

## **Computer Magazine Notes: April – October 2023**

All the computer magazines reviewed below are held in the SeniorNet office or at the Wellington Public Library, and are available for borrowing. We do not review every magazine we receive. Now concerning Consumer magazine mentioned below, it is not of course a computer magazine, having a general focus which is much wider than just some occasional computer coverage. However, one of our members subscribes to Consumer, and has drawn relevant reviews in it to our attention. We do not hold Consumer but the Public Library does.

R M D Munro

### **Australian Personal Computer (April 2023)**

#### **Getting Things Going Again**

The lead article in this issue is “11 Ways to Revive Dead Tech” (pp.58 – 63). It’s certainly comprehensive, but does explore many aspects of computer technology which are probably of little appeal to most SeniorNet members - TrueNAS, Stadia controllers, media servers, anyone? Even so, one topic that will be of interest in certain SeniorNet quarters should be noted. It’s about reviving old PCs with ChromeOS Flex. The article tells you how to install the Chrome operating system onto dated Windows or Mac computers, thus turning them into useful Chromebooks. The comment is made that “seeing Flex thrive on a spec designed to run Windows or macOS for the first time is as surprising as watching grandad clamber out of his chair and run a four-minute mile”. That image has a certain appeal.

## **Wiping the slate clean**

We're at the stage of life when we may need to permanently erase data on computers whose owners have either died, or who no longer need them. Now a good way to do this is to bring the relevant machines into our Help Centre, and to get the experts there to do the job. But for do-it-yourselfers, there's detailed instruction in "Erase all your private data" (pp.75 – 79). The article explains that "to completely erase [unwanted private data] ... you need a dedicated privacy cleaner. Thankfully there are two excellent free tools available." These are named and procedures explained.

## **Back to skul**

A major article is "Best new PC skills you should learn today" (pp. 68 – 74). The article lists 16 of them along with the best free tools to use. Now teachers should of course be aspirational, but the time period allocated for learning this material seems unrealistic to me. Also, I'm not certain of the practicality, at least for our members, of all the new tricks mentioned. But, for the sake of completeness, on this occasion I'm going to list them all.

They are:

- 1) Enhance the quality of your video calls
- 2) Display live captions in video calls
- 3) Disguise your email address to stop spam
- 4) Encrypt your private emails
- 5) Schedule emails to send later
- 6) Unlock and delete locked files
- 7) Find and delete duplicate files\*

- 8) Recover accidentally deleted files\*
- 9) Diagnose problems with your Wi-Fi
- 10) Send large files quickly using Bluetooth
- 11) Share Wi-Fi passwords using QR codes
- 12) Record your screen including audio
- 13) Download streaming audio and video
- 14) Copy text from photos and videos
- 15) Install software more easily – without junk, and
- 16) Stop programs slowing your PC booting.

Those lessons asterisked could well be of interest to a number of our members.

### **Music 101**

I had a friend with a remarkable mind. He was not a musician, but he loved classical music and his particular gift was item identification. You could turn on 2YC, hear a snatch of music, and ask him what it was from. “Ah”, he would say smiling, “that’s from the first movement of Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto”. And so on. Well now, he has died, but a short article in this issue (p.95), reminds us of a programme that’s even more impressive in identifying music. It is of course Shazam. Its range is very wide and not just classical. The comment in the article is that Shazam is “impressively fast and accurate, and provides lyrics”. (My friend, who was a stickler for precision, would have added “when they exist ... think Songs without Words”.)

## Australian Personal Computer (May 2023)

### **ChatGPT**

There are a number of articles in this issue which mention ChatGPT and AI (artificial intelligence) generally, e.g. “Microsoft’s 365 Copilot is about to do the job of most office clerks” (p. 15); “The meteoric rise of ChatGPT” (p. 17), and, a major guide, “AI: Make it work for you” (pp. 48 – 53). These articles make it clear that ChatGPT (and similar tools) are very important, are not going away, and that we all have to take them and their impact very seriously. I quote: “we’d say the future is looking pretty dire for administrative staff, office clerks, technical writers, Excel, PowerPoint or Notes documents”; and “in the beginning, we were impressed. Now we just want to keep our jobs.” It’s not hard to think that these commentators could have gone even further. The major article on AI noted above makes the powerful point that “if you don’t want ... AI eyeing up your job, it’s time to work out how you can get it working for you”. Now most of us at SeniorNet are retired, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t need to understand AI, or that we shouldn’t use it. However, the truth is that many of us don’t know where to start, and a good place to discuss this would be at a Q&A session.

### **Beyond Covid**

The lead article in this issue is “Antivirus: go free or buy a suite?” (pp.60 – 77). This is a valuable, comprehensive article which examines 12 AV products and fully fledged security suites. Now some new SeniorNet members might ask: do you really need antivirus tools? The answer is that you most assuredly do. Which products does this magazine recommend? It ranks them by the following categories: APC Editor’s Choice; APC Highly Recommended; and Other. I’ll note the first two only.

### *APC Editor's Choice*

(alphabetical order): Avast One Essential  
G Data Total Security  
McAfee + Advanced  
Microsoft Defender AV

### *APC Highly Recommended*

(alphabetical order):  
Avira Free Security  
Bitdefender Premium Security  
Kaspersky Internet Security  
Norton 360 Advanced

Now if you have an antivirus programme which is not listed here, you might like to look it up in this article to see why it's not been given the highest honours. And if you have Microsoft Defender (which comes built-in with Microsoft operating systems) – rest assured that it is highly regarded. That programme, aided by running Malware Bytes (say every month), can be expected to keep your system safe.

### **Visual acuity**

SeniorNet Wellington runs a popular photography group. But it's not just its members, but also our wider membership, who will be interested in the wonderfully informative article, "Restore your old photos & videos" (pp. 84 – 91). This article tells you how to (and I quote):

apply realistic colour to old black-and-white photos  
remove scratches, rips and blemishes from pictures  
enlarge small images without distortion by 'upscaling' them  
scan old photos for free using your phone's camera  
remove unwanted people and objects from shots  
sharpen blurry and grainy old videos for free, and  
reduce background noise in your home movies.

The tools to help you do all this are free. To me, the standout app described in this article is Google's PhotoScan. It works with both Android and iOS, and "makes scanning photos incredibly easy and produces impressive results. It removes glare from glossy prints, detects the edges of images and crops them accordingly, and applies smart rotation to keep your pictures the right way up no matter which way you scan them".

## **SSDs**

Thanks in part to George Barna, many SeniorNet members now have solid-state drives (SSDs). A superb article here, "Speed up your SSD for free" (pp. 74 – 80), tells you a great deal about these drives, including how to:

- check the health of your SSD and reveal its estimated lifespan;
- reduce the time it takes to save files to your SSD;
- free up space on your drive to boost its performance;
- disable unnecessary features that slow your drive;
- ensure your PC is configured to boot from your SSD; and

benchmark-test your drive to monitor its speed over time

And while we're on the subject, what is the estimated average lifespan of an SSD? The article suggests that "most SSDs comfortably last for between seven and 10 years".

### **Australian Personal Computer (June 2023)**

#### **Be careful**

Public Wi-Fi is very useful, but to employ some modern jargon – there are bad actors around. There's a sensible article here, "Don't get hacked in public" (pp.64 – 65). It's practical and headings are "Use random hardware addresses to stop Wi-Fi tracking; Stop your devices connecting to Wi-Fi automatically; Disable file sharing on your laptop; Block hackers accessing your Bluetooth; [and] Avoid 'Evil Twin' Wi-Fi networks". The article is detailed and helpful.

#### **Artificial intelligence**

The jury is sensibly still out as to whether ChatGPT and its ilk are, as sometimes rather breathlessly claimed, "the most important developments since the invention of the printing press or the splitting of the atom". But there's no doubt that AI is very important. Reflecting that, this issue refers to it in a number of thoughtful articles. These include "The risks of the generative AI gold rush" (pp. 22 – 24), "AI can now read your mind" (p. 15), and "Mucking about with AI" (p. 16). Key points made (some of which are useful reminders) include:

the resultant text may be grammatically correct, [but] biased and not necessarily factual;

AI can be used to write computer code and “researchers have found ways to mass-generate malware”;

experts working in the field admit that they don’t currently know exactly how AI works, let alone what it is capable of; and

AI software has been developed that can decode brain patterns into language, using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging. This will help people unable to speak, say following a stroke. But, researchers point out, a door has been opened towards reading people’s thoughts, even if against their will.

## **Australian Personal Computer (July 2023)**

### **A New Toolset?**

The lead article here is “Stop using Windows Tools” (pp.74 – 81). There’s a shock tactic in this very direct injunction: what on earth is wrong with Windows Tools, one wonders. What’s Microsoft done now? The answer is, it appears, that in the author’s opinion Microsoft has not done as much as it could to update or further develop its set of tools - and there is better (and free) alternative software. In many areas, he has, very frankly, a strong point. This is a major article, detailed and informative, and for those SeniorNet members who like to get under the hood, it could offer hours of interest, if not fun. For more normal people though, it could well be a bridge too far. That said, if you’re dissatisfied with one of the significant Windows tools, then this is your opportunity to find authoritative guidance as to what to replace it with. In my case, I find I’m not the only person dissatisfied with the Windows search



function. The article describes it as “notoriously poor, especially at finding documents, photos and other files stored on your hard drive. It’s slow, inaccurate and often yields no results for your search queries, even when you know that matches exist.”

The question is of course: what to use instead? The article suggests a programme called “Everything” ([www. voidtools.com](http://www.voidtools.com)), saying that “it quickly indexes all the files and folders on your hard drive so you can find documents, photos and other items simply by typing part of their names into its search box”. But the point is made that this programme doesn’t index the text *within* files, and that is precisely what people often want thoroughly searched through. So, what do you do? The article says that the solution is the portable version of DocFetcher ([docfetcher.sourceforge.net/en/index.html](http://docfetcher.sourceforge.net/en/index.html)). It “indexes office file formats ... as well as PDF, EPUB and HTML files, and the meta data of MP3 and JPEG files.” It sounds ideal and there’s only one reason why I haven’t installed it. That’s because I’m not sure I can trust it not to exploit its access to all my files for some commercial purpose. Pity.

## **Australian Personal Computer (August 2023)**

### **Artificial Intelligence Rivals**

As you have seen, ChatGPT has become part of our vocabulary. But that programme is not the only one of its kind, and we should be aware of its competitors. In that context, Google has developed Bard, and there’s an article here which compares them – “Google Bard vs ChatGPT: Two AI chatbots, alike in dignity, but which should you use?” (pp. 32 – 33). Before giving its assessment, the article sensibly notes that these programmes are really just “a very clever game of word association, no matter how convincing they may be [that they

are ‘intelligent’].” Both programmes have a similar range of capabilities, including the production of credible text. (This is what can make them dangerous: just because these programmes say something, that doesn’t mean it’s true. They are susceptible, as it were, to hallucination and humans do need to fact-check their output.) A significant difference between the programmes is that unless you buy the premium version of ChatGPT, the dataset that will be searched to answer your query may not extend beyond September 2021. By contrast, Bard keeps itself reasonably up to date by including access to the Internet in its searches. The article sensibly says both programmes “are works in progress, and might have developed new abilities by the time you read this”. These are exciting times.

### **Mind and Matter**

Read-it-latter apps are very useful. We all see news items, magazine articles and so on which we want to read, but haven’t got time at the moment, can’t be certain we’ll find them again, and would like to put them in an easy place to save to read again – when the opportunity presents itself. But where to put them? Well now, along with many other Android users, I’ve found Pocket. It’s a great app. Happily, it’s also available for Apple. But an article in this issue describes “Matter: a better reading app” (p. 50). The article is enthusiastic, saying that Matter “is arguably the best read-later app available for Apple devices”. Why? It seems that as well as being highly proficient in saving articles for reading later, its premium version allows you to follow nominated writers and have their work automatically delivered to your device. Further, Matter has its own social network; so, if that appeals, you can follow friends and see what they’d been reading, and then you. Healthy competition? To me, all this seems a little over the top, but the rule in computing

today seems to be, if it can be programmed in, then put it out there. Less is not more.

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You guessed it - password managers. There is a very useful article in this issue, "Get the right password manager" (pp.76 - 79). The article argues pretty convincingly that, for safety and convenience, we all ought to be using password managers. But it acknowledges that most people don't. I suspect that would certainly be true for many SeniorNet members. They have not forgotten that one of the best of these password managers, Last Pass, was itself hacked.

### **Australian Personal Computer (September 2023)**

#### **Putting it all together**

Knowledge is power, and there are times when we need to know more about our computers than we normally do. A useful article in this context is "Glow 1.70" (p.48). This programme presents a comprehensive overview of your PC, including such matters as the version of the operating system you're using, how much storage space you have, which drivers you have (and whether they're working), the health of your hard drives, and information about your battery. Glow even tells you when your computer was last turned on. Because the programme dives under the hood, it may trigger a security flag, but don't worry about that. The article says that it is completely safe.

#### **After Macrium Reflect**

Those SeniorNet members who backup their PCs often use an invaluable free programme called Macrium Reflect. But the company which produces it has decided that, from 1 January 2024, it will no longer support the free edition. This has been of concern far beyond SeniorNet. Around the world people are asking what's the next best alternative? APC has been looking at free alternatives, and recommends Hasleo Backup (see p.79 – 80). Although our meeting time at SeniorNet is limited, it would certainly be of interest to more than a few SeniorNet members to have the issue of how to replace Macrium Reflect discussed at one of our Q&A sessions.

### **Australian Personal Computer (October 2023)**

#### **Looking ahead**

Ever since Google Glass in 2014 we have been waiting for a breakthrough in what's called "virtual and augmented reality". (Can you think of a better name for it?) In any case, think of wearing a small computer on your head (like a swim-mask) into which you look and see really interesting things. Well, Apple which has based its huge fortune on creating must-have technology, has now developed a headset called a Vision Pro. Built around comment on it, there's a major article here called "Vision on! The past, present and future of spatial computing" (pp. 56 – 63). The article puts the hard question: "is Vision Pro the future market leader, or just an overpriced gimmick?" The respected commentator, John Honeyball, considers Vision Pro "is possibly the most profound potential change in personal computing for decades". That's all very well, but what could it be used for? In fact, there's a long list of potential users, which would clearly include architects, engineers, designers and surgeons, and I hardly need mention the games industry where, if Vision Pro

takes off, it could be huge. But will Vision Pro soon be in many Christmas stockings? I doubt it. Reports suggest that it will cost \$US3,499 (c \$NZ5,902). Does that make it an overpriced gimmick? I think that, temporarily at least, it does. Nevertheless, if people find it really useful (as the early IBM PCs were found to be), then in due course the price will undoubtedly come down, keen gamers will start to buy it, and eventually normal people will become interested in purchasing it. Even so, it may be a bit of a wait before we see one at SeniorNet. (I've yet to see a 3-D printer demonstrated there.)

### **Changing the oil and so on**

The lead article in this issue is "PC Service & Tuneup Guide" (pp. 64 – 71). This is an example of the best sort of computer journalism: relevant, comprehensive, and utterly practical. Topics explored include: getting a complete hardware audit; monitoring temperatures; cleaning the interior of the computer; checking RAM and hard drives; testing your battery; updating components - and so on. It's a sort of article that you would put into your desk file.

### **Lost computer file**

If you lose important data, your best strategy would be to contact Sandra and ask for an appointment at the Help Centre. Experts there will do their best to get it back for you. But if you want to try to get it back yourself, one approach would be to use Recuva. There are no guarantees in this area, but Recuva is well established as a useful tool. The question is though whether Recuva Professional is worth paying for; after all you'd expect it to do a better job than the free version. See "Recuva Professional" (p.49). The answer though is counterintuitive. The verdict reached is that the free version is in itself a competent programme, and that there are no significant advantages in upgrading.

## **Math anxiety**

Some of us have grandchildren who are struggling with maths. Indeed, it's estimated that up to 11 percent of children may have dyscalculia. What to do? Well, many of us are familiar with Duolingo, the impressive app that you can put on your smartphone and which will help polish up your French, Spanish or whatever. Happily, there's a note in this issue about Duolingo Math (p.96). It's designed to help kids master basic maths topics (including fractions, decimals and time), and I've tried it and it's good value.

## **Consumer (Autumn 2023)**

### **Talking money**

A smartphone has become a necessity. Society assumes you have one: the Government certainly does. As ever, our task as consumers is to get the best device for the least cost. In other words, to ensure value for money. But for this, we need friends at court. One friend, I submit, is Consumer magazine, and in this issue there's an invaluable list of smartphones ranked by performance, display, battery life, camera quality, repairability, and average price. Recommendations are made, and the bottom line seems to be that you don't have to pay too much to buy a reasonable phone. See "Consumer Test: Mobile Phones" (pp.94 - 96). Another friend at court is information from our Q&A and other sessions: people there are only too happy to talk about their phones, the best places to buy them, and to get them repaired.

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