



Australian Human  
Rights Commission

# Shaping Perceptions: How Australian Media Reports on Ageing

*Summary Report*



## Why 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.

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

*– Robert Fitzgerald AM, Age Discrimination Commissioner,  
Australian Human Rights Commission*

Negative stereotyping and the underrepresentation of older people and their experiences by the media are well documented in Australian research.<sup>1</sup> However few studies have directly engaged with media professionals on these issues.

This research builds on existing knowledge about **how** age is represented in Australian media by bringing media industry professionals into dialogue on **why** negative age portrayals persist and discussing **what** needs to be done to achieve more diverse, accurate and balanced media representation.

This research was undertaken between May and June 2024 and involved a review of literature and media reportage on age-related topics by key media outlets in Australia. In-depth interviews were then conducted with prominent journalists, presenters, editors and producers across Australian media networks as well as with academics, media educators and corporate communications specialists. Their voices are reflected throughout the report.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Finding 1:

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

While there are some positive examples of Australian media reporting on ageing, this research found that, more commonly, problematic recurring themes persist in media portrayals.

This research found these recurring themes to be:

- **the framing of ageing as a problem**, 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
- **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 an aesthetic concern
- **invisibility** of older Australians and their lived experiences.

### 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, and 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 when it comes to issues of age or ageing, resulting in the perpetuation of misconceptions and misreporting of older people and their experiences.
- **Time and resource constraints:** understaffed and overworked newsrooms with fewer resources and tighter deadlines means it is increasingly difficult for journalists to dedicate time to properly research and cover stories on age and ageing.
- **Loss of experienced and specialist practitioners in newsrooms:** previously, senior or specialist journalists would have acted as experienced advisors for younger journalists on age-related topics.
- **Invisibility of age within the diversity and inclusion space:** while many interviewees spoke about being provided with disability or gender awareness training, none reported being offered similar training or resources on age or ageism awareness.
- **Lack of consensus among academics:** about the nature or extent of the issues identified regarding the portrayal of age in Australian media.
- **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 intergenerational tensions, 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.

## WAYS FORWARD

Key opportunities are presented in the research to support and grow the media's capability to address ageism and promote more diverse, accurate and balanced representations of ageing. A strong, collaborative partnership approach between the media industry and age sector is essential to realising these opportunities and shaping future media practices.

### 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 or experts, so important 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 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.*



## WHAT MEDIA PROFESSIONALS SAID

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

“It [ageing] 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.”

“**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.**”

“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...”

“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.**”

“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 online traffic which unfortunately

encourages newsrooms to pursue more stories reporting on that conflict and tension.”

“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.**”

“In the media industry itself, being a public-facing job, it’s [ageism] even more acute. There’s **very little value placed on older women journalists and presenters.**”

“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.”

“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... So **younger journalists do not learn by watching anymore and that’s a huge loss with massive long-term consequences...**”

“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.**”

## WHAT MEDIA PROFESSIONALS SAID

*“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 ‘Tik-Tok’ stars and bearing the economic burden of the ageing population.”*

*“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.”*

*“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.”*

*“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.**”*

*“**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, LGBTIQ 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.**”*

*“**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.”*

### Endnotes

- 1 See for example Australian Human Rights Commission, ‘Fact or Fiction: Stereotypes of Older Australians’ (2013) <<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/projects/fact-or-fiction-stereotypes-older-australians>>; Australian Human Rights Commission, ‘What’s age got to do with it?’ (2021) [https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/ahrc\\_wagtdwi\\_2021.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/ahrc_wagtdwi_2021.pdf); TJ Thomson et al, ‘Visibility and invisibility in the aged care sector: visual representation in Australian news from 2018-2021’ (2024) 190(1) Media International Australia 146-164 <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1329878X221094374>>; Vivienne Selwyn, ‘Critical perspectives on media representations of ageing in the Australian press: Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), Daily Telegraph, Newsonline, The Australian and The Conversation, 2010-2016’ (MRes Thesis, Macquarie University, 2017) <<https://doi.org/10.25949/19434872.v1>> and Muhammad Asim Imran, ‘Redefining older Australians: moving beyond stereotypes and consumer narratives in print media representations’ (2023) 0(0) Media International Australia <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1329878X231208788>>.