RMIT x U3A Altona

Playshop February 2024

Summary

Executive Summary

On Monday 26 February, 10 U3A Altona members attended a playshop held by RMIT University at U3A Altona. The playshop 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.

At the beginning of the workshop, participants discussed how they felt about their data. Most said they had mixed feelings, with some feeling more secure than others. This introductory exercise was very useful in establishing a sense of trust amongst the groups that they could share without concern.

The first exercise where participants mapped out their data demonstrated that most participants enjoyed accessing data through technology through at least one device. Whether it was a Garmin, a smartphone, a tablet or a laptop—most participants used internet-enabled devices for something they really enjoyed such as exercise, speaking to family or playing games. We were very pleased to hear that so many participants play games on their smartphones and tablets because play is a big theme in our research.

The second half of the workshop focused on changes across time. The postcards to a past self highlighted how delighted some participants were in 2009 with the introduction of smartphones into their everyday lives—how it made so much more possible. At the same time, participants were sure to remind us to stay sceptical about the influence of technology, never allowing it to totally take over one's social and personal life and to remain alert to scams. The postcards to a future self reminded us to remain optimistic and hopeful about the future and choose what technology is going to work for individuals.

> We thoroughly enjoyed our time at the Altona U3A, and we look forward to seeing some of you again. As we mentioned, 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 playshop, including examples of the activities and recommendations for the future. The playshop 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 playshop 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. Most participants had mixed feelings, some had serious concerns about the security of personal data and the efficacy of databases. Participant **Ellen said she felt her data was very secure and safe, thanks to her son who managed her digital security**, but she worried about **content moderation on social media and youth crime**, which could be facilitated through platforms. Some participants were **suspicious** but still **interested** in what data could **make possible**, others suggested that while there were **issues with security**, data could be **informative**.

apprehension,
suspicious,
ownership,
dilemma,
issues, gathering
informative,
safe, interesting, amazed,
info, reliable,
selective
working,
privacy

Figure 1: U3A Altona members' feelings and thoughts 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** through which they encountered data many times a day—such as internet connected devices including laptops, smart watches and tablets. **Others had fewer devices** or were **more selective** with how they used digital devices. Nearly all participants reported having **a smartphone**, which they found **useful and affirming** for connecting them with **friends and family**, and allowing them to easily **play online games**. Participant Laurie said they **didn't like their smartphone because it was too small**—the keyboard is too small to send texts, indicating that technologies designed for a "universal" user can exclude certain people from using them. The **diversity of perspectives** on technology across the group made the discussion **lively and entertaining**, especially as participants discussed their different views on social media, mobile technologies and news media.

Figure 2: James maps out his devices and how he feels about them.

Several participants had multiple devices that connected to each other to enable consistency of information across devices. James has several smart devices that he uses for interconnected tasks. For instance, he uses a Garmin device on his bike to track his cycling, which is linked with his smartwatch and iPhone so he can monitor his statistics and see his performance over time. James's devices also include a Macbook Pro and two Dell laptops, which he uses for **"Zoom, work, research, emails, writing and YouTube"**. As with other participants, research is a big part of James's life, so he uses an iPad for **"quick research and scanning"**, which he has linked to his Macbook and iPhone to keep documents and research threads connected across devices. Most of James's uses of these technologies seemed interesting and energising, especially cycling, research and working on projects. On his iPhone, **"weather, news and banking"** were coded in blue, suggesting they were more mundane and less exciting.

Figure 3: Greta maps out her devices and how she feels about them.

Greta's experience of data is strongly influenced by her recent diabetes diagnosis. She described the glucose monitoring device she wore as **"lifesaving"** alongside a connected smartphone app that alerted her to any highs or lows in her blood sugar. While Greta was recently waiting for a new device, she used a paper and pen to record her blood sugar instead of the app and said it was very time-consuming and sometimes confusing. During the playshop, she said the device and app would be particularly useful for the parents of children with diabetes, who could monitor them at a distance in a friendly, caring way. Greta also described using her phone to keep up with her family via Facebook and Instagram. Greta said she relied on Facetime for **"human contact and visibility of family and friends"**—highlighting how instrumental digital media can be in keeping us connected to support networks.
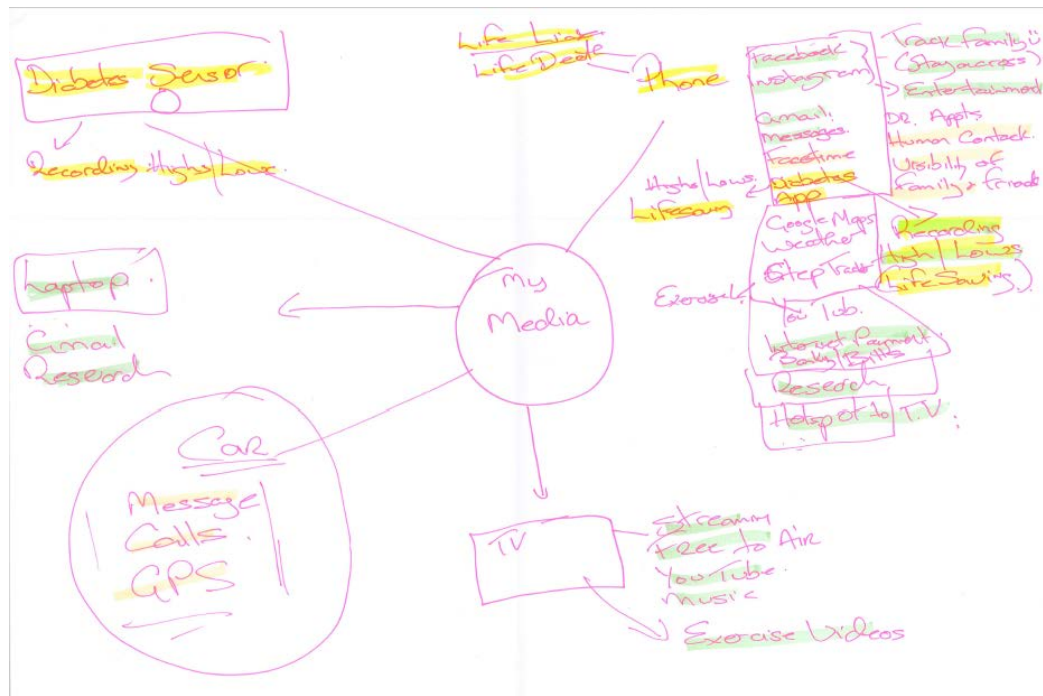
Figure 4: Greta's media map

While participants like James and Greta described using lots of devices and connecting them through platforms and services, others including Laurie, Marie and Greg had fewer devices. Marie said she has a **"dumb phone, which stays in the kitchen all day and beside my bed at night to please my children"**. Marie's experience highlights how older adults can feel an obligation to manage their devices to make other family members feel better—in this case Marie's children's concern about her is assuaged through the guarantee of proximity to a phone. Participant Sandra described her laptop as **"my life"** because it is so essential, and added **"no TV, no iPad, no smart devices and I don't want them. No car"**.
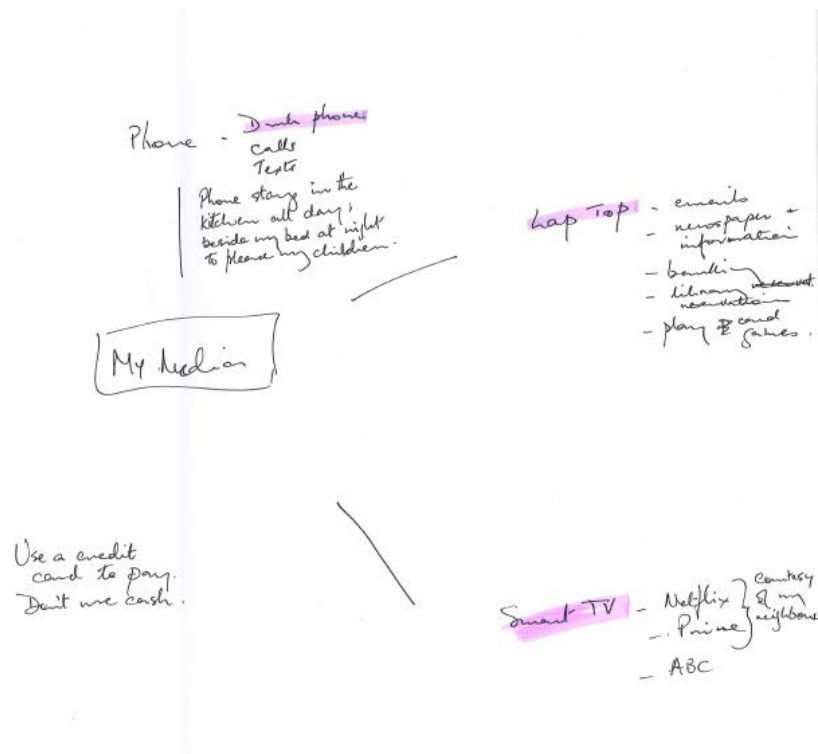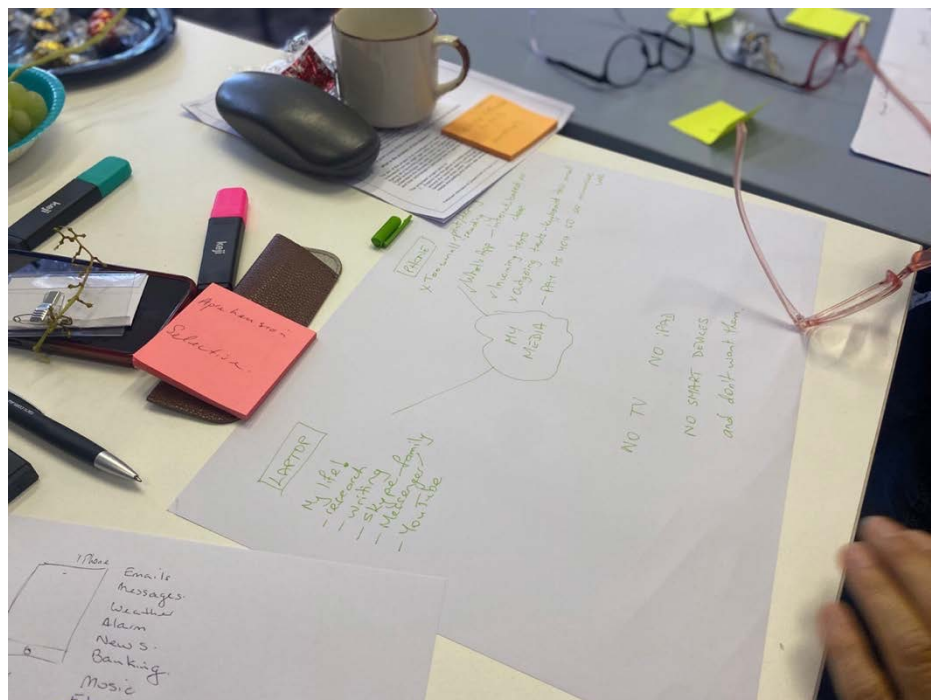
Figure 5: Marie's media map

Figure 6: Sandra maps out her devices.

Greg mapped out the apps on both his and his wife's smartphones. Greg listed just two apps that he liked to use: WhatsApp and *The Saturday Paper*; everything else he preferred to do offline. Greg mentioned being distrustful of digital information based on his years of

experience in the construction industry when critical information could be incorrect, for instance when pipes were not in the places they were meant to be. Greg is also a keen tennis player and told the group about how difficult it was to book the local tennis courts online—often the booking system doesn't work so **"people don't take any notice of the online system and just show up."** Similar frustrations were shared by other participants, particularly around systems that weren't well-maintained or when it felt like technology made something that used to be simple much more complicated.

The **lively, friendly discussion** in the first activity highlighted the **diversity of older adults' perspectives on technology**. Some participants felt **social media was pointless**, while others found it **essential for keeping up-to-date** with near and distant family and friends. Some participants who use social media emphasised feeling **distrust in platforms' handling** of **their data**—demonstrating that trust in platforms is understandably low after a series of high-profile leaks and scandals.

At the same time, the group raised **concerns about Australian corporations' handling of personal data**, especially in the wake of the Medibank and Optus leaks. Our first task demonstrated how most participants who enthusiastically embraced digital data did so with a degree of **scepticism around data security**. The first activity also offered an opportunity for those who were more reluctant to use digital services to express their **frustration** that more and more of **contemporary life was being moved online**, which could leave some people vulnerable to exclusion.

Possibilities: pasts & presents

The final part of the playshop involved asking participants to write postcards to their past and present selves. We were interested in what their homes and technologies were like in 2009, and what they were currently experiencing in 2024. These exercises were also used to enable the connection between the emotions and feelings described at the start of the playshop with thinking through past and future changes to everyday life with technology.

Postcards to a past self

In this *second activity*, many of the postcards to a past self expressed excitement about the introduction of smartphones in 2009. The **recent past** seemed to be associated with lots of **new opportunities** for participants to connect with loved ones and colleagues across the internet, and the introduction of **affordable, faster broadband** made many different forms of **communication and connection** possible. Some participants, including Jane wrote about their enjoyment of updates to technology, especially mobile phones and home internet. As Jane wrote, **"I really like how phone usage has progressed. No longer a land-line that I use. Now the iPhone is a compact device I use for all sorts of reasons."**
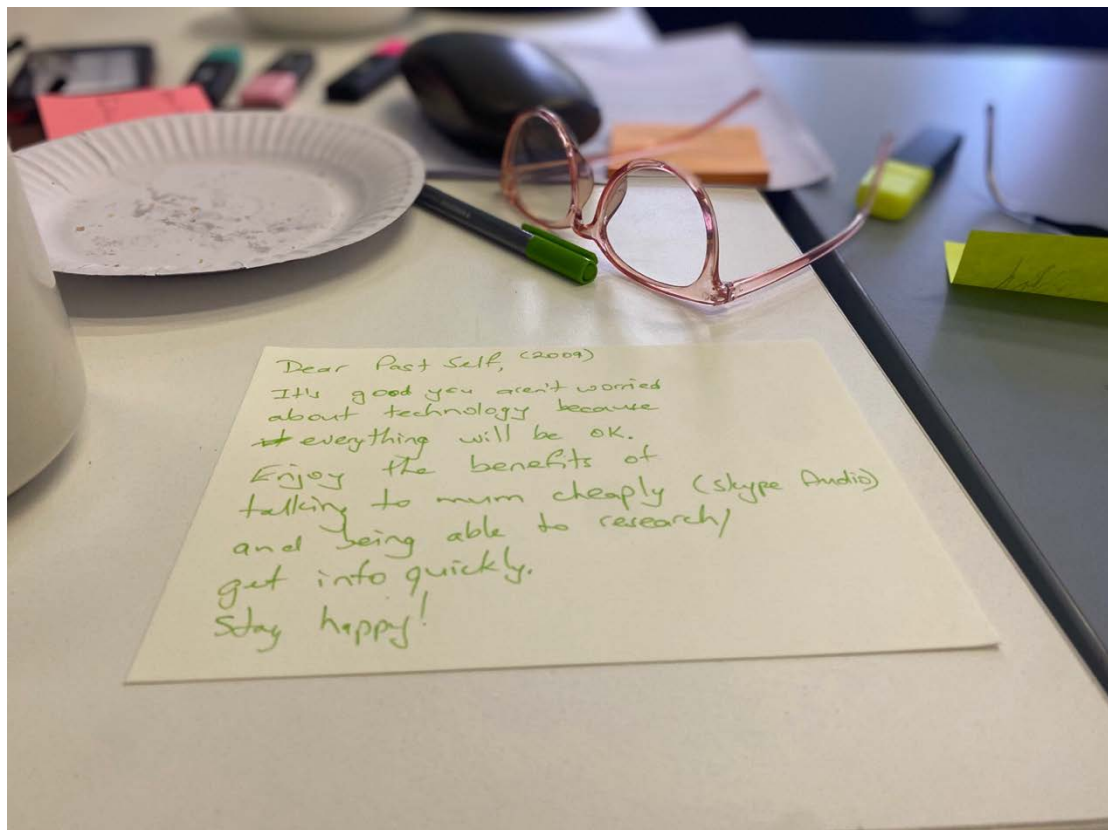
Figure 7: Sandra's postcard to a past self.

Another upbeat postcard from Sandra emphasised the benefits of being able to communicate with family online. As she wrote,

> *Dear past self, It's good you aren't worried about technology because everything will be ok. Enjoy the benefits of talking to mum cheaply (Skype audio) and being able to research/get info quickly. Stay happy!*
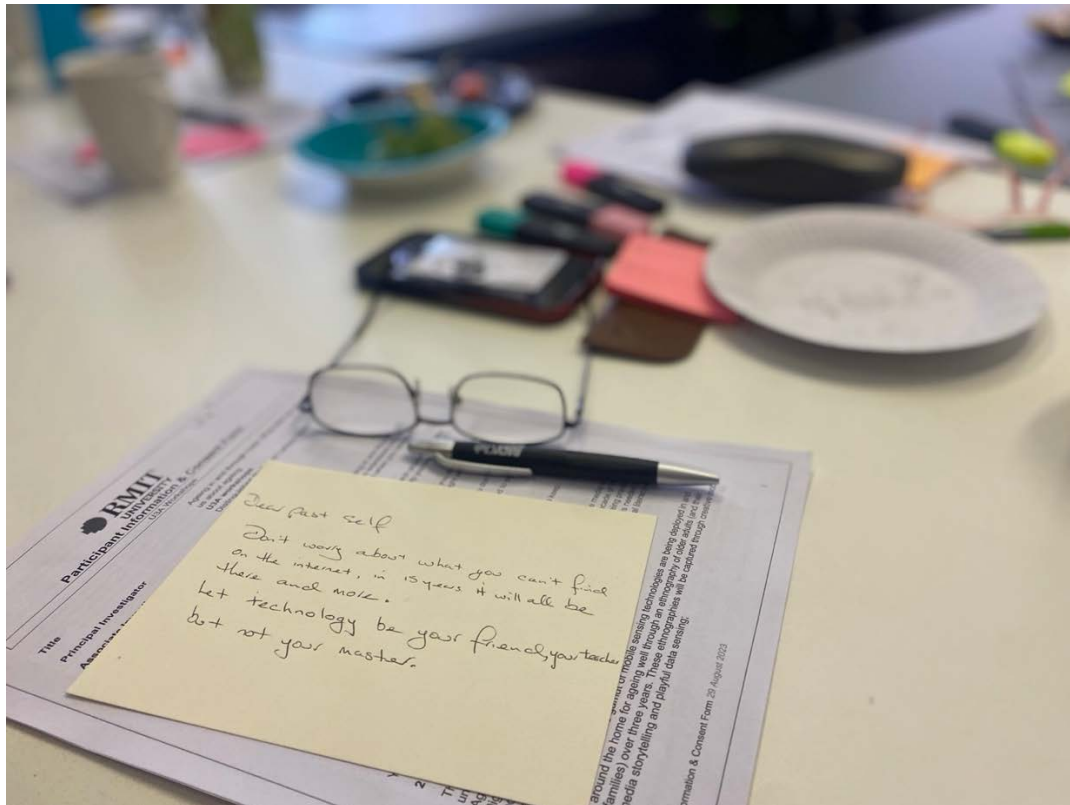
Figure 8: James's postcard to a past self.

A very astute postcard from James observed,

> *Dear past self, Don't worry about what you can't find on the internet, in 15 years it will all be there and more. Let technology be your friend, your teacher but not your master.*

While there was much excitement expressed in the past, there were serious concerns too, particularly around scams and potential harms. As Jane wrote (see Figure 5), **"I'm concerned with the privacy scams which are prevalent."** Sally was also concerned with hacks, writing **"What worries me about the internet is that our bank account could get hacked. I hope we have that covered."** Both Jane and Ellen are expressing a sense of powerlessness in the face of possible scams—that the sophistication of online scams was raising concerns even in 2009, as well as the lack of transparency around digital data.

Hazel expressed a vehement dislike of gambling in her postcard to her past self, writing **"I detested the intro of gambling 24/7 via mobile phones."** Hazel's concerns are rooted in the social problem of gambling addiction, made even more accessible by smartphone apps. Most participants seemed to feel a sense of wonder and possibility about how technology might be useful in the future.

Postcards to a present self

This *third activity* was the first time we had asked playshop participants to think about the present day, rather than the future. Based on feedback from previous playshops, some participants had expressed some alarm about thinking about the future, finding it too challenging or confronting. Some participants in the Altona playshop said they would have liked to talk more about the future and its possibilities, so we will incorporate this feedback into our future playshops.

In their present-day postcards, several participants, including Sally, Greg, Anita and Greta, expressed excitement about the future, especially the extraordinary change they had witnessed and the possibilities of technologies in the home making their lives easier. Greta in particular wrote,

> *Dear Current Self, The future will be available and cost effective … You will be able to have robots in the future to help with chores and keep you at home longer. Your health care needs will be automated and accessible. Hopefully society will remember, seniors need to be taught.*
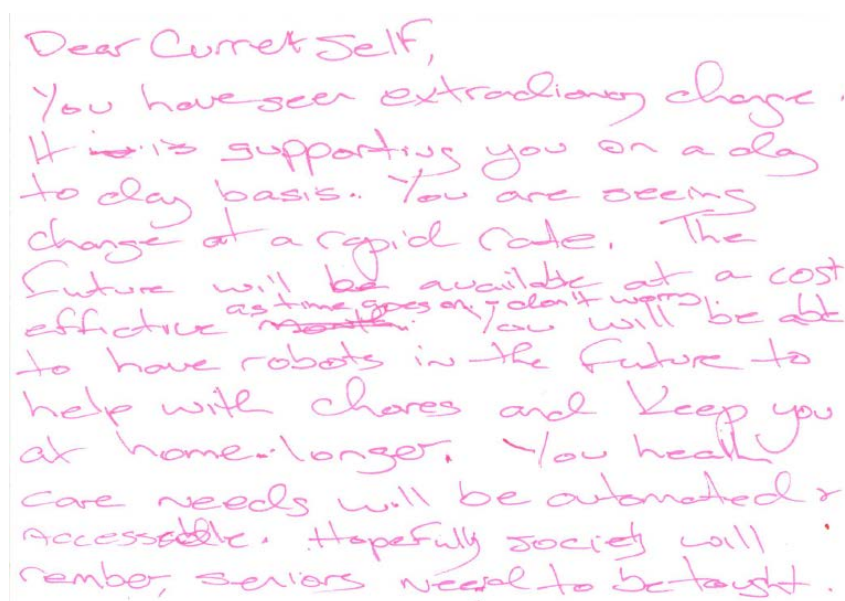

Figure 9: Greta's postcard to her current self

Anita was also excited about the possibility of a **robot cleaner** as well as **good digital security** so she felt safe. Similarly, Sally wrote **"I'm looking forward to finding out new uses for technology which will be useful for me later when I'm frail."** Continuing his cautious optimism from the previous exercise, James wrote,

> *Dear present self, Life and technology are exciting and change is very exciting. The future home needs and will support people to do what is <u>important</u> to the family and your growth. But continue to control it not let it control you.*

Overall, participants seemed to feel **optimistic about the future**. Similar to James, some participants including Caroline wrote about the importance of **balancing the influence of technology with in-person interactions**. As she wrote,

> *Dear Present Self, I hope that in the future we develop a heathy balance between using technology and maintaining relationships. I think it will become really important for people to still have real world experiences such as socialising, shopping, gaming etc not just always online but to go out into the world as well.*

Caroline's reflections chime well with Ellen's reflections that the internet has opened up a world of **possibilities including learning new skills, using YouTube for arthritis exercises and playing brain games**. At the same time, Ellen also says that **"technology has evolved that fast it is frustrating trying to keep up and that photoshop of faced on the news has taught me to mistrust the info uploaded on social media."** Looking towards the increasing use of AI, Nora said, **"AI has such wonderful possibilities to move the planet forward. I'm concerned about the possibilities of AI being hijacked for capitalist ideas, warmongering, i.e power and control."** Caroline, Ellen and Nora's postcards indicate that while there may be many **opportunities**, there are some important **limitations and concerns** that need to be addressed.

Sandra is very passionate about keeping **unnecessary technology out of the home**—as indicated in their map from the first activity and their postcard to their present self, which said,

> *Dear current self, You are resisting technology in your home— keep it up! Yes, get multiple power points—or maybe wiring so you don't have to have cables everywhere—but keep it beautiful, soft, natural. Stay in contact with people, invite them home, go out. Protect your eyes from too much screen time—go into the garden. Enjoy life!*
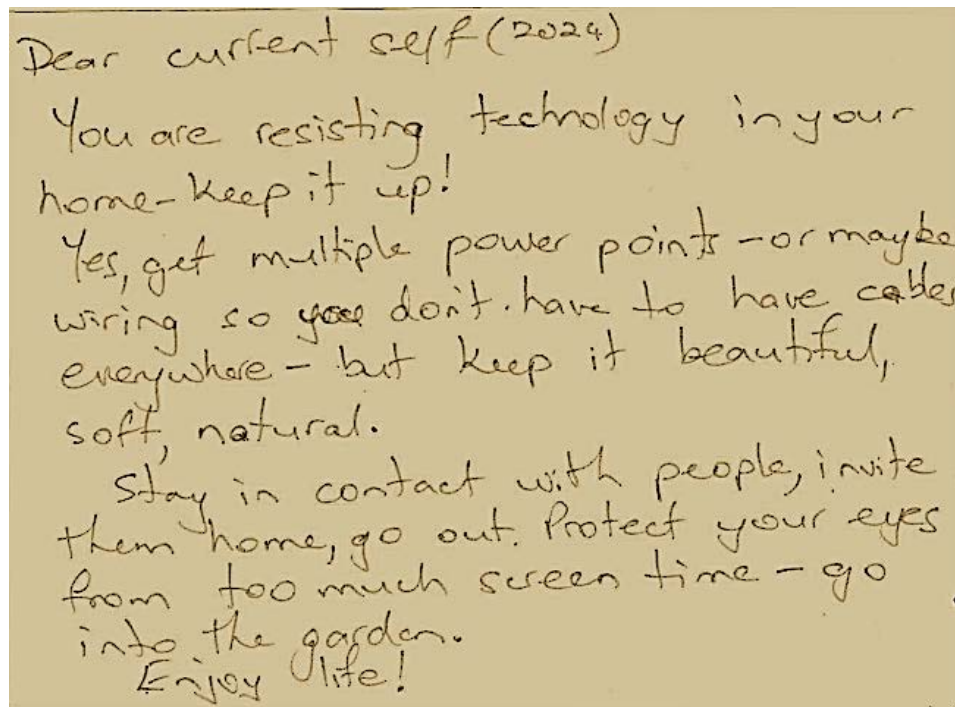
Figure 10: Sandra's postcard to her current self

Although she wanted to resist and reject technology, Sandra's postcards both still emphasised the importance of **enjoying what is important** in everyday life.

Changes for future playshops

The playshop was very successful. The focus was clear and we felt that we got to hear from all participants about their experiences. Some participants may have felt shy about contributing, but it seemed that everyone found a moment to express their opinion. We found that the postcards exercises could have been changed for those participants who wanted to speculate about the future. Our changes for future playshops are:

1. Encourage all participants to share their experiences.
2. Provide the option for participants to write a 'postcard to the future' if they wanted.

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 playshop 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.. If you would like any further information about being involved in the ethnography, please contact Dr Caitlin McGrane: caitlin.mcgrane@rmit.edu.au.