

## Testimony of Paul Kleyman

First, I would like to thank you, Senators Breaux and Craig, members of Special Committee on Aging and your able staff for shining your spotlight on this topic. I also want to thank the American Society on Aging and its President and CEO, Gloria Cavanaugh, for supporting my work on the journalism of aging. I do wish to make clear, though, that my comments today are strictly my own and do not represent those of either ASA or the Journalists Exchange on Aging and the 750 journalists in the network that I coordinate.

Today's distinguished panel, in which I'm proud to participate, can, at best, reveal only the tip of the iceberg regarding ageism in the media. I believe that ageism is one of the last remaining "isms" that can be openly expressed in our society. Whether it is meant playfully or pointedly, a headline that declares "Geezer Nation," an editor's reference to older people as "prune faces" or a statement that news organizations should ax their "old warhorses" and hire younger staff are epithets that have no place in the news or in newsrooms.

### **An 'Old Audience'? Red-lining by Age in the Media**

Nowhere is ageism more evident than in the business coverage of the media itself. Business stories repeatedly state that a television network's bottom line is most heavily damaged when its programs attract older audiences. In fact, the term "OLD AUDIENCE" appeared without irony or comment in a large-type statement that highlighted -- perhaps I should say *low-lighted* -- an article in the *New York Times* only about two years ago (Oct. 1, 2000).

Just three weeks later, the Wall Street Journal (October 24, 2000) reported on its front page that NBC had lost ground in its competition for "the coveted 18 to 49 age group." The article stressed, "In the past three years, the median age of NBC's audience has risen to 45 from 41, *a bad omen for advertising revenues*" (emphasis added).

More recently, on March 2 of this year, an Associated Press article ran on front pages nationwide about how ABC was "wooing" David Letterman to replace Ted Koppel's *Nightline*. The article noted that Letterman had "long been unhappy with CBS' older prime-time audience . . . ." Both Letterman and Jay Leno frequently make jokes about how old network audiences are, based on what television executives say about network economics.

All of these jokes and denigrating comments have their roots in the fact that television advertisers pay far less for every 1,000 viewers a program attracts who are older than those in that coveted 18 to 49 age group. Better yet are the rates for those 18 to 35. In fact, programs of great interest to older viewers have actually won the ratings competition for the most viewers in their time slots -- but still earn a great deal less money for the a network or local TV station.

Let me ask you to put these questionable economics aside for a moment and think about those newspaper articles. Take a phrase like "old audience." If a newspaper ran an article today that said CBS had to recover from having a "black audience" or a "women's audience" the nation would be in an uproar. It not so long ago in the history of racism that real estate brokers discouraged home sales to African Americans in certain areas because they said doing so would "bring down the property values." This was a terrible, self-perpetuating myth. I believe that the continued derogation of older audiences is tantamount to media red-lining by age.

### **'Prune Faces,' 'Old Warhorses' and September 11**

News organizations also have been determined to attract younger readers -- and there is nothing wrong with that -- except these efforts are often accompanied by an irrational bias against both older readers and older reporters or editors.

Let me mention some of the things that are going on in newsrooms.

\* One reporter at a national news organization told me in confidence that until a couple of years ago he dealt with an editor who was set on minimizing images of older people in stories. This editor thought it a big joke to call older citizens "prune faces," and the news staff referred to this as the editor's "no-pruneface rule."

\* Another example: A book on economic forces in the news (1) distilled interviews with over 200 influential editorial executives. The study's author derided older journalists who were out of touch with "today's tools and rules" of high-tech interactivity. She commented, "Some news executives are beginning to understand this. As they do . . . , they unceremoniously ax the old warhorses to make way for something new."

\* A more subtle example is that this past spring an editor at a metropolitan newspaper circulated a memo to the editorial staff telling them they will be judged on how well they have tried to reach 18 to 35-year-old readers. Meanwhile, the coverage of older people was quietly weakened.

At least sometimes, though, experience does count -- such as after the terrorist attacks of September 11 last year. In an article that appeared in the American Society on Aging journal, *Generations* (2), a former producer for ABC News noted that "the only time older people are given their due respect is when it is time for experts, experts, experts. [Network] gatekeepers do not believe that the personal stories of older folks draw in the viewers in the ways that the personal stories of 15-year-olds do." She said that such a moment for older experts came following the September 11 attacks. At a time of national crisis, Americans responded to those with knowledge, seasoned by experience and wisdom. We wanted to hear from our elders.

### **Harvard's New 'Age in the Press' Study**

What about newspapers? A study titled "Age in the Press" (3) released this year by Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy found "that newspapers try to dispose of upper-middle age journalists, irrespective of their expertise, in order to be able to recruit younger people."

The study's author, Hans Bergström, added, "In their market strategies newspapers are paying nearly no interest to readers in the upper-middle ages, in spite of the fact that this is fastest-increasing group of readers. Focus is instead on meeting threats from the Web and reaching out to the young, those supposed to be the hardest-to-get readers."

I do not wish to suggest that the financial issues facing newspapers are uncomplicated for the newspaper industry. However, the scapegoating of older readers is not the right solution. Newspaper studies since the mid-1980s have shown that the percentage of younger people who read a paper every day is declining. (This is not true of Sunday newspaper readerships, but it is six-day-a-week readers who most affect advertising revenues.) But the reaction, to chase after young adults -- often at the expense of loyal older readers -- suggest to me that a little knowledge, poorly acted on, can be a dangerous thing.

*Presstime* (4), the magazine of the Newspaper Association of America, ran an article comparing

readerships in the U.S. and those abroad. The article showed that while only 40% of young adults in the U.S. read a paper every day, the figure is much higher in many other countries, for example, it's 82% in Canada. One financial expert stated that newspapers abroad do "far more research to understand reader consumer behavior" than publishers in the U.S. Belden Associates of Dallas has calculated that its clients spend "as low as 2 cents per reader" on their consumer research. This is only one example I found in my limited search to understand the underlying the knee-jerk response of the media that leads to simplistic approaches and derogatory views of older Americans.

### **Good News -- The Emerging Age-Beat in Journalism**

Before closing let me emphasize that there is some good news in many American newsrooms. I coordinate a group called the Journalists Exchange on Aging. In the almost 10 years since a group of reporters formed it, I have seen a slow-but-steady growth in the number of journalists devoted to what we call the "age beat," among them, by the way, several writers and editors at the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*.

A study we released last fall (5) showed that at least 60 daily newspapers now have a reporter assigned to follow the issues of aging on a regular basis for at least part of their time. The average time devoted to concerns of people in mid- and later life was around 50% -- and about 15 papers have a full-time age-beat reporter.

The main finding of our survey was that reporters on aging are "seasoned and sensitized." That is, these are seasons reporters averaging 22 years as professional journalists, and they have a passion for covering issues in aging that is often driven by their personal experiences of aging. In other words, the age beat may not be seen as a money-maker by newspaper publishers, but reporters -- especially aging boomers with elderly parents -- realize that this coverage is important to the lives and futures of Americans and will not let it go away.

### **Economic Growth Should Not Stunt Coverage**

As news organizations struggle to secure their future economic growth, I believe that it is also critical for them to look for ways not to stunt the growth of their coverage about major social developments, such as the longevity revolution. In manufacturing it is always easy to protect the bottom line by cutting back on some areas of production and pursuing new markets. But important as commerce is, the production of news is different. For one thing it is protected in our Constitution -- protected as a public trust. The longevity revolution we are experiencing is one of the greatest stories of the 21st century. It affects every individual, community and social institution. American citizens of every age need the news media to help us better understand this enormous change. News management needs to wake up and smell the demographics.

Thank you for this opportunity.

### **REFERENCES**

- (1) *Megamedia: How Market Forces Are Transforming the News*, by Nancy Hicks Maynard (New York City: Maynard Partners, Inc., 2000).
- (2) "Media, Marketing, and the Images of the Older Person in the Information Age," in *Generations*,

Fall 2001 (vol. xxv, number 1), special issue on "Images of Aging in Media and Marketing," San Francisco: American Society on Aging.

(3) "Age in the Press," by Hans Bergström, Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. To download, go to [www.shorensteincenter.org](http://www.shorensteincenter.org). Then click "Papers." Then click "Working Paper Series."

(4) "Lessons From Abroad," by Ed Barron, *Presstime Magazine*, National Association of Newspapers, Oct. 16, 2001.

(5) "The Journalists Exchange on Aging's Third National Survey/The Age Beat's Heart Beat Steady Despite Ageist Media Economics," *Age Beat* (Number 20) publication of the Journalists Exchange on Aging, Fall 2001. For PDF of 11-page report, go to [www.asaging.org](http://www.asaging.org), click "Media," then click *Age Beat*.