Australian Human Rights Commission

Shaping Perceptions:

How Australian Media Reports on Ageing

October 2024

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1. Message from the Commissioner

Ageing in Australia is an inherently complex and diverse narrative.

The media plays a critical role in relaying this narrative, and in both reflecting and influencing community attitudes and behaviours towards ageing and older people.

How we view the world and those around us is largely shaped by what we read, what we hear and what we watch. The media informs how we see and treat others, and even how we see and treat ourselves.

This research was undertaken to contribute to understanding how ageing and older people are portrayed in the Australian media. It was designed to get the insiders' story, from the people who create the news and media content and those who help craft the media landscape each and every day.

Despite wide recognition of the significance of issues around age and Australia's ageing population, this study found a prevailing culture of negativity in mainstream media towards ageing, which either overlooks or minimises important issues affecting older people, excludes older people's personal experiences, or portrays them as an economic or social burden.

Ageism – how we think, feel and act towards ageing – is shown to permeate the media industry and mainstream Australian culture, with media portrayals both mirroring and contributing to these biases. While there were some positive representations of ageing and instances of accurate coverage, they were found to be in the minority.

The journalists and communications specialists interviewed identified a number of underlying drivers, including the current state of Australia's shrinking media newsrooms. With specialist reporters being phased out, and overworked journalists facing tighter deadlines with fewer resources, the study found it is increasingly difficult for journalists to adequately research or report on age and ageing.

Lack of access to subject matter experts and relevant spokespersons on age-related topics was seen as another key barrier to better and more extensive coverage of the issues affecting older Australians.

I hope this research will be a foundational document that helps inform and connect the media industry and the age sector. There are clear opportunities identified in this study for the media and age sectors to work together in improving reporting standards and shifting the narrative on ageing.

Collectively we must do better to ensure media coverage accurately represents the diversity of older people, their stories and the issues that affect them. Importantly, their issues not only affect them but often influence the whole of society and future generations.

Ageing is a natural stage in our lives that should be celebrated, and the complexities acknowledged. It is vital that older people are humanised and valued in mainstream culture, with their voices amplified, and the issues they face told in an accurate and balanced way. Simply put, older people have the right to have voice and presence in Australia's media and the stories they tell.

Robert Fitzgerald AM
Age Discrimination Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission

2. Executive summary

Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards people based simply on their age.[1] Ageism remains pervasive and normalised, with evidence suggesting it is one of the most socially accepted forms of prejudice in Australia.[2]

While individual and community perceptions regarding age are formed by a complex interplay of personal and social factors, the media continues to play an important role in both reflecting and shaping how age and experiences of ageing are perceived, interpreted and valued.

Past research conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission (Commission) and others has found that ageism is present in Australian media representations of all age groups.[3] Common themes include negative stereotyping and underrepresentation of older people and their experiences, the pitting of younger and older generations against each other, and depictions of later life as a time of frailty and decline.

These media portrayals can shape how we view ourselves, erode solidarity between generations, and contribute to ageist attitudes and discrimination in our communities. Despite ongoing efforts by researchers and advocates to encourage more diverse, nuanced and realistic representations of ageing in Australian media, negative portrayals persist.

The focus of this research is on how the Australian media presents ageing. The Commission engaged RedBridge Group Pty Ltd to conduct the research, with the key aim of highlighting the voices of media industry professionals and bringing them into dialogue on the issues identified.

The research was undertaken between May and June 2024 and involved a literature review of select research and relevant sources, along with content analysis of age-related reportage by key Australian media outlets.

Additionally, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists, editors, producers and other communications specialists to gather their industry 'insider' perspectives on the underlying drivers that influence media content, and to identify ideas or solutions for promoting more diverse, accurate and balanced representations.

This report highlights three key findings. The detailed results from the research can be found at Chapters 4 and 5 of the report.

KEY FINDINGS

Finding 1:

There are known and real issues with Australian media portrayals of ageing and older people

While this research found there are some positive examples of Australian media reporting on ageing, these were found to be the exception. More commonly, there are problematic recurring themes which continue to persist in media portrayals.

This research found these recurring themes to be:

- **the framing of ageing as a problem**, accompanied by the recurring assumption of ageing as though it is something to be solved, fought or cured

- **a prevailing narrative of decline, frailty and vulnerability**, and a framing of older Australians as both fundamentally powerless and an impending social and economic burden. The process of ageing was also frequently associated with the inevitability of isolation and loneliness

- **intergenerational conflict**, with a focus on perceived tensions between older and younger generations, especially around wealth and finance

- **gendered ageism**, with stories on older women often focused on beauty and image, where ageing is framed as a critical aesthetic concern and a woman's value is conflated with her appearance

- **invisibility** and the underrepresentation of older Australians, their lived experiences and the reality of age and ageing being characteristics that may result in discrimination. The research also shows there is a lack of focus on intersectionality and age

Finding 2:

Australian media representations reflect a broader mainstream culture that undervalues older people

Many of the media professionals interviewed reported that older people are not valued in mainstream Australian culture the way they are in Indigenous communities or other cultures. Many also reported that the issues affecting older people are often regarded as 'lesser' than those affecting other groups such as women, people with disability and younger people. This culture of undervaluing older people underpins the specific media industry drivers outlined in Finding 3.

KEY FINDINGS

Finding 3:

Australian media representations are underpinned by specific drivers in the media industry

This research identified specific drivers in the media landscape and industry that contribute to bias and negativity in media reporting on ageing, including:

- **Lack of access to subject matter experts:** interviewees noted they do not have ready access to expert spokespeople to provide comment or background when it comes to issues of age or ageing. This results in the perpetuation of misconceptions and misreporting of older people and their experiences and is a significant barrier to better coverage of issues around ageing and ageism.

- **Time and resource constraints:** reduced staff numbers, overworked newsrooms with limited resources and tighter deadlines means it is increasingly difficult for journalists to spend adequate time to properly research and prepare stories around ageing and ageism.

- **Loss of experienced and specialist practitioners in newsrooms:** the phasing out of senior or specialist journalists with expertise in covering age-related stories, has resulted in a lack of experienced advisors for young journalists on these topics.

- **Invisibility of age within the diversity and inclusion space:** while many interviewees spoke about being provided with formal training on disability, cultural diversity or gender awareness, none reported being offered similar training, education or resources on age or ageism.

- **Lack of consensus among academics:** about the nature or extent of the issues identified regarding the portrayal of age in Australian media and whether ageism in the media is a meaningful problem.

- **Workplace tensions:** interviewees noted that newsrooms today are often characterised by tensions between the few remaining older, well-paid journalists and younger 'under-paid and over-worked' journalists. This tension may contribute to unconscious bias in media reporting.

- **Business drivers:** the 'click bait' nature of reporting, particularly around the real or perceived 'generational war' or tension, combined with the commercial drive to target a younger audience, is perpetuating and exacerbating poor portrayals of older people. Conversely, corporate communications practitioners reported that where there is a business imperative for accurate representations, such as of an older or younger customer base, avoiding stereotypes and ageist tropes become factors that are consciously considered.

While the research findings suggest that ageism has been normalised in contemporary media practice, this report identifies key opportunities for the media industry and age sector to take a strong, collaborative partnership approach to improving the accuracy, quantity and quality of coverage about older Australians and the issues that affect and matter to them. The three opportunities identified in this report are a call to action for the two sectors to proactively pursue and accelerate change across the media landscape.

Opportunity 1: Addressing the expert gap

There is opportunity for the media industry and age sector to work together to improve media access to relevant advocates and experts, so necessary context can be shared on stories around ageing, and the voices and experiences of older Australians represented. There was an almost unanimous view among those interviewed that a greater availability of spokespeople would result in more accurate and extensive media coverage, helping to reshape the narrative on ageing.

Opportunity 2: Addressing the education and training gap

The media sector is encouraged to expand and strengthen their existing diversity training for staff to specifically cover age and ageism. There is opportunity for the media industry and age sector to co-design tailored educational materials and training programs to inform media professionals and support improved editorial practices in reporting on age-related topics.

Opportunity 3: Shifting the narrative on ageing

There is an opportunity for the media industry and age sector to collectively embark on a new communication campaign, to combat ageism in the broader community, advance the business case within the media industry for more accurate and diverse representation of ageing, and improve media reporting standards on the coverage of different age groups.

3. Introduction

3.1 About this research

Through language, imagery, narrative and representation, the media plays an important role in both reflecting and shaping how age and experiences of ageing are perceived, interpreted and valued.

There are known issues with the negative portrayal of age and ageing in the Australian media. For example, the Australian Human Rights Commission's (Commission) 2013 research report *'Fact or Fiction: Stereotypes of Older Australians'* found that older Australians were underrepresented and poorly portrayed in traditional media, social media and advertising. Media was seen to create and reinforce negative stereotypes of ageing in older people.[4]

In 2021, the Commission's research report on ageism across the adult lifespan, '*What's Age Got To Do With It?'*, found ageism to be present in Australian media representations of all age groups. Research participants agreed that the media uses stereotypes to characterise people across different age groups and media narratives of scarcity and greed were seen to spur on intergenerational conflict.[5]

Other studies have highlighted similar issues of stereotyping, invisibility, underrepresentation and negative representation of age and ageing in Australian media which can contribute to ageist attitudes, discrimination, and the marginalisation of older people.[6] Studies have also drawn attention to workplace ageism and discrimination within the media and advertising industries, though there has been limited focus on the potential ripple effects on media content.[7]

To counter ageism and negative age stereotypes, researchers and advocates have made recommendations, led public awareness campaigns and developed resources such as media and messaging guides to encourage more diverse, nuanced and realistic representations of age in Australia.[8]

While work has been done to demonstrate how age is and should be represented in the media, few studies have directly involved or engaged with media professionals on these issues.[9]

This research builds on existing knowledge about 'how' age and ageing is represented in Australian media by bringing media industry professionals into dialogue on 'why' negative age portrayals persist and 'what' needs to be done to drive positive change, with a view to engaging the industry in the Commission's ongoing efforts to combat ageism and age discrimination in Australia.

3.2 Objectives

The objectives of the research were to:
- review current knowledge and evidence on how age and ageing is presented in Australian media
- gather insights from media industry professionals about the underlying factors that influence media representations of age and ageing
- provide ideas and solutions, informed by media industry professionals, for engaging with the media on promoting more diverse, accurate and balanced representations of age and ageing.

3.3 Methodology

The Commission worked with an external research partner (RedBridge Group Pty Ltd) to conduct this research, using two integrated methodologies:

- desk-based research to provide an understanding of 'how' age and ageing is portrayed in the Australian media
- qualitative research to provide an understanding of the 'why' behind the themes identified in the desk-based research and to inform the way forward.

(a) Desk-based research

The desk-based research involved:

- a literature review of select sources around the presentation of age and ageing in Australian media
- a content analysis of media reportage on age and ageing, covering a wide range of Australian media outlets comprising of News Corp mastheads and TV, Nine mastheads and TV, the ABC, SBS, The Guardian Australia and The Daily Aus.

(b) Qualitative interviews

A total of 26 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted.

- Seventeen interviews were conducted with journalists, presenters, editors and producers. These media professionals were recruited from all major media networks including the ABC (radio, television and on-line), News Corp (print and on-line), Nine (radio, print, on-line and television), Channel 7, the Daily Mail, the Saturday Paper, and SKY News (television and digital).

  Interviewees worked in bureaus based in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, as well as regional Queensland. One interviewee was an Indigenous affairs reporter and one worked at a dedicated culturally and linguistically diverse media outlet. The gender split of these interviewees was approximately equal.

- Four interviews were conducted with academics in the media/communications space, including some who had published research about the portrayal of ageing in the media.
- Two interviews were conducted with senior corporate communications practitioners working in age-related sectors – one in superannuation and one in private health insurance.
- Two interviews were conducted with senior advertising practitioners.
- One interview was conducted with a representative of an advocacy body working in the age sector.

The views expressed by the senior advertising practitioners and age sector representative are incorporated into chapters '5.2 Journalists, producers and editors' and '5.3 Academics' respectively, due to their thematic consistency.

(c) Limitations

This research aimed to build on existing knowledge about age-related portrayals in the Australian media and provide detailed insights from within the media industry itself. For this reason, only a select review of sources and content was undertaken for the purpose of gathering key themes and background to inform the qualitative interviews.

In recruiting for the qualitative interviews, the participation of media industry bodies could not be secured. Hence, while their perspectives would have been relevant and insightful to the discussions, it is absent from the research findings.

While the sample of interviewees was varied and included professionals working in mainstream media, advertising, corporate communications, academia and age-related advocacy, due to the limited sample size of the qualitative interviews, the results are indicative only and should not be interpreted as representative of the views and experiences of the media industry in its entirety.

4. Overview of literature review and content analysis

4.1 Summary

The literature review found that, while age-specific issues are notably absent from the literature and general discourse on diversity and inclusion in Australian media, there is a significant body of existing research on the prevalence of negative and stereotypical media representations of older adults.

Within this research there are well-evidenced issues, including around:

- the invisibility of older people
- the framing of age as a problem
- gendered ageism.

The literature review also identified gaps in the existing research, including on:

- intersectional experiences of ageing
- counterstereotypes and positive portrayals of ageing.

Additionally, only limited studies about age and the media directly involved or sought insights from media industry professionals. This research attempts to contribute to closing this gap by providing insights from journalists and other media industry professionals (see Chapter 5: Qualitative interviews).

The content analysis found extensive reporting on topics related to age and ageing in Australian media. It found that the issues identified by the literature review were similarly manifest and widespread across much of the media content analysed. This included depictions of:

- ageing as a process of inevitable decline
- older people as vulnerable and lacking agency
- ageing as a crisis and socio-economic threat
- the gendered nature of ageing.

The need to reframe the way ageing is represented and conceptualised in Australian media was highlighted in several studies. This content analysis found notable efforts by SBS and the ABC to provide content that counteracted widespread negative and stereotypical portrayals of age/ageing in the media.

4.2 Literature review

This literature review considered works from three principal categories, comprising:

- selected scholarly works on diversity in Australian media
- scholarly works on ageism and the Australian media (including works detailing issues of ageism more broadly)
- government and non-scholarly works on ageism and the Australian media.[10]

The Selected Bibliography for the literature review can be found at the Appendix of this report.

(a) Selected research on diversity in Australian media

In this review of selected scholarly works, age was found to be mostly absent in broader discussions about diversity and inclusion in Australian media, which tended to focus on issues of ethnicity, gender and sexuality. A minor exception to this, as identified in this review, was when age was correlated with the compounding barriers that women face as they get older.[11]

Beyond this, age and ageism are notably absent, or otherwise only featured in discussions about children and young people.[12] This review identified one exception to this in a 2023 report from Screen Australia's '*Seeing Ourselves*' research series, which examined diversity in Australian TV drama. This report is discussed in the below subsection, 'Areas of thematic consistency'.[13]

Overall, the findings from this review of selected works suggests that age is largely absent from the current broader discourse on diversity and inclusion in Australian media – except when it is discussed in the context of women and the cumulative barriers they face in older age.

(b) Research on ageism in Australian media

There exists a significant body of research, entailing formal scholarship, government-initiated research, and research commissioned by the not-for-profit sector, on the prevalence of stereotypical and ageist representations of older adults in Australian media.[14]

This research demonstrates that older adults as a group are too often characterised principally by decline, dependency, and vulnerability, with an emphasis on a 'crisis of ageing' narrative, which positions the ageing individuals as both inherently helpless and an economic and social threat. This framing is accompanied by an underrepresentation of older adults generally in various media formats, including in television programming and print media.

A number of studies and reports have also made recommendations to counter these harmful media tropes and trends.[15] For example, the Older Persons Advocacy Network has recommended guidelines for media reporting on older people, which emphasise agency and respect when interviewing older people, and avoidance of patronising language in favour of person-centred language.[16]

(c) Areas of thematic consistency

(i) Age and invisibility

Screen Australia's 2023 report '*Seeing Ourselves 2: Diversity, equity and inclusion in Australian TV drama*' (Seeing Ourselves 2), identified a clear absence of older people both in screen representations and in research on diversity in the media. Seeing Ourselves 2 was notable for being the first in Screen Australia's report series on diversity in Australian TV drama to specifically address age and ageing as characteristics that may result in discrimination.

The report found a significant underrepresentation of older people in Australian TV drama, with only 6.7% of main characters aged 60 and over. The report also called for a greater focus on intersectionality; though it did not specify how age might intersect with other protected characteristics.[17] This lack of focus on intersectionality and age is discussed below as a recurring gap in existing research.

(ii) Framing of ageing as an economic and social problem

Another recurring theme identified in existing literature is the framing of ageing as an economic and social problem, where people are conceived of primarily as economic units through a neoliberalist world view. This encompasses narratives that commodify older persons either as consumers or as a burden on the nation's resources.[18]

Key subsets of this theme include media representations of older people in the contexts of aged care and the COVID-19 pandemic. Several studies have identified negative portrayals of older people in these contexts, where they are depicted as vulnerable, in poor health, less socially worthy and valuable compared to younger people, and automatically at risk of COVID-19 due to their age. This reductive, medicalised framing of ageing is seen to exacerbate ageism, which can lead to poorer health outcomes for older people, as well as contribute to the denial of their agency and dignity of risk.[19]

Further, while younger people are frequently presented in the media as active risk-takers, older persons are often framed as passive and at risk, or burdensome and worthless.[20]

Other studies also referred to the impact of structural inequalities on media representations. For example, in the advertising industry, where older workers make up only a small portion of the workforce, studies noted a

sense of 'resigned resilience' among older workers towards negative age-based assumptions, which they may also be complicit in perpetuating.[21]

(iii) Gendered ageism

Where age and gender intersect, studies noted that older women are frequently cast in a compassionate light, as both passive and invisible victims. Studies referred to various examples of media portrayals of older Australian women experiencing homelessness, where they are presented as being among the 'most deserving category of homeless people', yet remain largely invisible from media representations of 'rough sleepers'.[22]

Studies also identified the issue of gendered ageism within the media industry workforce, with one report stating that:

> '[m]any noted the declining number of women "as you go up the food chain". For those with a long career, the issue of ageism is of increasing concern.'[23]

(iv) Reframing ageing

Another recurring theme in the literature is the reframing of media representations of older people.[24] Some argued for a reframing of ageing through methods of co-design with older people to facilitate 'empowerment' and enable older people to shape their own narratives.[25] Others highlighted the importance of linguistics in shaping how age is framed and conceptualised.[26]

(d) Gaps in literature

(i) Intersectional experiences of ageing

This literature review identified a clear gap in existing research on age and intersectionality. Ageing is typically absent in broader discussions about diversity in Australian media. There is also limited examination of the impacts of multiple and intersecting characteristics, such as socio-economic status, gender, sexuality, race and disability, on ageism in Australian media. There is an opportunity for further research to fill this gap.

(ii) Counterstereotypes and positive representations

While the negative aspects of age representations are well-documented, there is a notable gap in literature focusing on the identification and examination of counterstereotypes and positive portrayals of ageing in Australian media.

There is also a significant gap in literature exploring how older people and ageing are presented in social media. Further research is needed to better understand how age biases may be reflected and reinforced in the context of social media, as well as how older adults may use social media to challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes around ageing.

4.3 Content analysis

A sample of media coverage was drawn from key outlets comprising:

- News Corp mastheads and TV
- Nine mastheads and TV
- ABC
- SBS
- The Guardian Australia
- The Daily Aus.

Search terms included ageing, ageism, aged care, older people, older Australians, older men, older women and elderly. The search was conducted in June 2024 and produced at minimum one page of results (search result: "ageing" in The Daily Aus) and at a maximum, 742 pages of results (search result: "ageing" on the ABC website).

The sampled content was analysed for recurring themes, such as how issues of age/ageing were framed and what aspects of age/ageing were emphasised. The analysis also considered what positions, principles or biases were explicit or implicit in the reporting.

(a) Areas of thematic consistency

(i) Ageing as a process of inevitable decline

Across content from all outlets sampled, ageing is repeatedly framed as an inexorable process of decline, both mentally and physically. Assumptions about the inevitability of pain, suffering and loss of capacity, underpin many representations and the fear of ageing is presented as normal and natural.[27]

This narrative of decline and deterioration is accompanied by a recurring assumption that ageing is something to be fought or resisted.[28] As examined in the below subsection on 'Gender and ageing', there is a distinctly gendered element to such exhortations to fight or slow the ageing process, which emphasise traditionally gendered notions of beauty and aesthetic appearance. However, this analysis also identified many examples of media content encouraging people of all genders to resist the ageing process, though the focus tended to be less on appearance and more on the need to fight ill health or loss of capacity.[29]

The content analysis also found examples of reportage that contrasted the typical framings of ageing and decline by highlighting extraordinary feats performed by older people. For example, the ABC produced a segment titled 'Running 500km at 94', about a 94 year-old-man who had just completed his 100th five-kilometre run.[30] As noted in the qualitative interviews with academics (see Chapter 5), these 'superhero' narratives, which exceptionalise accomplishments by certain older persons, contribute to entrenching a patronising approach to ageing whereby such feats are presented as unattainable for most older people.

(ii) Older people as vulnerable and lacking agency

In content from all the media outlets surveyed, older people are frequently portrayed as a vulnerable group lacking agency. This observation pertains to content where all older people are characterised as inherently vulnerable, as opposed to reports about specific groups who may have diminished capacity in older age. Reports on elder abuse, which highlight legitimate issues around abuse of power and trust, are also excluded from this observation.

The content analysis also identified instances where media coverage portrayed caring for ageing parents as burdensome.[31] Such articles often infantilised older adults, reinforcing the notion that infirmity and incapacity are unavoidable in older age. Additionally, the media reviewed frequently associated the process of ageing with the inevitability of isolation and loneliness.[32]

Another assumption implicit in the content analysed was that of older people as passive recipients of charity, which reinforces the view of older people as vulnerable and lacking agency.[33] This characterisation of older people as vulnerable and passive is sometimes used as fodder for ridicule, with the underlying reasoning for publishing such stories difficult to ascertain.[34]

Further, older people as victims of abuse and/or criminal conduct is also a recurring theme, particularly in ways that seem intended to elicit sympathy for the victim.[35]

(iii) 'Crisis of ageing' as a socio-economic threat

A recurring theme in media representations of older Australians entails the framing of people and their inherent value, or liability, as economic units. This often leads to older people being portrayed as vulnerable and lacking in capacity, including the ability to care for themselves, thereby posing a socio-economic threat to society.

Several media outlets posit the 'costs' of an ageing population as, at best, a 'risk', and at worst, a 'crisis', with all perpetuating the view that older people are a threat to the wellbeing of societies in general.[36]

The concept of ageing as a socio-economic threat is framed by some media outlets as the assertion that 'ordinary' or 'younger' taxpayers will be impossibly burdened by the sharp rise in older Australians. In this context, older Australians are depicted as not only failing to contribute to society but also placing unconscionable strain on younger working Australians.[37] The uncertain economic state of younger Australians is also framed in media reporting as a consequence of Baby Boomers' spending and housing habits.[38]

Such narratives are further bolstered by accounts of overseas societies that are supposedly buckling under the weight of non-productive and resource-intensive older people, with Japan and Thailand often being used as examples by Australian media.[39]

(iv) Gender and ageing

This content analysis highlighted that across Australian media reporting, there are few positive accounts of women's bodies as they age. This is evident in the media's coverage of female celebrities, with those who are of more youthful appearance being lauded, sexualised or objectified.

An example of this is news.com.au's coverage of Cher's publicity event in which the 77-year-old is praised for looking 'decades younger' and for 'showing some skin'.[40] A majority of the article focused on Cher's appearance, rather than the professional reasons for the publicity event. Comparatively, the media coverage also included mention of Cher's professional collaborator, an 84-year-old male fashion designer; however, there was no mention of his appearance or relative youthfulness.

Similarly, there are examples of media coverage regarding supposedly ageing Australian female celebrities, where a woman's value is conflated with her appearance. Middle-aged female Australian celebrities are presented as 'still' remaining sexually attractive despite their advancing years.

This revulsion for the ageing process is commonly paired with dubious health advice, imploring women to 'reverse the ageing process', and spruiking the benefits of various anti-ageing serums and the importance of sleep for maintaining youthful skin.[41]

This content analysis demonstrates that there is a predisposition among Australian media outlets to frame women's ageing as a critical aesthetic concern.

(b) Examples of positive portrayals

While still perpetuating some of the negative stereotypes and tropes around ageing, SBS and the ABC were notable in their offering of more diverse portrayals of ageing and representations that demonstrated clear efforts to go beyond the usual negative dispositions about ageing.

Case study: SBS and the ABC

Compared to other media outlets, the ABC and SBS were notable for their efforts in providing content that:

- **approached ageing through an intersectional lens**, for example, in this episode of SBS 'Insight', *'Western society has a negative attitude towards ageing. Here's why women need to change that: With each birthday, Faith Agugu embraces getting older. She believes many women have internalised the negative Western narrative that surrounds women and ageing'* and the ABC's examination of positive ageing for the LGBTQIA+ community in *'Coming up: Ageing Fabulously'*[42]

- **directly countered ageist stereotypes**, for example, *'The problem with how we talk about ageing and the elderly: We need to foster a society that sees the value in all stages of life'* (SBS) and, *'Ageism and 'youth obsession' contribute to grief in ageing Australians. How can that change?'* (ABC)[43]

- **framed the ageing process in a positive light**, for example, *'The joys of caring for ageing parents, despite the distance'* (ABC), *People in their nineties [who] reveal the secrets to ageing well* (SBS) and in this SBS English learning program episode, *'Learn English: SBS Learn English will help you speak, understand and connect in Australia - Learn fun phrases you can use to describe the process of growing older'*.[44]

The ABC's article *'Elderly farmer David Morris finds love while volunteering to drive cancer patients to treatment in Victoria'* provides a good example of non-ageist reporting that depicts an ordinary older Australian, who not only contributes to the betterment of society, but finds profound happiness in doing so.[45] In particular, this story:

- challenges stereotypes of isolated, lonely older people without partners

- presents an older person as not only involved in his community but as someone actively working to help make his community a better place

- does not resort to the 'superhero' trope whereby an older person must either perform a feat that most others could never aspire to, or patronises them for achieving something that would not otherwise be considered extraordinary for a younger person.

5. Qualitative interviews

5.1 Summary

The Australian journalists, editors and producers interviewed for this research reported that issues around ageing are complex and important to society, and have deep economic and social impacts. However, they acknowledged that these issues are typically underreported and do not receive the coverage they deserve.

They attributed this to a few key factors, including:

- the often distressing, and therefore unpopular, nature of the subject matter
- limited newsroom resources, including specialist reporters with the time to cover the issues properly
- lack of subject matter experts and spokespeople to provide comment to the media
- the media industry's commercial drive for a younger audience, despite current audiences typically reflecting an older demographic.

While recognising that specific issues around ageing and ageism are underreported, interviewees were of the view that there is generally good coverage of other topics of particular interest to older populations, such as superannuation, property values, and the public and private health systems.

There was also a view that ageism is potentially more prevalent in the media industry than in the broader community, particularly for older women.

Other issues highlighted by the journalists, editors and producers were:

- generational tension in newsrooms, between older, highly paid journalists and younger, 'under-paid and over-worked' journalists, and its ripple effects on media coverage
- the tendency for 'click bait' coverage to pivot off perceived generational tensions and portray older people as vulnerable, a burden, or the beneficiaries of a tax system that disadvantages younger people
- lack of training or education on ageing or ageism in the media industry and the loss of 'informal' instruction following the retirement or redundancy of older, more experienced journalists.

Despite these barriers, there was an almost unanimous view among those interviewed that a greater availability of subject matter experts and spokespersons would result in more accurate and extensive coverage of the issues affecting older Australians.

The academics interviewed were divided on whether ageism in the media is a meaningful problem and on whether media organisations are in fact seeking to appeal to younger audiences to grow their subscription base.

Several academics observed that mainstream Australian culture generally has not caught up with the reality of ageing Australians, such as extended lifespans, and the notion of life stages being experienced at different numerical ages.

The corporate communications professionals interviewed identified ageism in the media as a reflection of mainstream Australian culture, noting that 'Australia is not a place that values older people.'

Entrenched ageism in Australian culture was perceived to make stereotypical portrayals of age an 'easy story', resulting in a media landscape where older people were either pitied or reviled, and their strengths or values ignored. They identified 'frailty' and 'intergenerational conflict' as two prevailing age stereotypes in media portrayals.

Intersectionality, where age is overlayed with other characteristics like race or gender, was also recognised as a factor that can worsen the implications of ageism.

Significantly, it was considered that more balanced and positive representations are possible where there is a business imperative to pursue more accurate representations of older people.

5.2 Journalists, producers and editors

(a) Ageing and ageism are 'big issues'

There was broad consensus among the journalists, presenters, editors and producers interviewed that ageing and ageism are important public policy issues with profound, wide-reaching impacts.

They observed some challenges to include sustained pressure on the health and aged care systems, pressures on social security and superannuation, as well as impacts on productivity and economic growth. They considered that Australia's growing ageing population would exacerbate these challenges and place further pressure on existing resources. A number of interviewees recognised and connected with these issues at a personal level.

> *'With Australia's ageing population and what that means for future demands on the health system and aged care, there are some really big issues that need urgent work right now.'*

> *'If people are going to live longer, they need to work longer otherwise it's self-defeating. That raises a host of other issues like more aged care, more hospital beds, and the sustainability of the pension and superannuation systems and how they work together.'*

> *'We are all going to get old, so if ever there was an issue where we all literally have a conflict of interest, this is it. Plus, most of us will have to deal with parents getting older and wanting to make sure they have a comfortable and dignified retirement.'*

> *'A lot of Australians mistakenly believe their superannuation balances will fully fund their retirement and there is very little understanding and awareness about retirement security. With governments pushing back the age of qualification for the pension there are some really big challenges coming and if as a country we aren't preparing for those challenges then we are going to have a massive social and economic problem.'*

> *'You don't need to look too hard to find examples of ageism. I've seen countless examples in my personal life, in my own broader family and social circle.'*

> *'Warehousing the elderly is bad for productivity and it also really does put a strain on the system when they can't earn an income. It really is important from an economic perspective to keep older Australians that want to work engaged.'*

There was also a strong sentiment from a minority of journalists, mostly female, that issues around ageing and ageism are gendered. This view was underpinned by a perception that older men are often presumed to offer more experience and wisdom.

> *'Ageism is a huge issue, and it's also very gendered.'*

> *'There is a bigger stigma around women ageing and still being capable. It's a problem for some men, but other men's age can also be seen as experienced and worldly. Most older women don't get that benefit.'*

> *'There is a general view that older women are even more vulnerable than older men and I think that can come through very strongly in media coverage.'*

(b) Assessment of current coverage and content

Almost all journalists, producers and editors interviewed agreed that the issues around ageing and ageism deserve greater media attention and coverage.

> *'Ageism is one of the biggest 'isms' in Australia right now and it's not getting the coverage and attention it deserves.'*

> *'These issues were covered pretty prominently during the Royal Commission but not a lot since. There hasn't been a lot of follow up since then and it should [have been].'*

> *'Ageism is under covered, and I am not sure why. It's incredibly important and we are all going to get old so if it's not relevant to you now, it will be one day.'*

> *'Stories about race and sex discrimination always have an acute interest but there's not always a lot of interest in stories about age.'*

> *'During the Royal Commission there was a lot of interest. There should be a lot more follow-up but I think governments have also dropped the ball on it.'*

> *'It [ageing and ageism] is well reported but it's a bigger crisis than a lot of people realise which by definition means it's under reported.'*

The media professionals observed that there has been noticeably less coverage and focus on stories around ageing and ageism since the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality & Safety and the COVID-19 pandemic.

'I haven't done a lot of reporting on ageing issues since the Royal Commission. I think since then aged care has been left by mainstream media. It's something I have been thinking about doing more on but, at the moment, it's all about energy.'

'I think the last time there was a deliberate and fairly sustained focus on reporting on issues affecting older Australians was during COVID because the health risks were obviously greater for the elderly, particularly those with chronic conditions. A couple of years before COVID there was obviously the Royal Commission into aged care which was also a story that had a very strong focus on issues principally impacting the elderly.'

'During the Royal Commission we put a lot of people on it because it was a big yarn and a lot of human stories. Since then, there hasn't been a particular focus on coverage. During COVID we tried to cover all angles, from school children to the elderly, so it wasn't a specific focus just on the elderly, but we did a lot on it given the health risks, particularly in aged care, but also the isolation for many.'

Many of the interviewees said that although there are fewer stories specifically about older people compared to those crisis times, or exclusively on ageing and ageism, other issues considered to be of primary interest to older people are covered well. These include topics such as superannuation, financial security in retirement, and access to health care and services.

'We cover relevant issues like health and retirement income and asset values like property. Probably the closest we get to reporting specifically impacting the aged is employment equity stories, people in the later parts of their career being unemployed or underemployed and the broader consequences of that.'

'We probably cover issues of interest to older Australians more than any other media, it's a piece of the market we have got to our own. Superannuation stories rate very well for us, property finance too.'

'There's a fair bit of coverage of issues around superannuation which impacts every worker of all ages but is obviously more relevant to those who are retired or in the later stages of their working life.'

'I don't think there's a conscious decision to cover stories specifically for our older audience but there are stories that are obviously of more interest such as superannuation or self-managed funds and, in our coverage, we are mindful of that and probably backend the story with data that is likely to be relevant and useful.'

There was a strong sentiment that elder abuse, particularly financial exploitation, is an emerging crisis that deserves greater coverage and public education. The rise of elder abuse cases was associated with current cost-of-living pressures and there was an expectation that this problem will become more common.

> *'Elder abuse, specifically around finances and people stealing from or guilting their parents to give them an early inheritance, is a big emerging issue and something I think the media needs to increase public awareness around. Whether it's the current cost of living crisis or related to housing affordability or a combination of issues, it does appear to be more common and frequent.'*

> *'Perhaps there is a correlation because of the current economic stress, but elder abuse and inheritance impatience appear to be more prevalent. I think this is something the media generally needs to be mindful of and provide a more educative role.'*

Interviewees observed that subscribers and other audience members were generally not interested in stories about ageing or ageism; there is limited appetite for these stories and they do not rate highly. They also said positive stories around ageing were harder to find and negative ones were sometimes 'confronting'. Content broader than topics of perceived self-interest were considered more popular with audiences, including older audiences.

> *'It scares the shit out of people to be quite frank, so it's never popular. Aged care for example are never positive stories – people being mistreated, lack of funding, they aren't particularly nice stories.'*

> *'Stories about ageing, particularly access to and quality of aged care, financial security in retirement aren't generally well read. They can be confronting issues and I think our readers don't necessarily want to think about those things.'*

> *'It's not content that people always like to consume but also there's not always a lot of content to report on.'*

> *'It absolutely isn't given the coverage it deserves because it's both complicated and often distressing. Reports on elderly people being mistreated in aged care facilities aren't uplifting or feel-good stories.*

> *'We have a very high audience average age of 75 on TV and 45 on digital. The funny thing is, the things that rate the highest apart from politics generally are stories on schools, universities, and any health story. They are very interested in stories about the next generation.'*

There was a repeated view that journalists are unable to spend adequate time on stories around ageing and ageism because of limited resources in newsrooms and expectations of output despite reduced staff numbers.

> *'We really are day to day coverage now and we don't have the resources to properly plan coverage and reporting unless there's something that is coming up and we know our audience is interested in like the Olympics and who our medal hopes are, that sort of thing.'*

> *'The problem with the modern newsroom is we have to do more with less. There was a time when as a journalist you could spend a few days working on a story on important issues like aged care access or financial security in retirement. But now that we have such depleted newsrooms, you have to write and file a couple of stories every day, so you just don't have the opportunity to dedicate the time and energy these stories deserve.'*

> *'We did have a journalist specialising in these issues … but alas she was one of the first to go when we had the first round of redundancies in 2012 which kind of speaks to what management thought about that round as a speciality.'*

(c) 'Things we don't do well'

There was unprompted acknowledgement from many interviewees that there are some things the media generally does not do well when it comes to reporting on issues around ageing and ageism, including an acceptance that 'click bait' headlines can be a feature of some media coverage. These interviewees admitted 'click bait' headlines that capitalised on a real or perceived 'generational war' or tension, resulted in strong audience traffic to their platforms, and more subscriptions.

> *'Put 'Boomer' into a headline and you'll get a heap of clicks. Younger subscribers read them because they feel aggrieved about what they see as the easier path the elderly have had with housing, free education and asset accumulation and because the headline pisses off older subscribers they click the link too.'*

> *'There is always a temptation in media to report on the 'generational war' between Boomers and Generations Y and Z. Stories about Boomers 'living large' at the expense of younger generations are good click bait and generate a lot of on-line traffic which unfortunately encourages newsrooms to pursue more stories reporting on that conflict and tension.'*

> *'There's definitely 'click bait' – that's the business model for a lot of platforms because it works, for the same reason ice cream stores don't sell spinach flavoured ice cream.'*

Younger, less experienced journalists felt this perceived conflict was new and developing. Older journalists were sceptical, stating stories highlighting younger generations' different values and priorities are a legacy of past practice.

> 'There's some really interesting research, especially the stuff you are doing, which powerfully demonstrates the difference in attitudes between generations on various issues. But there's also nothing new and unique to that. In the 1980's it was fretting about television content and the amount of time kids were spending watching television and now it's the same stories again but just about screen time on iPhones and on social media. It's just a new brand of bullshit.'

> 'I think society in general and therefore the media have always been a bit judgmental about younger people. The story angles are new but I'm not sure the tension is new.'

> 'It's always been thus.'

Unprompted, some younger journalists and producers said that the frustrations of younger 'poorly paid and overworked' journalists' could subconsciously influence how they cover intergenerational issues and stories on perceived 'generational tensions.' Both older and younger journalists acknowledged that there are significant salary differences in newsrooms between younger and older employees due to the changing nature of the media and reduced industry profits.

> 'Particularly in the last five years the 'Battle of the Generations' has bled into newsrooms too. In most newsrooms there are older journalists who are very well paid whilst the younger ones are deeply underpaid and very overworked. So whilst there's a lot of respect for the older journalists in the newsroom, there is also some tension too. I wonder whether those newsroom dynamics maybe influences headlines.'

> 'There is a real inequity in pay structures in media not just based on gender but also age. Older journalists are the beneficiaries of pay structures that existed 20 to 30 years ago that have long ceased. Only 15 years ago most print jobs in the [federal] gallery had an entry level of over $100,000 are now paying much less than that in actual terms and around half of what it was in real terms. That causes a lot of frustration I think, and our newsrooms are probably a bit of a microcosm for the rest of the country, and I think that can be reflected in some reporting.'

> 'I think by younger journos, they [older people] are portrayed as whingers who have taken advantage of things that have organically occurred like free education and home ownership.'

> *'I can see why younger journos resent older journos and how that influences content and coverage. The industry has changed so much that not only are younger journos paid so much less but they are unlikely to ever get that bigger money that once commonly existed. Part of that resentment is knowing that those pathways for higher income don't really exist anymore. They [younger journalists] will be on shit money until they inevitably leave for a corporate job which they won't enjoy as much but it's the only way to pay the bills and have a decent lifestyle.'*

Some respondents commented on the rapidly changing nature of newsrooms, driven by cost-cutting considerations. They observed that this has resulted in younger desk editors and news directors, potentially creating an imbalance in newsrooms and the subsequent news coverage.

> *'Traditional mainstream audiences are still Boomers, but most media organisations are now led by Gen Xers and sometimes even Gen Z.'*

> *'Over the past few years the average age of most newsrooms has dropped by at least 10 years. There's been a conscious move by media organisations to cut their wages cost base by moving on older journalists who are generally on the higher income bands. One of the consequences of that is it makes newsrooms less representative [of society] and I think that is impacting the quality of coverage.'*

Interviewees also discussed the problem of ageism within the media industry itself, with some speculating that it may be more prevalent in media workforces than in the broader community. Consistent with other findings, there was a strong view that, just as ageism is gendered in the wider community, it is particularly pronounced in the media industry.

> *'In the media industry itself, being a public-facing job, it's even more acute. There's very little value placed on older women journalists and presenters.'*

> *'The day I had to wax my upper lip was the day I knew I had to get out of TV and get into print.'*

> *'It's the same in the jobs market. You'll have stand-out candidates, but they fall down in the application process because of their birth year.'*

The media professionals interviewed were not aware of any internal, formal training or education on issues around ageing and ageism, and stated that this was not seen as necessary in their organisations. In contrast, interviewees from two media organisations said there was formal, albeit irregular, training on issues around gender and/or cultural diversity.

> *'A long time ago at a different media organisation we had training about correct labelling of ages but there was nothing beyond that, certainly nothing about ageism and issues around ageing.'*

> *'I am not aware of any training or education that's been done.'*

> *'There's no specific training. We always try to be sensitive in covering all issues but there's no training or education internally.'*

> *'There is zero training and education on ageing and ageism [in our newsroom]. There is with cultural diversity and gender, but there is nothing equivalent with ageing and ageism.'*

> *'No, never.'*

It was noted by some respondents that in the past, any void of formal internal training was filled by informal instruction from older and more experienced journalists and producers.

> *'I've worked at several organisations and bureaus over 20 years and there's never been any formal training or education but there's always been informal instruction from older more experienced colleagues. Inside the media industry a whole generation of older journalists in newsrooms have been wiped out by redundancies because they were on higher incomes and media organisations are all looking to cut costs and replace higher paid journalists with younger, less well-paid journalists. So younger journalists do not learn by watching anymore and that's a huge loss with massive long-term consequences. COVID and working from home has really intensified that.'*

> *'There was a time when the training was actually learning on the job from experienced journos around you. You'd pick things up by listening to them or they'd politely, or sometimes impolitely, let you know if you were doing something wrong. That's not really the case anymore.'*

(d) Other underlying drivers of negative media portrayals

The interviewees stated that while their primary audience is typically older people, appealing to younger audiences is seen as crucial for the sustainability of their media organisation.

> *'I am mindful that in traditional media we are writing to a mostly older audience but also at the same time we are trying to appeal to a younger audience that might become subscribers. So that thought is in the background all the time.'*

> *'Newsrooms are obsessed with engaging younger audiences to survive, and I think in the rush to appeal to a younger audience we can be guilty of not getting the balance right.'*

'The demos of our program skews older, so stories on superannuation and tax concessions resonates. But it's not something we deliberately set out to do in the same way we don't set out to pitch to a younger audience even if we are mindful of building and developing a future audience.'

'Our product and content are primarily focused on finance and business, shareholdings etcetera so our readership is mostly older people. Superannuation stories rate very well for us, property [and] finance too. But those stories appeal to our audience more generally, so it's not something we have deliberately done to connect with older people.'

Despite this awareness of the commercial importance of attracting a younger audience, there was a strong rejection among those interviewed of any deliberate editorial strategy underpinning their story choices or direction.

However, they readily accepted that media coverage does generally portray older people negatively, often presenting them in ways that perpetuated and 'leaned into stereotypes'. This included portraying older people as vulnerable, an economic burden, and as beneficiaries of a taxation system structured and shaped by their generation. It was acknowledged that this is an area where the media industry needs to improve.

'Advertisers want a younger audience, but our audience definitely skews toward older. But there's no editorial direction or plan – we very much go day to day and issue by issue.'

'We are trying to find that sweet spot where we continue to appeal to our older and loyal audience but also to engage that younger audience that we need to survive for the longer term. But that doesn't influence what we cover and how we cover it.'

'I think the elderly are generally pretty poorly portrayed. Mainstream media often likes to mock older people's language and habits. Older people are too often portrayed as technology luddites, vulnerable and scared, while younger people are portrayed as 'TikTok' stars and bearing the economic burden of the ageing population.'

'I think the media broadly leans too much on stereotypes and that's something we as an industry has to improve on.'

'Generally ageing is depicted as an economic burden because we have a lot of economic debate in this country, particularly in the current cost of living crisis where everyone is more resource competitive.'

'There is a tendency to report on Boomers as a demographic problem and a burden on the taxpayer and sucking up resources. I think we as an industry need to re-evaluate how we present these stories and be careful we aren't sort of perpetuating these stereotypes.'

> *'The media too often represents stereotypes of the elderly as irrational rather than wise.'*

> *'Because of the mounting crisis of aged care, there is a tendency to classify older people as helpless victims of an advancing demographic bubble they are part of.'*

> *'The media doesn't really like to talk about it [ageism] as a problem. Instead, it's too often about 'how are we going to afford them?' I think in the media we are guilty of creating a fear about getting old.'*

> *'I thought it was most interesting during COVID where it exposed a few assumptions about the value of older lives, that deaths of those in their 90s was somehow not as serious. Because they are elderly its almost easier to slot them into a prescribed category.'*

Some of those interviewed also expressed personal concerns about how older Australians are perceived more broadly in society.

> *'I'm not worried about dying one day, but I am worried about being old and being seen as a burden or as a problem or not valued.'*

There was a view among some that First Nations cultures placed greater value on their Elders and the knowledge they passed down through generations, and that this underpinned attitudes and portrayals. Importantly, they thought Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders were more accessible and available for the media to interview as spokespeople.

> *'In Australia I think the only group that properly values its Elders is the Aboriginal culture where older people are valued and celebrated. They gain knowledge over their lifetime and pass that knowledge on.'*

> *'In our world, Aboriginal Elders are really revered. On many stories impacting the Indigenous community you'd go to an Elder for comment on a story to lend weight to what you are reporting on. But you don't get that sort of representation for older people in general.'*

(e) Lack of relevant spokespeople on age-related matters

There was broad agreement that there is a critical lack of media spokespeople as advocates for older Australians, and that this presents a significant barrier to better coverage of issues around ageing and ageism.

> *'There is a lack of experts on ageing issues available for comment.'*

> *'There's a strong representation of spokespeople available on just about every issue or interest group except ageing. There's plenty of talking heads for stories on gender inequality, LGBTI issues, Indigenous affairs or ethnic and multicultural groups. But finding someone to speak on ageing and ageism is much tougher. The few that have the expertise required for comment are either inaccessible or unresponsive.'*

> *'There's a couple of spokespeople around but not a lot.'*

> *'I think the elderly would feel underrepresented in media coverage more generally. Expertise in this area was lacking in the Royal Commission coverage, we had plenty of coverage about the politics of it, and the political consequences as well as financial perspectives and you can do a good job with that but there was certainly not a lot of experts we could call on for comment or background or explanation.'*

> *'There's a lack of voices available to represent older Australians.'*

> *'There are a few organisations we can tap into for comment or background but to be honest they aren't very accessible. When you are working to deadline or wanting nice clean copy from a third-party, I don't really know who to go to.'*

Others reflected that the problem was not only the lack of available spokespeople as subject matter experts, but also the absence of journalists with expertise to cover age-related stories. They said this impacts accurate and extensive coverage and contributes to knowledge gaps.

> *'The problem with modern journalism is there's not enough subject matter experts reporting. Readers and viewers tend to have cognitive dissonance when consuming these stories because whilst a subject matter expert will see the flaws in an issue's reporting, to the audience it's correct and accurate.'*

> *'There are a few journalists who know their stuff on issues around health, healthcare and ageing … most newsrooms can't afford to have dedicated journalists with that type of deep specialisation anymore. So, combine that with a lack of available spokespersons representing older people and you have a real problem.'*

> *'I think journalism is a fairly young industry and consequently most don't have much interest in stories impacting older Australians.'*

These respondents were of the view that the availability of more voices and spokespeople for older people would improve the visibility of older Australians and their stories and assist with shaping more balanced and representative media coverage. There was a clear appetite among the media professionals interviewed for more proactive leadership and media engagement from the organisations representing older Australians.

> *'I think older people lack those champions out there in the media. I think it's really important that we have more voices in the media representing older Australians.'*

> *'We are very reliant on organisations to put people forward for comment on stories but with organisations that represent older people they don't necessarily put spokespeople forward for us to speak to.'*

> *'I think more vocal and prominent voices or spokespeople would help better shape the coverage.'*

> *'Most relevant organisations aren't even reactive, they are just silent and invisible. I think the conversation would be improved if these organisations were proactive.'*

5.3 Academics

(a) Lack of consensus regarding ageism in the Australian media

Among the academics interviewed for this research, most recognised and supported the Commission's work and research on ageism. However, there was a lack of consensus among these interviewees as to whether ageism in the Australian media was a meaningful problem.

Academics who did see ageism as a foundational problem in the media expressed a range of views including that:

- There has been inadequate focus on age and ageing in the Australian media and that a 'spotlight' is welcome, as it is a 'universal truth that we are all getting older' and 'what we see influences expectations'.
- The media has 'the power to reinforce stereotypes' but also to provide new visions about what it means to age well.
- Ageism is firmly ingrained in society, where 'old' is synonymous with 'bad'.
- Ageism is reinforced in the media, where older people are characterised as 'frail, foolish and forgetful', as old 'Boomers', with images of 'their crossed and ageing hands' reinforcing their vulnerability and lack of 'agency, autonomy and independence'.
- Media reporting on older people often focuses on or 'defaults' to aged care, which while an important topic, means other important age topics are overlooked or absent from much of the media discourse.
- Attempts by the media to present positive portrayals of older persons often rely on 'ageing superheroes', such as an older person doing an extreme sport or getting a university degree at an advanced age, which reinforces a patronising view of older people and their capacities.
- Negative stereotypes of ageing, particularly of women and ageing, are instilled at an early age, for example, in children's books featuring stories of 'craggy, old, manipulative women'.
- Ageing women are seen as 'almost an affront' to society and ageing women's bodies are seen as going against society's deepest 'values' of 'beauty and strength'.
- The most pernicious example of these biases was seen in reporting of COVID-19 deaths during the height of the pandemic, where the lives of older people were dehumanised and devalued, and their deaths portrayed as 'normalised and acceptable', implying that 'collective relief' should be felt as 'only' older people who 'were going to die anyway' were most impacted.

> '[we have all] internalised all those negative associations with getting older.'

Academics who disputed that ageism in the media was a meaningful problem conveyed various viewpoints including that:

- The worldview of older people still dominates and shapes stories and discourse in the media – and often in ways that are opposed to reform, for example, in relation to issues such as superannuation, tax and negative gearing or on current topics of discussion such as 'problematic international students'.
- There are more important areas of 'identity politics' than age and pushed back against the notion of 'identity politics' more broadly.
- Younger people are affected far more than older people, both in the media and beyond, noting that it was not until recently that the economic difficulties experienced by younger generations were acknowledged by the media as 'a genuine crisis', with the media previously characterising younger people as lazy and incompetent.
- Older generations are more economically secure than younger generations and as a result 'ageism is not as dominant' because older people have become the prime audience for advertising.

These academics conceded that there may be some unfortunate examples of older people being stereotyped in the media, such as for being greedy in their refusal to transfer wealth. However, they were of the view that these depictions were not pervasive or necessarily problematic for older people.

> *'If I were honest about it, I feel quite well-represented in the media.'*

(b) Ageing audiences

There was agreement among the academics interviewed that traditional media audiences were ageing. However, there were differing opinions about the extent to which younger audiences were being 'chased' or targeted by the media.

Those who believed that media outlets are focusing on a younger audience associated this with ageism.

> *'I think media does project a certain ageism, because they are trying to garner support from younger audiences.'*

Others reflected that digital technology had transformed the media landscape, and the use of web analytics to measure 'success' has meant that click rates dominate what content gets produced. Consequently, while traditional media may aspire to attract a younger audience, they may be forced to produce content that their existing older audience will click on.

(c) Redundancies and loss of institutional knowledge

There was greater consensus among interviewees on the issue of redundancies in the media, which was seen to disproportionately affect older workers, who were often considered too expensive and hence targeted for redundancy. Interviewees observed that the departure of experienced older workers has resulted in a young media workforce characterised by a lack of experience and expertise, as well as high turnover rates, where young workers are being replaced by even younger workers.

> *'This is important because an increasingly youthful workforce is making content for an ever-ageing audience'*

It was further noted that resource pressures in newsrooms, have created a tendency among journalists to default to easy contacts and sources for stories, such as politicians or experts. This has resulted in a lack of representation of older people's lived experiences and simplistic generational narratives such as:

> *'Baby Boomers are eating up all your resources and not leaving anything behind for you [and] you cannot get a house, [or] Millennials are all crying in the corner. These are the sort of overarching narratives…. all you see are [older people], completely decrepit [in an] aged care home…you will never see the 85-year-old healthy Italian sitting in the backyard doing his tomatoes and being happy about it.'*

(d) Lack of understanding about the realities of ageing

A number of the academics interviewed observed that mainstream Australian culture has not caught up with the reality of extended lifespans.

> *'It is not 1940 [when] we were dying [at] 50 years old with a heart attack.'*

However, it was noted that media depictions continue to present older people as either 'superheros' or as overly vulnerable and/or incapacitated. Examples referred to include depictions of older parents with dementia in the ABC TV dramas 'Mother and Son' and 'Packed to the Rafters.'

Academics who saw ageism as a problem in the media, said they wanted to see more depictions of older people living their lives in ordinary ways, as part of society and their community. For example, stories of older people engaging in new romance or volunteer work, as opposed to stereotypical portrayals, such as of an older person coming to terms with the death of a spouse.

These interviewees were particularly concerned about negative depictions of older people with dementia, both in the media more broadly and specifically in the context of coverage on the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (Royal Commission). While acknowledging the importance of the Royal Commission coverage, the interviewees noted that 'so many pictures of people locked up and abused' has made people 'really scared' of the ageing process. It was also seen to highlight a crucial problem, in that the media will only report on the 'worst cases' as only those were considered newsworthy. While smaller, regional outlets were observed to often cover 'happy stories' about local aged care services, it was considered that such stories would 'not fly in Greater Sydney media.'

(e) Absence of age in the diversity and inclusion landscape

Interviewees acknowledged that there was lack of age diversity within the media industry and that this lack of diversity was reflected in the absence of older Australians in media representations, with the 'white pensioner archetype' still dominating media narratives around ageing. Greater diversity in representations was seen as necessary to reflect the rapidly changing composition of Australian society.

(f) Examples of best practice in media portrayals of ageing

While there were differing views on what the media gets right in depictions of ageing, most academics interviewed agreed that better representations tend to be found on the ABC, SBS or in The Guardian. These media outlets were described as doing 'a reasonable job' and having 'balanced depictions of ageing.'

> *'There have been some beams of light on ABC and SBS [that have challenged] some of the myths and stereotypes.'*

There was also acknowledgement that there is more interest and coverage of ageism compared to five years ago. It was noted that Ageism Awareness Day, received good coverage and there is now considerable scholarly research on the topic, as well as guides on how to avoid ageism and 'othering' through descriptors such as 'senile' and other derogatory terms.

Other commentary about positive media portrayals noted:

- a rise in positive representation of older women, where women's ageing bodies are seen as something to be celebrated rather than 'something to be reviled'
- better representations of Indigenous Elders, which assists with countering the 'white pensioner' archetype
- more accurate representations, such as depictions of older parents living ordinary lives in the ABC TV series 'Fisk.'

(g) Conclusion

Despite differing views on whether ageism is a problem in Australian media, there was agreement among the academics interviewed that media coverage of age/ageing should be about 'life stage' as opposed to simple 'numerical approaches', and that we must 'stop clumping older people together.'

It was noted that throughout one's life, there can be 'periods where people are unwell or have a disability' but it is 'really important for people to understand that older people can be happy and productive … and a huge asset in the workforce.'

5.4 Corporate communications practitioners

(a) It is the culture, and it is easy

The two corporate communications practitioners interviewed for this research identified ageism in the media as a product of ingrained societal norms in mainstream Australian culture, noting that 'Australia is not a place that values older people.' It was observed that while 'some cultures deeply respect their elders,' Australia is not one of those cultures.

There was a perception that to become old in Australia is to become 'invisible,' driven and characterised by a loss of economic utility and value. Older workers were seen to 'cost more' and therefore 'they want you out.' 'Intersectionality,' where age is overlaid with other characteristics like race or gender, was also recognised as a factor that can worsen the implications of ageism.

Entrenched ageism in Australian culture was seen to make stereotypical portrayals of age an 'easy story,' resulting in a media landscape where older people were either pitied or reviled, and their strengths or values ignored.

The interviewees highlighted two prevalent age stereotypes in media portrayals.

The first was 'frailty,' where older people are seen as vulnerable, incompetent, incapacitated, impaired and despondent. 'It's always someone frail on a walker, with a cup of tea and a biscuit,' someone who 'doesn't know what's what,' in short 'a portrayal of weakness.'

The second was 'intergenerational conflict,' where older people are portrayed as selfish wealth hoarders, who are no longer contributing to the progress of the economy or society and 'stopping others from getting a look in.' Concerns were raised about the 'social discord' this type of narrative creates.

(b) Alignment with business values and drivers

The interviewees, who worked in the superannuation and private health insurance sectors respectively, asserted that the communication practices of their organisations do not replicate the age stereotypes they see in the broader media landscape.

They attributed this difference to two key factors.

The first is a broader recognition in corporate communications of the importance of diverse representations and that age is an important factor in diversity. However, within this context, it was acknowledged that age must compete with what are considered 'higher order equity issues' such as gender and disability.

The second is a recognition of the business imperative and benefits of more accurate representations of older Australians. As one interviewee commented, '[i]t's our business to know things about our customers' and hence there is a focus on ensuring representations accurately reflect and are 'true' to older or younger customers. There is a conscious effort to avoid stereotypes that could lead to 'discord' and 'alienation' of customers and that this conscious, deliberate approach is 'embedded in what we do.'

| *'We think about it more overtly.'*

It is clear that when business values and drivers align, more positive representations of age/ageing are possible. However, despite this 'overt' thinking, the interviewees could not point to any source of expertise or guidance on what is good or best practice in this space. Though they had undergone disability awareness training, they had no knowledge of equivalent training for age or ageism.

(c) Age bias in the workplace

The interviewees observed that although they had not personally experienced ageism or age discrimination in their careers, there was a relative absence of older workers within their organisations – 'we're all under 45.' While these interviewees did not attribute this to the existence of age discrimination against older workers, the interviewees admitted that there was a very clear 'skew' in their workforces.

One explanation given for this, was that it might have something to do with the need to be 'quite computer literate' to deal with the 'super complex systems' of the organisation.

Another interviewee was of the view that there have been improvements, observing that it was no longer common to hear questions in a recruitment process about whether older applicants would 'bring the right vibrancy or energy,' that there were 'older people in mid-level roles that weren't there early in my career' and this was accompanied by a greater focus on the 'strengths' that older workers bring.
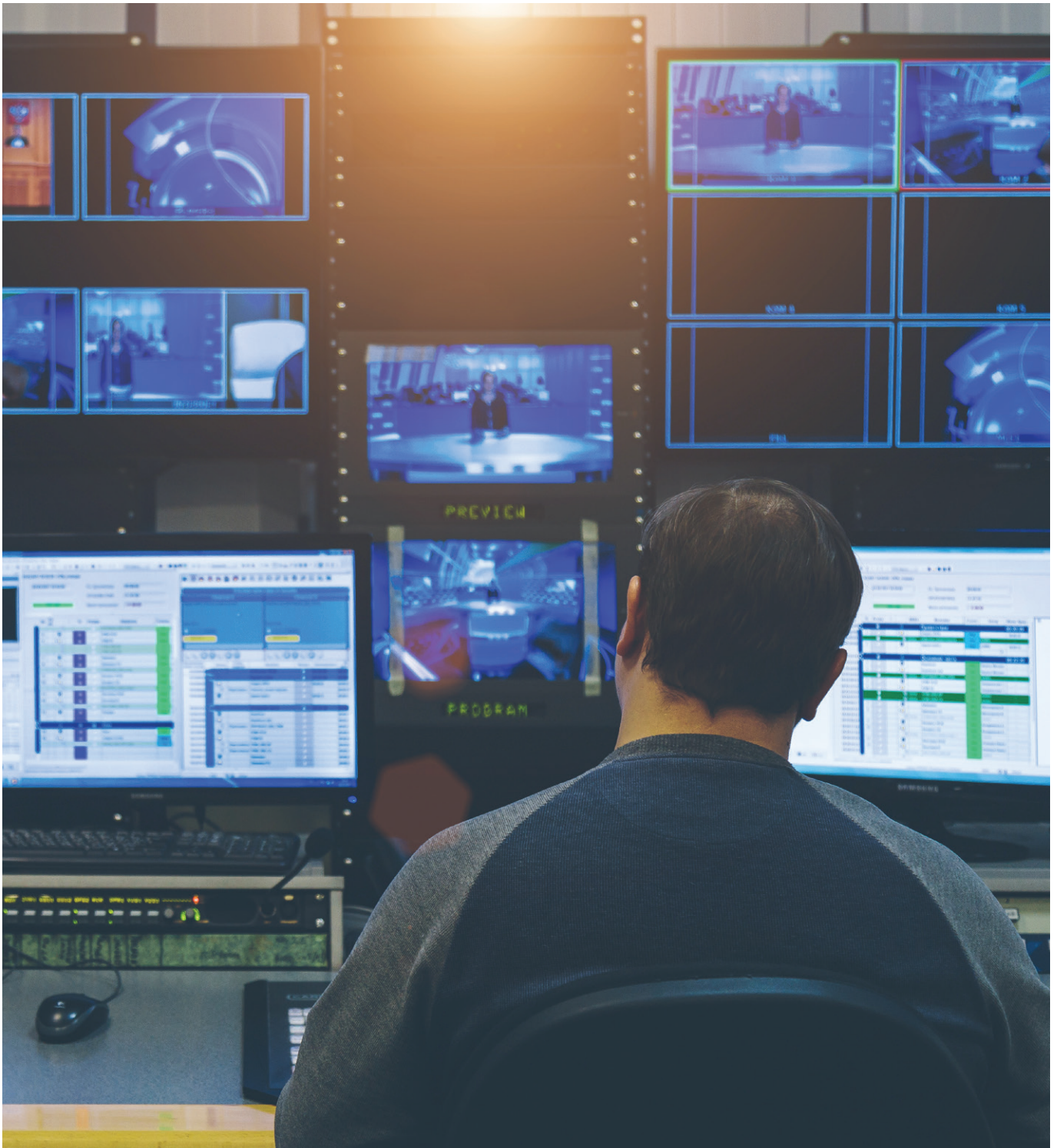
6. Ways forward

This research identified some key gaps in existing literature about age representations in Australian media that are worth further investigation, including in relation to age and intersectionality, counterstereotypes and positive media portrayals of ageing, as well as ageism in social media. It also identified insights into workforce ageism and gendered ageism within media organisations that may warrant specific attention from the media industry.

In contemplating a way forward, this report focuses on three key opportunities for both the age sector and media industry to work together in a strong, collaborative partnership approach to support and grow the media's capability to address ageism and promote more diverse, accurate and balanced representations of ageing.

Opportunity 1: Addressing the expert gap

There is an opportunity for the media industry and age sector to work together to improve media access to relevant advocates or experts, so that necessary context can be gained on stories around ageing and the voices and experiences of older Australians represented. There was an almost unanimous view among those interviewed that a greater availability of spokespeople would result in more accurate and extensive media coverage, helping to reshape the narrative on ageing.

Opportunity 2: Addressing the education and training gap

The media sector is encouraged to expand and strengthen their existing diversity training for staff to specifically cover age and ageism. There is opportunity for the media industry and age sector to co-design tailored educational materials and training programs to inform media professionals and support improved editorial practices in reporting on age-related topics.

Opportunity 3: Shifting the narrative on ageing

There is opportunity for the media industry and age sector to collectively embark on a new communication campaign, to combat ageism in the broader community, advance the business case within the media industry for more accurate and diverse representations of ageing, and improve media reporting standards on the coverage of different age groups.

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