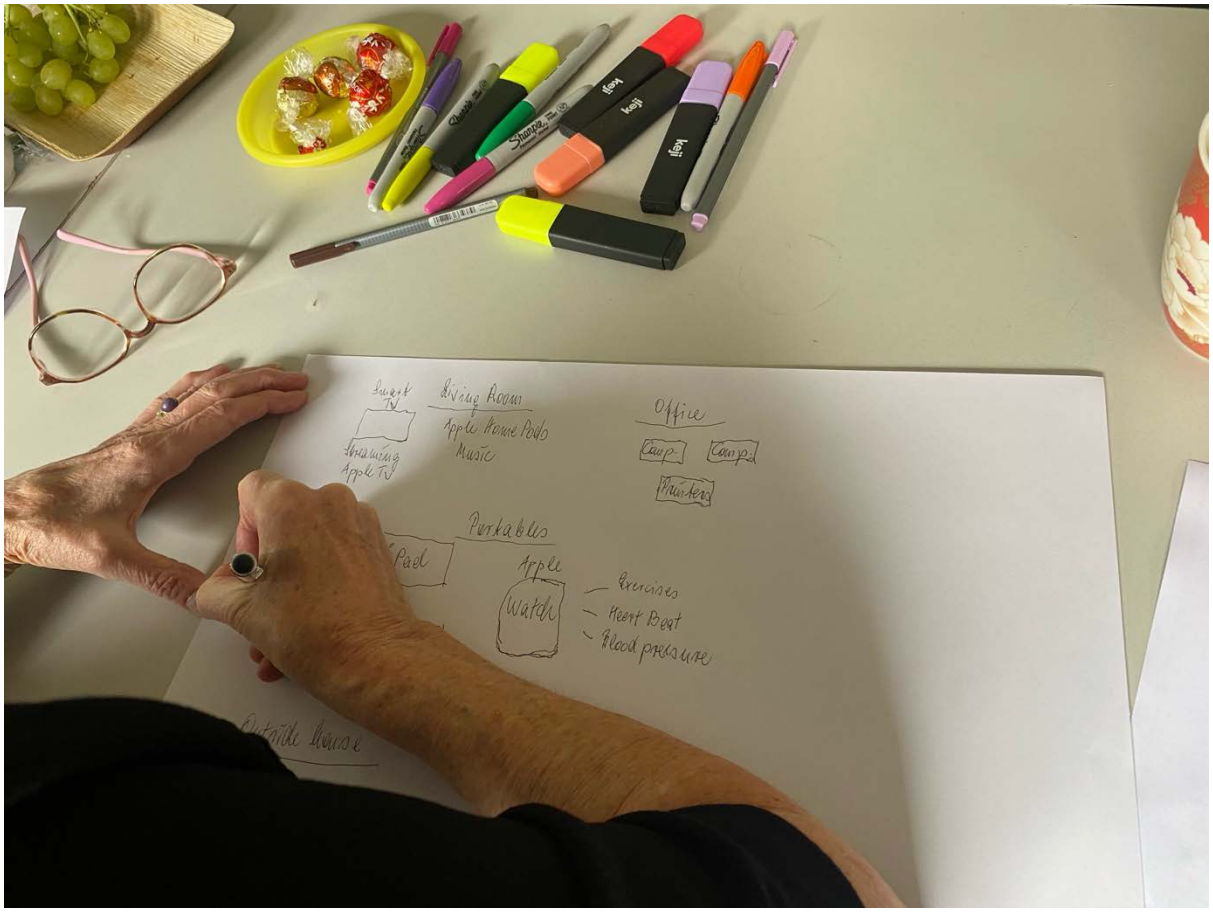
RMIT x U3A Bentleigh

Play-shop February 2024

Summary



Executive Summary

On Monday 19 February 2024, 15 U3A Moorleigh members attended a play-shop held by RMIT University at U3A Moorleigh. The play-shop was part of the Australian Research Council Discovery Project (DP 230103075) *Ageing in and through Data: What can data tell us about ageing?* The project aims to explore the lived experience of older adults with data (i.e. computational information) and technology. As technology has become increasingly necessary for everyday life, this project asks what we can learn from mundane encounters with data and, crucially, what data misses or can't capture.

Our findings from this play-shop indicate that data manifested a wide array of emotions, feelings and expectations for participants. Through three exercises, we invited participants to express themselves openly about how they encountered data in their everyday lives, how these encounters had changed over time and what they might look like in the future. In the first half of the workshop, we found that some participants felt comfortable and at-ease with data because they had worked with it all of their working lives, while others were less familiar and had limited encounters with data.

In the second half of the workshop, our attention moved to the past and the future. There was a sense of nostalgia from some participants as they discussed previously favoured technologies. Other participants expressed how preferences around video game play had changed over generations, which reflected updates to technology and changing relationships to the digital. The future proved to be a little more challenging for some participants, which we have noted and will change in future play-shops. Some participants looked to the future with anxiety and concern about the wellbeing of future generations, while others believed that the stoicism and ingenuity of humanity would prevail through challenging times.

We are very grateful to the workshop participants for sharing their time and expertise with us. Our three suggested changes to improve the workshops are:

1. Simplify definitions and include concrete examples.
2. Encourage all participants to share their experiences.
3. Change the 'postcard to the future' exercise to 'postcard to the present'.

Finally, we are looking to recruit participants for the 2-year ethnographic component of the research. Anyone interested in learning more can contact Caitlin (caitlin.mcgrane@rmit.edu.au).

In the following pages, we provide a detailed summary of the play-shop, including examples of the activities and recommendations for the future. The play-shop lasted 2.5 hours and was led by the Chief Investigator on the project, Distinguished Professor Larissa Hjorth and the project post-doctoral Research Fellow, Dr Caitlin McGrane.

Expectations, feelings & emotions

The play-shop began with a brief introductory exercise where participants introduced themselves and said a few words about what came to mind when they thought of data. After a brief discussion on terminology, we collectively established that data referred to information that is gathered about people through digital devices. Examples include step counts, emails, downloads, streaming, and social media activity.

This exercise established that there were a variety of expectations and attitudes in the room towards data. It set the tone for the rest of the play-shop and established trust amongst the group that they could express themselves freely and share information. During this exercise, group members asked questions and explained things to each other, increasing the knowledge sharing in the group. Figure 1 is a word cloud representation the feelings and emotions participants expressed about data:

Figure 1: U3A Bentleigh members' feelings about data

For the *first activity*, we asked participants to map (outline or list) their everyday encounters with data through their media devices (including smartphones, tablets, smart watches, computers, cars etc). Some participants had many devices that they encountered every day—such as internet connected devices including laptops and tablets, as well as non-internet connected devices such as digital clocks and microwaves. See Figure 2 as an example of mapping devices and data in everyday life.

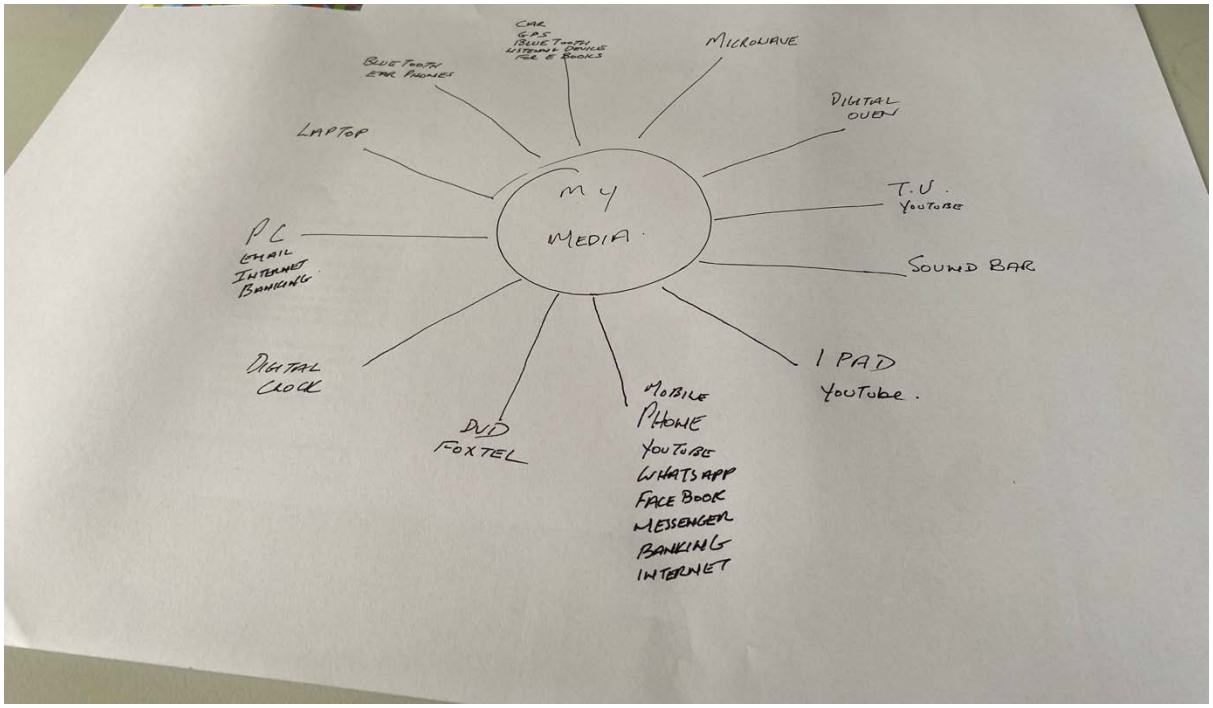


Figure 2: A participant maps out their media uses and digital devices

We then asked participants to use coloured highlighters or symbols to indicate how their devices or uses are associated with feelings and emotions.

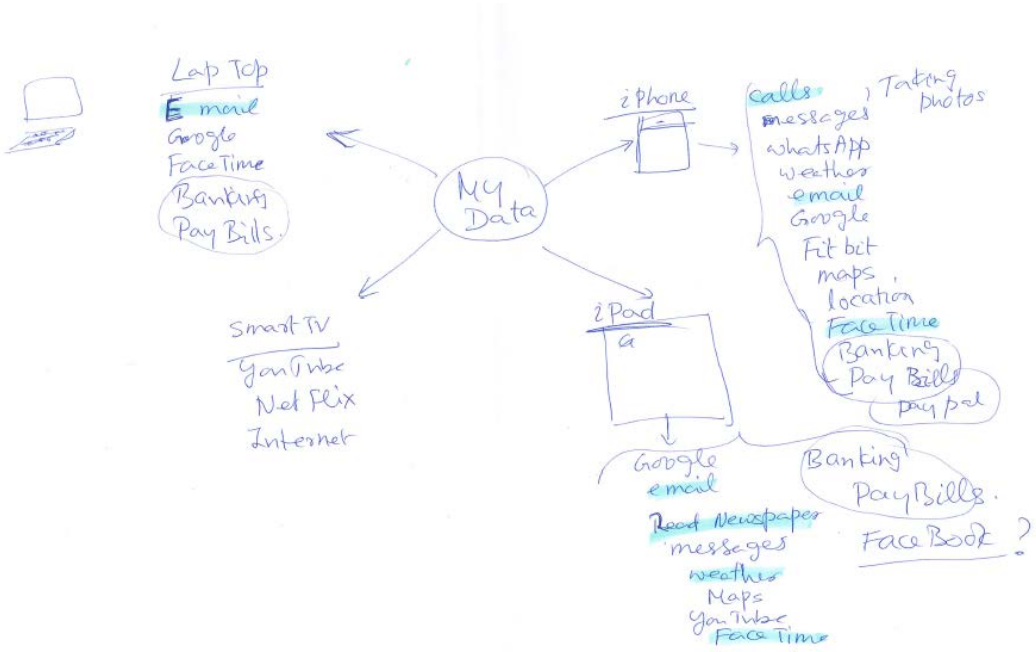


Figure 3: Maya's colour-coded map of devices

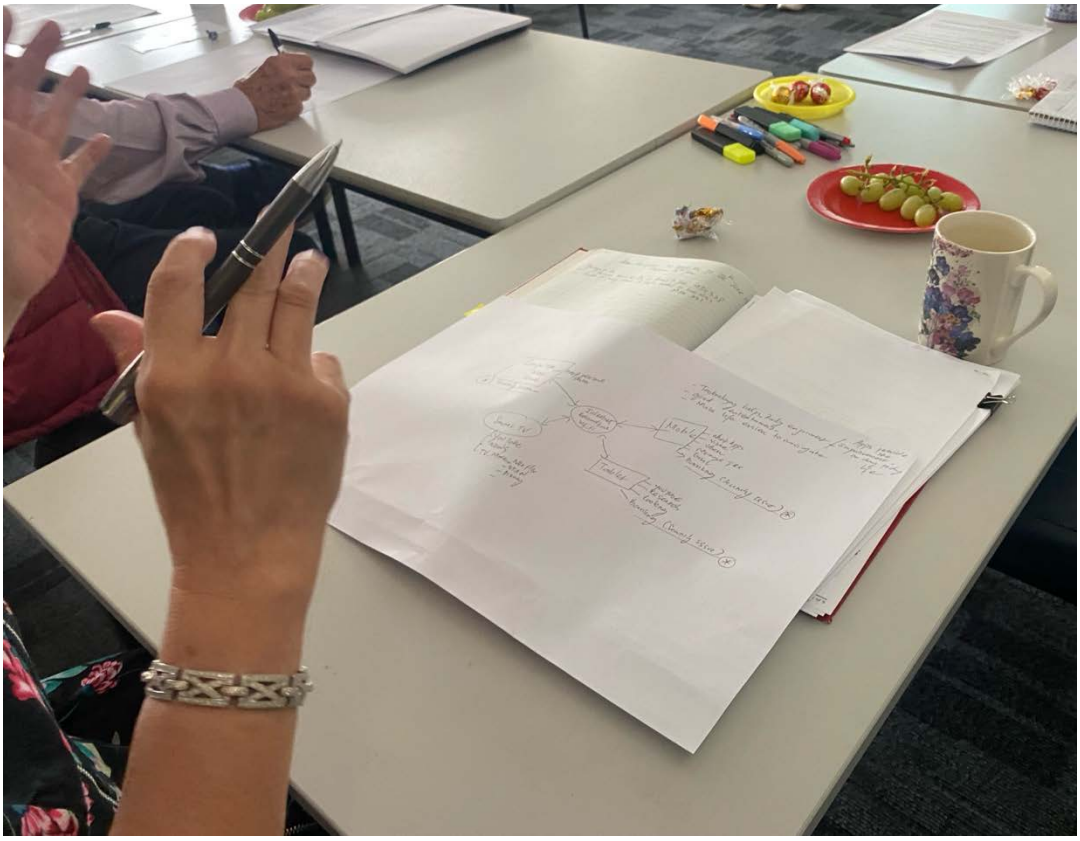


Figure 4: Minh describes how her devices make her feel

Participants had variations of digital integration in their homes and lives. Some had incorporated a great deal of new digital technology, while others had less. Most participants agreed that the internet enabled **easier access to information**, **research resources** and **entertainment**. Participants emphasised that **feeling secure and safe** with technology was very important, while also using it to make life easier to enhance their opportunities for connection. One participant, Lena[1], who had a computer programmer background, helped other U3A members with their technology described her home set up:

> *Outside, I have a heat pump, I have solar, everything controlled by WIFI so I can switch it on and off my phone. [Computer programming] was my occupation, [now] it's my hobby.*

Many participants described their enjoyment of using technology for entertainment. Minh (Figure 3) said that while she enjoyed using entertainment services, she experienced a constant sense that there might be **security problems** with her devices, which influenced her enjoyment of technology:

> *In my home I have a computer and a Smart TV. Each of those on the connectivity as I've said I feel security,*

[1] All participants have been given psuedonyms to respect their privacy.

> *especially computer and email. So with mobile, I do the banking, and on the tablet. So the good thing, our technology helps make our lives easier, more enjoyable, especially when you put on the Smart TV, connect to TV and Netflix. It's good and dependable, as well as make our life easier. But always in the back of my mind are issues. Always security issues.*

Other participants enjoyed using YouTube as a learning and research resource or as a way to connect with international faith communities.

Transport was a common thread for several participants. Chris spoke about how the public transport smartphone app allows him to look up when a bus is about to leave, but expressed some **frustration** with new sensor technology in cars.

> *Last year, I bought a new car. I'm still learning, it's just chock full of computers. Adaptive cruise control, for example—I can set one speed and it will slow down if the car in front of me is going a bit slower. It reads every speed sign and tells me whether I'm over the speed limit or not. But it's a problem because it misreads them. On a highway, it'll read the off-ramp speed and apply it to me, so I have to suffer 'ding, ding, ding' until I see a new one and it says, 'oh ok you're in the 100km zone again.' Image recognition is a big problem, [machine learning and AI systems] are not doing too well there.*

Chris also gestured towards the **funny, playful possibilities** of data visualisations. He described being out on a boat on the Gippsland lakes and how the GPS technology in his laptop had mapped out all the attempts to moor the boat.

Participants also described how digital media and technology were **helpful** for people who experienced hearing loss. Participant Rose described how her hearing aids were connected via Bluetooth to a smartphone app (see Figure 4) that enabled her to hear the TV even while she was in a different location in her house.

Figure 5: Rose demonstrates her hearing aid app on her phone

Rose's discussion about her hearing aids precipitated a moment of **informal learning** whereby participant Esther asked the group how Bluetooth worked (she was frustrated by her new wireless ear buds). Chris, touted as the group's IT expert, explained that Bluetooth is based on jumping radio frequencies, "technically it works on changing the frequency over 71 different channels instantly, such that it can avoid conflict with other radio signals."

Chris also helpfully explained that Bluetooth can't be easily blocked by governments because it's based on frequencies and that transmission of the signals requires more power that reception. This explanation helped Esther understand how the technology was working, even if it didn't fix her ear bud problem straight away.

Leaning *how* the technology works, what it is capable of and what its limitations are, seemed very interesting to participants who didn't already know some of these details. Chris's explanation was supported by other experts in the room, including computer programmer Lena and former Artificial Intelligence researcher Maya. These instances of **knowledge and affective sharing** enabled participants to be open about what they were curious about with technology, as well as what they already understood quite well.

This section of the play-shop finished with a brief discussion around how participants felt **unsure** about **cloud storage**, with some saying that it can feel **difficult to trust companies** when they claim devices aren't ambiently watching or listening through microphones and cameras. Distrust and mistrust are both important in exploring older adults' everyday encounters with technology as they can be based on both lived experience or research with

technology and emotional or affective resonances. To increase trust in technologies, companies, governments and institutions must be more **transparent** about how they gather, store and use data. There is clearly **appetite for greater understanding** about technology amongst older adults, which needs to be addressed comprehensively.

Interestingly, some of the women participants were interested in the **gendered divide** they observed between people who had worked with technologies in their professions and those who hadn't.

> *Leslie: What we find is there's a divide between the people who have worked with technology, and the people who didn't—the women who come here and they were working in the house... And the people who worked [out of the home] with computers.*
>
> *Mary: And people who never ever had any interest in it. And didn't realize that it was going to be constantly evolving.*
>
> *Leslie: Who thought it was a fad.*

Leslie and Mary's observations suggest that any attempts to address digital literacy gaps must be attuned to any gendered dimensions that mean some women may lack experience or comfort with technology.

Possibilities: pasts & futures

The final part of the play-shop involved asking participants to write postcards to their past and future selves. We were interested in what their homes and technologies were like in 2009, and what they imagined it might be like 10 years in the future, in 2034. These exercises were also used to enable the connection between the emotions and feelings described at the start of the play-shop with thinking through past and future changes to everyday life with technology. See Figure 5 example.

Postcards to a past self

In their reflections on technological changes over the past 15 years, participants described **enjoying** using **devices** that were **not connected to the internet** including mobile phones for phone calls, and VHS players to watch films and TV. When discussing VHS tapes and players, Ann said,

> *They were user friendly and easy to use. You could just press 'stop' and the next time you went into it, you were in the same spot. It didn't reset itself. Much easier to manage. Life was simpler. Once you got it, you got it.*

Figure 6: Writing a letter to a past self

Other participants agreed that they felt **life was simpler with less technology**. Chris reminded the group of the important context of immense technological change throughout the 20th Century:

> We [older people] have lived through an incredible period of innovation of stuff. We've not just gone through *one* we've gone through *several.*

In addition to technological change, participants described noticing **generational change** around the ways technology was incorporated into everyday life. Many participants noted their grandchildren and great-grandchildren had a familiarity with technology, almost as if they understood from birth how it worked. This had not been the case for most participants, who described **learning how technologies worked** as they were introduced into their personal and working lives.

In 2009, many participants were entering retirement and transitioning out of the workforce. At this time, participants such as Sandra felt **optimistic** about the future as they were taking on more caring responsibilities with grandchildren. Participant Clara said prior to retirement she had used a desktop to do bookkeeping for her husband but otherwise, “I had very little to do with technology except for the home phone but subsequently I have adapted. It's been a struggle.” There was a sense that the last 15 years had involved **adapting to a lot of change** for many participants, especially as paid employment became less of a focus for some.

For other participants, such as Maya, the spectre of technological development in 2009 was deeply tied to her paid employment. Maya spoke about feeling **concerned** about the

integration of some technologies in 2009 from her perspective as a University lecturer researching Artificial Intelligence. At that time, she said,

> *We could see that it was in our hands within university research areas, we wondered about when it gets out of the research area and gets into everybody's hands, what it will be like. So I can see what is happening now. AI* was *research, we never thought it would happen the way it has.*

Maya also reflected on how, having left academia and the protection of University spam and phishing filters, she feels more **exposed to online threats** without institutional support. Maya's experience indicates that older adults may need assistance in establishing security protocols on their own devices when they leave the workforce. Most participants seemed a little **nostalgic** about some of their past technologies because they felt easier to use, manage and understand. As we looked to the future, we invited participants to describe some of the changes they thought might eventuate.

Postcards to a future self

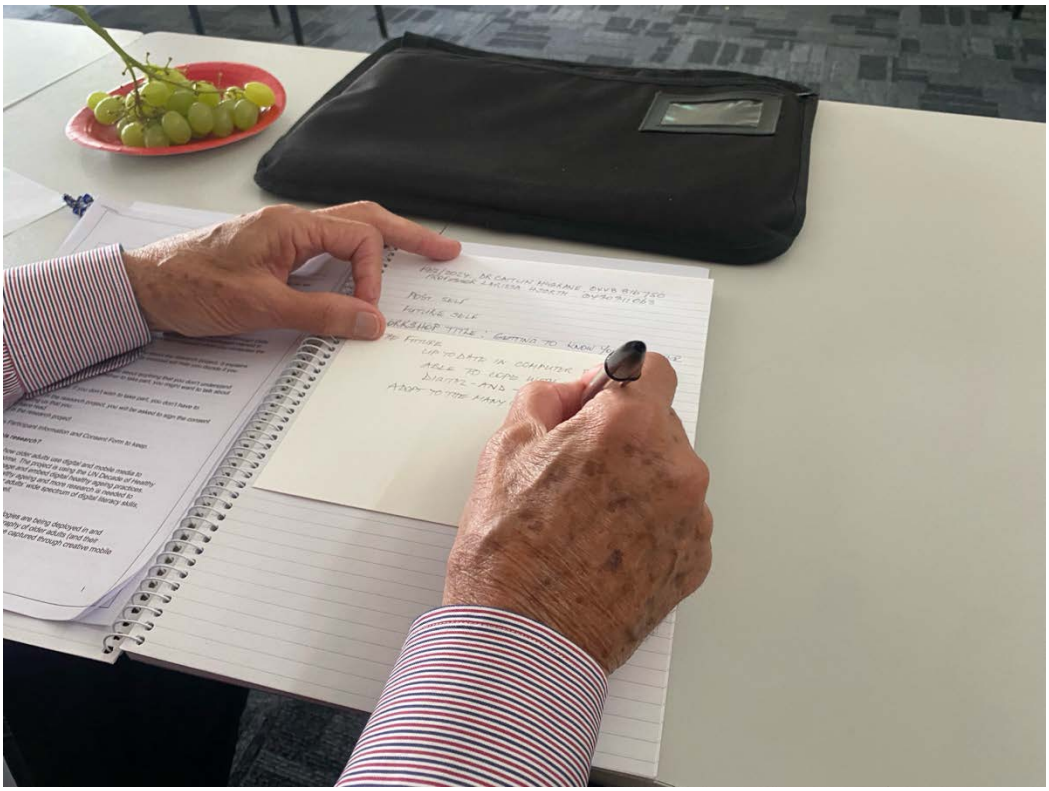


Figure 7: Chris writes his vision for the future

When thinking about the future, most participants seemed to have **mixed feelings about the future**. Some, like Esther, described her vision as "**doom and gloom**". Esther spoke of her

concern for her grandsons and other young people in terms of their physical and mental health from spending so much time on screens. Esther was particularly concerned about **drone warfare** and the use of robots, the environment and the impacts of biological threats such as viruses.

> *I am concerned about the advances in advancing technology and the use of robots. Already, the authorities are thinking of replacing humans with robots in times of war. And will all fresh food be replaced by organic food? And where are they going to grow it? As people get too used to medication, which is happening with antibiotics as well, what is going to happen with that? And will viruses be the cause at the end of the earth of mankind on earth and not war?*

Other participants had more positive views of the future. For instance, Antonio's postcard read, "The future—I had a lot more electronic and digital appliances, a lot more surveillance… what are they going to come up with next? I don't know. None of us know…**I feel very positive**. Although I think the surveillance is going to grow, right. I don't like that aspect of society. But we've got a problem with our youth and we've got to surveil them." Similarly Mary's vision of the future was optimistic, "I hope to continue to **take advantage of all the opportunities that technologies have provided**. I want to continue learning, history, politics, etc. Online, if necessary. Hopefully, technological solutions will be found to solve the climate crisis. Also, I will welcome advances being made in medicine… I'm well aware of the problems we have and the dangers that confront us."

Maya's vision of the future was **mixed**, having already experienced **'friendly surveillance'** from family alongside the challenges of intergenerational knowledge sharing.

> *So in terms of surveillance, my son has already put up cameras around my house, so that he can see where I am, which I don't like but he feels better… I have to ask my grandkids to show me how the phone works. And if I asked my son anything, he just says 'didn't you teach that stuff?' It's hard for them to understand that in a short time how much can change… It's going to be hard when things change so fast [to keep up]… And grandkids won't have the time or the patience to teach us… How many people still find it hard to go to the bank? You have to be cautious when using banking stuff online. So my vision of the future is a bit variable.*

The play-shop finished with Chris' vision of the future, which was optimistic about **humanity's ability to adapt** to survive in a changing world.

> *There's no doubt that the solutions will be found to curb the excesses like online scams etc, which digital technology has allowed. But we cannot perceive what will emerge, it's just beyond us. Evolution will continue at an ever-increasing pace. Mankind will grapple with environmental issues and eventually come to grips with an overpopulated world. Already over 70 years of predominantly, what we have experienced peaceful coexistence is being challenged by the emergence of right wing ideas. The use of technology will continue to evolve, we will have robots, we will have drones to counter those excesses. Mankind will adapt and will survive in a very different world.*

Changes for future play-shops

The play-shop was very successful. The focus was relatively clear, although we will reduce the academic tone of our definitions and include concrete examples in future play-shops. We felt that we got to hear from a variety of participants about their experiences, but not everyone in the group. Some participants may have felt shy about contributing, but we also want to ensure we hear from as many people in the group as possible. We also felt that the 'postcard to the future' exercise might have been overwhelming for some participants, which isn't our intention but will inform how we structure future play-shops. Our changes for future play-shops are:

1. Simplify definitions and include concrete examples.
2. Encourage all participants to share their experiences.
3. Change the 'postcard to the future' exercise to 'postcard to the present'.

Conclusions

We are enormously grateful to the participants for their generosity in sharing their time, thoughts, worries and ideas with us. These insights are extremely valuable, and we look forward to incorporating them into our future research and publications.

As discussed, the play-shop is part of a three-year ARC-funded project. We are beginning the ethnographic part of the research where we will visit participants in their homes to explore how technology is being deployed in the everyday lives of older adults. Participation in the ethnography is entirely voluntary and will involve two visits per year for two years. Participants in the ethnography will be given a tablet and a FitBit, which will belong to the participant and will not be accessible or monitored in any way by the research team. We will invite you to share data with us and collaborate with others in playfully engaging with data as the project progresses. If you would like any further information about being involved in the ethnography, please contact Dr Caitlin McGrane: caitlin.mcgrane@rmit.edu.au.