MEDIA RELEASE

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Knowing when and when not to use AI is a critical new skill, new Australian community panel finds

People in Australia are finding AI increasingly difficult to avoid, but say the ability to question, assess and decide when to use it is more important than knowing how AI systems work, according to a new Community Panel on AI.

The panel brought together 25 participants aged 19 to 68 from diverse backgrounds and life circumstances. Through workshops and written responses, participants shared detailed accounts of how AI is entering their lives, and what helps or hinders their ability to use it effectively and navigate AI-mediated environments safely.

Researchers from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society at Swinburne University of Technology, in collaboration with Telstra, hosted the panel to better understand how Australians are adapting to the growing presence of AI in their daily lives.

Insights from the panel will inform a new national study exploring what AI capability looks like in everyday life and the capabilities people need to navigate an increasingly AI-mediated world. This study will help policymakers, educators and community organisations better target support, learning opportunities and appropriate resources.

Key findings

- **AI is becoming unavoidable**: Participants said AI is increasingly difficult to avoid across work, education and everyday life, with two thirds feeling pressure to either use or avoid it.
- **Judgement matters more than technical knowledge**: Participants identified critical thinking and judgement as key capabilities for navigating AI, rather than simply understanding how AI systems work.
- **'AI discernment' is essential**: Participants valued being able to decide when, how and whether to use AI, including when to question or reject its outputs.
- **AI-generated information can be difficult to assess**: Over half of participants say AI is making it easier to find information online. However, discerning the reliability of AI-generated answers and summaries has become a critical new capability they are developing.
- **AI is changing how people navigate the internet**: Concerns about AI-generated images, video and audio, including impersonation and scams, are influencing how people use social media and interact with online content.

- **People want more opportunities to learn**: Almost all participants are interested in attending public AI learning events and activities, but nearly half were unsure where to find local opportunities. Most rely on informal sources, such as friends, colleagues, social media, and AI itself to build their AI knowledge.
- **Trusted community learning matters**: Most participants believe there is not enough public input into AI and expressed strong interest in discussing AI with people outside their usual networks and "echo chambers", particularly through local and public forums.
- **Participants want greater accountability**: They called for policymakers and organisations to take greater responsibility for AI safety and for everyday people's voices to be included in decisions about AI.

What we found

AI is increasingly seen as unavoidable in work, education and everyday life. Most of the participants have been pressured to use or avoid using AI. This may be through workplace adoption, in educational settings, through websites using chatbot assistants, or through the transformation of search through AI summaries. Two thirds have had disagreements with others about AI use.

Rather than knowing more about how AI models or chatbot systems work, participants saw critical thinking and judgement as the most important capabilities. This means that they value the ability to control when and how AI is being used in digital environments and people are constantly making judgements about whether or when and how they should use it themselves. We refer to these capabilities as 'AI discernment' – the ability to critically assess when, how or whether to use AI.

"The good news is that people in Australia are already approaching AI with care, curiosity and discernment. The clearest message from the panel is that people want a meaningful say and to be part of the conversation about how AI is introduced and managed", said Dr Dominique Carlon, panel lead and ADM+S Research Fellow.

Most participants distinguished between using AI to find information or explain things and relying on it for personal advice. Only some are okay with asking chatbots about health, finance or other kinds of personal advice including parenting tips. Navigating the reliability of AI answers is fast becoming a critical new skillset, made more difficult by the unpredictable tendency of AI-generated summaries to contain errors.

AI capability is not simply a matter of technical knowledge for most of the participants. As one noted, "you could be really good at using AI, but you still need judgment and common sense."

Participants expressed strong concerns about the potential for AI to be used to deceive or impersonate people. Most said they were no longer confident they could tell whether an image, video or audio had been created or altered using AI. For many, this is changing the way they use social media and engage with websites or email from unfamiliar people. A common theme was the need for greater accountability from organisations developing and using AI.

Community learning and meaningful participation

Regardless of age, workplace or educational context, and particularly for those outside of work or education, participants reported not having adequate access to opportunities to learn about AI. Many said they rely on people around them for information and support. Participants emphasised the value of learning about AI in trusted community settings and through local discussions – they want to hear about AI outside of their own 'echo chamber'.

There were some non-negotiables. First, panel members wanted a stronger commitment from policymakers and organisations to be accountable for ensuring AI safety. Second, they want public forums for their voices to be heard and to hear from others in discussions about AI.

"Our job is not just to report on the deep ambivalence people have about AI right now, but to ensure those experiences help shape the policies and programs that can support people through this technological transformation", said Professor Anthony McCosker, project lead and Chief Investigator at the ADM+S.

"One of the most important insights from this research is that people are looking for practical support and trusted information as AI becomes more a part of everyday life," said John Wilkinson, Telstra Chief Sustainability Officer (Acting).

"That's why we believe this research is so important. By listening to how Australians are experiencing AI, we can better understand the capabilities and support people need to use these technologies with confidence and make informed choices about when and how they use them."

The Community Panel marks the first stage of a broader national study to understand what it means to be AI capable in Australia. By bringing lived experiences into discussions about AI, the project aims to ensure that policy, education and support initiatives reflect the realities of how Australians are engaging with AI today.

This research is part of the Critical AI Capabilities Index (CAIC) project at ADM+S.

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-ENDS-

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ABOUT THE ARC CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE FOR AUTOMATED DECISION-MAKING AND SOCIETY

The ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S) is a cross-disciplinary, national research centre, which aims to create the knowledge and strategies necessary for responsible, ethical, and inclusive automated decision-making (ADM).

Funded by the Australian Research Council from 2020 to 2027, ADM+S is hosted at RMIT in Melbourne, Australia, with nodes located at seven other Australian universities, and partners around the world. The Centre brings together leading researchers in the humanities, social and technological sciences in an international industry, research and civil society network.

Our Centre aims to contribute to the mitigation of the social and economic risks in the development and implementation of ADM and artificial intelligence (AI), and to improve outcomes and efficiencies in four key focus areas where these technologies are already well advanced: news and media, transport and mobility, health care, and social services.

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