

**STYLEGUIDE**  
for Journalism, Entertainment and Advertising

*aging is an active verb, a process, not a label; to experience life*

# Media Takes: On Aging

**INTERNATIONAL LONGEVITY CENTER – USA**

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**AGING SERVICES OF CALIFORNIA**

STYLEGUIDE  
for Journalism, Entertainment and Advertising

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**International Longevity Center - USA**

**Aging Services of California**

**Nicole S. Dahmen, Ph.D. and Raluca Cozma, Editors**

### International Longevity Center - USA

The International Longevity Center - USA is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research, education and policy organization whose mission is to help individuals and societies address longevity and population aging in positive and productive ways, and to highlight older people's productivity and contributions to their families and society as a whole.

The organization is part of a multi-national research and education consortium and includes centers in the United States, Japan, Great Britain, France, the Dominican Republic, India, Sub-Saharan Africa, Argentina and the Netherlands. These centers work both autonomously and collaboratively to study how greater life expectancy and increased proportions of older people impact nations around the world.

International Longevity Center - USA

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### Aging Services of California

Aging Services of California is the state's leading advocate for quality, nonprofit senior living and care. The public-interest association represents more than 400 nonprofit providers of affordable senior housing, continuing care retirement communities, assisted living, skilled nursing, and home and community-based care. Aging Services' advocacy, educational programs and public relations help its members best serve the needs of more than 100,000 seniors. The association also directs an extensive consumer education campaign, "Aging is an *Active Verb*," featuring its website – [www.aging.org](http://www.aging.org) – as a key resource. Founded in 1961, Aging Services of California was formerly known as California Association of Homes and Services for the Aging.

Aging Services of California

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## Contents

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|                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Preface</b>                       | 7  |
| <b>Introduction</b>                  |    |
| International Longevity Center - USA | 8  |
| Aging Services of California         | 9  |
| <b>Reality check on aging</b>        | 11 |
| Elder abuse                          |    |
| Mass media and communication         |    |
| Journalism                           |    |
| Entertainment                        |    |
| Advertising                          |    |
| Stereotypes and ageist terminology   |    |
| <b>Recommendations</b>               | 25 |
| Accurate portrayal of aging          |    |
| Recommendations for journalism       |    |
| Recommendations for entertainment    |    |
| Recommendations for advertising      |    |
| Terminology                          |    |
| <b>Endnotes</b>                      | 39 |
| <b>Glossary</b>                      | 41 |
| <b>Resources</b>                     | 51 |



## Preface

With the longevity revolution, humankind is entering a new and unprecedented stage of development, the impact of which has been made greater because of its rapidity. In the past, countries typically saw their first great gains in life expectancy occurring from improvement in infant, child and maternal mortality, as well as from the control of infection and disease. With advances in medicine and public health, the United States alone gained 30 additional years of life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, we are no longer limited to a life view that must accommodate itself to the historic brevity of life, to random and premature illness and death. With centenarians the most rapidly increasing age group and weekly media reports about progress in medical technology, people realistically expect longer and healthier lives.

The advent of a possible means to delay aging and extend longevity is a great intellectual and social as well as medical achievement. The added years of life that are now available for so many is requiring that we as a society change obsolete mind-sets and attitudes about growing old. The social construct of old age, even the inner life and the activities of older persons, is now subject to review and revision. The very words we use to describe people are undergoing greater scrutiny.

It is ironic, then, that at the same time Americans are beginning to see an unfolding of the entire life cycle for a majority, we continue to have embedded in our culture a fear of growing old, manifest by negative stereotypes and language that belittles the very nature of growing old, its complexities and tremendous variability.

This report is an important step in overcoming ageist language and beliefs by providing journalists and others who work in the media with an appropriate body of knowledge, including a lexicon that helps redefine and navigate this new world.

Robert N. Butler, M.D.  
President and CEO  
International Longevity Center - USA



## Introduction

From botox to Social Security, issues facing our aging population are on the front page of newspapers, the focus of advertising campaigns and the subject for major motion pictures. The media and marketing industries are starting to pay attention to the opportunities and challenges facing our aging population.

We are moving into uncharted territory. Every day, 12,000 boomers turn 62. A new generation is forming and society is trying to catch up. Corporations are watching their workforce age. Policymakers are struggling to keep financial and health support systems in place. Scientists are rushing to find treatments for age-related illnesses. And the media is trying to navigate the vast amount of ever-changing information and attitudes about growing older.

The International Longevity Center - USA is committed to bringing awareness to the issues of aging and educating media professionals covering the growing population of older Americans. In 2006, the ILC-USA published a comprehensive report, *Ageism in America*, examining age discrimination in American society. The report documented the deeply embedded and widespread ageist attitudes of our culture, including in marketing and media. Building on that report, *Media Takes: On Aging* is a resource for journalism, entertainment and advertising professionals as they encounter the increasingly complex issues of the age boom.

Older adults have the right to fair and accurate portrayal of their stories and their issues. *Media Takes: On Aging* outlines the ageist depiction of older adults in the United States and provides the necessary tools for professionals to help proactively combat stereotypes.

Megan McIntyre  
Director of Communications  
International Longevity Center - USA

## Introduction

For a variety of reasons the *California Association of Homes and Services for the Aging* changed its name in 2006 to *Aging Services of California*.

The new name is shorter, easier to remember and takes advantage of the association's classic website address – [www.aging.org](http://www.aging.org). But for the 48-year-old nonprofit organization, those practical considerations were secondary to addressing a bigger concern: to develop a new identity that is more progressive and inclusive. “Aging Services,” it was determined, represents the broader spectrum of living environments and supportive services and care available to older adults today.

The new identity, not coincidentally, demonstrates what we are attempting to accomplish by publishing *Media Takes: On Aging*. The objective of this unique *styleguide* is to work with media professionals in journalism, entertainment and advertising to represent older adults and the aging process in an accurate, contemporary and unbiased manner. For example, we removed the condescending phrase “for the Aging” from the association's name; and proceeded to direct a public education campaign to essentially redefine “aging” as an active verb, a process we all experience rather than a label placed on old and frail adults. Also removed from the name was the anachronistic use of “Homes,” which dates back to “old folks homes.” Using California's rationale, more than a half dozen other state associations have since adopted the new “Aging Services of...” identity.

Of course it is a simpler task to modify names and words associated with *aging* than it is to modify society's overall perceptions. Still, a reality check on our communication through mass media is an important step in the right direction. It could even influence how we age well into the future.

Stuart Greenbaum  
Director of Public Relations  
Aging Services of California



### Reality check on aging

The largest generation in U.S. history, the boomer generation, is entering their sixties. There are currently 76 million Americans who were born during the two decades after World War II. This accounts for 28 percent of the adult U.S. population. There currently are more than 36 million people age 65 and older. The average life expectancy of men is 82 years and of women, 85. In addition, throughout the developed world, people are living longer and having fewer children, so the population balance is rapidly changing. By the year 2025, one out of every five Americans is projected to be age 65 or older.

The term “ageism” was introduced by Robert N. Butler, M.D., in 1968 to take advantage of the effectiveness of the terms racism and sexism in identifying and promoting attitude change. It was quickly adopted by the media. Ageism can be defined as ideas, attitudes, beliefs and practices on the part of individuals that are biased against persons or groups based on their age. “Ageism is one of the

last isms alive and well in this country,” according to Anita Landis, a senior creative strategist who specializes in promoting active senior living communities at GlynnDevins Advertising & Marketing.

Unfortunately, the majority of older persons report that they have experienced ageism. Although polls do not reveal the frank personal expressions of prejudice by the population at large, ageism remains embedded within the nation’s institutions with discrimination in the workplace, healthcare, language...and the media. In addition, ageism is apparent in direct and personal responses toward older persons, where insensitivity and impatience are not uncommon. Especially painful is the extent of various forms of abuse – physical, emotional, sexual and financial.

Eighty percent of older Americans have been subjected to ageist stereotypes. Older people are generally stereotyped as sick, frail and physically dependent on others. While names and characterizations may vary, the message is the same: older men and women are incompetent and lack self-sufficiency.

**Ageism can be defined as ideas, attitudes, beliefs and practices on the part of individuals that are biased against persons or groups based on their age.**

## Media Takes: On Aging

An October 2, 2008 article in the *New York Times* by John Leland noted that professionals sometimes refer to it as *elderspeak*, the “sweetly belittling form of address that has always rankled older people: the doctor who talks to their child rather than to them about their health; the store clerk who assumes that an older person does not know how to work a computer, or needs to be addressed slowly or in a loud voice. Then there are those who address any elderly person as “dear.”

In his book *Ageism: Negative and Positive* Erdman Palmore, an authority on aging and professor emeritus at Duke University, observes that, like all stereotypes, the stereotype of a typical older person exaggerates the importance of a few characteristics, and the society assumes these characteristics to be true for all older people. The mass media certainly are one of the most visible and influential institutions responsible for perpetuating stereotypes about older Americans.

**As with all struggles for human rights, part of the fight for the fair treatment of older persons entails bringing the prejudices to light and making the public aware that they do not represent reality.**

Documenting the extent of prejudice toward older persons can lay the groundwork for a change in social attitudes and expectations and contribute to legislation and enforcement to achieve a cultural and personal transformation. As with all struggles for human rights, part of the fight for the fair treatment of older persons entails bringing the prejudices to light and making the public aware that they do not represent reality.

Rather than continuing to perpetuate ageist stereotypes, small steps by the media can lead to great strides in this transformation.

This *styleguide* provides recommendations on steps professionals in the media – in journalism, entertainment and advertising – can take to be proactive in changing ageist stereotypes. First, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the current state of ageism within the United States.

### **Elder abuse**

Between 1 and 3 million Americans age 65 and older have been injured, exploited or otherwise mistreated by someone on whom they depend for care or protection. However, only one out of six incidents of elder

abuse, neglect, exploitation and self-neglect is brought to the attention of authorities. Types of elder abuse include physical abuse; emotional and psychological abuse; sexual abuse; financial abuse; active and passive neglect; self-neglect and/or abandonment.

Media coverage of documented and undocumented elder abuse has definitely contributed to awareness of this serious criminal activity. It is important, though, that stories are objectively covered, and do not sensationalize the circumstances or arbitrarily stereotype older people as weak mentally or physically.

### Mass media and discrimination

“It is clear that the media’s obsession with youth often comes at the expense of older Americans,” stated John Breaux, chairman of the Special Senate Committee Hearing on Aging, convened in 2002. “In the quest to target youth, media and marketing have ignored the purchasing power and preferences of millions of baby boomers and seniors across the country.”

The mass media both inform and reflect how people live, think about themselves, and perceive others. The influence of marketing and media on contemporary culture cannot be overstated. According to Edward Alwood, a journalism historian and an associate professor at Quinnipiac University, “The capacity of the news media to create and perpetuate prejudice is one of the most unsettling and frightening aspects of American journalism.”<sup>1</sup>

The portrayal of older people in the mass media influences the viewers’ explicit and implicit attitudes and beliefs toward older people and old age. On one hand, such images affect how young people anticipate their future and how they interact with older people, and on the other hand, influence the way older people participate socially and evaluate their potential and limitations.

In other words, perceptions of older people and the views older people have of themselves are *directly* affected by how older people are depicted in the news media, on television, in film and in advertising. The mass

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media do oftentimes perpetuate ageism, even if inadvertently. Still, they have the best forums and opportunities to offer redress and to ensure that they are providing accurate depictions of older Americans.

### Journalism

A 2002 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that coverage of issues deemed relevant to older people tends to rise in relation to the upcoming presidential election. Because older adults vote in large numbers, candidates talk about health issues relevant to this age group. Therefore, before elections, news media follow the officials' lead. Moreover, newspapers only cover issues of interest to older adults when such topics are in the spotlight in Congress or during election campaigns, exhibiting very little independence.

Age beat reporters partially fill that void. Paul Kleyman of the American Society on Aging, a San Francisco-based national organization of professionals in the field of aging, notes that more than 700 U.S. and Canadian journalists representing a range of media belong to the Journalists Exchange on Aging. JEoA is an information network designed to help reporters who cover aging as a regular beat or in frequent assignments,<sup>2</sup> and publishes *Age Beat* online (www.

asaging.org) with the assistance of the ASA. JEoA and recent *Age Beat* newsletters provide information and networking opportunities for journalists covering issues in aging but not those representing services, products or organizational agendas.

In 2001, an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* reported that about 50 U.S. newspapers had news beats on aging.<sup>3</sup> The age beat is a wide-ranging assignment that offers freedom to transcend traditional departmental slots in news, features, business, health

and sports. Moreover, the article noted, that with the aging of the U.S. population, reporters working on the age beat are covering not just older persons, but a historic change. The boomers, one of whom turns 50 every seven seconds, will be the largest single generation of older people

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## Media Takes: On Aging

in history. The age beat audiences are therefore not only older people, but also their middle-aged children who start caring for their parents and thinking about what is in store for them.

People aged 45 to 74, according to readership studies, are the most loyal audiences of mainstream newspapers, and only turn to television when their eyesight fails them. They are also the most willing to read a paper from front to back, browsing through a wide range of content for items of interest.

In contrast, younger audiences are more interested in specialty magazines and, of course, online sources – rather than general-interest publications. Therefore, the trend of making newspapers bright and shiny, with more graphics, shorter stories in an effort to capture the short attention span of younger audiences could discourage loyal readers without necessarily managing to engage new ones.

### Entertainment

Television programming in the United States continues to focus heavily on people between age 18 and 49. Television and films tend to portray older women and men as one-dimensional. Renowned media researcher George Gerbner found that people who watch large amounts of television believe that older persons are in poor shape financially as well as physically, sexually dormant, close-minded and inefficient.

Although the majority of Gerbner's groundbreaking research was done in the 1980s, his findings are still relevant. For example, even now few soap operas have characters representing family members, doctors, lawyers or neighbors who are older adults. Further, older characters often are portrayed as sweet, childlike, comical, absent-minded or befuddled; or worse as repulsive, feeble, irrational or out of touch with reality.

The following research results and statistics give more credence to concerns of misrepresentation of older adults in television and film.

Consider:

- Less than 2 percent of prime-time television characters are age 65 and older, although this group comprises 12.7 percent of the population.
- Only one-third of characters on prime-time television are women, and less than one-third of the female characters are older than 40.
- Although Americans who are age 40 and older comprise 42 percent of the American population, more than twice as many roles are cast with actors who are under the age of 40 as actors who are age 40 and older.



## Media Takes: On Aging

- White men under the age of 40 get most of the writing jobs for Hollywood's television and film industries.
- Approximately 70 percent of older men and more than 80 percent of older women seen on television are portrayed disrespectfully, treated with little if any courtesy, and often perceived as "bad."
- Eleven percent of male characters and 22 percent of female characters on television between age 50 and 64 are characterized as "old."
- A 2003 study found that only 27 percent of all women's roles on primetime television went to women age 40 and over, and they were typically cast as victims who were betrayed, abandoned and abused.

Television can provide older persons with a substitute for lost social contacts. More than 70 percent of older viewers report that television is a "strong" or "moderate" companion. Actually, one characteristic of the boomer generation is that, unlike generations before, it has grown up with television. These are the people who witnessed world-changing events on television. Events like the assassinations of JFK, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King; the walk on the moon; the Vietnam War and anti-war protests; the sexual revolution, civil rights, women's and environmental movements; as well as the Cold War. As older people watch more television than any other age group, they are particularly vulnerable to incorporating stereotypes about aging into their self-image.

In a survey of older audiences, many people over the age of 60 mentioned their perception of negative stereotyping of aging in broadcasting, such as being dependent, frail, vulnerable, poor, worthless, asexual, isolated, grumpy, behind the times, miserable, pathetic, senile, and a drain on society.

But the issue is less about being positive or negative about older people than about showing the diversity of older people's lives and experiences.

### *Underrepresentation of older people*

A research study by George Gerbner and Larry Gross noted that, although older people are the fastest growing age group in America; and although they watch more television than the average viewer, they "seem to be vanishing instead of increasing" in television programming. "As characters age, they lose importance, value and effectiveness. Visibly old people are almost invisible on television," the study concluded.

Similarly, a 2000 study of prime-time shows by Children Now, a child advocacy group, found that less than 3 percent of characters were 70 or

older (while, according to the 2000 census, they represented 9 percent of the American population), and 13 percent were “older adults” between the ages of 50 and 69, in contrast to the 28 percent in real life. Moreover, twice as many older people portrayed were men, while in reality older women outnumber older men.

Several other studies in the past two decades consistently found a gross underrepresentation of people over age 60, a problem that is notably worse for female characters who are usually cast in “senior” roles at much earlier ages than male characters.

While “young old” people (60 to 80 years of age) are underrepresented in broadcasting, “old old” people (over 80) are practically inexistent (several content analyses over time could not identify even one such character).

This invisibility of older characters in programming (and advertising) is unquestionably damaging. As Gerbner notes, “Representation is, of course, not just a question of numbers or of fidelity to census figures. It is a question of the variety of roles, opportunities, life chances, and images most people see in common from infancy on and as they grow older. Those underrepresented in the world of television are necessarily more stereotyped and limited. Visibility is privilege in the symbolic world.”

Participants in surveys also complained about the paucity of older contestants on quiz shows, where they believe that older people’s experience of life, general knowledge and expertise built over their lifetimes would make them into good candidates – especially because this age group frequently watches such programming.

In surveys, older viewers reported that they became so accustomed to seeing young characters in network shows, that this scarcity of older characters has become “natural.” One older participant said, “It probably contributes to the feeling of invisibility older people have in the world. It teaches us that older people don’t count.” One woman added,

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## Media Takes: On Aging

“Negative portrayals often tell more about the teller than the characters, so don’t take it personally.”

### *Misrepresenting and mocking older people*

“Ageism is one of the last non-taboo prejudices left in the country,” noted Pat Sajak, in his article “Breaking News in 2007: Aging is Good!” that appeared in the online newsletter *Human Events*. The “Wheel of Fortune” host added, “If a public figure disparages almost any other group, he can expect the P.C. police to break down his door and haul him in front of the court of public opinion (or Oprah) to apologize for his insensitive remarks.

“However, when it comes to mocking the elderly, the risks have been minimal. Movies and TV shows routinely have fun joking about seniors’ supposed inability to reason, move, have sex or adapt to modern ways. Entertainment executives speak openly about their disdain for older demographics as they pursue younger audiences with abandon.”

Sajak concludes his pointed comments with the admonition, “But change is in the wind.”

It may be easy to dismiss some perceived ageism as comedic or dramatic license for the sake of entertainment. Yet, by contrast, other prejudicial or biased representations have become rare and, when they do appear, are roundly criticized.

Women in particular suffer from ageism and ageist roles more than men. While men are routinely depicted as productive professionals, research shows that older women on television are often “invisible” and ignored because they no longer play the role of obedient daughter, child bearer or sex object. This invisibility is piercing for a mature woman not only because she is not perceived as being sufficiently worthwhile to be visible, but because she appears on society’s radar screen as a symbol of frailty, weakness and ugliness. Exceptions occur when women are seen in socially accepted roles of mother and grandmother.

Emblematic of visible motherhood but invisible womanhood are characters such as Edith Bunker (“All in the Family”), Estelle Costanza (“Seinfeld”) and Marie Barone (“Everybody Loves Raymond”). Much like the Jewish mothers so prevalent on television for the last 50 years (Ida Morgenstern in “Rhoda,” Sylvia in “Nanny,” Sheila in “South Park” and Susie in “Curb Your Enthusiasm”), these one-dimensional women “push, wheedle, demand, constrain and are insatiable in their

## Media Takes: On Aging

demands.”<sup>4</sup> While laughing at the ridiculous antics of Edith Bunker, audiences are also imbued with messages that reinforce her limited role in an ageist society. She can’t compete as a physically attractive human being. She’s invisible in that realm and does not represent any emerging new images for mature women. One 2002 study noted that older characters in television programming are more likely than members of other age groups to provide comic relief by displaying physical or mental incompetence.<sup>5</sup>

### *Some causes and effects of ageism in Hollywood*

Ageism in Hollywood, ironically, affects people in the industry as much as it does the rest of the population. Older actors often get overlooked, because of Hollywood’s obsession with the youth market. Late night shows have young talent bookers who dismiss older entertainers as irrelevant. Jack Paar, who hosted the “Tonight Show” from 1957 to 1962, said some of his favorite guests were septuagenarians like Eleanor Roosevelt and octogenarians like Albert Schweitzer. “Today’s talk-shows are dumbed down,” Paar said to the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>6</sup> When they are booked for late night shows older guests are often asked to make silly cameo appearances, rather than sit down and talk. Network and executives stepped up courting their young audiences in the 1990s, when ratings began to be judged on demographics, not households.

### *A mismatch between news and entertainment programming*

Today, as cultural values change and the number of retirees grows, the expectations about social and physical aging have changed. As researcher Maria Vesperi argued in a 2003 report<sup>7</sup>, sanctions concerning age-appropriate hairstyles, dress, demeanor and recreational behavior have loosened considerably. The trim, smooth-skinned retiree on a racing bike is seen as an inspirational model, not an oddity. There is an ongoing shift away from the emphasis on aging as a social welfare problem and toward a focus on healthy, active individuals with stock portfolios and independent lifestyles.

The risk is that the model image of healthy/wealthy older people may be as much a stereotype as other generalizations and help create unrealistic expectations. However, according to ethnographic studies, this portrayal does reflect the situation of some people in their early retirement years, who experience new forms of civic engagement, creativity, and a blossoming of avocations. The popularity of Elderhostel

## Media Takes: On Aging

programs and the opening of public university classrooms to auditors over age 60 are further indicators that today's older adults are eager for continued social and intellectual stimulation.

To appease advertisers who seek to reach viewers in the 18-35 year old demographic, compared to prior decades most network newscasts now play down serious reporting about government, international affairs and major public issues as the appeal to intellectual content is believed to be confined largely to older audiences. It is ironic that at the same time networks depict older persons as senile, comical, incompetent and irrelevant, networks also view them as the appreciative audience of intellectually rigorous reporting.

### Advertising

"Daily we are witness to, or even unwittingly participate in, cruel imagery, jokes, language and attitudes directed at older people," contends Robert N. Butler, M.D., president and CEO of the International Longevity Center - USA.

Greeting card and novelty companies call them "over-the-hill" products: from anti-aging soap and gift boxes with prune juice; to birthday cards mocking the mobility, intellect and sex drive of the no-longer-young, reported the Associated Press in a widely circulated 2004 article titled "Ageism in America."

Many Americans chuckle at such humor. Others see it as offensive, as one more sign of pervasive ageism in American. While many authorities on the various forms of ageism, including Maria Dwight from Gerontological Services, Inc., consider greetings cards to be perhaps the worst offenders for negatively stereotyping older adults, just as many authorities point at advertising and marketing.

In fact, recent television commercials clearly illustrate the ageist bias that permeates advertising and the mass media:

- A soft drink commercial features an older man and his grandson. The man's hand is shaking so much from the ravages of age that his grandson is able to exploit his condition and shake up a bottled beverage.
- An office supply company commercial features an older woman and her family. The confused woman mistakenly takes a photograph of her family with a stapler.

## Media Takes: On Aging

- An ad for bottled water features an older man in a nursing home. After drinking the vitamin-infused beverage, the man gains the strength to flirt with his nurse.
- A long-running series of popular ads for a theme park features a frail and creepy older man. After dance music plays, the man awakens, begins a zany dance routine, and leads droves of children to the park.
- An ad that first ran during a Super Bowl game features an older couple. Fighting over a bag of chips, they push each other to the floor and hit each other with their canes. The woman loses the battle and winds up holding her husband's dentures.
- A network baseball commercial features an older ex-ballplayer attempting to break back into the big leagues. A series of pathetic moments demonstrate just how incapable the man is: When a fly ball hits him on the top of his head, he can barely throw the ball and is easily knocked over by a younger player.
- A candy bar ad features a young man and an older woman. The young man flirts with the older woman and a message flashes on screen pointing to his impaired judgment after eating the candy.

As a major component of the mass media that influences mainstream culture, advertising often mirrors contemporary life in both its best and worst aspects. The average American receives a torrent of advertisements each day, from print, broadcast, outdoor and online media, featuring an unprecedented range of products from fast food to pharmaceuticals. Nielsen Media Research reported in fall 2005 that the average American watches four hours and 39 minutes of television per day. Each day, Americans are exposed to approximately 100 television advertisements and an additional 100 to 300 ads through other media.

Researchers argue that nowhere might the image projection be more damaging than in commercials. That is where promises are made. The fact that one can buy youth, or at least a youthful appearance, endows that state and quality with high value.

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## Media Takes: On Aging

“The marketers talk about the “senior market” as one homogeneous blob,” Maria Dwight remarked. “Would they lump together all people who are ages 20 to 60? I think not. Then why combine all those aged 55-plus? The assumption seems to be that you stop growing when and if you are grown up.”

The lack of diversity is consistent with research on magazine advertising. In a 2001 analysis of advertisements in 31 popular magazines, Miami University professor Judith de Luce remarked, “If we were to draw a picture of American life exclusively from evidence derived from these 31 magazines, we would have to conclude that the consuming population consists primarily of people 18 to 49 years old. We would also have to conclude that there are almost no people of color in the United States.”<sup>8</sup>

The advertising industry continues to target audiences in the 18 to 49 age group. In the 1950s and 1960s advertisers began targeting this lucrative group after the major television networks took a closer look at the demographic details of their viewers. At this time, the boomer generation was entering their 20s and starting families of their own; this was the largest and most lucrative market. Today, the boomers are now grandparents and make up a large segment of the population, yet the advertisers still concentrate on the younger demographic.

Even when directed at older Americans, most marketing/advertising is insensitive to older persons’ vision and hearing limitations (small fonts, many colors, little color contrast, speaking quickly, etc.)

When older adults are included, their depictions often perpetuate negative stereotypes including:

- Dependent – not able to care for themselves, must rely on others to care for their most basic needs
- Despondent – depressed, afraid, hopeless, lonely, neglected and sad
- Vulnerable – hypochondriac, sedentary, wary, worried and victimized
- Severely impaired – feeble, inarticulate, senile, slow thinking and incompetent
- Shrew-curmudgeon – bitter, complaining, demanding, prejudiced, nosy, selfish and stubborn
- Recluse – naïve, quiet and timid
- Self-centered – emotionless and humorless
- Miserly – greedy, cheap and frugal
- Elitist – demanding, prejudiced and wary

### **Stereotypes and ageist terminology**

*Use of new technologies, including computers and the Internet:*

Research data indicate that computer use among older people is more positively influenced by income than it is by age. New technology use also correlates with increased education.

“Our research indicates that older people use the Internet for pretty much the same thing that younger people do: shopping, banking, researching, dating, e-mail, games, etc.,” says gerontologist Maria Dwight. Older people expect the same transparency and level of service that everyone wishes to receive, but have “less patience and more insight into exaggerated claims and gratuitous language.”

*Second childhood stereotype:*

In her book *The Fountain of Age*, Betty Friedan observes that Hollywood employs the so-called “second childhood stereotype” when depicting older people. For instance, in the movie “*Harold and Maude*” (1971), Ruth Gordon plays a fey, childlike, white-haired old woman prodding a teen-age dropout in his rebellion. In “*On Golden Pond*” (1981), Henry Fonda and his new step-grandson sneak off to go fishing, like two naughty boys taking advantage that the mother is not looking. “*Just You and Me, Kid*” (1979), in which teenager Brooke Shields plays stickup with octogenarian actor George Burns, was promoted as “the story of two juvenile delinquents.”

*Threat to younger generations:*

The media often perpetuates the myth of intergenerational conflict, where older adults are benefiting at the expense of the young. Emphasis is placed on the depletion of resources for younger groups as a result of older generations’ use of Medicare and Social Security. In reality, older persons have the potential to make significant contributions to aide the younger generation, including financial support of their adult children and grandchildren, help with childcare, housing and provide volunteer services.

*Well-off older folks:*

According to research from Maria Vesperi<sup>9</sup>, more positive depictions of older adults started to emerge in the late 1980s, when “the public dialogue shifted from discussion of the fragile, dependent aged to a focus on healthy older people with self-serving ‘lifestyles.’” Vesperi calls this



## Media Takes: On Aging

group “woofies” – well-off older folks. Many niche publications targeted at older adults are actually unabashed vehicles for advertisers trying to reach this group. This stereotype creates a dominant perception of older persons as a leisure class, with implications in social and political decisions. It also creates unrealistic expectations of what late life should be (much as teen publications raise concerns about body image and social values).

### *“Just kill me” observations:*

It is not uncommon for a healthy individual to whisper “just kill me” or “put a pillow over my head” upon witnessing the plight of a very old, frail or disabled person. Two things are not taken into account with such disparaging remarks: 1) the objection is incredibly disrespectful to the individual who may be valuing every moment of life; 2) and no one knows for certain the value they will place on their own life, given similar circumstances, until they personally experienced it. Avoiding ageism, as with all forms of discrimination and negative stereotyping, often requires observers (and communicators) to carefully view situations from another’s perspective.

### *Ageist terminology:*

Far from comprehensive, unfortunately, but here are some obviously ageist words and phrases to avoid.

- Ancient
- Biddy
- Blubbering idiot
- Codger
- Coot
- Crone
- Dirt ball
- Crotchety old man
- Dirty old man
- Foggy
- Fossil
- Gaffer
- Geek
- Goose
- Geezer
- Gone senile
- Gophers
- Greedy geezer
- Hag
- Little old lady
- Miserly old man
- Old fart
- Old goat
- One foot in the grave
- Over the hill
- Prune
- Senile old fool
- Sweet old lady
- Vegetable
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Recommendations

#### Accurate portrayal of aging

Today, as a result of improvements in nutrition, exercise, healthcare, assistive technologies and generally a focus on well-being, average U.S. life expectancy has risen to 77.6 years. So although it is true that the human body loses some degree of resiliency with age, the extent to which physical changes occur varies from person to person, and the stigma associated with these changes is often unwarranted. According to Anita Landis, “Older Americans are savvy. They’ve seen just about everything. Our media spends a lot of time on the poor, frail older person and all the cons that are out there. That’s important, but it’s not all there is to aging.”

What follows is an accurate portrayal of aging in America:

- Eighty percent of older Americans are healthy enough to engage in normal activities.
- Sixty four percent of Americans age 65 and older report no limitation in major activities.
- Only 20 percent of Americans age 65 and older report that they need assistance with basic daily activities.
- Rates of disability are continuing to decline for persons 65 and older.
- Many older persons have an interest in sex and continue to engage in sexual activity, which plays an important role in their lives and, in fact, may be more satisfying after age 60.
- Studies have also shown that people who continue to learn and regularly exercise are more likely to maintain cognitive abilities than those who do not.

Attributing physical decline to age erroneously suggests that age itself is the cause of decline when, in fact, illness is often the cause. Further, diseases that manifest themselves later in life are often caused by behavior and environmental exposure early in life. Assumptions that certain diseases are “old-age diseases” have ramifications for all Americans, resulting in limited funding for research on illnesses that affect people at all ages, such as Parkinson’s disease and arthritis. Although old age is often blamed, the real culprits of many illnesses include poor nutrition, environmental pollutants, stress and genetic predisposition.

## Media Takes: On Aging

Now studies are finding that the insults can have health consequences, especially if people mutely accept the attitudes, reported John Leland in the *New York Times*, October 7, 2008.

**Becca Levy, an associate professor of epidemiology and psychology at Yale University, who studies the health effects of such messages on elderly people, found that little insults can lead to more negative images of aging and, in fact, even worsen functional health over time.**

Becca Levy, an associate professor of epidemiology and psychology at Yale University, who studies the health effects of such messages on elderly people, found that little insults can lead to more negative images of aging and, in fact, even worsen functional health over time. Levy's seminal long-term survey of 660 people over age 50 in a small Ohio town, published in 2002, found that those who had positive perceptions of aging lived an average of 7.5 years longer – a bigger increase than that associated with exercising or not smoking.

In a more recent study, Levy found that older people exposed to negative images of aging, including words like “forgetful,” “feeble,” “absent-minded,” “helpless” and “shaky,” performed significantly worse on memory and

balance tests; in previous experiments, they also showed higher levels of stress.

Levy concluded that many Americans start developing stereotypes about older people during childhood, reinforce them through adulthood, and enter old age with attitudes toward their own age group as unfavorable as younger person's attitudes.

The American mass media play a vital role in shaping the image of older persons. John Zweig, a veteran marketing and advertising expert, succinctly sums up the media's role: “Incumbent upon us in mass communication and marketing is to accept the fact that discrimination and negative characteristics exist, but that we have to use the power and technical tools of our trade to model an intrinsically better approach to aging.”

Recommendations for journalism, entertainment and advertising follow:

### Recommendations for journalism

Older adults are probably the news media's most loyal audience. They've grown up reading newspapers, watching history's most respected TV anchors and reporters, and generally valuing news coverage. Boomers and individuals in the sixties and older seek out and appreciate real news – more so than the condescending feel-good, fluff stories that too often are covered to satisfy older readers.

*Avoid stereotypical and demeaning terminology:*

- Writers, particularly those who consider themselves nowhere near being a “senior” or among “the elderly,” must remember that the bar has moved to the right, says Jim Berklan, editor of *McKnight's Long-Term Care News*. “What once might have been considered old (perhaps 60 or 65), no longer is. The average age of nursing home residents, for example, is closer to 80 than most people would think; for assisted living, it is over 80.”
- *Washington Post* columnist Abigail Trafford says the word senior “has probably had its moment. The word is laden with stereotypes. It conjures up dentures and discounts, decline and dysfunction. As one person said: ‘I’m turning 60 this year, and I don’t think I will be a senior for a long time.’ Another said: ‘Senior definitely means older than me.’”
- When in doubt, ask sources what terms they prefer. Refer to this book’s Glossary for preferred and disliked descriptors. Remember, however, that even the most experienced editors that may have difficulty reaching a consensus on some of the terms. Language is evolving, as are the realities it conveys.
- Based on a national survey of age beat reporters, Paul Kleyman, the editor of *Aging Today*, recommends journalists avoid being patronizing, demeaning or using stereotyping terms such as *feisty*, *spry*, *sweet*, *little*, *feeble*, *eccentric*, *senile*, *grandmotherly*, etc.
- Don’t ascribe a routine behavior to an older individual, suggesting it is a deviation from the norm. Older adults are active, sexual, etc., like people of any other age. Don’t gratuitously mention family relationships when there is no relevance to the subject: “Golda Meir, a doughy grandmother, told the Egyptians...”
- “I’d like to see more use of the words *individual* or *person*. As in *individuals with epilepsy* (not *epileptics*) or “individuals who are (blank)

## Media Takes: On Aging

years old” rather than over-using the noun form of *elderly*,” encourages *McKnight’s* Berklan. The editor also discourages, as patronizing, such comments as “He is 80 years *young*.”

- For individuals who reside in skilled nursing homes, especially, Berklan adds, writers for *McKnight’s* are careful to use the term *resident*, rather than *patient*. These facilities are indeed people’s homes, and while many are there for medical care, many others are permanent residents who are unlikely to leave.
- Remember that older adults are not a monolithic group. As Jim Toedtman, the editor of *AARP Bulletin*, noted, “The difference between aging boomers and younger boomers is the difference between The Beatles and Springsteen, between antiwar rebels and anti-nuke environmentalists, between prudent savers and spenders awash in red. Differences grow geometrically as people stay active and live longer and longer.”

*Consider the applicability of stories on aging:*

- According to Toedtman, one major topic of concern to older persons that news media seem to neglect is financial literacy. Older adults are often targets of financial scams. Further, the impact of finances on retirement, inheritances and lifestyles for those on fixed incomes all are subjects especially relevant to older adults.
- Moreover, the media often make generalizations about the economic status of older adults. The news media should report on realistic financial planning for retirement when all one has to live on is social security. Too often the media focus only on retirement planning for wealthy older people.
- Equally upsetting – and neglected – is the topic of doctor shortage. The United States doesn’t have anywhere near enough primary care doctors. “The failure of the medical establishment to generate more interest and expertise in geriatric medicine is almost a disgrace,” the AARP editor pointed out.
- Similarly, journalists should not shy away from covering the issue of social isolation. As more people live longer, they’re also increasingly disconnected. “We see this in every natural disaster. The elderly die or are sick or injured disproportionately. Have we learned from France’s disastrous summer heat wave of 2003? Exploring that is a good story,” Toedtman recommended.

## Media Takes: On Aging

- American journalists on the aging beat could learn from foreign lessons and how media in other parts of the world report on and for older adults. Europe, Russia and Japan already have a greater percentage of older citizens. And China's older population is exploding. By 2030, one of every four people over 65 in the world will be from China.
- AARP and social researchers at the University of Southern California found in a 2004 survey reported in "Images of Aging in America" that many Americans still have misconceptions about aging and older people, such as that they are asexual, miserable or "pretty much alike." The study revealed that those with less knowledge about aging had higher levels of anxiety about the aging process. Before rooting out such misconceptions among their readers, journalists themselves should correct their own prejudices.
- Remember that stories about aging are not of interest only to the older audiences. As in any type of journalism, aging-related stories need headline support to engage readers of all ages.
- When it comes to the writing, *McKnight's* Berklan suggests, the use of good analogies is critical. "Put an older person's perspective or experience into something equivalent to a younger person." For instance, to convey the discomfort and aggravation associated with a poor quality wheelchair, make comparisons to modes of transportation they can relate to – dirt bikes, ski lifts and off-road vehicles.
- "Older people have seen and done a lot. Most have something worth sharing. Listen to them. If they're good communicators, you're often going to get rich, unexpected quotes and information that your innate biases otherwise would not take you to," advises Berklan.

### Recommendations for entertainment

Reach the widest possible audience and be profitable. No one disputes these fundamental objectives of film and television producers. Consequently, the most relevant and simple recommendation to make to entertainment professionals with respect to ageism is to try to avoid stereotyping, thus insulting and discouraging viewership by such a large, increasing percentage of the population.

Producers as well as directors, writers, casting directors and others involved in the production of films and TV shows have distinct roles to play in more accurately portraying older adults and aging issues. The criteria for improving depictions is no more complex than to be realistic,

representative and respectful; and, if it helps, to consider a parent, grandparent or older friend or mentor as an example or reality check.

Surveys of older people show they are interested in seeing older

characters with balance and diversity in mainstream popular programming, and older people as presenters of and participants in fact-based programs.

The preconceived notion that older participants and guests turn young audiences away doesn't bear out. Several talk show hosts admit that the older they are, the more outspoken and funnier their guests are.

There are films that seem to get it right – not by necessary portraying older people in a positive light, but by presenting realistic characters. Back in 1993, *U.S. News & World Report*<sup>10</sup> recommended the following films that

**The criteria for improving depictions is no more complex than to be realistic, representative and respectful; and, if it helps, to consider a parent, grandparent or older friend or mentor as an example or reality check.**

fairly depict and show the complexity of older people:

- “The Wash” (1988)
- “Cinema Paradiso” (1988)
- “Thank You and Goodnight” (1990)
- “Age Old Friends” (1990)
- “Strangers in Good Company” (1991)
- “Enchanted April” (1992)
- “The Cemetery Club” (1993)

More recent films that reflect the diversity of older and various facets of the aging experience include:

- “Iron Lion” (2003)
- “In Her Shoes” (2005)
- “Away from Her” (2006)
- “Venus” (2006)
- “Little Miss Sunshine” (2006)
- “Love in the Time of Cholera” (2007)
- “No Country for Old Men” (2007)
- “Young @ Heart” (2007)

## Media Takes: On Aging

Professionals involved throughout all aspects of film production – particularly screenwriters, but also casting directors, producers and directors can have significant, positive influence on the portrayal of older adults.

In fact, it should come as no surprise that many top film directors already are especially sensitivity to aging issues. Consider the many directors who are just hitting their stride when they reach retirement age. At 76, Clint Eastwood directed two of his finest movies, “Letters from Iwo Jima” (2006) and “Flags of Our Fathers” (2006). At 69, Roman Polanski made “The Pianist” (2002). Past 70, John Ford made “Seven Women” (1966); At 70 Howard Hawks directed “El Dorado” (1966); Hitchcock was 73 when he made “Frenzy” (1972); as was Otto Preminger when he made “The Human Factor” (1979); and David Lean was 76 when “A Passage to India” (1984) was released. Even older than that, in 2003 at the age of 85 – after a recent career of announced retirements and comebacks – Ingmar Bergman wrote and directed “Saraband.”

### **Recommendations for advertising**

There are currently 76 million aging boomers who are likely to transform the culture and experience of aging in America as they have changed other facets of life, and experts are developing new insights into how to reach the mature market. Products targeting boomers are set to become the next big ad category in the coming years. Workshops, websites and how-to books on reaching the mature market abound.

In the new advertising/marketing environment, successful practitioners will need to understand older consumer’s needs and aspirations and include more realistic images of older persons across all media. Sandra Timmermann, director of MetLife’s Mature Market Institute, acknowledges that while there are advertisements that portray older people playing golf, walking on the beach and sleeping in hammocks, these are not necessarily authentic. As she says, “Retirement is more than that.” The sheer numbers and wealth of the next generation of older persons demand no less.

As John Zweig notes, the new advertising/marketing environment offers the opportunity to support “values of meaning and contributions that are appropriate for older people to embrace as their material lives wind down. It should not be a fact that we ignore or deny, as it is one of



the real opportunities of aging that we can become less concerned with the superficial and more focused on core values.”

The marketplace should pay attention to certain trends among the new generation of retirees:

- Older people have psychologically shifted from acquiring material possessions toward a desire to purchase enjoyable and satisfying experiences.

**Surveys have found that healthy, active older people perceive themselves to be 75 to 80 percent of their actual chronological age and relate and respond better to advertising characters who are 10 to 15 years younger than the target audience.**

- Older Americans have a growing appetite for adventure travel, second careers, education, and personal growth and self-actualization opportunities.
- Surveys have found that healthy, active older people perceive themselves to be 75 to 80 percent of their actual chronological age and relate and respond better to advertising characters who are 10 to 15 years younger than the target audience. It is important to note that this tendency starts as early as people who turn 30. It may be that the perceptions of chronological age need to be redefined, rather than age itself.

- In addition, not all older people have large amounts of discretionary income. Many older adults must make do on social security checks alone and are not capable of retiring in the lavish style often portrayed in advertising.

*Some positive stereotypes in advertising:*

- Kindly grandparent – family-oriented, fun-loving, generous, grateful, wise, kind, loving, supportive and trustworthy older people
- Golden ager – active, independent, adventurous, well-traveled and well-informed, curious, determined, healthy and health-conscious older people
- John Wayne conservative – the patriotic, religious, nostalgic and reminiscent retired people

## Media Takes: On Aging

- Liberal matriarch-patriarch – the liberal, mellow and wealthy type
- Activist – older people who are health-conscious, liberal, political and sexual
- Small-town neighbor – the old-fashioned, conservative, emotional, frugal and quiet older people

*AARP: The Magazine*, founded in 1958 by Ethel Percy Andrus, Ph.D., a retired teacher and high school principal who also formed the National Retired Teachers Association and AARP, has a positive, enlightened tone toward aging. It urges older Americans to be active in society, to be committed to the future and to lead lives of independence, dignity and purpose. As the most prominent magazine for older adults, and now the largest circulation magazine in the United States, *AARP: The Magazine* has some advertising standards that ensure that its 20 million diverse readers get the respect they deserve. The magazine turns down 35 to 40 percent of the ads submitted for publication, mostly because they are ageist, or because they tend to pigeonhole older people in some way.

These standards can be applied by other publications:

- Instead of a message that says, “I feel terrible. Give me product X.” use phrases like “I feel great with product X.”
- Don’t make a long story short: older people like to have plenty of product information on which to make a decision.
- Take 15 years, at least, off a target age group: people tend to report that they feel younger than their chronological age.
- Don’t put them all on a diet. Most older people eat the same foods as everyone else, and most have cooked nutritious foods for years.
- Keep a sense of humor. More time to relax means more time to smile.
- Don’t take the romance out of life: there may be more time for it.
- Plan for their future: life is continuing, not rushing toward its close.
- Fear appeals *don’t* work.

*Retirement is changing; older adults are embracing volunteerism:*

- Recent research indicates that the volunteering rate is about three times higher for those over 50 who were asked than for those who were not.
- While their first impulse is to express delight about their newfound freedom, retirees are generally less forthcoming about the negative aspects of being retired. Upon reflection, they discuss missing the type

## Media Takes: On Aging

of relationships they had at work, the camaraderie and challenges in the workplace. Perhaps most important, they miss a sense of purpose. Volunteering can fill that void.

- *Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement*, a report by the Harvard School of Public Health, states that boomers “are less likely than younger cohorts to volunteer out of a sense of duty or obligation and more likely to volunteer as part of a social interaction.” Boomers, the report adds, “are more likely to volunteer as a result of social, self-development, self-esteem, or leisure-focused motivations. Episodic, familiar, community-based opportunities are also preferred.”
- Research by AARP shows that 80 percent of boomers expect to continue working beyond typical retirement age. Large numbers may begin to look for part-time work with more flexible hours or for opportunities to volunteer and contribute to the good of society.

*Assume older adults and boomers think as individuals, not as a cohort:*

**Although it is possible to tap into the shared history and culture of boomers, this hardly homogenous population is at various life stages, and live a variety of lifestyles.**

- Over-using “boomers” as a catch-all word and shortcut identity for people currently in their 40s, 50s and 60s deserves advertising and marketing campaigns, warn Matt Thornhill and John Martin of The Boomer Project, a marketing research and consulting firm. Although it is possible to tap into the shared history and culture of boomers, this hardly homogenous population is at various life stages, and live a variety of lifestyles.
- Americans over 55 are not one, big homogeneous group. Older people of different ages, genders, religions, races, economic classes and geographic locations will likely react differently to different messages.
- Clever appeals and humor might not work with all age groups. Those under 60 are more apt to appreciate word plays and innuendo. Those over 60 tend to favor more concrete communication.

*Tell people stories, good stories:*

- Remember that numbers numb and jargon jars. Stories are the most

## Media Takes: On Aging

convincing and appealing. Stories bring the abstract to life and can be effective in advertisements, marketing materials and in media relations.

- Stories don't have to be long. In fact, shorter is often better. A good story can be told in two or three minutes.
- Put stories first, data second. People don't think about what they don't care about, and stories get them caring enough to think about the facts.
- Remember that photos tell stories, too, but be wary of the "greeting card effect" – photos that are so sweet they seem fake. Show real people doing real things in real locations. Setting is important in showing people what the experience at your organization is really like. Avoid posed shots. Be real. It's not all about the smile.

### *Use emotional and positive appeals:*

- Given their focus on emotionally meaningful goals, older adults prefer emotional messages to informational ones. When researchers showed older and younger people two different ads for the same products, the older viewers preferred the emotional messages, while younger people showed no preference one way or the other. In addition, older people remembered the slogans and the featured products better when they were emotionally meaningful.
- Age sharpens interpersonal skills. With age, people lose some of their cognitive and physical abilities, but their emotional skills improve. "As they get older," Stanford researcher Laura Carstensen writes, "humans seem to acquire advanced interpersonal skills that make them successful negotiators. They are able to appreciate different perspectives, assess complex interpersonal implications, and decide which course of action is most promising." This finding has implications both for message and for the kind of volunteer assignments that play best to the strengths of older adults.
- Optimism is the ultimate sell. Researchers have found that older adults don't process or retain negative images as well as younger people do. When shown positive, negative and neutral photo images, older adults remembered positive images far better than negative and neutral ones. Recent brain research confirms this conclusion.
- Aging Services of California's current public education campaign, titled "Aging is an *Active Verb*," depicts famous and "everyday"

## Media Takes: On Aging

people who have accomplished great feats and contributed notably to society as older adults. The Emmy-nominated TV public service announcements are available for viewing at [www.aging.org](http://www.aging.org) or on the website of the creative team, Pilotfish Productions, at [www.pilotfish.tv](http://www.pilotfish.tv).

### Terminology

#### *Avoid euphemisms:*

Choose your words carefully. It may seem like a minor issue of semantics, but every little bit contributes to the bigger effort to reverse America's bias against aging.

Society's preferences for words and terms change too often, too fast and too arbitrarily to make definitive recommendations about usage. The multitude of descriptions used over the years by gays and lesbians validate this argument. So too do various racial and cultural terms, such as Black or African American; or Latino or Latin American or Hispanic or Mexican. It is always better to use descriptions and adjectives only when essential to the story.

"It's our experience," notes Eunice Nichols, director of Experience Corps San Francisco, "that many volunteers over 70 are very comfortable with – or even prefer – the term *senior*." Elizabeth Fox, founder of Experience Corps Washington, D.C., says the word *retirees* worked well in early recruitment efforts. "It was the simplest way to convey the idea that we were looking for people who had time during the day," she says.

If you need to identify individuals over the age of 50, "older adults" is preferred over "senior" and "elderly," which can be discriminatory in nature. After all, we don't refer to people under age 50 as "junior citizens." Instead, say "man" and "woman," and give the age, if relevant to the story.

Evaluations of words describing old age differ between groups. The use of "aging" and "aged" as nouns are definitely bad. A survey by a university gerontological program found that "elderly" is acceptable to people ages 54 and under, while those over 55 view the word negatively. Similarly, "retiree" is viewed as positive by people ages 54 and under, but disliked by those over 55. "Veteran" is viewed favorably by all ages. Yet while "senior citizen" is considered neutral by people ages 54 and under, it is offensive to people over 55.

Focus groups have shown that while a few older, low-income adults

## Media Takes: On Aging

seemed to prefer “golden years,” “maturity” and “senior” or “senior citizen,” euphemisms are probably not the best way to go in messages with broader reach. Until the perception of aging changes, this isn’t a solvable problem. If it’s bad to get older, then any synonyms are bad, too.

“Boomers” or “baby boomer generation” are preferred over “baby boomers,” which is perceived as condescending. Also, communicators (especially in advertising) need to appreciate that boomers are a generation, like others, consisting of a whole range of socio-economic-political demographics.

*Emphasize experience and independence:*

“Experience” is a very powerful – and welcome – word. Focus group participants preferred descriptors that acknowledged accumulated wisdom and life experience. Words like “coaches” and “the experienced” work well, especially when respondents assumed their own unique, individual experience – versus the “generic” experience accrued as everyone ages. “The most profound finding of the research that we did,” Margaret Mark, former advertising executive for Civic Ventures and Experience Corps says, “was the discovery of this yearning to have your own personal or professional experience validated, to have somebody out there who needs and values what you’ve done with your life.”<sup>11</sup>

“Independence” is a very important word for older adults and for marketing professionals. It reflects the desire to age in a place of one’s own choosing, with dignity, while remaining active and vital. Senior living and care professionals explain that their services facilitate independence and autonomy by providing support with dining, transportation, maintenance and, of course, healthcare.

*Design for readability:*

In addition to terminology and wording, advertisers and marketers must also remember design. Sandra Timmermann reminds us that it is “important to think about readability rather than the artistic approach.”

**“Independence” is a very important word for older adults and for marketing professionals. It reflects the desire to age in a place of one’s own choosing, with dignity, while remaining active and vital.**

## Media Takes: On Aging

Research done by MetLife's Mature Market Institute recommends the following guidelines to increase readability when developing advertisements targeted toward older people:

- Avoid italic fonts.
- Avoid all caps.
- Use standard leading.
- Avoid faded images and screens behind areas of text.
- Use high contrast (dark text on a light background).

### Endnotes

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### Glossary

#### *Access*

Usually a patient's ability to obtain medical care or healthcare services

#### *Activities of daily living (or ADLs)*

Indicate routine activities such as bathing, dressing, grooming, cooking and eating; used to determine an individuals' need for supportive services and care

#### *Acute care*

Medical services provided to treat an illness or injury, usually for a short time

#### *Ageism*

Stereotyping and prejudice against individuals or groups because of their age. The term was coined in 1969 by gerontologist Robert N. Butler, M.D., founder and president and CEO of the International Longevity Center, to describe discrimination against seniors and patterned on sexism and racism. Dr. Butler defined ageism as a combination of three connected elements: prejudicial attitudes towards older people, old age and the ageing process; discriminatory practices against older people; and institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about older people.

#### *Aging*

An ongoing, all-inclusive process (we all experience) rather than a label placed on older, frail adults

#### *Aging services*

An inclusive term for residential options, and services and care provided to older adults

#### *Alzheimer's disease*

A progressive and fatal brain disease named for German physician Alois Alzheimer, who first described it in 1906; the most common form of dementia, the disease destroys brain cells, causing problems with memory, thinking and behavior severe enough to affect work, lifelong

## Media Takes: On Aging

hobbies or social life; Alzheimer's gets worse over time, and it is fatal; today, it is the seventh-leading cause of death in the United States affecting more than 5 million Americans; While there is no current cure, treatment combined with the right services and support, can make life better for the millions of Americans living with Alzheimer's

### *Ambulatory care*

Medical service provided on an outpatient basis, may include diagnosis, treatment, surgery and rehabilitation

### *Assisted living facility*

A housing facility staffed with 24 hour care to residents that could include help with bathing, dressing, feeding and housekeeping; usually provided for less medical care than skilled nursing facilities

### *Blind*

Describes a condition in which a person has loss of vision for ordinary life purposes; avoid using "the blind," instead use man/woman who is blind (see also visual impairment)

### *Boomer*

Describes a person who was born during the post-World War II baby boom between 1946 and 1964. "Boomers" and "boomer generation" are preferred over "baby boomers," which is perceived as condescending. As it captures an entire and diversified generation of 76 million people, they should not be lumped together unless compared to other generations.

### *Catastrophic illness*

A highly serious and costly condition that could be life threatening or cause life-long disability and financial hardship

### *Continuing care retirement community*

CCRCs are designed for healthy people who are looking for security and assurance about where they are going to live as they grow older and how they are going to cope with potential illness or the frailty of older age; CCRCs offer an independent lifestyle, with residential living and various healthcare services, and residents know that they can continue to enjoy the same conditions no matter what happens to their health, and at a fixed cost agreed on beforehand

## Media Takes: On Aging

### *Chronic illness*

A moderately inconvenient to highly serious condition that will not improve, that lasts a lifetime or reoccurs and may result in long-term care needs (includes Alzheimer’s disease, arthritis, diabetes, epilepsy)

### *Custodial care facilities*

Medical or non-medical services which do not seek to cure, are provided during periods when the medical condition of the patient is not changing or do not require continued administration by medical personnel; much long-term nursing care is classified as custodial

### *Deaf*

Refers to a profound degree of hearing loss that prevents understanding speech through the ear; avoid using “the deaf,” instead use man/woman who is deaf (see also hearing impairment)

### *Dementia*

A general term for the loss of memory and other intellectual abilities serious enough to interfere with daily life

### *Disability*

General word used for a functional limitation that interferes with a person’s ability, for example, to walk, see, hear or learn; may refer to a physical, sensory or mental condition; use as a descriptive noun or adjective, such as persons who are mentally or physically disabled

### *Elderly*

Use this word carefully and sparingly. The term is appropriate only in generic phrases that do not refer to specific individuals: *concern for the elderly*, *a home for the elderly*, etc. In other words, describing a person as elderly is bad form, although the generalized category ‘elderly’ might not be offensive. If the intent is to show that an individual’s faculties have deteriorated, the *Associated Press Stylebook* recommends citing a graphic example and attributing it to someone.

### *Gerontology/Geriatrics*

Gerontology is the study of the social, psychological and biological aspects of aging; distinguished from geriatrics, which is the branch of medicine that studies the diseases, disabilities and health of older people

## Media Takes: On Aging

### *Handicap*

Not a synonym for disability; describes a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment or by one's own self; can be used when citing laws and situations but should not be used to describe a disability; for example, the stairs are a handicap for him

### *Hearing impairment*

A generic term used to indicate any degree of hearing loss, from mild to profound; use people who are hearing impaired

### *Homes*

More contemporary descriptions are aging services, or senior living communities or campuses; homes is considered anachronistic, even condescending (as "homes for the aging")

### *Hospice*

A unique care situation that provides services for people with terminal illness; provides for medical, emotional and social help in a comfortable and familiar place, usually the patient's own home

### *Impairment*

Refers to loss or abnormality of an organ or body mechanism, which may result in disability

### *Inpatient*

Refers to an individual who has been admitted to a hospital and is receiving services under the direction of a physician for at least 24 hours

### *Insurance*

A way of responding to the risk of an adverse event, such as having to pay large healthcare expenses, by spreading those risks among many people; provides a way to substitute a small, predictable payment (a premium) for the risk of having to make a large payment in the event of an uninsured accident or illness

### *Long-term care*

An umbrella term used to describe health, community and social services provided for individuals who need continuing assistance because of physical or mental disability; professional services are provided

## Media Takes: On Aging

in older adult communities, care facilities and private residences; additionally, the term describes in-home care provided by family and friends

### *Long-term care insurance*

Coverage for the cost of healthcare and residential care in some cases

### *Medicare and Medicaid*

These huge programs are distinct and not interchangeable, but people frequently confuse them with one another. *Medicare is a universally available federal program for all people 65 or older and many people with disabilities. Medicaid is a federal and state poverty program restricted to low-income individuals.*

### *Midlife*

References to people in midlife are more inclusive than using *boomer(s)*, a term identifying one's birth cohort. Midlife generally identifies the years between people's early 40s and early 60s, but precision is somewhat slippery. Be aware that middle age traditionally was considered to begin at age 35, when 70 was regarded as a typical benchmark for very old age. Increasingly, the large and generally active boomer generation is likely to extend the concept of midlife well into the 60s, according to Paul Kleyman, editor of *Aging Today*.

### *Nondisabled*

Appropriate term for people without disabilities; normal, able-bodied, healthy or whole are inappropriate

### *Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC)*

A community or neighborhood where residents remain for years, and age as neighbors, until a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community develops

### *Older (people, adults, individuals, Americans and so on)*

A national survey of nearly 100 age-beat journalists found that this is the top choice term, seen by reporters as the more neutral and flexible general descriptor for people in later life (the 2007 Journalists Exchange on Aging survey was coordinated by Paul Kleyman, editor of *Aging Today*, and Steve Slon, editor of *AARP: The Magazine*).

## Media Takes: On Aging

### *Outpatient*

Refers to an individual who has received healthcare services without being formally admitted to a hospital

### *Palliative care*

Any form of medical care or treatment that concentrates on reducing the severity of disease symptoms, rather than curing or delaying progression of the disease itself; goal is to prevent and relieve suffering and to improve quality of life for people facing serious, complex illness; non-hospice palliative care is offered in conjunction with curative and all other appropriate forms of medical treatment; should not be confused with hospice care, which delivers palliative care to those at the end of life

### *Pre-existing condition*

A physical or mental condition of an insured individual which first becomes known to the individual before the insurance policy is issued; insurers may choose not to cover treatment for such a condition, at least for a period, or may raise rates because of it

### *Premium*

The cost of health plan coverage, not including any required deductibles or copayments

### *Preventative health services*

Services aimed at preventing a disease from occurring, or preventing or minimizing its consequences; includes care aimed at warding off illnesses, at early detection of disease and at stopping further deterioration

### *Primary care*

Care at “first contact” with healthcare system, including an array of non-specialist services provided by physicians, nurse practitioners or physician’s assistants

### *Primary care physician*

A physician, such as a general practitioner or family physician, who serves at the patient’s first point of contact with the healthcare system and coordinates the patient’s medical care

## Media Takes: On Aging

### *Provider*

Any healthcare professional or institution that renders a health service or provides a healthcare product, includes hospitals, senior living communities and care facilities, rehabilitation facilities, physicians, nurses, etc.

### *Referral*

A primary care doctor's written permission for a patient to see a certain specialist or to receive certain services; required by many managed care health plans

### *Respite care*

Short-term care given to a patient by another caregiver, so that the usual caregiver can rest

### *Senior/Senior citizen*

Use the term sparingly; can be discriminatory in nature; the preferred terminology is older adults

### *Skilled nursing facility*

An institution that offers nursing services similar to those given in a hospital, to aid rehabilitation of former hospital patients who are seriously ill; historically referred to as nursing homes

### *Skilled nursing facility*

These facilities, also called nursing homes, provide 24-hour skilled nursing care

### *Speech disorder*

A condition in which a person has limited or difficult speech patterns; use a man/woman with a speech disorder; for a person with verbal speech capability, use man/woman without speech (do not use mute)

### *Tertiary care*

Healthcare services provided by highly specialized providers such as neurosurgeons, thoracic surgeons and intensive care units; these services often require highly sophisticated technologies and facilities



## Media Takes: On Aging

### *Triage*

The classification of sick or injured persons according to severity in order to direct care and ensure the efficient use of medical and nursing staff and facilities

### *Visual impairment*

A generic term used to refer to all degrees of vision loss; use man/woman who is visually impaired

### *Underserved*

Persons who have insufficient access to care either because they have insurance that does not cover all necessary care or because needed services are not available in their locality





### Resources

- **AARP ([www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org))** is a nonprofit membership organization of persons 50 and older dedicated to addressing their needs and interests. It has more than 39 million members and its aims include informing members and the public on issues important to this age group, advocating on legislative, consumer and legal issues, promoting community service, and offering a wide range of special products and services to members.
- **Aging Services of California ([www.aging.org](http://www.aging.org))** is the leading advocate for quality nonprofit senior living and care in the state. This public-interest association represents more than 400 nonprofit providers of aging services (including affordable housing, continuing care retirement communities, assisted living, skilled nursing, and home and community-based care) that collectively serve more than 100,000 older adults. The association also directs a statewide public education campaign – “Aging is an *Active Verb*.”
- **The American Federation for Aging Research ([www.infoaging.org](http://www.infoaging.org))** provides the latest research-based information on a wide range of age-related diseases, conditions and issues.
- **America Society on Aging ([www.asaging.org](http://www.asaging.org))** is the largest organization of multidisciplinary professionals in the field of aging. Its resources, publications and educational opportunities are geared to enhance the knowledge and skills of people working with older adults and their families.
- **Civic Ventures ([www.civicventures.org](http://www.civicventures.org))** engages millions of boomers in the workforce. Founded in 1998, the organization’s programs, original research and strategic alliances demonstrate the value of people’s experience in solving serious social problems. Its national service program, Experience Corps ([www.experiencecorps.org](http://www.experiencecorps.org)), works with more than 2,000 members in 20 cities to help 20,000 students.
- **Gerontological Society of America ([www.geron.org](http://www.geron.org))** is the nation’s oldest and largest multidisciplinary organization devoted to research, education and practice in the field of aging. The primary

## Media Takes: On Aging

purpose of the Society – and its 5,200-plus members – is to advance the study of aging and disseminate information among scientists, decision makers and the general public.

- **International Longevity Center – USA ([www.ilcusa.org](http://www.ilcusa.org))**, founded in 1990 by world-renowned gerontologist and Pulitzer Prize winning author Robert N. Butler, M.D., is the first nonprofit, nonpartisan, international research, policy and education organization formed to educate individuals on how to live longer and better, and advise society on how to maximize the benefits of today’s age boom.
- **The OASIS Institute ([www.oasisnet.org](http://www.oasisnet.org))** is a national, nonprofit educational organization designed to enrich the quality of life for mature adults. Seeking to keep older people active in the community through educational and volunteering programs, OASIS offers programs such as Positive Attitudes and Positive Aging to help people deal with the stresses of aging.
- **Selling to Seniors ([www.seniorsnews.net](http://www.seniorsnews.net))** is an advertising publication that contains case studies of successful sales approaches, highlights of research studies and reports on demographic trends, including ways to effectively segment the mature market in order to increase advertising effectiveness. It is a useful guide to mature consumers’ attitudes, spending habits, media preferences and more.
- **Stanford Center on Longevity (<http://longevity.stanford.edu>)** has a mission to transform the culture of aging by combining scientific and technological discoveries with swift entrepreneurial action. The SCL links top scholars with government, business and the media to focus on practical solutions for maintaining physical fitness, improving memory, and using technology to improve savings and healthcare.
- **ThirdAge ([www.thirdage.com](http://www.thirdage.com))** is a rich online resource for older people, with articles on issues relevant to people over 40 and to those who want to build a genuine relationship with older people, such as relationships, romance, health, wellness, well-being, spirituality, and personal growth and development.

## Media Takes: On Aging

- **University of Pittsburgh’s “Generations Together: An Intergenerational Studies Program” ([www.gt.pitt.edu](http://www.gt.pitt.edu))** focuses on intergenerational relationships and taps the wisdom of age, with programs such as the Intergenerational Early Childhood Program, Youth in Service to Elders, and Intergenerational Artist Education Program, which links older masters of the visual, literary and performing arts with budding artists.
- **Gerontology Program, University of North Carolina at Greensboro ([www.uncg.edu/gro](http://www.uncg.edu/gro))** delivers leaders in the profession with the highest quality trans-disciplinary education in gerontology and performs basic and applied research, preparing students for academic and professional careers serving age-related markets nationwide.
- **USC Davis School of Gerontology ([www.usc.edu/dept/gero](http://www.usc.edu/dept/gero))** is the nation’s leader in the field of gerontology, has consistently pioneered innovative educational programs. Through the efforts of the faculty, staff and Board of Councilors, the Andrus Gerontology Center is committed to promoting successful aging and an older population that is healthy, active and involved in the life of the community and nation.









# Media Takes: On Aging

## Styleguide for Journalism, Entertainment and Advertising

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With the longevity revolution, humankind is entering a new and unprecedented stage of development, the impact of which has been made greater because of its rapidity. The advent of a possible means to delay aging and extend longevity is a great intellectual and social as well as medical achievement. The added years of life that are now available for so many is requiring that we as a society change obsolete mind-sets and attitudes about growing old. This report is an important step in overcoming ageist language and beliefs by providing journalists and others who work in the media with an appropriate body of knowledge, including a lexicon that helps redefine and navigate this new world.

Robert N. Butler, M.D., President and CEO, International Longevity Center - USA

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**Media Takes: On Aging** is an attempt by the International Longevity Center - USA and Aging Services of California to work with media professionals in journalism, entertainment and advertising to represent older adults and the aging process in an accurate, contemporary and unbiased manner. The styleguide begins with a reality check on aging – an overview of the “longevity revolution” and its impact society, and a brief review of how older people currently are represented by the mass media. The book then shares authoritative recommendations, a glossary and resources.

Ultimately, the objective of **Media Takes: On Aging** is to help overcome ageist attitudes and actions. As a matter concerning both style and substance, a good place to start is to redefine *aging* as an active verb – a process we all experience rather than a label placed on the old and frail among us.

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The **International Longevity Center - USA** ([www.ilcusa.org](http://www.ilcusa.org)) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research, education and policy organization whose mission is to help individuals and societies address longevity and population aging in positive and productive ways, and to highlight older people’s productivity and contributions to their families and society as a whole.



**Aging Services of California** ([www.aging.org](http://www.aging.org)) is the state’s leading advocate for quality, nonprofit senior living and care. The public-interest association’s advocacy, educational programs and public relations help its provider-members best serve the needs of more than 100,000 seniors. The association also directs an extensive consumer education campaign, “Aging is an *Active Verb*.”

