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The Journalist’s Toolkit on Ageing: Helping shape media perceptions

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Abstract
During 2002 Bond University's Centre for New Media Research and Education (CNMRE) and the Positive Ageing Foundation of Australia (PAFA) have been co-operating to develop The Journalist’s Toolkit on Ageing, an interactive web-based tool designed to help shape media perceptions on ageing. The toolkit is designed for media professionals and journalism students who want a solid grounding and knowledge of ageing issues. Rather than being an exercise in political correctness, this resource aims to challenge perceptions and raise awareness about age and how it is represented in electronic and print media. The site features references, articles to publish, story ideas, writing tips, links to other resources, downloads, statistics, and much more. Up-to-date information is presented with material that is freely available for publication or broadcast. This paper explains the rationale behind the project, introduces the site, and discusses the educational and journalistic issues it has raised.
**Introduction and rationale**

A research project at Bond University’s Centre for New Media Research and Education, sponsored by the Positive Ageing Foundation of Australia, is taking up the issue of age and developing an online resource for reporters and students to help them navigate questions of age in their work.

In this presentation I will explore some of the issues related to the reporting of age and offer a quick tour of the “The Journalist’s Toolkit on Ageing” web site.

**An ageing society**

There is no doubt that age has become laden with many other agendas in recent years.

For a start, age has strong political connotations and has become a key factor in public policy debate. Our citizens are living longer, which has economic and social implications. The increasing proportion of adults aged more than 55 in the community has prompted debate in areas such as employment, superannuation and health care. Just a glance through the conference papers being presented at this world congress highlights the issues involved. Changing attitudes to work have also blurred the notion of “retirement” and there is no longer a “typical” life path once people have ended full-time employment. Improved health technologies, enhanced medical knowledge and different lifestyle choices also mean the retirement stage of life is now extended for many people, sometimes as long as 30 to 40 years, which is longer than they might have spent in the full-time workforce.

Such economic data adds weight to the need for all sectors of society – especially the media as key shapers of public opinion - to review attitudes to ageing and the social role and status of older people.

**Literature**

This project follows some successful educational training ventures which have asked journalists to rethink their attitudes to the reporting of sensitive or stereotyped social groups or behaviours. Examples include the University of Queensland Department of Journalism’s Media and indigenous Australians project (1998); the Hunter Institute for Mental Health’s Response Ability project (2001) targeting media portrayal of suicide; and Griffith University’s *All-media guide to fair and cross-cultural reporting for journalists, program makers and media students* (Stockwell & Scott, 2000).

Directly in the field of the media and ageing, there has been the booklet and website developed by the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care (Queensland), titled *Don’t call me Granny! A guide for communication professionals* (n.d.). This is an innovative and informative guide which we have found extremely useful in the formulation of materials for our web site.

There has also been some helpful international research into the media and ageing which has underpinned this project which I will review briefly here.

Evers (1998, p. 12), in a comprehensive review of the European literature on the media and
The dominant theme in the media is the contrast between the affluent, skilled, young and beautiful, and the poor, inadequate, old and unattractive.

Older people were often portrayed as lacking in intelligence, life skills and interest as individuals (unless they have an estate desired by younger people). They are also disproportionately presented as sick, infirm, frail; a problem to others and to society at large. (Stacey and Osborne, 1998, p. 734).

Diamond and Damato (1996, p. 43) surveyed news coverage of 73-year-old US presidential candidate Bob Dole and concluded that stereotypical attitudes put him in a no-win situation. When Dole took an afternoon nap to get more energy it was news, but when younger opponent Bill Clinton chose to have a “power nap” it was not reported, they noted. In contrast, a study of the content of three major US news magazines surrounding astronaut John Glenn’s return to space found there were few comments which could be interpreted as ageist or demeaning to older people (Hilt, 2001, p. 161).

Kleyman (1999, p. 304) summed up the positive approach to the interface between the media and the ageing issue in his call for journalists to look beyond a “medical model” on ageing. He said increasing numbers of journalists were:
Learning that the dynamic but little-discussed emergence of mass longevity not only extends far beyond the medical model of reporting on ageing, but also offers one of the most exciting untold stories of our era – the emergence of a new generation of empowered, vital older adults.

Kleyman (1999, p. 305) noted that although there was some evidence that the media were starting to cover age issues differently, very few news organizations had taken the step of assigning reporters to cover ageing as a specific beat or even to attend to it on a regular basis.

**Issues in reporting age**

Why is there a need for the media’s attitudes to ageing to be challenged?

My local newspaper in Queensland, *The Gold Coast Bulletin*, recently provided some evidence:

“Beware of old men in hats driving Volvos” the heading of April 24, 2002 reads.

What a remarkable example of a negative age stereotype in a media product. Nevertheless, there is a redeeming feature. In smaller type underneath the heading one can see that the words are actually being attributed – to District Court Judge Robert Hall, who had concocted the stereotype himself while sentencing a road-rage motorist who had broken an 80-year-old man’s jaw.

In his sentencing remarks, Judge Hall sympathised with the accused, saying he (the judge) was also still “young enough to be annoyed by Volvo and Kingswood drivers wearing hats” but that the assailant had gone “far too far”.

Like many ethical case studies, the newspaper’s behaviour here cannot be easily categorised. Is it justifiably exposing a judge’s stereotypical remarks to highlight their inappropriateness? Or is it cashing in on a broadly shared prejudice in the community and using the judge’s remarks as a convenient mechanism for taking its own cheap shot at older drivers? Where does all this leave our old men driving Volvos in *The Gold Coast Bulletin*?

We need to prompt journalists to rethink they way they portray older people and cover the issue of ageing.

Cynical editors might label it another exercise in political correctness, but they need to recognize that age, like gender, race, religion and sexual preference, are up for negotiation and debate as identifiers. In fact, as noted above, age may be the poor relation among these stereotypes and there is a need for better education among media practitioners on its use.

Ethical guidelines already warn journalists and editors against ageism, amidst their counselling against other stereotyping. The Australian Journalists Association (MEAA, 1999) Code of Ethics groups age with some of these at Item 2 when it states:

> Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, *age*, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability.

Similarly, the Australian Press Council covers age under Principle 7 of its Statement of Principles:

> Publications should not place any gratuitous emphasis on the race, religion, nationality, colour, country of origin, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, illness, or *age* of an individual or group. Nevertheless, where it is relevant and in the public interest,
Publications may report and express opinions in these areas. (Australian Press Council, 1996).

Both are concerned with unnecessary emphasis and are equally tolerant of the public interest permitting emphasis on such characteristics if there is some important reason to do so.

Important reasons abound. For example, age must be mentioned when identifying the accused as part of a court report because it is crucial that as many identifying characteristics as possible distinguish that person from others with similar names and occupations who might be inclined to sue for defamation.

Emphasis on age is also necessary when the subject of the story or the circumstances of the report make it so. For example, mentioning the age is crucial to a story about a contestant who has won the Over 75 high jump division in the Asia-Pacific Masters Games.

It is also excusable when the subject of the story has chosen to emphasise their age as a factor in the story. For example, *The Courier-Mail* considered it newsworthy when a 90-year-old “Brisbane pensioner” released her second CD since launching her musical recording career at the age of 87 (Mathewson, 2002, p. 3). While the “pensioner” terminology would be frowned upon, such a story clearly portrays an older person in a positive light—countering the sorts of stereotypes highlighted in the literature cited above. Nevertheless, the story has earned itself a page three positioning in a metropolitan daily newspaper because of its news value of unusualness or novelty. Some would argue that older people are engaged actively so often that it should not be seen as the norm, and not unusual just because it had escaped the newspaper’s stereotypical newsgathering net.

Sometimes it is just a word that categorises reportage as ageist. *The Australian* newspaper reported on its front page on Wednesday, April 17, 2002, an award of $1 million in damages against a Perth stockbroker who had lied to a client, made reckless promises and traded irresponsibly, costing the client his entire investment.

The report went on to describe the client as “an ageing Fijian businessman”. Just how relevant is the word “ageing” to this description of this client, now a successful plaintiff? What does it tell us? Does it indicate that this individual was old and vulnerable, perhaps as a result of the medical consequences of the ageing process? Or does it mean absolutely nothing, since we are all technically “ageing” from the moment we are born?

The debate gets more complicated when we choose to use age as an identifier simply to help the reader conjure an image of an individual. Should we use age for this purpose? I am sure that once the toolkit is launched we will attract a range of comments on this subject because feature writers in particular have frequently used the age of an interviewee as a device to help the reader position that person within a generation and gauge the individual’s achievements.

While citing age might be a fast and efficient way to do this, critics might argue that it is better to conjure the picture in the reader’s mind by mentioning actual dates, durations and milestones which relate more closely to the individual involved and are less likely to generate stereotypical images of someone in that age bracket.

**Highlights of the site**

All this has informed the conceptualisation and development of The Journalist’s Toolkit on Ageing, our interactive web-based tool designed to help shape media perceptions on ageing. The
The toolkit is designed for media professionals and journalism students who want a solid grounding and knowledge of ageing issues.

Rather than being an exercise in political correctness, this resource aims to challenge perceptions and raise awareness about age and how it is represented in electronic and print media. The site features writing tips, an ageing awareness quiz, an ageism detector where journalists can test their stories, references, articles to publish, positive ageing story ideas, links to other resources, downloads, and statistics. Up-to-date information is presented with material that is freely available for publication or broadcast.

The toolkit sets out to provide editors, news producers and journalism students with a relevant, user friendly information resource that will help media outlets develop positive policies on reporting on ageing. The site does not seek to dictate how stories should or should not be written. Instead it seeks to challenge perceptions and provide alternatives.

**Educational approach**

This project has represented a useful integration of the promotional needs of the client-sponsor – The Positive Ageing Foundation of Australia – and the research and educational needs of the Centre for New Media Research and Education at Bond University.

The project has been unashamedly pedagogically focussed. Part-time journalism instructor Mike Hardy took on the site’s development as his final project for his Master of Information Technology degree and teamed with two communications masters students – Molly Blair and Erland Dannett – who each undertook special project subjects centred on their development of content for the site. I acted as overall supervisor of the project, liaising with our centre’s client, the Positive Ageing Foundation, to ensure its needs were being met along the way.

Thus, it was an iterative process, consisting of a continual negotiation and renegotiation of everything you see in the site – its appearance, structure, and content. The process continues, with a senior undergraduate student Jasmin Sommerfeld now steering the web production and maintenance and teams of print and radio students generating text and audio content. The venture has even involved students and staff from a local high school – Helensvale State High School – who have built their own website of stories on the ageing topic, titled Re-generation Oz (www.helensvaleshs.qld.edu.au/regenerationoz).

The media should treat age as seriously as it does race, religion and ethnicity. There is a fine line between sensitizing and sanitizing the news. We encounter it in the reporting of race, gender and important issues like suicide. The Journalist’s Toolkit on Ageing hopefully will assist media practitioners to navigate the increasingly important issue of age as they go about their researching, writing, recording and editing.

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