concept but it is with Generation Y that it has become a defining criterion (both generations loved the TV sitcom *Friends*). Generation Y is not the only generation to make use of communication technology—

Australia's Generations¹

<i>Description</i>	<i>Born</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Pop'n</i>	<i>(% of Pop'n)</i>
Builders	Before 1946	61+	3.5m	17%
Boomers	1946–1964	42–60	5.3m	26%
Generation X	1965–1979	27–41	4.4m	21.5%
Generation Y	1980–1994	12–26	4.2m	20.5%
Generation Z	1995–2009	Under 12	3.1m	15%

even Builders are known to make use of emails, mobile phones and other technology enabling them to communicate on the run and around the globe. However, Yers have never known a world without these conveniences, and their social world and expectations are integrated with the very existence of such technology.

Generational difference

A common counter to generational research is that many of the attributes given to young people at any given time are really factors associated with youth itself, not the particular generation. For example, the dependence on friends as social networks is a normal part of the teenage years, but it is said that Generation Y is taking it with them into the adult years and honestly believe that those friends will remain friends for life. The labelling of Generation X as apathetic and pessimistic was seen as a normal part of teenage development, but the difference between Xer and Baby Boomer attitudes has persisted as Generation X has come to full adulthood.

Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay has contrasted the attitudes of 19 year olds in 1980 and 2000, finding a distinct attitude shift from pessimism to optimism.² The 1980 cohort was pre-occupied with the state of the world, the threat of nuclear annihilation, widespread terrorist activity, growing economic dislocation and recurring industrial trouble, while the 2000 cohort was utterly confident about their own, and the world's, long-term survival. Even after the events of 11 September 2001, the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2006 London bombings, Dr Rebecca Huntley suggests that today's young adults have a sense of optimism and confidence, either more capable of facing the world's problems or more effective at ignoring them.³

In Australia, Generation Y's anger around [September] 11 was less about the event itself than the reaction of the United States government and its allies. Many young adults have reacted negatively to the media hype around the tragedy and the relentless and insensitive use of images of death and destruction to sell papers and increase TV ratings. And whilst this was Generation Y's first exposure to international terrorism on a grand scale, most Yers were aware that in so many other places around the world this kind of stuff happens all the time. For many of them now, September 11 intensified their desire to enjoy life right now.⁴

While we can make generalisations about the attitudes of Generation Y, we really are guessing whether those attitudes will remain with Yers as they enter their late 20s, 30s and 40s and experience different stages of their lives. What we can say is that their experiences will be different from those of generations before because they have started from a different place in space and time.

Generation Y and privacy expectations

To return to our question 'what does this mean for privacy?', we need to evaluate how these Generation Y attitudes reflect or change the prevailing expectations of privacy. Some research on this issue has been conducted in the United States as part of a broader study of 'the lives of young Americans as they make the transition to adulthood'.⁵ Surveying 1,021 adults aged 18–24 years in April 2006, the researchers found a group that said that it valued privacy but evenly weighed it with the ease and convenience the internet provides.⁶ However, while 78% indicated they have a personal website, webpage or blog and regularly participate in online communities such as MySpace or Facebook, those who do not belong to online communities were more likely to place a higher value on privacy over convenience. The research suggested that Generation Y balances privacy and convenience concerns by taking personal responsibility for safe behaviour and self-censoring the type of personal information made available online. At the same time, many from older generations would blanch at the level of detail and the types of information young people feel comfortable about sharing, including 16% posting their home address online and 78% posting photos (often unflattering or 'sexy' photos). The concerns of young people in the online environment are more closely linked to identity theft and receiving spam than stalking and harassment (although the latter worries their parents).

There also appear to be differing standards depending upon the type of privacy under consideration. In a United States poll, the government's policy of eavesdropping on suspected terrorists' phone calls and emails without a warrant was considered wrong by 56% of 18 to 29 year olds (compared to 53% of 50 to 64 year olds who said it was the right thing to do).⁷ Those young people criticising government surveillance include some who otherwise share intimate details (and in one

△ The research suggested that Generation Y balances privacy and convenience concerns by taking personal responsibility for safe behaviour and self-censoring the type of personal information made available online. △

case 24–7 camera coverage of her life) in the online environment. A number of privacy experts in the United States indicate concern that young people have not thought through the consequences of this state of constant online surveillance, and seem to indicate that these people will be 'sadder and wiser' when they realise that 'the watcher is imperfect'. The difference between being blasé about one kind of privacy but being adamant about protecting another may seem illogical. However, the distinction seems to be based upon control of the flow of information. According to one young adult, 'What I get concerned about is when that control gets compromised without my consent.'⁸

This concern about control is reflected in the reaction of Facebook members in the United States when the site introduced a feature automatically broadcasting changes made to a member's profile.⁹ Facebook is predicated on controlling the privacy of your profile by determining who can see your profile, ie, who can be your 'friend'. Even though the changes to member profiles were only automatically broadcast to those listed as 'friends', there was a huge backlash from members who threatened boycotts of the site. Facebook hastily added controls so that members can choose to hide profile changes. It seems that young people will consider what information they share depending upon the rules of the community, and either changing the rules or membership of the community may lead to a breach of privacy.

Consultation with Generation Y

Are these privacy attitudes also held by members of Generation Y in Australia? Anecdotal evidence provided to the ALRC suggests this is the case. In order to test the suggestion, the ALRC is engaging with young Australians to find out their views on a range of privacy issues raised as part of its Privacy Inquiry.

The ALRC has established a website called *Talking Privacy*. While it was set up with young people in mind, it provides an accessible overview of the issues under consideration in the Privacy Inquiry that can be accessed by any member of the public. Young people in particular are encouraged to look at the site and then provide comments to the ALRC dealing with their experiences and perceptions of privacy. This might include a suggestion for change to the existing law, a story about an

instance when they considered their privacy to be breached, or more generally their views on what things should or should not be covered by privacy laws. Comments can be made anonymously.

Throughout the first half of 2007, the ALRC will also hold a series of workshops with young people to gain further insight into the views and expectations of young people when it comes to privacy laws. These will be held in Sydney as well as in a number of other Australian cities.

The outcomes of the ALRC's research will inform the proposals for reform that will be set out in a Discussion Paper to be published as part of the Privacy Inquiry in July 2007.

Endnotes

1. Table reproduced from McCrindle Research, *New Generations at Work: Attracting, Recruiting, Retraining & Training Generation Y* (2006), 8. In the United States, the Builders are often referred to as the 'Silent Generation'.
2. H Mackay, *The Mackay Report: Leaving School* (2000), 26.
3. R Huntley, *The World According to Y: Inside the New Adult Generation* (2006), 9.
4. *Ibid.*, 4.
5. Greenburg Quinlan Rosner and Polimetrix, *Youth Monitor: Coming of Age in America* (2005), 1. See in particular, *Part IV—The MySpace Generation* (2006).
6. *Ibid.*
7. J Berton, 'The Age of Privacy: Gen Y Not Shy Sharing Online—But Worries about Spying' *San Francisco Chronicle* (online) 20 May 2006 <www.sfgate.com>.
8. *Ibid.*
9. K Coughlin, 'Facebook's Facelife Uncovers What Many See as Flaws: Social Networking Sites' Mainstream Aspirations are Turning Off Purists', *Times-Picayune* (online) 5 November 2006 <www.timespicayune.com>.

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