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Title: The crossover generation: Baby boomers and the role of the public library

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**Kirsty Williamson** is the director of the research group, Information and Telecommunications Needs Research (ITNR), a joint initiative of Monash and Charles Sturt Universities, in Australia. Since the early 1990s, she has undertaken many research projects, funded by a range of different organisations including the principal funding body of Australian Universities, the Australian Research Council. Her principal area of research has been 'human information behaviour’, with libraries, particularly public libraries, being an important context. Her interest in public libraries and baby boomers has extended over several years and has been supported by key Australian libraries and library networks.

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Abstract
The article explores the concept of baby boomers as a ‘crossover’ generation, one that embodies characteristics of previous and later generations. The context is the retirement of the baby boomers and its potential impact on the public library. Ethnographic method within a constructivist framework was used, employing the techniques of focus groups and individual interviews. The findings focus on four principal areas: baby boomer characteristics; information needs and resource use; social needs; and the role of volunteering. Comparisons are made with other generations, as appropriate. The conclusion is that, despite some shared characteristics, differences require innovative responses from public libraries.

Keywords: Baby boomers; public library; intergenerational issues; silent generation; Gen X; Gen Y

The Crossover Generation: Baby Boomers and the Role of the Public Library

INTRODUCTION
Baby boomers (BBs) make up a large cohort of 5.4million people or one-quarter of Australian population (Fujitsu, 2008). As such a large group, they have had a major impact on Australian society. In this regard, there are similarities with other Western societies. BBs have grown up in a period of political stability, economic growth and, for some, free higher education. This well informed and often affluent group has also grown up with accessibility to public libraries (PLs) in their communities. In recent years they have also experienced an unparalleled burgeoning of technological tools in their workplaces and societies in general. As the older BBs approach their mid-60s, it is likely they will look forward to pursuing part-time work, leisure activities and community involvement in their time-rich retirement or semi-retirement. Libraries have good reason to plan and develop policy to cope with the expected surge in user demand that will ensue.

The argument of this article is that the BBs can be seen as a ‘crossover’ generation: embodying characteristics of both the previous ‘silent’, pre-boomer generation and the generations that follow them. Generational differences (as well as similarities) were a key issue to emerge from the study reported in this article. The silent, post-war generation, born from 1923 to 1943, was solabelled in a cover story of Time in 1951 because ‘the most startling fact [about it] … is its silence’, especially compared with their fathers and mothers. ‘It does not issue manifestoes, make speeches or carry posters.’ (Wikipedia, 2009: n.p.). In contrast, BBs have been far from ‘silent’, their life experience having been more carefree. They have also reaped the rewards of stability and plenty, achieved through the sacrifice of their parents. Nonetheless, BBs are considered in some respects to have less confidence than their parents’ generation which Mackay (1997: 72) refers to as
the ‘Lucky Generation’ because of the stronger and more stable values of this cohort. Lack of confidence could also be due, in part, to the impact of the Cold War during their formative years, and to the many societal changes with which they have grown up. On the other hand, BBs are the last link to the conservative values of the earlier generation (Salt, 2006: 278).

The generations following BBs, the so called Gens X and Y, are highly educated, given high school retention rates and the availability of university education (McCrindle, 2006: 3). Gen X is characterized as changing jobs and residences often, having a high disposable income, and seeking a work-life balance (McCrindle, 2006: 5). Reports of Gen X perceptions that BBs are thwarting their economic rise have been appearing regularly in the press (e.g., Anderson 2008; Gilburg 2008). The main burden of this commentary is that Gen X see BBs as driven workaholics, not prepared to step back from controlling positions in the workplace, while BBs see Gen X as not committed enough, because they are seeking to balance work and life commitments. Indeed, BBs may be torn between wanting to work less as they approach retirement and the need to stay in the workforce longer, as encouraged by government, and also by their fear of insufficient funds to last their expected long retirement. The 2008 - 2009 Global Financial Crisis will only exacerbate this trend. Gen Y, a comparatively small cohort, is seen as having been indulged by their BB parents and to be very demanding in the workplace. The similarities amongst these three generations come from a shared experience in the technological revolution which, although having a stronger impact on the younger cohorts, has produced commonalities amongst these generations.

The research questions that are addressed in this article are: (1) What are the similarities and differences between BBs and the generations before and after that make BBs the ‘crossover’ generation an appropriate label? and (2) What will be the impact of the retirement of the BBs on the PL, particularly on (a) use of resources; (b) BBs’ social needs; and (c) volunteering?

This article is based on research undertaken in 2007-2008, which extended a pilot study undertaken in 2005. The findings of the pilot study were reported in a conference paper (Williamson et al 2006a) and an article in the Australian Library Journal (Williamson et al 2006b). While this is Australian research, the prominence of BBs in most Western countries makes the present research relevant to the international scene.

THE LITERATURE
This literature review, which provides the background to the study, focuses on generational similarities and differences and the impact on the PL in the context of the retirement of the BBs. Emphasis is particularly on use of resources, especially the technological; social needs of the future; and the role of volunteering. It is important to note that Hugh Mackay, a leading social researcher and commentator, is cited in the literature (e.g., Mackay, 1997), and was also an interviewee in the study. The same is the case for Bernard Salt who appears both as a demographer, with many publications to his credit (e.g., Salt, 2006), as well as an interviewee in this article.

**Generational characteristics: similarities and differences**

What does the literature tell us about differences in generational characteristics? All generations experience their world in different ways. Strauss and Howe (1991, 1997, 2000) are well-known proponents of generational theory, which, amongst other things, describes ‘a generational persona recognized and determined by (1) common age location; (2) common beliefs and behaviour; and (3) perceived membership in a common generation’ (Strauss and Howe, 1991: 429). These common beliefs and behaviours are developed during childhood and, in particular, during the coming-of-age experiences where youth is divided from adulthood (Strauss and Howe, 1991: 31). Other writers, who have acknowledged the important impact of social, cultural, economic and technological environments on cohorts born at different times, include Mackay (1997).

Snapshots of the impact of different generational experiences come from a range of sources. For example, McCrindle Research (2006) described some of the influences on, first, BBs: ‘The advent of the TV, Rock and Roll, the Cold War, Vietnam War, the threat of nuclear war, and the decimal currency.’; second, on Gen X: ‘the Personal Computer, AIDS, single parent families, the growth in multiculturalism, and the downsizing of companies.’; and, third, on Gen Y who ‘lived through the age of the internet, cable television, September 11, globalisation, and environmentalism.’ A view of the silent generation comes from high-profile demographer, Bernard Salt, who dubs them: ‘The ‘frugals’. They value sacrifice and austerity, and live off their savings.’ (Gorr, 2009: 15)

In terms of particular generational characteristics of BBs, the literature points to the fact that BBs are, generally speaking, more highly educated, healthy, active, relatively more affluent,
technologically savvy, socially engaged, than previous generations (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2005; Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006). They are an influential market sector as a result (ABS 1999), enjoy quality products, convenience, and demand value for money. (Kahlert, 2000: 4)

Other characteristics of BBs are that they strive to remain youthful and mentally young, and view retirement as an active period of their life (Harkin and Huber, 2004; Kahlert, 2000: 4). They are also more likely to remain in their homes, living relatively independently compared with previous generations (ABS, 1999).

Boomers ‘have a reputation for maintaining their cultural and social influence through the decades as they age’ (Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006:1) and being vocal and influential on issues (Mackay, 1997; State Library of Tasmania, 2007). Another key Australian researcher on boomers, demographer Bernard Salt (2003: 94), described this cohort as having ‘forged new cultures at every stage of their life cycle’. This provides libraries with an opportunity to harness their influence as advocates (Roalkvam and Costabile, 2004; Turock, 2005) and advisers in the planning and future development of the library for this cohort (Turock, 2005).

**Attitudes to ageing and ageism**

Two important characteristics identified in the Demos UK study (Huber and Skidmore, 2003), on BBs’ attitudes to ageing, were ‘individualism’ and ‘liberalism’. In an Australia Institute study of BBs prospects at retirement (Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006), BBs inextricably linked feelings about retirement to ageing and the negative stereotypes linked to ageing. While older people may experience the stigma of ageism in the community, and the silent generation has not rebelled against this, ‘it is increasingly apparent that post-war BBs are likely to deconstruct many of the negative stereotypes as they enter old age’ (Bartlett, 2003: 28). A subsequent Demos study of BBs (2004) titled ‘Eternal Youths’ found that their BB interviewees considered the idea of being old ‘carried connotations not only of uselessness and decrepitude but also of the guilt of being a social burden’ (Harkin and Huber 2004: 18). These British BBs were also concerned that older people were portrayed in the media as constituting a ‘demographic time-bomb’. Many of this group thought old age commenced at 80, not the preconceived notion that it begins with the current retirement age of 65 (Harkin and Huber, 2004: 19). Thus there is a difference here between the BB generation and the one above.

**Work and financial status**
In keeping to attitudes to ageing, many BBs are also concerned about the loss of status or sense of self worth following retirement from full-time work (Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006, p. 21). A study, by American Association of Retired Persons (2004), reported that BBs associated retirement with negative conditions such as economic hardship, increased dependence on others for personal care, and increased isolation from society (p.11). On the other hand, although striving to remain youthful and mentally young, many BBs view retirement as an active period of their life (Kahlert, 2000: 4; Harkin and Huber, 2004).

Unlike their predecessors, BB women are more likely to have worked than to have stayed at home (State Library of Tasmania, 2007). This is partly because social attitudes are now very different from the time when women of the silent generation were of working age and families are smaller. Mackay discussed the changing role of women: from that of the older generation housewife, to BB women who took advantage of the availability of education and employment opportunities, to Gen Xers who were able to make more life choices at an even earlier age than their BB mothers (1997: 163). Nevertheless, older generation women do not necessarily view their BB daughters’ lives as better than their own: the BBs may have lived through so-called liberation, but often have had little choice but to work, whether because of the financial fall-out from divorce, or to support lifestyle choices, such as children’s education or home renovation. Thus the ‘revolution in gender roles and responsibilities, while seeming to have created far more choices for Boomer women, strikes many of their mothers as having imposed great pressure on them’ (Mackay 1997: 42).

Federal government policy is attempting to reverse early retirement trends by encouraging older people to remain in the workforce, and introducing more flexible working conditions (Australian Government, The Treasury, Social Policy Division, 2004; COAG, 2006). Indeed, as intimated above, remaining at work may be a necessity for many BB women who are substantially more likely to nominate their finances as a reason to keep working, probably reflecting the more parlous financial situation of older single women. (Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006). Women are less likely to have accrued sufficient superannuation with which to supplement the age pension, resulting in single female households with limited resources (O’Toole, 2005). While BB women have undoubtedly contributed strongly to changing views of the role of women, they have not necessarily seen a corresponding benefit in relation to sufficient savings for retirement. On the other hand, the position of older BBs is likely to be stronger than that of the younger ones, who experienced the depressed economy of the late 1980s in their early careers and who may still be
responsible for educating their children, thus making them less likely to be financially secure (Kahlert, 2000).

**Information needs and resource use**

Mackay (1997) described BBs as voracious users of information. In their approaching retirement BBs will be seeking information about planning for successful retirement, health, finance and investments, estate planning, legal, jobs and appropriate career planning, travel, genealogy, ageing well, and community information (COAG, 2006; Dempsey 2007; Joseph, 2006; Kleiman, 1995; Nevill, 2004).

Williamson (1995, 1998) undertook an extensive study of the information needs of, and source use by, older people aged 65 plus (i.e., the silent generation and even older). As with other studies of the information needs of older people, health was the number one topic for the sample as a whole; income and finance the number two; and recreation the number three. Williamson found that the younger aged in her sample had a need for significantly more information topics than the older cohort and in many of the same topic areas as the research mentioned above. Thus there may not be a sharp disjuncture between the information needs of the younger members of the silent generation, when they were ‘young aged’ (60-75), and those of the BBs. Indeed there may be strong similarities, with implications for library services.

Certainly a ‘crossover’ attribute emerging from the literature concerns BBs’ greater computer literacy levels (State Library of Tasmania, 2007) compared with the previous generation, but their lesser immersion in technology than the younger generations, making them betwixt and between, possibly in both attitudes and skills. McCrindle Research, (2006: n.p.) uses Prensky’s term ‘digital immigrants’ to describe BBs, while Gen Y – and many of Gen X – can be seen as ‘digital natives’. This distinction indicates that, while BBs may see themselves as adept with technology, they are nonetheless immigrants or newcomers in this field, in contrast with Gens X and Y who have grown up with technology tools in the school room, their native status giving them an advantage in the wired world.

Nevertheless, workplace experiences with information and communication technology (ICT) and an interest in technology, in general, have fuelled the competency of BBs. While they may not be as versatile as younger generations, they have coped with the challenges of rapidly
changing workplace conditions. Thus, in retirement, BBs will want to retain their ready access to computers and online resources. This may be difficult because, as Joseph (2006: 27) argued:

> Despite large numbers of BBs being very technologically savvy, the tendency of computer interfaces, operating systems and communications technology to evolve rapidly will ensure a constant need for ‘update’ opportunities for those who are out of the workforce and may lose touch with newer generation computers.

An aspect of resource use more likely to put BBs closer in attitude to the older generation than the younger ones involves enjoyment of the book as an artefact. One librarian participant in an Australian study noted that: ‘In general it would be fair to say that most BBs…have a house full of whiz bang technology… [but] they actually want BOOKS!’ (Jones, 2006: 40). Nevertheless, it is also the case that BBs will want information in the most convenient form and this will often mean online or in formats other than books - the form of information more likely to be used by younger generations.

**Social needs**

A further issue raised in the literature related to BBs focuses on their potential social isolation as they retire from busy workplaces. BBs have experienced the highest divorce and separation rates for any generation (ABS, Australian Social Trends, 1999), and ‘between 40 and 50 per cent of BBs are likely to be ‘living solo’ by the age of 75’ (Evandrou and Falkingham, 2000, cited in Huber and Skidmore, 2003: 67). This rise in the number of older people living alone could contribute to increased social isolation in retirement, especially for women, who are more likely than men to live alone in their senior years (Dempsey, 2007), with consequences for their life choices. This may mean that they are likely to belong to fewer networks than people in the past and to feel more disconnected from the wider community (Huber and Skidmore, 2003: 80). As BBs age, other factors, seen in the past, will also come into play, e.g., the death of a partner, the necessity to move from the family home or from where they have lived for most of their lives.

The implication is that libraries have a golden opportunity to invest in, and create spaces, that will be needed by BBs more than older generations because of the greater social isolation they are likely to face. These will also benefit the whole community (Joseph, 2006) and provide opportunities for social inter-mingling. There are also calls in the literature for coffee shops to be
incorporated into the PL (Dobson, 2004: 3; Williamson et al, 2006a, 2006b), which would also enhance social interaction.

**Volunteering**

The PL could also make a contribution to the lives of BBs by providing volunteer activities, as well as taking advantage of the assistance of those volunteers. According to the article ‘Global Turmoil Hit (sic) Retiring Baby Boomers’ (2008), as many as 38% of their sample, aged 45 - 64, will look for a career change or to learn new skills after age 65. The proportion who would like to participate in volunteer work after age 65 was 71%.

Mackay described silent generation women as willing volunteers in many different community areas, possibly due to their tendency not to work outside the home, and also to their experience of economic hardship during the war where all members of the community pulled together to support those in need (1997: 44-45). It is likely that BBs will not be so compliant about volunteering, and will want incentives and ‘more flexible and diverse options’ (Warburton et al., 2007: 333).

BBs, when they consider volunteering, will be looking for flexibility, the best use of their experience and skills, and activities that enhance their personal development. Discussing this issue in a PL context, Roalkvam and Costabile (2004) proposed that old volunteering strategies and jobs will not work for boomers.

BBs’ ‘crossover’ qualities should enable them to work well in intergenerational settings. Given their trail-blazing propensity, as described by Salt (2003: 94), they are likely to bring a new enthusiasm to how they go about volunteering. Many suggestions for innovative volunteering in libraries emerge from the literature (e.g., Fell, 2009; Demsey, 2007).

**METHOD**

The aim of the project, the findings of which provide the basis for this article, was: To investigate the needs of retired BBs that can be met by PLs, together with possible responses that PLs can make. Both the literature and the research participants made comparisons with other generations in discussing the issues involved, thus making it possible to develop the argument presented in this article.
As in the pilot study, conducted in 2005, the method used for the major project, undertaken in 2007-2008, was ethnographic within a constructivist framework, with qualitative techniques (focus groups and individual interviews) being principally used. The following describes the samples, data collection instruments and the procedures for these two types of interviews. The section concludes with a discussion of the data analysis.

Focus groups

The two focus groups (FGs) in the pilot study, which included eight BB participants in each, were undertaken in Newcastle, New South Wales, and St Kilda, Victoria, in 2005. For the major study, FGs of 8-10 BBs were held in Mildura, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Darwin. Participants were recruited by each of the libraries involved, with guidelines and support from the research team. Despite the efforts made to recruit younger BBs, there were almost twice as many ‘leading edge boomers’ (born between 1946 and 1955) in the final focus group sample, compared with ‘trailing edge boomers’ (born between 1956 and 1965). There were also more than twice as many females as males as the libraries found it much easier to recruit females. Since PL users are more often female than male, the predominance of females in the sample is appropriate. Focus group members were in managerial, professional or administrative positions, were self-employed or retired. Educational levels were higher than would be expected in the general community, given that most sample members were educated beyond high school level. It should be noted that the results are not generalisable beyond the samples included.

While the original aim had been to include equal numbers of library users and non-users, the team decided that it was preferable to include only the former, given the difficulty of locating non-user participants and the likelihood of obtaining richer data from people familiar with the PL. The total number of FG participants was 43.

Gatekeepers

In the pilot study, individual interviews were carried out with four ‘gatekeepers’ (GKs), defined as visionary leaders, with a broad knowledge of the needs of their communities. The GKs - two library managers, and two prominent community members - were encouraged to think creatively about the future PL, drawing on their particular work and life experiences.
The major study included thirteen new GK interviewees, making seventeen GKS altogether in the project. Of the seven new library GKS, three were younger – part of Generations X or Y; the other four were in the BB age group. Since it will be library managers from Generations X and Y who will be providing services to retired BBs, the team considered it important to elicit their perspectives. The suggestions for the library GKS came from the project funders who were representatives of key Australian libraries and therefore in a position to nominate innovative public library practitioners.

The other six GK interviewees were high-profile non-librarians, who are BBs themselves or experts in the area. Two were older than baby boomer age. Great care was made to invite high quality people (a list was generated by the whole team) and the calibre of those who took part was outstanding. They included a high profile sociologist who is a regular community commentator on a range of social issues, including the impact of baby boomers; an equally high profile demographer, much of whose work has focussed on the cohort; and the Federal Shadow for Ageing at the time of the data collection. Given how well known some of the GKS were, we asked them if they wanted to have their names attached to their quotations. Almost all of them did, thus explaining why some GK names appear in this article.

Data Collection

The FGs, which lasted on average for 1.5 hours, were convened in the libraries where they were recruited. In most cases, two of the research team acted as facilitators. The questions for the FGs included participants’ perceptions of their future lifestyles; the role that the PL could play; partnerships that might enhance PL service; and the contributions they might make as volunteers.

The GK interviews were, in most cases, conducted by one of the research team in a location convenient to participants, e.g., their work place. These interviews lasted about one hour. The questions for the GKS focussed on the role of the PL in meeting BBs’ future needs; partnerships that might enhance PL service; and the contributions that BBs might make as volunteers. Most important in the GK interviews were the inspirational thoughts they might have about the PL. They were encouraged to think outside the square.

Because the questions asked in the pilot study were similar to those used in the major study, it was considered legitimate to include the data from the pilot study as part of the outcomes of the project, overall.
Data analysis

The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed by an experienced transcription typist. The initial analysis, undertaken by two team members, involved the identification of themes, to some extent determined by the questions asked. The data within each theme were then analyzed for categories and key quotations. ‘Voice sheets’, so called because they include the ‘voices’ or quotations of participants, were then set up for each theme, each of which was subdivided by categories into which illustrative quotations were entered. An overview, or summary, of the data for the voice sheet was then written. An example of part of a voice sheet for the theme, Attitudes to Technology (without the summary and with just of few of the quotations included), follows in Table 1.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings, based on interviews with GK and FG participants (60 in total), are rich and wide ranging, although not generalisable given the qualitative nature of the sample. They are, however, well supported by the literature.

The focus here is on four principal issues: BB characteristics; their resource use and how they will satisfy their information needs in retirement; their social needs and where they will find a social hub outside the workplace; and the role that volunteering could play in their lives in retirement. As appropriate, comparisons are made with other generations. They are based on comments of participants, who made references to other generations from time to time, as well on findings from the literature.

BB characteristics: generational similarities and differences

One of the GK interviewees, Hugh Mackay wearing his interviewee hat, labelled BBs as iconoclasts and pioneers: ‘They wanted to change the world and they have.’ He also saw them as impatient to get things done.

Ears pinned back, full on – there’s been a kind of generational impatience about boomers, which I think was fuelled by their formative years of the cold war, the
feeling…there could be a nuclear holocaust, and we’re all history, but there’s all this wonderful world out there to explore.

Yet, in older age, he saw them as exhibiting a ‘yearning to be more connected… and to be part of the neighbourhood’, and in their mature years to be ‘voracious consumers of nostalgia…they really do love looking back’. In other words, Mackay saw BBs as being more like their parents’ generation as they age than they might like to admit, in that they yearn after the closer community ties the older generation have enjoyed.

On the other hand, most research participants emphasized the differences in characteristics between BBs and the silent generation rather than the similarities. Participants were very aware of a particular BB persona, growing up as they have with commentary in the press on every aspect of life. A GK described BBs at retirement as being cashed up, ready to enjoy their well-earned leisure, which will result in their being more demanding than their parents were: ‘Their expectations of the library services will be completely different to their parents and preceding generations. …And they’re going to be more aware of what they want and less reticent about telling us that that’s what we want.’ This is in keeping with the literature, (e.g., Mackay, 1997; State Library of Tasmania, 2007). Another GK also contrasted the BB persona with that of older library users: ‘They're wanting a lot; they're articulate, they're assertive, they know what they want…as opposed to an older generation.’

In terms of attitudes to ageing, Hugh Mackay had a penetrating view of how BBs will approach ageing: ‘[They] will probably be angrier than any previous generation, as their faculties fail. Because how can you be young and deaf, or…young and de-mobilized – it just doesn’t work. [They] will be very cranky. That’s something to look forward to.’

Thus, in this section we see a view that suggests some continuity in terms of characteristics as well as a number of views expressing considerable differences with the generations above. This has implications for the PL. Particularly BBs are likely to challenge the stereotypes of ageing and to be clearer in their demands. A GK put it succinctly: ‘I don’t see the baby boomers as falling into their rocking chairs and being patient receivers of large print. I think they’ll be quite demanding and quite discerning borrowers.’ They are also likely to be an asset to the PL if used effectively, e.g., in advocacy roles, given their more assertive dispositions, compared with their predecessors. Thus libraries will need to manage this articulate and demanding cohort to the
advantage of all concerned, including using BB skills to enhance what the PL can offer the community.

Work and financial status

As noted in the literature, some BBs are in a quandary about retirement, drawing value from their workplace identity (Greenfield and Marks, 2004; Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006) and access to resources, and now facing uncertainty in relation to post-work activity. Attitudes to work are another area where BBs present similarities and differences with the previous generation and with Gens X and Y. BBs in some respects echo the strong work ethic of the earlier generation in that many wish to remain in the work force beyond retirement age. This attitude emerged in the response of one FG participant who said: ‘I’ve never thought about retirement, it’s not in my focus in any, way, shape or form…I work for myself, I expect to work for myself until I’m going to kick the bucket…My own parents have never retired.’

At the same time, the attitudes of most BBs are different from those of the silent generation who loyally worked all their lives for the one employer and mostly retired without fuss when the time arrived. As a GKs, a sociologist whose work focuses on women and work, said:

Retirement doesn't equal not working. What it means for BBs is they hope they are not going to stop working but they are going to stop working for other people or in a way where they have to be somewhere at 9 till 5, where their time is controlled by someone else.

This view is echoed by another GK, demographer Bernard Salt, who proposed that BBs would ‘change the terms of work … Boomers will stay in the workforce, but in a reduced capacity. … Boomers will push the working age out. …They’ll start organising work to fit in around their life, rather than their life fit in around their work.’

Hugh Mackay also saw BBs as being ambivalent about retiring, because of what it signifies for them: ‘Work is a kind of sign that you’re still fully alive, still fully engaged. …They will start to be interested in doing other things that emphasize…they’ve got something to offer, they’re still worthwhile contributors.’ The opportunities for PLs to engage BBs as volunteers is discussed later in this article.
On the other hand, a number of FG participants in the study relished the idea of leisure in retirement: ‘Since my retirement I’ve been more involved in community work than I was when I was working – all sorts of different groups, and I have done a bit of part-time study as well.’ This contrasting view of BBs’ attitudes is also represented in the literature, e.g. Kahlert, 2000; Harkin and Huber, 2004.

Nevertheless, many BBs will continue to work after they have reached retirement age, at least in a part-time capacity, partly because they may need to do so for financial reasons. Indeed, as mentioned in the literature review, many women, particularly, will need to continue in paid work, given the often parlous state of their retirement funds. While some participants, in the present study, were concerned about their financial status and whether their savings would support a long retirement, in general they were optimistic in outlook. One reason for this could be that the majority of participants were in the older BB segment and thus more likely to have benefited from economic boom conditions. Although the data were also collected before the ferocity of the global financial crisis was really apparent, the literature makes clear that the situation of the younger boomers and women could be quite difficult even with a booming economy (Hamilton and Hamilton, 2006; Kahlert, 2000). Thus even more BBs than earlier anticipated may need to contemplate a longer working life.

What are the implications of these findings for the PL? The PL has the opportunity to assist with information on a wide variety of work options, even perhaps providing a specialist in the area of new career development and work choices. With regard to finances, the library can play a role in providing information on financial management and the availability of financial assistance and counselling, although this would need to be handled with care. One consideration for libraries to keep in mind is that not all BBs will be in a strong financial position and users may not be able to pay. The traditional ‘free’ library service may be very attractive to many retired boomers.

**Baby Boomers’ resource use**

Here we examine attitudes to technology, the continuing importance of the printed book to many BBs, information needs, and electronic access to information.

*Attitudes to Technology*
Reflecting a diversity of views within the large BB cohort, there were varying attitudes to technology amongst the sample: an older BB described himself as a ‘technical junkie’, while a younger BB in the same group said she was a ‘technophobe’. One participant in the pilot study was not impressed with some achievements of the technological age: ‘[What] you find on the net is pretty bland kind of stuff whereas the books I accessed were written with passion.’ On the other hand, another pilot FG member warned of the problems that could arise for BBs who do not keep up with technological innovation: ‘I think as we age, we get marginalized if we can’t do [technological] stuff.’ Here we see attitudes that indicate that BBs are betwixt and between generations in their attitudes to technology, as indicated by the literature review, above.

Access to technology was important to almost all. Participants wanted to maintain the technological connectivity they had become used to in the workplace. FG participants had varying ranges of ability but, by and large, accepted the need to keep up with changes in technology, and enjoyed the facility of email communication and making travel arrangements via the Internet. This is indicative of the digital immigrant level of technical expertise as discussed in the literature (e.g., McCrindle, 2006). Interestingly, a recent Pew Internet project, which reported on the digital literacy of BBs, speculated that teenagers, who are great users of social networking tools, think email is for old people. (Pew Internet, 2009). A recent comment on Australia’s public broadcaster, the ABC, confirmed this view of email as ‘old technology’, designed originally to mimic the postal service (Marks, 2009).

Some participants alluded to seeking help when necessary from partners or children rather than solving problems themselves. On the other hand some BBs found themselves to be ‘on their own’ or helping older people. For example, a FG member, who had an older partner, said: ‘I can see a huge difference between myself and my husband. He is 6-7 years older than me and he’s totally out of technology. I’m the one that’s got to try and stick with it.’ An older generation GK confirmed his age-group’s aversion to technology:

Like a lot of people in my generation, I still retain some very sort of firmly held…values, I don’t think I’ll ever put an MP3 player in my ear, for instance. I’ve taken the decision not to have a Blackberry, or that sort of access to email wherever I go.

Training in the use of new technology tools will be an ongoing issue for BB ‘digital immigrants’ and there will be a key PL role for this. The continuing advent of new devices is
already challenging for BBs who may be at ease with some level of technology access, but do not necessarily revel in getting their hands on the latest and greatest new toy on the market, unlike younger generations.

Importance of books

The majority of BB participants in the project loved books: the feel and smell. For some, the sensual aspect of books was almost as important as the content. They believed books will continue to exist in libraries of the future. Social researcher, Hugh Mackay, endorsed this, expressing the view that, since the BBs had grown up with the pre-eminence of the printed word over other forms of media communication, attachment to books would continue. This they have in common with the silent generation.

Illustrations of the views, expressed in the study, included a library GK who thought she would never be without books: ‘People my age, they want to pick up a book, sit on a plane, read in bed, and there's something really nice about actually having the object with you and share it with people.’ A FG member emphasized the tactile appeal of books: ‘[It’s] the feel and the touch [of books]. Like those lovely Bloomsbury series books that are nice and small and beautifully bound.’ Senator Jan McLucas’ view was partly an endorsement. She noted that loving books was bound up with feelings as much as content: ‘I still like to have a book in my hand and read a book. It's a sensual thing, it's more than just the information that you're getting off the page.’

A FG participant was concerned that the library tradition of book provision needed to be maintained, especially for those without the technical skills to access books online. On the other hand, a library GK thought that, in future, hybrid book users would emerge – they would read a whole novel in print but sometimes individual chapters online: ‘Where you want to read a whole book cover to cover I think physical will still be the way to go…when you want to read a bit of it you’ll probably get it online.’

Information needs and electronic access

Participants wanted access to a wide variety of information in as many formats as possible. A library GK thought she would definitely use the PL if she was no longer at work:

It would be incredibly advantageous for me, either from home, or from the public library, to be finding electronic journals, that were of interest to me, material that
would also support my reading, biographical material, about authors, related works so that I could find more printed materials as well that were relevant.

Another library GK underlined the different approaches to health of the more technically savvy BBs: ‘Apparently there’s quite a growing trend towards self diagnosis [on the Internet].’ Agreeing with this BB trend, a FG member said: ‘I also really rely now, a lot, on electronic media…I access electronic databases like Medline to find out about medical issues that I think my children have got’. Another FG member also mentioned specialized databases: ‘I don't think the Internet can be a very credible source of medical information so I think it is better to use the special medical database for health issues.’

Foreseeing increased use of the library in retirement, for travel information and as communication hub, a FG participant commented: ‘We travel now, within Australia, camping, and we’ll do that more when we retire. So, we’ll be looking for resources from libraries, nationally, that will support our travel and enable us to communicate with home.’

The rise of e-government, e-banking and the Internet have all contributed to a perceived need for easy access to electronic resources. Many BBs now have, and expect to maintain, electronic access to a plethora of resources, via work places, or other connections. A library GK commented that BBs will want electronic access to a variety of content, for example, on health and wellbeing, travel and gardening. All of these information needs were seen to be important to the older, silent generation (and those older still) in the Williamson (1995, 1998) study. Health was the top information need in this study. Nevertheless, while there is considerable continuity in information needs, the means of meeting these needs are now different following the advent of the Internet. The role of libraries and their staff will be central to assisting access to electronic information for their BB clients.

**Baby Boomers’ social needs**

Participants were asked what role the library might play in the lives of BBs after they retire. Most saw the PL as potentially a community social hub and they imagined visiting the library for more than borrowing their beloved books. Classes of all varieties could be offered through the library as well as interest group meetings, and many participants saw a coffee shop as a vital addition to the library precinct. The library was viewed as a conduit for information sharing, research into issues challenging local communities, such as climate change and water use, and as the centre of an
inclusive community. For example, the following was Hugh Mackay’s summary of the potential social hub role that libraries can play.

The library as the village green, the meeting place, the stimulus for social contact and discussion will be attractive to [BB’s] partly because…a library seems to be not devoid of values, of course, but not carrying cultural baggage [like churches and schools].

Further to the village green concept, and confirming views in the literature (e.g., Huber and Skidmore, 2003), Hugh Mackay saw the library helping BBs re-connect with community: ‘Making some of these connections that will compensate them in their later years for the fact that many of their extended families have been fragmented, and they haven’t been communitarian.’ Another perspective was offered by Bernard Salt:

There's a lot of loneliness, a lot of isolationism, out in the ‘burbs that no matter how connected you are on the Internet, no matter how much radio and television, you still want companionship, and where do you find that companionship? At a point where you can actually access other people similarly situated, which is, I think, the library.

A slightly different perspective was offered by a GK who emphasized the perception of the library as a ‘safe place’: ‘BBs, some of them may be lonely…[or] have lost a partner, and a few of them [will be] looking to the library to provide a safe place for them to gather with other people of their age group.’ A FG member expressed fears about isolation from a personal point of view: ‘I’m very frightened about the isolation of getting older and I would like to see that sort of networking with less isolation…in the library, because when I come in I talk to the library staff but I rarely talk to any of the borrowers.’

A Gen X GK also hoped the library offered more than just a place to borrow a book and leave, and could be a place to relieve the pressures and strains of life: ‘I’d like to think that we could broaden people’s views and provide somewhere for them to not be alone…And you may not necessarily get that from a book. You might be getting that from the people that you meet in the place.’
While providing meeting points for lonely urban BBs, Bernard Salt warned against libraries catering only to the older generation. He agreed with the ideas expressed above, that young people also need to be attracted to the library hub, to share their experiences with others.

You're 68, widowed. What do you do with your day? I might go down to the library, see what's happening there, go to one of the lectures, chat with someone in the tea room. It's a place, it's a purpose. … [What] you want to get away from is that it's sort of a defacto senior citizens club. … It needs to have the right… energy, a bit of edge to it, so you want young people there as well.

A library GK noted that BB users who previously visited the PL in the evenings or weekends were exhibiting a changing pattern of use as they acquire more leisure time: ‘They’re coming during the day when they have a day off. … They may not necessarily borrow something, they just come in here to read the paper or hang out or relax.’ This indicates that BBs may already be turning to the PL as a social hub as they approach retirement.

Intergenerational mingling is an important aspect of the role a social hub can play in people’s lives and is discussed further below in the volunteering section.

**BBs and volunteering**

Volunteers could play a crucial role in the PL of the future since volunteering provides benefits not only for the library, but also for the volunteer. The literature, e.g., Joseph (2006), indicates that boomers are likely to continue to provide a large pool of volunteers in Australia, though one of the GKs from a regional area was concerned that rural volunteers were stretched to capacity and she was unsure that the BB generation would display the same willingness to volunteer their time.

The value of intergenerational mingling through volunteering in PL was articulated by FG participants, especially in relation to children’s activities, where they thought they might have a role. Many BBs expressed a desire to ‘give back’ to the PL, with time and the various skills they have accrued. This was recognition of the importance libraries have had to them throughout their lives. Participants mentioned a variety of volunteering roles they could fill: story telling and poetry for adults; facilitating courses and groups in areas of interest; mentoring young people; contributing to the library newsletter and teaching games such as chess. Another suggestion from a FG was that BBs could engage in public relations for the PL and, through their networks, create
partnerships of assistance to the library and community: ‘The boomers are highly educated, still very active and fit. There’s the opportunity for them to network into places that we can’t imagine at the moment, create partnerships that will assist not just other boomers but other parts of the community.’

There was a view that some BBs would like to reach out to younger generations, through seminars and talks at the PL, offering what they had learned. They could in turn benefit from learning from younger people – for instance, about technology and communications. As one FG member said: ‘there’s a lot of things young people could teach us.’ Another commented that it was not just technology young people can offer but ‘just stuff they’re learning, everyday living. I think they’re so astute and more aware than I was at their age.’

Technically savvy BBs would be useful as library volunteers, helping the less technically adept. A library GK proposed a ‘seniors online’ concept, whereby technically savvy BBs could provide training to those in the community who have less experience. She thought this idea could also work well with young library clients, providing a good cross-generational flow in relation to technical expertise.

As mentioned in the literature review section, there is a view that BBs will not be so compliant about volunteering in the silent generation, and will want incentives and ‘more flexible and diverse options’ (Warburton et al., 2007:333). The ideas put forward in the FGs were not, on the whole of the routine kind for which volunteers have been used in the past in libraries. In addition, there was concern from a number of GKs that the current valuable volunteers, mostly of the silent generation, were ageing and that it may be harder to recruit volunteers in the future for some of the more humdrum roles in the library. There is no doubt that PLs will need to engage BB volunteers differently from the ways they have done in the past.

**CONCLUSION**

The contention that BBs are a ‘crossover’ generation, with characteristics of both the older generation and younger generations, carries some weight. Undoubtedly there are always links between one generation and the next but the historical positioning of the BBs in the world, especially their being young enough to take of advantage of the communications revolution, has given them strong connections with the younger generations. While their differences with the older, silent generation appear to be considerable, the current research, together with some of the
literature, e.g., concerning the love of books (Jones, 2006; Mackay, 1997) and information needs (Williamson 1995, 1998), indicate that the differences may not be so stark.

The concept of the ‘crossover’ generation is useful for PLs in that shared characteristics and attitudes indicate where continuities in services may be acceptable. Nevertheless there is no doubt that the retirement of the BBs requires innovative responses on the part of PLs and that ‘the current paradigm of library services for ‘seniors’ does not match the characteristics and potential contributions of the baby boomer generation’ (ALC and IMLS, 2005). Moreover there is excellent opportunity for PLs to provide not only vibrant, well targeted library services, but also to harness the energy and creativity of the cohort. Several library GKs in the study pointed out that BBs make up the biggest group of users in their libraries and it is also clear that libraries are important places to BBs who value them as a safe and trusted place and forum (ALC and IMLS, 2005).

In terms of positive ageing, much discussed in the literature (e.g., ALC and IMLS, 2005; Borowski et al., 2007), libraries also have a golden opportunity to harness BBs’ natural youthful outlook and to enhance their retirement experience, e.g., by running forums and workshops to provide information about future careers (post-retirement), financial planning and health management. The current study, as well as the literature, has revealed that there are innumerable options from which PLs can choose to remodel their services. Making the choices as to which ones to take up is now the major task ahead.

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