

RMIT x U3A Creswick

Playshop March 2024

Summary



Executive Summary

On Monday 4 March, 15 U3A Creswick members attended a playshop held by RMIT University at U3A Creswick. 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.

The group discussed a range of opinions and ideas about technology and everyday life. Trust and scepticism were big themes for the group, many of whom were very astute in their observations about how technology could be expensive and burdensome. The group also discussed how data gathering and sharing could create unintended consequences, particularly when it is unregulated.

The mapping activity revealed the importance of technology and data in everyday life, particularly for friendly surveillance and remaining connected. Some participants were very careful to manage the influence of technology in their homes to ensure they continued to feel that it was a tool to be utilised, rather than a dependency. There was a healthy degree of scepticism around corporate surveillance and control through social media, as well as worries about the rise of mis- and disinformation and the weaponisation of personal data.

In the second half of the playshop, the participants let their creativity shine, producing some of the most decorative postcards we've seen so far. In the second half, participants recollected with nostalgia about the revelatory impact of mobile phones on their working and personal lives. While there was some consternation about the future of technology and choice, there was also a sense of wonder and possibility in relation to what technologies can make possible. It was encouraging for the workshop to end with an emphasis on how important community initiatives like U3A are to ensure older adults remain connected and active.

As we mentioned in the workshop, 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. The discussion was wide-ranging and covered many topics. Participants were particularly concerned about **trust, regulation, control, misinformation and the rampant gathering of personal data**. At the same time, most participants said they **enjoyed using the internet and data as tools** to assist them in **research, connecting with loved ones and feeling part of a global community**. Figure 1 is a word cloud that depicts some of the topics covered in the introductory exercise.



Figure 1: U3A Creswick members' feelings/thoughts/ideas about data

The introductory exercise was helpful in allowing the group to establish **similarities and differences around their approaches to data**. The sharing of **concerns, especially around misinformation**, allowed the group to create a sense of **trust**.

As we were discussing older adults' **digital access and literacy**, participant Graham raised an important point around how the whole community, not just older people, were being forced to use digital and online systems. As Graham put it, **"I don't think you can opt-out anymore. I think that the opportunity to opt-out has been taken away from people."** This sense of a **loss of agency and control** is important to note, especially considering our discussion about trust.

The importance of **human agency with technology** was also raised by Peter in relation to the introduction of smart fridges into the home. Peter noted that a smart fridge automates processes that might in fact be quite useful for older adults wanting to keep their minds active. Our conversation about mistrusting data and keeping a degree of **affective distance with technology** continued with another participant, Andrew, adding,

“This particular age group over 65s, it’s in our working lives when computers came in. But it was very much a white-collar work thing, whereas blue-collar workers didn’t. So blue-collar workers came in very, very late when it became cheap enough and now there’s a lot of mistrust. So there’s quite a wide gap now between people that do and people that don’t [feel comfortable with technology].”

These comments highlighted some of the significant concerns people in the group were expressing about the **ubiquity of technology**. Angela raised concerns about supermarket rewards cards, and how creeped out she had felt when she realised it was using her purchasing information to try and prompt her to spend more money. In response, Angela said she **“cut up the card and never used it again”**—this then prompted a discussion about the transferral of supermarket rewards cards to smartphone apps, allowing for more personalised **tracking, surveillance and marketing**.

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). The group shared some consensus around how data could be useful—several in the group have solar panels on their houses, which they look at through an app which gives them data about the electricity they were producing. Group members were also less enthusiastic about other forms of data, especially passwords and corporate surveillance through social media. The possibilities of data were also being realised by some in the group—David had a **defibrillator implanted** in his shoulder that sent data to his doctor about his health, while others such as Barbara were able to keep a friendly eye on loved ones.

Silvia’s map (see Figure 2) detailed her devices including a smartphone, smart speaker, laptop and TV. When discussing her smart speaker, Silva playfully **anthropomorphised** it, saying **“I’ve got Miss Google in the kitchen. She gives me the weather and the ABC Radio. And she also answers me—when I haven’t even asked her a question, she’ll speak.”**

Silvia’s playful interaction with a Google smart speaker makes her feel good about the device and how she uses it, indicated through the love hearts on her map.

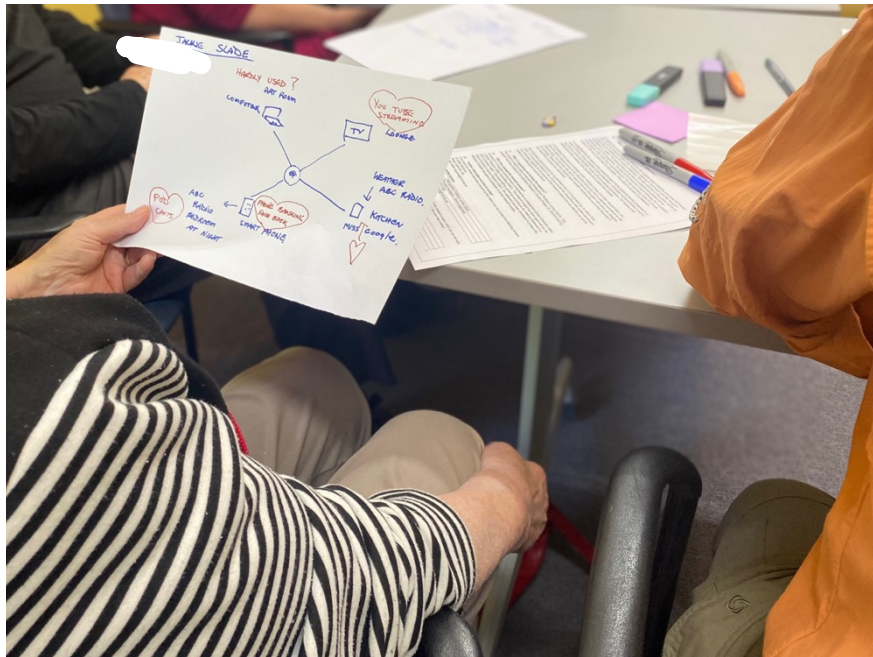


Figure 2: Silvia shares her map

Other participants also said they **avoided** having **too much technology** in the house. Some members of the group discussed how having **Wi Fi at home** could be **very expensive**, with potential solutions including hot-spotting through mobile data from a smartphone. Andrew's solution was an excellent example of **knowledge sharing**, when he described his internet connection.

We have a mobile digital Wi Fi thing which we can just take if we go away. We just take our Wi Fi with us. I don't have a[n NBN] box in the corner, I just have a little dongle that plugs into the computer... And as long as there's a mobile network out there somewhere, our Wi Fi goes with us.

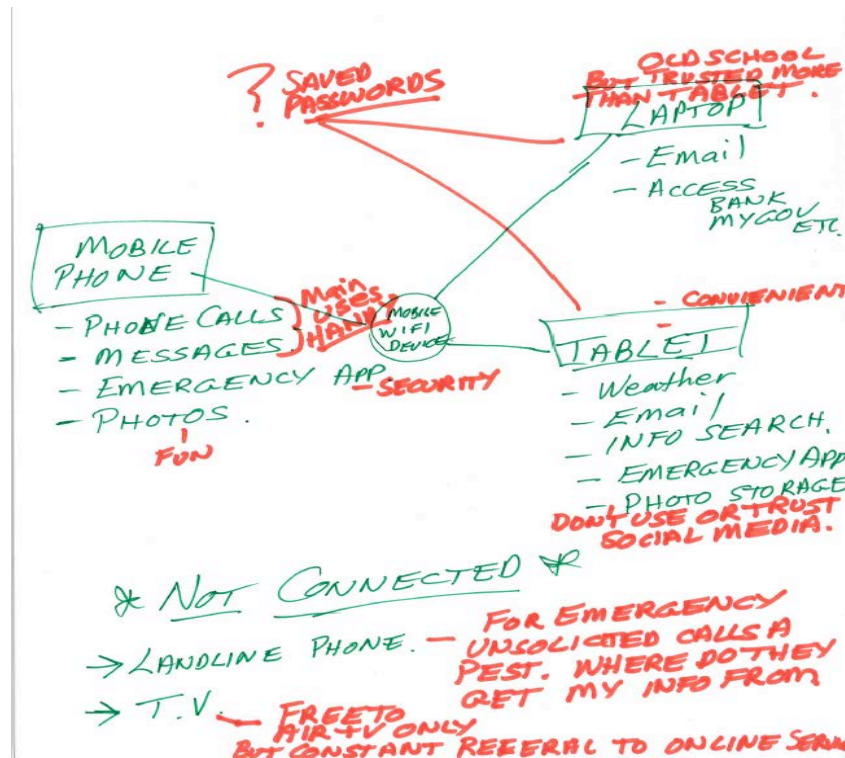


Figure 3: Peter's media map

The rural location of the workshop enabled us to get the perspective on living with the threat of bushfires. Sally, who volunteers for the CFA, explained how she used **two emergency apps**—one that enabled her to see what incidents were happening in the state and another to see a range of information relevant just to firefighters. The app was new, having just been introduced to replace an old technology.

People have [the app] now. We have pagers, but I tend not to use that—the joke is it's in the fruitbowl. But I use the [firefighters app] because that gives me all the information I need. Plus, I can then let them know whether I'm going to attend or not going to attend and it also tells me who else is going to attend. So I can see whether we're turning out or not coming out.

Being involved in a volunteer organisation such as the CFA made **friendly surveillance** of what was happening in the local area highly important. Another participant, Barbara, told the group about how her son was a truck driver and had installed 'WhereIs' on her phone so she could see his location while he was at work. **"I could look at any time and see where he is on the road... I just really just need to know where [he is]."**

Barbara's friendly, care-ful surveillance of her son through their smartphones gives her peace of mind. Graham then reminded the group that friendly surveillance can also be playful, adding **"I use [a similar app] for my wife [because] she works and I'm the chief cook and bottle washer. So I know when to put the tea on!"** Throughout the first activity, the group skilfully navigated the pros and cons of data in their everyday lives. Data could sometimes be a burden, especially if it was expensive, such as with at-home

Wi Fi or cumbersome to manage, such as passwords. In the second half of the workshop, we asked participants to keep these uses of data and feelings in mind as we reflected on change over time.

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 described enjoying using a mobile phone and having a home computer for work. Often participants wrote to their 2009 self from the perspective of 2024, telling them not to worry about the future. Several participants reflected described looking forward to retirement in their 2009 postcard, especially Jenny who wrote,

Dear Me, I am preparing to retire. Whilst having some apprehension. I'm looking forward to tossing my mobile phone away and getting out in the garden. However... as I reflect I think I'll get very used to my iPad information ++ and games, communication with everyone, watching television, using Chromecast, hard drives. My Google Home to talk to. I hope my health stays good, so I don't need my "falling over watch" or a CPAP machine. Let's see how it goes!!! I particularly look forward to throwing away the phone!!

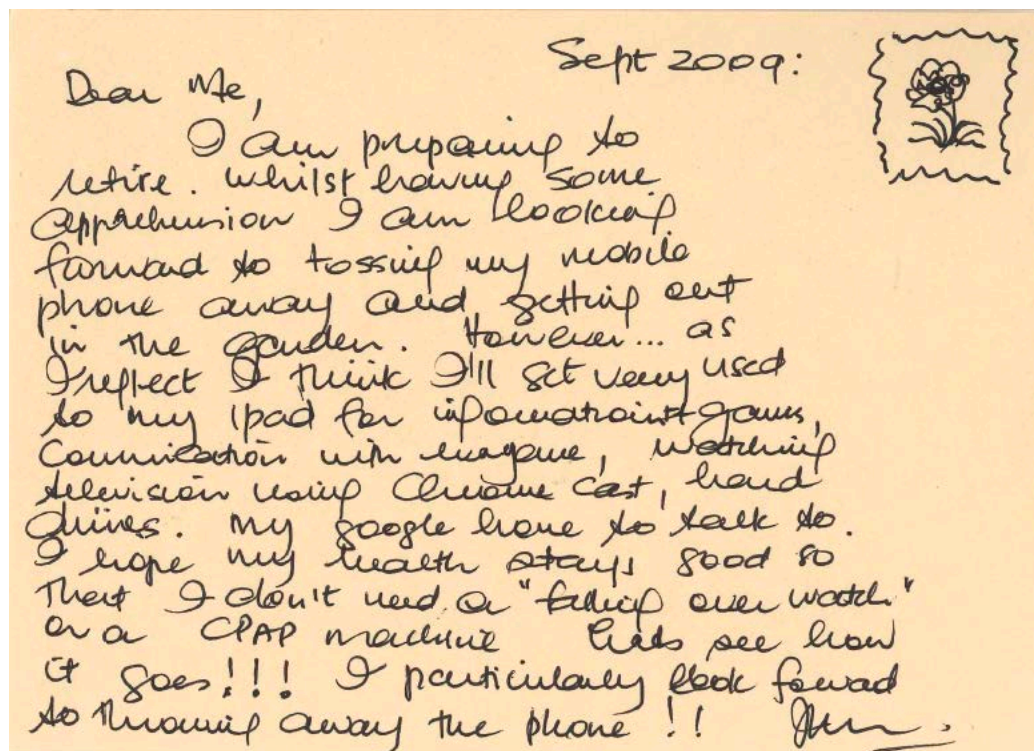


Figure 4: Jenny's letter to her past self

Other participants, such as Julia and Gus expressed **amazement** in their 2009 postcards at **the advances** being made so quickly in technology. Gus spoke about the **vast changes** that had been made in the **workplace**—from personal secretaries and whole rooms just for one computer to advances in personal laptops. Through participants **sharing these experiences** we get a sense of the **enormous shifts** that have occurred in participants' lives. In her 2009 postcard, Julia described being **delighted by the advances in digital storage**. She writes,

Dear Past Self, Back in 2009 we had the internet at home but it was only on a desktop in the study so we had to share it. It was often slow and mainly used for emails + Google. I used it for study as I was studying and working at the university it was mainly for articles + information and word for assignments and my writing. The advance in storage has been amazing. In 2000 we fought to get one gigabyte of data and now USBs store 16GB on portable storage.

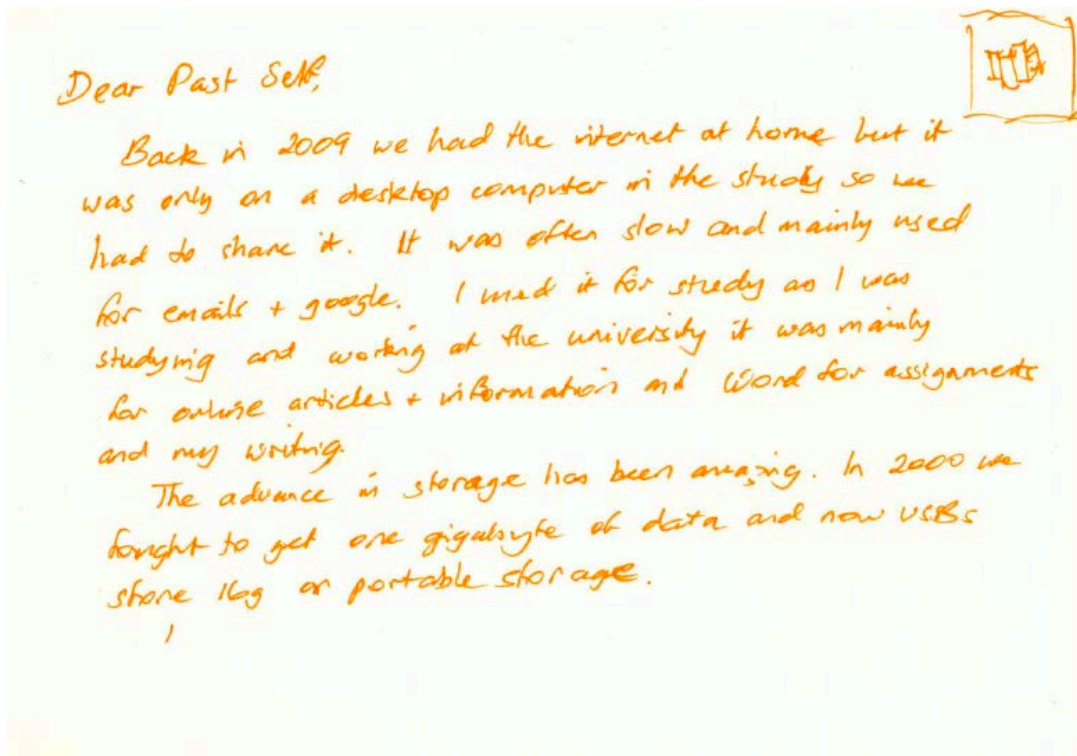


Figure 5: Julia's postcard to a past self

In many of the postcards to the past, there is a palpable sense of **excitement** at the opportunities being opened up by **mobile technologies**. The changes being made in 2009 seemed to be making life **easier, simpler or more accessible** for participants. For instance, David referred in his postcard to the updates to medical devices that would make his life easier, even if there weren't too many big shifts occurring in his technology.

Dear Old Me, The tech you've got will be more advanced but the same as work & home now. The only change will be cardiac devices—but that's another story!

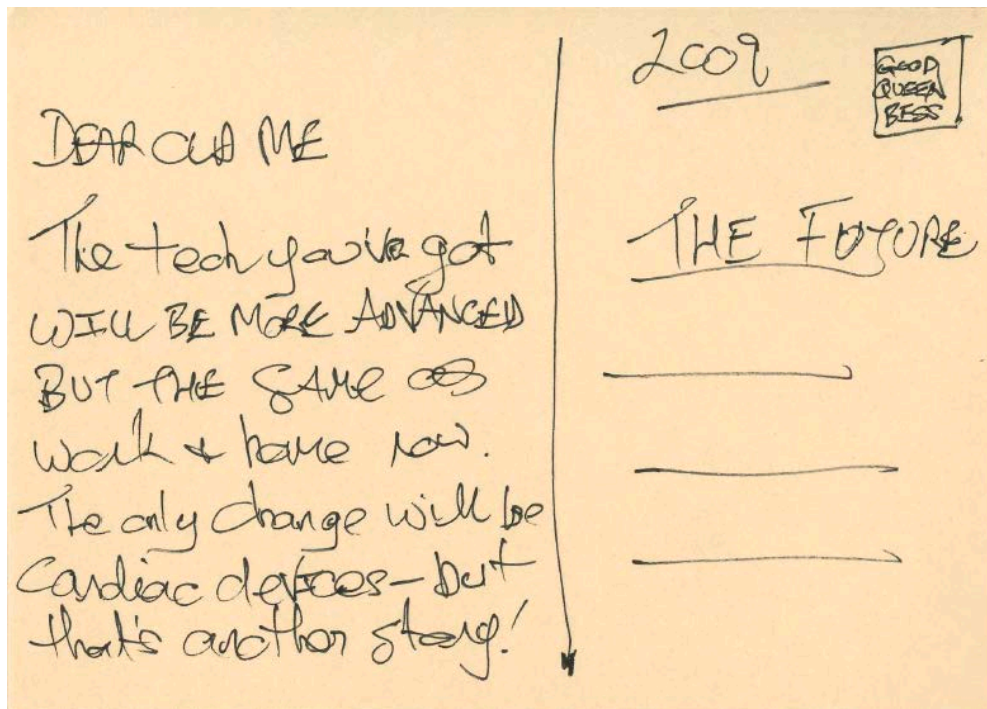


Figure 6: David's postcard to a past self

As the discussion in the group turned toward the present and the future, we returned to previous discussions about how an increase in technology wasn't always universally good. Julia raised the important point that for women fleeing violent homes, an increasingly **cashless society** could make it **harder for them to save money to escape** and could make it **easier to track them** after they left. These concerns speak to the point Graham raised at the beginning about opting out and how it was no longer seen as a choice that one could make. As we looked to the present and the future then, participants were interested in thinking through the possibilities and limitations of an increasingly datafied world.

Postcards to a present self

In this *third activity*, we asked participants to write postcard to their present or future self describing what they were currently enjoying or looking forward to about living with technology and what they were worried about. Many participants felt they would either be **forced to** use more technology or would **be able to use more technology as they got older**. Excitement levels differed depending on whether participants felt these changes would bring more good than bad.

Peter's postcard to the present was focused on a dystopian view of the near future in which all communications could be monitored. He wrote,

Dear today me, This is getting interesting. No-where is really safe from Big Brother. So I guess you just have to be careful on what you do, where you go & who you pass information to. If you know you are!

Dear today me,
Dear ~~future~~,
This is getting interesting. No-where is
really safe from Big Brother. So I
guess you just have to be careful
on what you do, where you go & who
you pass information to. If you
know & you are!

Figure 7: Peter's spooky letter to a present self

Peter's spooky sense of **omnipresent surveillance** reflects the ways smartphones and social media ambiently gather data through sensors. There can be a sense that one's data is not within one's control, which Peter is reflecting in his postcard. Participant Ina was similarly worried about technological change, and the ways society might be impacted. Ina wrote,

Dear Ina, So many changes—so much technology. I feel like I'm getting left behind since I retired. I suppose it's good for the future but I'm getting older and not keeping up. Sometimes I wish I lived in the last century (1800s). I don't like where all this is heading now.

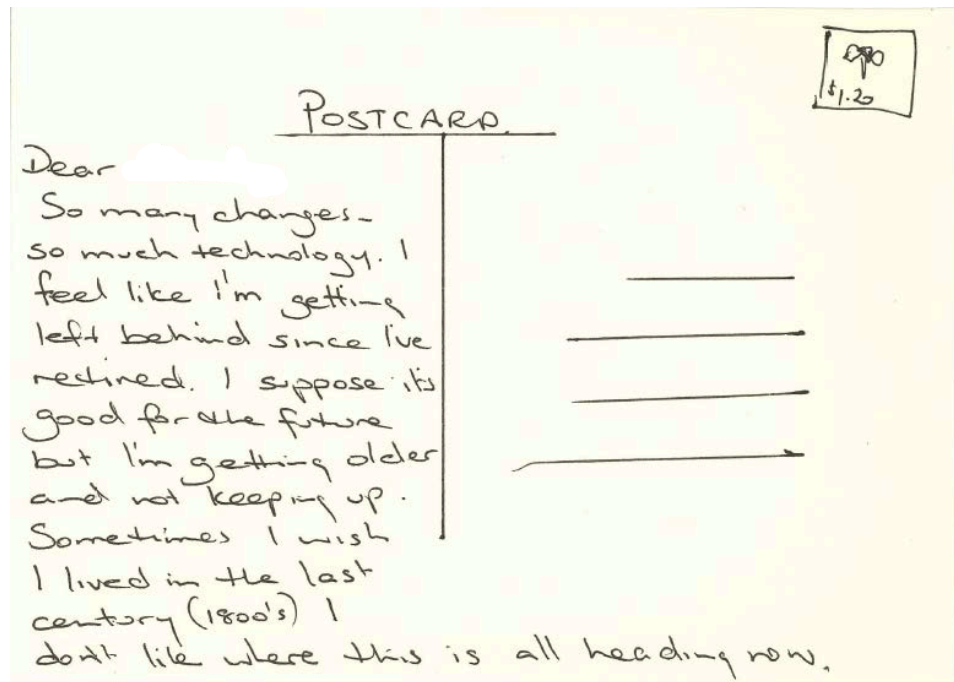


Figure 8: Ina's postcard to a present self

Other participants, including Jessica, were a little more optimistic about the changes. Jessica wrote,

Dear Future Self, The technology will continue to change therefore I will need to "learn" to use more apps and keep ahead with the changes to keep pace with the world, as it is everchanging hopefully all "new" technology is good and we feel we can trust what we will use or be aware of possible danger with some of it.

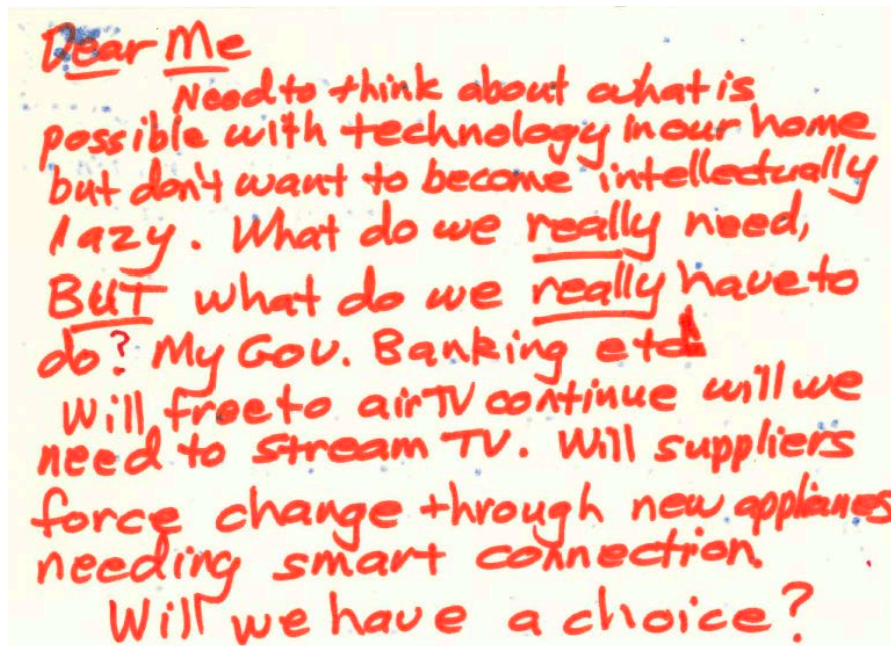
Dear future Self,

The technology will continue to change therefore I will need to "learn" to use more apps and keep ahead with the changes to keep pace with the world, as it is everchanging hopefully all "new" technology is good and we feel we can trust what we will use or be aware of possible danger with some of it.

Figure 9: Jessica's postcard to a present self

Jessica's postcard reflects the sense that the introduction of new technologies always requires **learning and change**. There is a sense that we will need to **manage the possible benefits and risks** through a sense of **hope** that things will be ok. Andrew's postcard to the future neatly sums up a lot of the discussion throughout the workshop—questioning what technology is necessary and what is deskilling communities. He writes,

Dear Me, Need to think about what is possible with technology in our home but don't want to become intellectually lazy. What do we really need, BUT what do we really have to do? My Gov, banking etc. Will free to air TV continue, will we need to stream TV. Will suppliers force change through new appliances needing smart connection. Will we have a choice?

A photograph of a handwritten postcard on a light yellow background. The text is written in red ink and matches the text in Figure 9. The handwriting is cursive and somewhat informal. The postcard is titled 'Dear Me' at the top. The text follows: 'Need to think about what is possible with technology in our home but don't want to become intellectually lazy. What do we really need, BUT what do we really have to do? My Gov. Banking etc. Will free to air TV continue will we need to stream TV. Will suppliers force change through new appliances needing smart connection. Will we have a choice?'.

Dear Me
Need to think about what is possible with technology in our home but don't want to become intellectually lazy. What do we really need, BUT what do we really have to do? My Gov. Banking etc. Will free to air TV continue will we need to stream TV. Will suppliers force change through new appliances needing smart connection. Will we have a choice?

Figure 10: Andrew's postcard to the present

Andrew's concerns about **trust** are representative of much of the discussion throughout the workshop—most participants seemed interested in incorporating more technology into their homes if it was going to be **beneficial to them**, if they could **control it** and if it **made sense** for their lifestyle.

Conclusions

We are enormously grateful to the group for sharing their experiences with us. We had a great time learning from everyone who attended. We found that most participants felt there would be **ups and downs** regarding technology now and into the future, reflecting the sense

that technology could be **a useful tool** as long as people retained **social interaction through community initiatives** such as U3A.

As Janet said in relation to ageing in place, **“the problem will be making sure I still maintain my social contacts because I think we will all be living at home, and we can socially isolate ourselves.”**

Others in the group concurred that using technology as a tool through which further socialisation could occur was paramount.

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.

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.