Television and Positive Ageing in Australia

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Murdoch University, 2005
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

As a means to engage with others, television offers the viewer a great deal. In Australia commercial TV is particularly popular, and many turn daily to this cultural arena which graphically portrays our shared concerns and values. Viewers are kept informed and entertained, advertisements display the luxuries and necessities that direct lifestyle choices, and local and global stories are presented for mutual consideration. Audiences are connected not only with products, personalities and newsmakers, but also with fellow viewers who are sharing the experience. Retired people take particular advantage of this multi-faceted link with the outside world, when additional leisure time and reduced social and physical mobility create spaces that can be filled with the narratives and ‘para-social’ connections of a medium that transports the world to the viewer. Yet one definitive statement that can be made about popular television is that older people are rarely acknowledged and often ridiculed. An easily accessible and valuable communications medium marginalises those most dependent upon it – for information and entertainment, but also, I would argue, dependent upon it to help facilitate key recommendations of the ‘successful ageing’ formula.

Authoritative prescriptions for ageing well emphasise the benefits of social engagement, with television helping to facilitate this by involving the viewer with local concerns and wider accounts of human enterprise. Yet the popular media often presume that older people are no longer viable consumers or citizens, thus alienating them from mediated stories and populations. ‘Success’, according to commercial media sensibilities, is equated with youthfulness and economic means – twin
attributes rarely associated with retired people. As a result, advertising is directed primarily at young, middle-class audiences, and the TV programmes to hook their attention are often typecast with similarly youthful protagonists. Older viewers are taken for granted and rarely acknowledged, and more disconcertingly, stereotyped and ridiculed to empower younger viewers. This dissertation seeks to explore these issues from a sociological perspective, primarily within the Australian context. Research strategies include a detailed analysis of the role of television in older people’s lives and how they are portrayed, with results aligned with ‘successful ageing’ guidelines. Included in this approach is a study of how older people are portrayed on commercial TV in Australia, and a discussion of findings. The final section includes a chapter which consists of an examination of negative media portrayals from a political and human rights perspective, and the final chapter which asks how the oldest and frailest may be impacted by the cultural devaluation of old age.
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INTRODUCTION

Commercial television has long been accused of speaking only to youthful audiences – the 18-39 year olds seen as the demographic group most likely to respond to advertising. Some analysts have pointed to the economic ramifications of this strategy that ignores increasing ranks of ageing baby-boomers, speculating that this generation is less likely than previous generations to see middle age as a time to wind down and look towards a secluded old age (Dychtwald, 1988; Deets, 1993, Wallace, 1999). There are some indications that advertisers and networks are beginning to grant the middle-aged a degree of accreditation as members of the consumer culture (if not the ‘Pepsi generation’), sanctioning that can be seen as positive in a society dominated by legitimisation according to economic worth. Blaikie (1999) sees this growing popular acceptance of the middle-aged as creating a ‘blurring’ of generations, as this group is increasingly encouraged to follow trends, fashions and lifestyles previously reserved for younger people (p.102-104).

This emerging validation may have some positive ramifications as we see increasing images of active, successful and youthful-looking middle-aged people, with advertisers seeking to promote goods and services to this group. However, whilst an acknowledgement of ageing baby-boomers will extend television’s traditionally youth-orientated focus, there seems little likelihood that older people will be fairly represented. Commercial television is in the business of attracting the attention of the gainfully employed, and promoting the idea that we can all aspire to improve our lifestyles, and maintain (or
regain) youthful attributes. In this climate there is a danger that retired people will be relegated to a subculture which is rarely seen and little understood, with the reality of ageing in a media-dominated society hidden away as something we collectively don’t wish to face. The mindset of the popular media is reflected in the overwhelmingly youthful TV population, often negative or stereotypical characterisations of older people and a dearth of television portrayals of the over 65s.

This thesis seeks to explore the representation of old age on commercial television, and how the TV/viewer interrelationship might influence self-identity and the concept of ageing positively. As we age in modern Western societies we are encouraged to age ‘successfully’ – gerontologists and health workers emphasise integration with society, and the state urges older people to ‘Have a Go’ (the rallying epithet of a local newspaper for seniors). Focussed on active engagement with life, this newspaper echoes many of the positive ageing ideals. Some marketers have ostensibly taken note of this ‘new reality’ of ageing and applied it to the baby-boomer demographic to encourage a continuation of active, consumer-orientated lifestyles. However Katz (2000) warns that this utilisation of the concepts of success and activity has masked the reality of old age, with a superficial acceptance of positive ageing ideals failing to translate into realistic media portrayals of older people:

The ideals of positive ageing and anti-ageism have come to be used to promote a widespread anti-ageing culture, one that translates their radical appeal into commercial capital. In so doing, and aided by powerful rhetorical and marketing practices, anti-ageing culture is effectively reinventing notions of maturity, ageing and elderhood with ideals of timeless living and growing older unburdened by the signs of ageing (para. 1)
Whilst overwhelmingly focussed on young people, when the commercial media do acknowledge ageing people, they do so primarily from the perspective of youthful, vital baby-boomers.

Marketers and advertisers are not interested in the reality of ageing, with retired people seen as having reached a financially impotent stage of the life course, rendering them irrelevant to the system. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that in 1996-7, government pensions were the principle source of income for 74 per cent of those over 65 (ABS, 1999, report 4109.0). Similarly, in their five-year study on television programming choices in the U.K., Gauntlett and Hill (1999) found the biggest majority of respondents in the older age group were on a low income (p.184). In other words, most retired TV viewers would be of limited interest to networks and sponsors, whose modus operandi is to seek out the audiences most likely to spend money. In this light, the emerging interest of marketers in the ‘healthy, wealthy and wise’ – the young old or middle-aged with physical stamina, economic means and middle-class credentials – may impact on society’s view of old age and the self assessment of the vast majority of those over 65. Rather than portraying ageing people, positive middle-aged characters are simply extending the concept of the youth culture. The indication that advertising agencies are incorporating gerontological theory into marketing practices means only that baby-boomers will be encouraged to stay younger, longer. Those over the retirement divide are rarely accorded recognition as valid consumers and rarely acknowledged with positive portrayals.
The growing media alignment of the baby-boomer demographic with the hallowed youth market is based on the assumption that middle-aged people – who grew up with the background chant of advertising jingles – may be more amenable to commercial messages than their parents. My interest lies in exploring how the alienation of the oldest cohort from the consumer message (and therefore the commercial media) might impact on positive ageing in relation to social attitudes and self-identity. Whilst the formation of ‘self’ involves a complex variety of personal and social variables, of which viewing TV is only one, television plays an integral part in the lives of most people, and in particular, the older audience. My focus is on commercial television due to the popularity of the commercial networks in Australia – The Productivity Commission Report (2000) gives an indication of this popularity when it reports that the ABC and SBS networks had a combined audience share of only 17 per cent in 1997, whereas a Roy Morgan research survey found that 94.5 per cent of Australians had watched commercial TV in the previous week (p.61). In addition, the 50+ age group were the heaviest users of all popular media – magazines, newspapers, commercial radio, and especially commercial television (p.72). Gauntlett and Hill (1999) write that viewing TV plays a large part in the lives of most retired people, with those over 65 watching 36 hours a week, which is 40 per cent more than average (p.173).

The media enables retired people to access information, including local and global news and current affairs, thus promoting positive ageing in one sense through social involvement. With TV readily at hand, at the press of a button and at little cost, even frail and housebound older people can engage with story
lines and characters and ‘keep in touch’. Yet some researchers have condemned commercial television in particular for promoting ageist concepts, deterring from the positive role of TV in encouraging social connection. For example, Robinson’s (1998) research into the portrayal of older people in advertising found that older adults were often depicted negatively to reinforce the youth-orientated nature of the advert (p.12). Also, Heaton et al’s (1995) analysis of daytime talk shows found them dominated by young people and youth issues, with older people rarely represented in talk shows, even though they comprised the largest audience segment (p.168).

If commercial TV projects youth-orientated values and an ‘anti-ageing’ culture, then the question of the ‘effects’ of television discourse and images needs to be addressed. In this light, my thesis is underpinned by critical research into the effects of TV on audiences. Some media analysts have discounted the notion that TV programming affects viewers, arguing that audiences actively construct and deconstruct meaning, accepting or rejecting messages subjectively. This theoretical model – ‘uses and gratifications’ – came into favour after many years of ‘effects’ research had failed to provide conclusive proof that passive audiences responded uniformly to TV programming. However, critics of the uses and gratifications paradigm have pointed to flaws in the argument for critical assessment of programming. For example, Berger (1991) writes of the hegemonic power of the media which ‘shape people’s very idea of themselves and the world’ (p.50), and Lewis (1991) reminds us that TV is a part of our social world, shaping our values, interests and defining our social roles (p.15-16). According to Scannell (1996), we can form a close social bond with TV characters, with television seen as a friend, projecting authenticity and sincerity as it orientates to
the normative values of ordinary talk, effectively creating an interactive social relationship (p.24).

A theoretical stance which does consider our social relationship with TV to have an effect is the ‘cultural indicators’ paradigm, which is based on the hypothesis that television viewing plays a large part in the enculturation process. The main component of the paradigm is ‘cultivation analysis’, which posits that the self-concept and worldview of heavy TV viewers is cultivated by stereotypical and ideological messages which dominate the medium. The heaviest viewers of television are statistically the oldest audience segment, which is also a group often stereotyped negatively. Also of concern in relation to this age group is research which points to a fear of crime in heavy viewers. Signorielli (1990) reports that violence on television has been found to cultivate a sense of insecurity, mistrust and depression, and a view of the world as ‘mean and dangerous’ (p.88). Relevant to this is Scannell’s (1996) view that the daily ritual of watching TV provides us with ‘matter for concern’ (p.150). In this light, a focus on negative and violent stories might contribute to a sense of isolation for older people and encourage disengagement from the wider community, which TV discourse can project as unrealistically hostile.

Television programming may also encourage alienation through its relentless focus on youth, promoting a sense that older people are extraneous to society. Old age is shunned by TV producers, who are keen to attract the attention of younger people (as the more impulsive consumers), and disassociate their products from the ‘stigma’ of age. In her book, ‘The Fountain of Age’, Betty
Friedan (1993) writes of the absence of people over 65 ‘doing, or even, selling anything at all in the mass media’ whilst at the same time, there is an obsession with the ‘problem’ of age and how to avoid it (p.35). The author also points to the lack of positive images in the media, and the often negative stereotyping in relation to ageing. Older people are depicted as ‘ugly, toothless, sexless, incontinent, senile, confused and helpless’, with many of the over 65s accepting these negative representations (p.49). The media often make use of stereotypes to quickly and simply make a point, or to make characters instantly recognisable. Signorielli (2001) looked back at older representation on U.S. TV through the 1990s, and compared her findings with earlier research in the 1970s and 80s. She found a serious under-representation of older characters, particularly in prime time, and a relegation of older people to limited or demeaning roles, observations which differed little from earlier research (para.18). Negative portrayals can be seen as perpetuating a set of ‘mythologies’ in relation to old age, which might contribute to our perception of what it means to grow old.

The stereotypical image of older people projected through the media limits our understanding of old age, and fails to acknowledge human diversity. Gauntlett and Hill (1999) write that identity politics of the 1970s and 80s saw broad groups such as women, ethnic minorities and older people emphasising the universal nature of their experiences. However, this has been replaced by identity theory which acknowledges the diversity within groups (p.176). Some researchers have questioned the use of chronological status to define a person, suggesting definitions based on how people assess *themselves* through dress or behaviour. Riggs (1998) writes that many people into their mid sixties still identify with
middle age, in an era of expanding life expectancy. She considers chronological age as an unreliable means for defining the life course, and suggests that ‘social’ age or shared life experiences should be the main criteria for grouping people together (p.13). In a similar vein, some researchers have questioned the validity of ascribing the capacity to work with chronological age. By setting a particular age for retirement and the awarding of a pension, it became socially accepted that all people over that age were no longer useful. In tandem with this, with the media still only beginning to intermittently acknowledge the experience of 40 – 65 year olds, and virtually ignoring anyone older, it can be surmised that those well into retirement, in their 70s or 80s, would be considered a faceless and unproductive ‘burden’ on the rest of society.

At this point, and before I go further, it would be prudent to consider the concept of old age within a wider context – the social meaning of age is undoubtedly influenced by issues such as retirement, and in this light a brief review of the historical and institutional processes which have helped shape our understanding of old age is in order. O’Reilly (1997) traces the low status of older people in modern societies back to the late 19th century, when it was presumed that they were unable to keep up with the demands of technological progress (p.12). Medical groups increasingly focussed on age-related deterioration, and with the establishment of social welfare that designated 65 as the age to retire, old age became associated with decline and lack of productivity. Kersey (1997) sees the introduction of the Australian aged pension in 1908 as heralding a modern age of discrimination on the grounds of age, with older people stigmatised as a ‘burden’. She writes that in 1987 the federal government passed laws against compulsory
retirement, yet in reality many older people are compelled to retire at 65, with involuntary retirement exceeding voluntary at a ratio of 2:1 (p.14). The author sees this forced exclusion from the workforce as creating an ethos of powerlessness and inequality. ‘The work ethic is regarded as the measure of one’s worth, and to regard a person as too old to work is to consider him or her no longer capable of participating in society’ (p.16).

A cultural emphasis on the value of the work ethic goes back even further than industrialisation, according to Davis (1980). He writes that traditionally, in America, the virtues of physical strength and hard work have been cherished in a country created by migrant settlers (p.35). Here in Australia, also, a history of attracting young, hard-working migrants for their skills and labour may have contributed to an ethos that devalued those unable to contribute to the labour market. (Our national anthem declares ‘for we are young and free’, attesting to this admiration for youth). Historically, the status of older people has varied considerably – in traditional Western societies, elders were respected because they were invested with the wisdom of the community, were few in number, and older men often controlled land and resources (Davis and Davis, 1986, p.5). However, Posner (1995) writes that whilst many Western societies conferred status on older people, their lot often became precarious when they could no longer work - for example in the Christian Middle Ages, many without families to support them spent their last years living in monasteries with few comforts (p.225). In primitive traditional societies, the author points out that the status of elders ranged from very high to very low, and that some cultures killed, abused or seriously neglected them, with the level of respect accorded to elders often measured in
relation to the availability of food resources (p.230). On the other hand, modern capitalist systems, with advances in nutrition, medicine and welfare have generally ensured that older people are well looked after in physical terms. Whilst mass education and retirement policies have reduced the value of older adults’ expertise, there is no doubt that capitalist societies have improved the care of older people, with mass production allowing for provision for the non-productive (Posner, 1995, p.220).

However, Posner goes on to make the observation that ‘the honorific status of older Americans is lower today than it was when the nation was founded’ (p.230). In modern times, many cultures still accord elders a high degree of respect in sharp contrast to many Western societies. For example, writing in the ‘Unesco Courier’, Puijalon and Trincaz (1999) report that in rural societies in Africa, social differentiation is based on age, creating a hierarchy with the oldest community members revered for their ‘mythical knowledge’ – the oral history which informs and regulates the social order. The authors compare the Western view of decrepitude in old age with the African view that age-related impairment indicates the accomplishment of becoming close to God (paras. 4/7). Even in developing countries that are embracing Western technology there is a continuing respect for elders. Riggs (1998) gives the examples of China and India, where television portrayals of elders emphasise wisdom, honour and vigour. However, she points to Japan as a country that has rapidly evolved from a traditional society into a Westernised industrial nation, and more often negatively stereotypes older people on TV (p.9) It seems there is a correlation between advanced industrial nations and the low ‘honorific status’ of older people. This thesis acknowledges the
complex variables involved in the socially constructed concept of age, but forwards the hypothesis that television, as perhaps the most powerful and pervasive tool of the capitalist economy, has an effect on our sense of who we are and our place in society.

In order to address the topic comprehensively, my dissertation is divided into five parts that approach the subject of older people and television from different angles.

- In Part One, I explore the literature to assess the nature of the older audience, how older people are portrayed in programming and advertising, and how this might influence self-concept and worldview.

- Part Two discusses theoretical perspectives in relation to media ‘effects’ research and also reviews the concept of positive, or ‘successful’ ageing – the daily ritual of watching TV is aligned with the contemporary emphasis on activity and involvement in later life.

- Part Three introduces my own research to give an Australian perspective to a subject that is dominated by American, and to a lesser extent, British analyses. A range of popular Australian-produced programmes, and the advertisements that accompany them, are analysed to compare the Australian commercial viewing experience with overseas research. Whilst American findings in relation to older portrayals on TV have particular relevance here due to large numbers of programmes imported from the U.S., content regulations ensure Australian networks air 55 per cent local programming, primarily to maintain our unique cultural identity.

- Part Four follows on from this analysis with an assessment of how Australian
governments have responded in contemporary times to the issue of media portrayal of older people, and how seniors’ organisations in the U.S., U.K. and Australia have addressed concerns about ageism in the media. Activism, in relation to older people, is highly organised with large professional groups advocating on behalf of seniors who are often restricted from active political involvement due to complex physical, cultural and social impediments. Research into how governments and seniors’ organisations have responded to mediated ageism reveals a clear recognition of the correlation between cultural representation and positive, healthy ageing.

- Part Five goes on to consider this correlation from a human rights perspective. The role of the media in modern democratic societies is assessed, as are the concepts of citizenship, social equity and cultural rights in media-dominated societies. The final chapter extends this perspective to analyse the role of television in the lives of the most marginal older citizens – those in care. Here research points to television as an integral part of the lives of many institutionalised older people who utilise the medium to retain a degree of autonomy and social engagement. Issues in relation to TV and positive ageing are particularly relevant to our elders on the fringe.
OLDER AUDIENCES

- An Identity Profile: Countering the Mythologies

Older people are perhaps the most disparate group in society, yet are often categorised purely by outward appearance and the physical reminders of our own mortality. In Western societies there is a taken for granted assumption, fuelled by often intractable retirement directives, that only those capable of working are deemed viable, contributing members of society. In this way, those over 65 are physically and metaphorically pushed to the margins of society, creating a ‘mystique’ of age which is exacerbated by the trend towards age-specific housing and reinforced by poor representation of older people in the mass media. After retirement, people from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a multiplicity of skills are suddenly perceived as an homogenous group, and those who were previously categorised in a variety of ways, by gender, class, ethnicity or occupation for example, now become an amorphous aggregation. In categorising and labelling people according to chronological status, little acknowledgement is given to a heterogeneous group that encompasses the full range of human diversity, and who often have little shared experience. The convenience of categorising people only according to late age not only fails to acknowledge human dissimilitude, but also fosters stereotypical notions based on limited assumptions. Most notable among these suppositions is the presumption of decline – that older people, as no longer sanctioned to contribute via the workforce, must therefore be a burden on society, plagued by physical ill health and restricted by psychological impairment.
Researchers such as Davis (1980) have indicated the inaccuracy of this view, pointing for example to the myth of intellectual decline ‘whilst there may be some slight decline in intellectual performance over the lifespan, the change is not truly statistically significant’ (p.14). Friedan (1993) goes further, contending the mental capabilities of older people represent a ‘newer and higher’ form of intelligence, quoting research that suggests the reality of ‘the wisdom of age’. Rote and memory tests have traditionally been used to test mental acuity, with older people often scoring less than their younger counterparts. However, Friedan argues that these tests are geared towards young people, and that older people perform as well or better with training (p. 104). Older test subjects often see the wider picture, insisting that abstractions be related back to specific social contexts ‘instead of looking for “the one correct solution” older people, given problems that are inherently open-ended and ambiguous, seemed to seek dimensions from the actual experiences of life that might remove the ambiguity’ (p.106). The ‘pure logic’ of youth has been seen by some researchers as a developing mode of thinking. Studies have found that young people respond to questions in a passive way, whilst older adults questioned premises, basing answers on their accrued life experience. This observation ties in with Coleman’s (1990) definition of wisdom which appears to rely on ‘integration of knowledge and experience over a long period…Their field of application comprises situations that involve important decisions that have long-term implications and situations that are complex and perhaps also ambiguous in interpretation’ (p.72-73).

Studies have also found that older people appear to retain information as well as younger people, indicating very little deterioration of memory. Coleman (1990) writes ‘many studies have now stressed the strengths that remain in elderly people’s
memory and learning ability. Simple measures of learning show little or no decline into old age’ (p.70). This assessment of the mental capabilities of older people is in sharp contrast to the cultural stereotypes of inflexibility, senility and incompetence which are often associated with age. Decline and impairment are not necessarily related to chronological age, and as O’Reilly (1997) points out ‘it is beneficial to remember that ageing people, like young people, experience a full range of emotional and disease states, including anxiety, grief, malnutrition, unrecognised physical illnesses…alcoholism…and the overuse of drug tranquillisation. Many of these conditions can cause a pseudo-senility’ (p.15). The ageing process, in reality, is less related to mental decline than to increasing maturity and insight into the human condition, with very few older people succumbing to senile dementia. Hendricks and Hendricks (1986) acknowledge the impact of senile dementia for those affected by it, but indicate the small numbers of older people afflicted, and the role of depression in the decline of some people ‘from 15 to 25 per cent of the elderly in the community may have significant symptoms of mental illness. These symptoms are thought to be caused by senile dementia in only 5 to 6 per cent of the population. In about 10 per cent they are thought to be caused by depression, which is a potentially treatable condition’ (p. 30). The authors go on to point out that mental health problems in the aged are not very different to the rest of the population (ibid).

The authors do not elaborate on the causes of depression in the aged, but it would not be unreasonable to surmise that negative imagery and the mythology associated with ageing would play a part. The myth of decline, for example, is often reinforced by health professionals who focus on the minority of elders who need special care.
Writing from a health care perspective, O’Reilly (1997) laments the attitudes of fellow workers who fail to acknowledge individual difference, and consider all older people as a ‘problem’. In seeing all seniors as an homogenous group, professionals can make generalised assessments and foster stereotypical ideas about old age. The author writes that age-grading is a focus of health care for the aged, designating people by chronological age rather than by individual ability or character, resulting in a blunting of sensitivity on the part of health professionals (p.xi). O’Reilly makes the observation that ‘stereotypes, norms, and designated age-grades are the markers of the myth. This message, in turn, probably impacts negatively on the elderly’ (p.112). In a similar light, Friedan (1993) gives an account of her experiences at the Salzburg Seminar on Health, Productivity and Ageing in 1983, where she found that health professionals were only interested in perceiving older people in terms of ‘care’ rather than ‘productivity’ or ‘work’. Although many guest speakers gave statistical evidence in relation to the positive mental and physical abilities of the over 65s, the professionals in the audience ‘seemed positively outraged, threatened in some very basic way personally, and somehow affronted morally, at the very idea of subjecting older people to the same standards…applied to the rest of society’ (p. 199).

There is an assumption amongst many in the caring industries that older people have reached a final and static end-stage, with the self no longer evolving but marked by decline. Writing from a Meadian perspective, Chappell and Orbach (1986) warn that ‘change is inherent in the process of living (so)…it is important to remember (this) in relation to the elderly, whose lives frequently are characterised as standing still. Not only is this characterisation false, but it also tends to keep us from recognising the potential of rich and full lives during old age’ (p.88). The view of old age as static
and problematic is echoed in the wider community, where people’s view of old age is
often based on attitudes conveyed by authoritative voices ‘licensed’ by society to
relay our cultural norms and expectations. In tandem with professional voices, the
voices associated with capitalism, which are relayed through the mass media, have a
particularly powerful resonance. However, messages and entertainment are couched
in consumerist rhetoric, and are often based on an imperative to reach the youth
market – this can result in a limited and stereotypical view of the world and project
the idea that youth equates with success, ability and physical beauty. Blaikie (1999)
points to the inadequacies of a culture that focuses on youth and physical perfection
at the expense of acknowledging the variation and complexity of human beings.
‘Because stereotypes, particularly those associated with consumer culture focus
attention on superficial appearances, the old are reduced to their observable physical
attributes. We fail to see beneath the surface’ (p.182).

Some researchers have looked beneath the surface and discovered that many older
people find it difficult to equate cultural assessments of old age with their own self
perception, and often consider their cohorts as ‘old’, but have a different view of
themselves. Hendricks and Hendricks (1986) observe that
	nearly all see themselves as original and exceptional…but
the sense of uniqueness goes beyond individuality to encompass
a belief that although our age mates are obviously becoming older,
we alone have a particular youthfulness. The person we appear to
someone else is not necessarily the one we are for ourselves. The
real “me” is the one inside. Externally age may show, but these
signs are generally dismissed as merely superficial. Compared to
the inner person, outward appearances are hardly proof of anything
(p. 512)

Some older people might find it very difficult to come to terms with the conflict
between the capable, unique internal ‘self’ and the negative stereotypical view of old
age often held by society. The authors go on to make the observation that ‘this ‘psychological distancing’ may be a protective device, which insulates from negative cultural assessments of old age’ (ibid).

The dichotomy between the outer and inner self is interpreted by Featherstone and Hepworth (1990) as the ‘mask of age’:

The perpetual tension between social categories based on generalisations about ageing and the actual personal experience of ageing in its diversity is of constant concern… In recognition of this tension some writers find it easier to describe the ageing process as a mask or disguise which like some trick of the make-up artist’s craft, conceals layer after layer, the timeless human personality beneath (p. 254)

Whilst advertising forces within the mass media quite literally encourage us to use ‘the make-up artist’s craft’ to hide the shame of our advancing years, it seems that there has been a long history in literature and the arts of negativity in relation to the ageing body. Featherstone and Hepworth (1990) observe that the physical evidence of the march of time has a long history of disenchantment ‘there does not appear to have been a time in Western culture when the sight of the naked ageing body has given much pleasure’ (p.255). Aside from the fact that most naked bodies in the contemporary well-nourished West would give little aesthetic pleasure, it seems that the sight of bodies representing the ‘deadly sins’ of gluttony, lust or pride, for example, are less likely to offend our sensibilities than bodies that remind us of our biological destiny. The human ‘spirit’ or ‘self’ may become trapped within a biologically declining organism, yet it retains its diversity, uniqueness and value; as Blaikie (1999) observes ‘the very existence of the ‘mask of age’ testifies to the vulnerability of an unchanging inner consciousness, the ‘ageless self’, in the face of stereotypical assumptions and expectations held by the non-aged’ (p. 190).
The biological reality of ageing is only one reality amongst several – Davis (1980) speaks of the psychological and social conceptions of age that influence how we see ourselves and how we project ourselves to others. From a psychological perspective, the adaptive capacities of individuals vary according to subjective interpretations of life experiences. The author writes ‘if we perceive ourselves as psychologically at a certain age, we may act out that role as we understand it to be’ (p. 4). However, a person’s ‘social age’ is related to expected and socially sanctioned roles, dress codes and language usage that have been deemed culturally appropriate, with collective perceptions of people based on these age-related markers (ibid). In this way, while some will convey a more youthful image based on internal self-concepts, others will follow society’s cues, often based on rigid or stereotypical expectations, and project a more culturally accepted ‘personality’, regardless of a more youthful internal reality. But socially stipulated codes of dress and behaviour may serve to bury a ‘self’ which has changed little since youth. Many social gerontologists consider ‘personality’ to be the result of a combination of biological, psychological and social factors, which whilst evolving, present stable and recognisable features that persist throughout the lifespan. The stable features of personality persist into old age, begging the question as to why society expects older people to act and behave in new and restricted ways. ‘Surely no-one retires and suddenly becomes a blank slate: people have biographies, traits, personalities and…relationships that carry over from one age to the next…people are not ahistorical, nor do they become strangers in a totally new land’ (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1986, p. 93).

It seems the individual in old age is very much the same person as at other stages of the life cycle, yet the social reality of the ageing experience for many can be an
alienating one. Giddens (1989) writes that the transition to the age-grade of ‘elder’ in traditional societies marked the pinnacle of status, but in industrialised societies ‘retirement tends to bring the very opposite consequences’ (p. 85). Retirement seems to be the definitive milestone that delineates those who are socially sanctioned to express themselves, and be represented in the public arena, and those who have had their say and whose judgements are irrelevant. However, according to Giddens (1989) ‘the productivity and attendance records of workers over sixty are superior to those of younger age groups’ (p.600). Yet regardless of the physical and mental capabilities of older people, they are, to all intents and purposes, ‘put out to pasture’. Whilst some create active and meaningful lifestyles in retirement, they do so in an environment often quite hostile, or at least indifferent to seniors. Couple this with the trend for parents and grown children to be separated by distance and filial work commitments, and the trend towards age-segregated housing, and it can be seen that the lifestyles and experiences of seniors can become narrowed. Many turn to the television to replace the mental stimulation and social networks lost in retirement – TV provides information about a world that may have become more distant and mysterious. Gauntlett and Hill (1999) found that older audiences considered the television to be company, a friend, a comfort after loss or when ill, and ‘for physical and/or financial reasons – television creates what we might call ‘virtual mobility’. There was a sense that TV could take them to places they were unlikely to see’ (p.198).
•  **The Role of Television in Everyday Life**

It is this ability to provide ‘virtual mobility’ that defines the power of television, and gives an indication as to why most of us turn to the TV to fill the spaces in our lives. The Productivity Commission’s Broadcasting Inquiry Report (2000) informs that 99 per cent of Australian households owned at least one television set in 1996, and that the average Australian spends approximately half of their leisure time watching TV. Comparative statistics show us spending 2 per cent of our leisure time on outdoor activities, 3 per cent socialising and 3 per cent shopping (ABS cat no: 4153.0, 1998, p.61). There is perhaps a sense of the magic of a medium which can ‘transport’ us around the globe, keep us informed with graphic and current news stories, bind us together with shared knowledge and experiences, even allowing us to help shape history, as media messages facilitate widespread debate. Thompson (1999) sees our increasing dependence on the media as liberating, with the self becoming unconstrained by its location, creating new experiences and arenas (p.233). It seems reasonable that older people would utilise increased leisure hours to seek out the intellectual and social benefits of keeping in touch with society and the wider world, and the viewing of TV can be seen as less a passive activity than a meaningful social experience.

Several studies have found TV viewing to be the favoured pastime of all older people, regardless of educational or socio-economic status (Davis and Davis, 1986, p.80). While Gauntlett and Hill’s (1999) analysis of older respondents did find those with a higher income, good health and wide social networks were less dependent on television, their research also found that most older respondents in fact had low incomes, moderate health and only intermittent contact with family or friends (p.84).
Gauntlett and Hill’s study revealed that many respondents across the lifespan considered television to be a primary source of entertainment, information and companionship, with some perceiving actors and personalities as ‘friends’ invited into their living spaces. One older woman wrote, “As I am very often alone in my flat, I would miss the feeling of personal contact one gets with newsreaders or actors who appear regularly” (p.115-116). In older people, a dependence on television for companionship and information can be interpreted as ‘disengagement’ from the real world, or conversely, can be seen as a need for human ‘contact’ diminished through retirement or ill-health. TV viewing provides the opportunity for vicarious friendships and social interactions that may have become difficult to access with the increasing isolation of age.

For those in late retirement especially, television can become a conduit between the self restricted by physical decline, and the outside world, offering social contact and a wider sense of reality. Indeed, TV viewing can be considered an important activity if we use the guidelines provided by Horgas et al (1998) to determine ‘successful ageing’. The authors examined the everyday activities of very old people, and defined them on two levels:

In Western culture, successful living requires different daily activities, and engagement in those activities that ensure personal maintenance (e.g. eating, bathing, dressing) are considered a basic ingredient of successful life. The person who engages in more than just basic activities, who takes part in the external environment, who turns towards others, and who engages in self-enriching activities is considered more successful (para. 3)

The authors report that participants in research into the everyday activities of the oldest old spent 80 per cent of their day at home, and that their leisure time was dominated by watching TV (para.18). Whilst some professionals and proponents of
'successful ageing’ would consider television watching as a passive exercise, Katz (2000) warns that distinctions between passive and active behaviours can be constructed according to the interpretive criteria of researchers. Writing in relation to the daily activities of institutionalised older people, Katz observes that ‘what many activity checklists indicate as appropriate, normal, and healthy activities for older individuals are those which coincide with middle-class moral…conventions’ (para. 24). In classifying TV watching as passive and unproductive, some health workers and researchers risk trivialising an activity that can encourage social engagement, itself an important marker of ‘successful ageing’.

Television viewing activities can also provide routines and demarcation points in days left unstructured after retirement. News breaks and favourite programmes punctuate the day, and time can be marked off according to scheduled televised events. Scannell (1996) writes that the media contribute to the shaping of our lives ‘for the effect of the temporal arrangement of radio and television is such as to pick out each day as this day…with its own involvements and concerns’ (p.149). The author points to the anticipatory allure of television, which not only packages the day into temporal zones, but also helps to create a future which is manageable and predictable. The past, present and future become intertwined, creating a sense of control and order in our often unpredictable lives. Scannell goes on:

In being ahead of itself, broadcasting is towards a future that is not radically indeterminate but known-in-advance in significant ways, in ways that make the future significant, that bring it towards us and into our present…(and) In the course of many years broadcast output becomes sedimented in memory traces of a common past and of the biography of individuals (p.153)
The daily ritual of watching TV engenders a sense of communal participation, allowing us to collectively remember the same cultural milestones - television can be seen as a keeper of historical records, allowing us to watch graphic reminders of the past. It is also a cultural reference point as it informs us of current affairs, and it has an almost ‘mystical’ quality as the harbinger of unforeseen future events.

Yet for some older people the seductive power of television can generate a sense of guilt, as those used to defining themselves according to ‘work’ and ‘productivity’ find that a redefinition according to leisure pursuits alienates them from society. Gauntlett and Hill (1999) write of the emotional consequences particular to this age group, of watching long hours of TV. There is a sense of ‘seduction’ and ‘guilt’ for some who have been conditioned by long years in the workforce ‘excuses have to be made in order for such respondents to effectively ‘forgive’ themselves for giving in to temptation’ (p.196). The authors link this guilt to the Protestant ‘work ethic’, which has traditionally encouraged people to use their time productively (a concept sustained by the contemporary value placed on ‘productive ageing’). Scannell (1996) equates this guilt with the Heideggerian concept of anxiety, producing for some a sense of lost time ‘a squandering of something precious – my-time, my time on earth – precious because it is finite’ (p.173). However, this guilt associated with ‘wasting time’ may be misplaced. The watching of commercial television and our active response to advertisements can be seen as activities that support the capitalist system. Sut Jhally (1990) compares the viewing of adverts with the Marxist concept of labour, with the audience working for the media. The programmes can be seen as the ‘wage’ or reward for watching the ads, seen as the ‘labour’ (p.203). Indeed, not all older viewers feel guilty about their viewing habits, and as Gauntlett and Hill
(1999) point out ‘they weren’t so concerned that they actually took steps to reduce their viewing; or else television was so compelling that they were unable to cut down’ (p.128).

The compelling allure of television is perhaps based on the medium’s ability to ingratiate itself into the day to day activities of our lives. We feel the need to watch regularly for graphic updates of daily events, to ‘stay informed’. Television communicates to us at a personal level, utilising a personalised idiom that helps to generate a sense of authenticity and sincerity. The viewing experience becomes an intimate interaction between the individual and actors or personalities who work to provide a meaningful and personal connection. Davis (1980) speaks of the ability of the small screen to project a personality into our living rooms, with the same immediacy as a real life speaker. Through the use of tactics such as close ups, for example, the speaker becomes life-sized ‘the sense of immediacy and intimacy is enormously attractive’ (p.44). Other strategems used to create a ‘para-social’ experience include the presenter looking into our eyes and speaking to us directly – “thanks for your company” or “I’ll see you again tomorrow night”, disguise the mediated nature of the interaction, and project a sense of empathy and intimacy. Scanell (1996) writes that the power of TV lies in its seemingly natural part of our everyday lives. ‘Broadcasting is a very much taken-for-granted part of the orderly, unremarkable ordinariness of everyday life’ (p.95).

Many people extend their viewing experiences by incorporating TV discourse into the ‘ordinariness’ of their everyday lives. Dorothy Hobson (1990) writes, for example, that ‘women use television programmes as part of their general discourse in
their own lives, the lives of their families and friends and to add interest to their working lives’ (p.62). Older people often have reduced social networks, and may be less able to utilise TV discourse in social interactions; however, Riggs (1998) points to groups of retired people who structure their viewing experiences to empower and enrich their day to day lives. Her research into television use in a retirement village demonstrates the positive social benefits of discerning viewing practices. The author interviewed residents of a retirement village which housed a mix of older people from academic or professional backgrounds, and who were able to access a wide variety of channels and networks. For example, Riggs mentions Barbara, who preferred watching TV to organised activities ‘she became a cable information addict, in particular, a self-described C-SPAN junkie…In her mid 70s, Barbara has joined political causes…whose agendas she was exposed to on C-SPAN’ (p.55). Although spending much of her time watching TV, Barbara is representative of many in her community who enrich their lives through discussion of mediated information with like-minded neighbours. For most retired people, however, cable or satellite television remains financially out of reach, with most relying on commercial networks for entertainment and information. Here in Australia, cable TV is watched by only a small percentage of people – 17 per cent across all age groups in 1999 (Productivity Commission Broadcasting Report, p.71). With the dominance of free to air television in Australia, many share the same viewing experiences, providing opportunities for conversation, but also reinforcing the social impact of stereotypical, negative or limited representations of minority groups. The next chapter looks at evidence which clearly indicates that the popular media often negatively stereotype old age, whilst simultaneously projecting a positive image of youth.
CHAPTER TWO

OLDER PORTRAYALS

• **Age Orientation and the Media**

The popular media draw a demarcation line across the lifespan, wooing a younger audience with flattering portrayals whilst those on the other side of the line are relegated to obscurity – the retired are virtually ignored, or at best airbrushed, disguised or caricatured. Featherstone and Hepworth (1990) sum up the broad view of ageing:

> Images are often constructed in sets of polarities...when we think of images of ageing bodies, it is evident that in our culture images of youth become positively charged with connotations of beauty, energy, grace, moral fortitude and optimism, whereas images of old age become negatively charged with ugliness, idleness, degeneration and moral failure (p.252)

The commercial television medium, in particular, encourages oppositional classifications – good/bad, black/white, old/young – in order to quickly and simply get messages across to fickle audiences watching with the remote-control at hand. In order to win the attention of viewers, story lines, news reports and advertisements utilise simplistic or sensational depictions and stereotypes, often presenting a narrow view of reality. Arnold Becker, vice president for research at CBS has said, “I’m not interested in culture. I’m not interested in pro-social values. I have only one interest. That’s whether people watch the programme” (Twitchell, 1996, p.93).

Hooking the attention of the highest consumers, seen to be predominantly white, middle-class and *young* is the ‘raison d’etre’ of commercial television. Many see this as the reason that other groups are often underrepresented, or portrayed negatively.
Ironically, this relatively youthful and affluent audience segment represents the minority of viewers, yet portrayals represent this group disproportionately. Because fewer younger people watch TV, advertisers can take for granted an older audience, but must work hard to capture the attention of younger viewers. Twitchell (1996) reminds us that ‘television is not so much interested in the business of communications but in the business of delivering audiences to advertisers. People are the merchandise, not the shows’ (p. 92). Based on this aphorism, programmes that rate highly can be axed in favour of less popular programmes that nevertheless attract high numbers of 18-39 year olds (the most prized audience age group). An often-quoted victim of this practice was the programme ‘Murder She Wrote’, popular with all ages in the USA, but particularly with the oldest audience segment. This was a programme which portrayed a powerful, authoritative older woman in a widely appealing format, ranking 7th in general audience popularity. However, NBC network executives were unhappy with the number of younger viewers, and axed the programme in favour of ‘SeaQuest’ which ranked 60th in audience popularity but attracted more young viewers. The advertising rate for ‘Murder She Wrote’ was $75,000 for a 30 second commercial, and the rate for ‘SeaQuest’ was $101,000 (Thomas and Wolfe, 1995, para.14).

Marketers consider younger viewers to be more easily influenced by advertising, with older viewers considered as more experienced consumers. Thomas and Wolfe (1995) write ‘people who market to older consumers know that as a person’s age rises, so too does the cost of marketing needed to make the first sale’ (para. 23). (There is a certain irony here that this acknowledgement of the discerning wisdom of older consumers often translates into a media-generated view of old people as
irrelevant and senile). Coupled with this recognition of the discerning older viewer is the relative youth of most media and advertising decision-makers, who may lack the insights needed to reach this audience segment. Thomas and Wolfe (1995) interviewed advertising executives and their agencies and found that most had no first-hand experience with ageing. Their survey revealed the average age of advertiser’s representatives was 31, and the average age of agency representatives 28 (para. 6). However, advertising agencies may have little incentive to focus their attentions on older audiences. Thomas and Wolfe’s research also found that most sponsors’ products were designed to appeal to the 18-49 age group, leading the authors to observe that marketers are missing an opportunity to influence the consumer habits of the oldest and largest audience segment (paras. 25-27). (Many researchers have investigated the economic ramifications of ignoring the aged demographic- see for example Sawchurch, 1995; Long, 1998; Carrigan and Szmigin, 1999).

Marketers are loathe to associate their products with programming and advertising which portrays older people, believing that all age groups prefer to see youthful characterisations. However, there is research that suggests this mindset is unwarranted. Riggs (1998), for example, reveals that research into young female fans of ‘Inspector Morse’ (an older British detective) saw the hero as romantic, vulnerable and a ‘new’ man, and also as a feminist champion (p.19). Similarly, Gauntlett and Hill (1999) report that ‘The Golden Girls’ (depicting the exploits of a group of older women) has been one of U.K. TV’s most popular comedy shows with young and older audiences (p.181). Carrigan and Szmigin (1999) have also found that older models in advertising are received at least neutrally, and even positively by
youthful audiences, giving the examples of advertisements for Compaq computers and Clinique cosmetics which used older models, yet appealed to all market segments (para. 8). The authors also point to research which has found many older people want to see images ‘which are aspirational in their terms: healthy, fit-looking people in their age group’. They quote research conducted by NSM for IPC magazines, which found 62 per cent of older women wanted to see women of their own age in advertisements (para. 7).

Friedan (1993) looked at the level of aged representation in magazines, finding graphic evidence for an emphasis on youthful images. During a one-month scrutiny she found that out of 290 faces in advertisements in ‘Vogue’ magazine, only one was a woman seen as over 60. In ‘Time’ magazine there were no faces over 60 in the adverts, whilst in news stories there were 12 older males (including 5 world leaders), and no older female images. The higher number of older male figures didn’t transcribe into a fair representation in male magazines – in ‘Esquire’ only 3 male images out of 201 were conceivably over 60. Friedan was particularly concerned to find that a feminist-inspired magazine ‘Ms’ had no images of older women. The editor, Gloria Steinem, herself over 50 at the time, was bothered by the anomaly but pointed out that advertisers refused to use older women as models (p.p.37-38). Other researchers who have found a similar underrepresentation in the print media include Hollenshead and Ingersoll (1982) who reviewed 3482 magazine advertisements, finding only 2.6 per cent of images were of older people. Similarly, England, Kuhn and Gardner (1981), in a longitudinal study, analysed 2200 adverts and found only 2 per cent of all images depicted older people - they also found a sexist double standard with far fewer older female images. Wass et al (1985) also did a study of
263 Sunday newspapers, where less than 1 per cent of total space covered stories relating to seniors.

In the case of specialty magazines marketed to older readers, researchers have found much higher usage of older models, but even here there is some cause for concern. Carrigan and Szmigin (1999) report high numbers of older images in a wide selection of U.K. and U.S. magazines for the mature market, yet most U.K. adverts were focussed on infirmity. The authors point out that none of the U.K. publications reviewed (Sage, Active Life, Goodtimes, Choice) followed any age-specific advertising guidelines. This was less of an issue in the U.S., with the largest publication (Modern Maturity) using a set of advertising guidelines in collaboration with ‘AARP’, to limit the number of infirmity-related advertisements (para. 25). However, Cutter (2001) makes the observation that U.S. magazines for older readers often go to the opposite extreme and avoid the realities of ageing, with some avoiding any reference to age at all. He cites as an example the magazine ‘New Choices For Retirement Living’ which recently changed its name to ‘New Choices: The Magazine for Your Health, Money and Travel’ (para. 2). The author also considers that the segmentation of aged stories, and a focus on a leisure class of elders may become a ‘foundation upon which to make social and political decisions’, overlooking the diversity and wider needs of this older age group (para. 15). The author writes that age segregated reporting in the media does not acknowledge the range of activities and interests of older people, and he mentions a small group of journalists in the U.S. who integrate ageing issues with other stories in newspapers, such as news, features, business and sport (para. 18).
There is some evidence that fragmenting the media and directing age-specific advertising and programming to older people does not reflect the needs and wishes of many consumers. In her report to Carlton Television (2000), Karen Ross investigated the views of older audiences across the U.K. and found that favourite programming genres of older viewers mirrored wider community taste: drama and news/current affairs ranked first, and documentaries, comedy and light entertainment were also popular (section 3.1). Many older respondents also indicated a desire for more programmes that portrayed positive and beneficial relations across the generations, depicting a variety of interacting age groups. Gauntlett and Hill (1999) found a similar picture in their five-year study of audiences, with many older respondents voicing a desire for integrated representation. A programme in the early 1990s on the BBC, ‘Prime Time’, in particular, was maligned by some for focussing on age-related issues – one respondent wrote it was, ‘about wrinklies, by wrinklies, for wrinklies’ (p180). Whilst many respondents did emphasise a preference for ‘gentle’ and ‘pleasant’ programming, without gratuitous sex, noisy over-animation, bad language and violence ‘at the same time, when faced with programmes aimed explicitly at the older audience they resolutely reject both the patronising ‘inspirational’ approach, and the Radio Two style invitation to ‘take things easy’ (p.182). It can be argued that this desire for a slower-paced, less sensational television format reflects the wider adult viewpoint, which is generally over-ridden in favour of the perceived preferences of younger audiences.

This imperative to attract youthful audiences, regardless of the preferences of the majority of viewers, can be seen most obviously in news and current affairs formats. Older audiences often consider that networks fail to meet their needs and fail to
report adequately on issues that relate to their experience. Chafetz et al (1998) found 66 per cent of older respondents wanted to see news stories that included older people, yet a full quarter of respondents described the news media as hostile, negative or uninterested in their affairs (paras. 28/30). Grossman (1998) notes that in order to lower the audience’s age level, producers include titillating tabloid items about crime, celebrities and gossip, whilst playing down reports about politics, international affairs and public issues (para. 2). This desire to lower the age level of news audiences reflects the requirements of sponsors – if an advertiser promotes a product within a programme most popular with the over 50s, the advert reaches 16 per cent of this age group and 6 per cent of younger viewers. If the advertiser places the advert in a programme most popular with the 18-49 age bracket, 12 per cent of this group will see the advert, and 10 per cent of older viewers (Goerlich et al, 1995, para. 4). In other words, because the younger group watches around 40 per cent less TV, networks must work to attract the smaller audience in order to win advertising revenue. This overriding mandate underpins television’s elemental objectives, and influences not only programme content and the skewing of age group representation, but may also encourage negative stereotyping of those deemed less important by advertisers.

• **Stereotyping and the Media**

Taylor and Willis (1999) define stereotyping as ‘the selection and construction of undeveloped, generalised signs which categorise social groups…Implicit within the stereotype is the fact that the signs chosen make common assumptions about the group in question’ (p41). Commonly held, oversimplified notions of others may protect us from being overwhelmed by details, with broad generalisations about groups fostering an image of a predictable, orderly universe. However, in trying to
make sense of a complex world, the traits and ‘norms’ we ascribe to individuals can become the taken-for-granted. According to Taylor and Willis (1999), these cultural assumptions about groups illustrate relations of power and subordination, with depictions made by those in power serving to ‘perpetuate and reinforce those ideas about people, until they have entered the ideological realm of ‘common sense’’ (ibid). Whilst cultural stereotypes can arise in a variety of ways – not least through limited association – the mass media are in a particularly powerful position to influence societal perceptions of group attributes, behavioral norms and cultural expectations.

Television demands and often receives our undivided attention, entrancing us with graphic representations of the world outside, broadening our reality. We can ‘see’ how other groups live, groups with which we may have limited contact, or no contact at all. The ‘enchantment’ of television may limit our critical ability to analyse characterisations, and stereotypical representations of groups can come to shape our beliefs and expectations. Kunda (1999) makes the point that not using stereotypes requires an effort, and when we are tired or distracted, we are often unable to invest the effort needed to see through the stereotypical image. She cites Bodenhausen’s (1990) research which found that people were more likely to use stereotypical assumptions at their ‘off peak’ times, when they were less alert or more tired (p.357-59). Most of us are particularly tired at the end of the day’s work, which is when we usually turn on the television for the evening. That TV distracts our attention is perhaps obvious; but Reeves and Nass (1996) go further and emphasise the power of television to suspend reality, with actual physical changes in the brain indicating ‘broad and deep’ responses to visual media (p.253). They write that their research
and other studies have provided ‘the most compelling evidence yet that social responses to media are not dictated by “common sense”…people are influenced by labels, and the influence goes beyond their ability to analyse their own responses’ (p.149).

Kunda (1999) makes the additional observation that stereotypical ‘labels’ colour our judgement of people even when individuals don’t fit the stereotype. She writes ‘because…our interactions are guided by how we expect them to behave, the impact of impressions is likely to be very pervasive indeed, even in the presence of individuating information’ (p.357-58). Yet some media analysts argue that stereotypical characterisations on television serve a positive role in pointing to inequalities in society. Taylor and Willis (1999) cite Martin Barker’s view that to remove offensive stereotypes would ‘obscure questions such as: why is this group being represented in this way? Who has the power to represent them so? And how can social structures, which uphold such forms of power be contested?’ (p.44). This view of the critical ability of viewers echoes the ‘uses and gratifications’ paradigm which sees audiences as active participants in the viewing process, subjectively accepting or rejecting messages, but this view fails to acknowledge the power of television to override critical ability. Reeves and Nass (1996) argue that people have not evolved to deal with modern technology, with the human brain operating in the belief that all perceived objects are real, with no ‘switch in the brain that can be thrown to distinguish the real and mediated worlds’ (p.12). They go on to write that in order to follow a plot on TV ‘the default is to automatically and unconsciously ignore fabrication and expect reality’ (p.13). In this light, it can be argued that
stereotypical characterisations become embedded as realistic portrayals as we suspend reality and become engrossed in mediated stories.

Other media theorists are similarly concerned that television has become such an integral part of our existence that we may consider mediated stories and images to be a true and accurate reflection of reality. Lowe (1995), for example, sees the media as having, to a certain extent, taken the place of reality by supplying our need for information, entertainment and education. He writes:

In the case of media portrayals of social types we may come to recognise and accept the media’s version as a credible interpretation…The stereotypes chosen by the media for their constructions of social categories can be amplified on to the public in such volume and quantity as to create a consistent and plausible image that becomes almost a standard for that type (p.144).

These stereotypical notions and expectations may influence societal behaviour towards older people. Levy (2001) gives the example of research by Chen and Bargh (1999) which found that implicit evaluations of people influenced whether they were approached or ignored, with overriding assumptions about older people possibly influencing intergenerational contact, and creating issues of isolation and neglect (para. 6). The author also reports that her research has found older individuals who are exposed to negative stereotypes may have a negative self-image, with many demonstrating worse memory performance, self efficacy and will to live than those exposed to positive aged stereotypes (para. 8).

The negative self-assessment of a group can only diminish society when cultural expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hendricks and Hendricks (1986) illustrate how ageism affects older people:
Not only are the phrases and adjectives they use to describe their contemporaries generally deprecating, but their own self-concepts reflect the very ambivalence they perceive in the attitudes of those with whom they interact. In every instance the views people have toward...specific age stages are shared by the ideals of the culture in which they live...In an era that eschews traditional authority and values youth, freedom and the rapid dissemination of new ideas, old age is unlikely to be accorded very high prestige (p.36)

If we accept the popular media as the main purveyors of our cultural stories, then their predominant focus on youth would reinforce and perpetuate ageist concepts. In this atmosphere, even intermittent positive portrayals of ageing may have a limited effect, and may even serve to reinforce more pervasive attitudes. Kunda (1999) sees it as ironic that the more individuals deviate from universal stereotypes, the less they are likely to alter perceptions. Counter-stereotypic individuals are relegated to a 'subtype' and considered to be unrepresentative of the group as a whole (pp.384/390). Examples in the popular media might include Mick Jagger and Paul McCartney, who may be inspirational for their ages, but can be seen as atypical. This is highlighted by the media’s description of them and others as ‘ageing rockers’, implying decrepitude and irrelevancy.

‘Ageing’ rockers are accorded little cultural status by the media, (presumably because most fans are of a similar vintage), they are parodied in the same way other ‘ageing’ media characters are. Producers may seek to flatter younger viewers with negative assessments of older people to emphasise the ‘power’ and ‘freedom’ of youth. This can be seen as ‘agenda setting’ which some researchers see as an integral aspect of media production, with producers emphasising certain topics, slighting other issues through omission and using stereotypes (Hilt, 1997, p.14). Old age becomes the antithesis of youth, as negative aged portrayals provide a foil for the
energy and enthusiasm of young people. Robinson (1998) writes ‘the sentiment among advertisers is that if they are not targeting a particular demographic group then why should they care how that group is portrayed. The problem then becomes one of ethics’ (p.12). Negative portrayals of older men and women project the cultural message that the attributes of age, such as caution and wisdom are anachronistic and irrelevant to modern society, which empowers young people, but devalues older people. Having said that, it can be argued that the overwhelmingly positive images designed to empower young people may not always have the desired effect. It may be that relentless images of middle-class, good looking, and successful younger people may generate a sense of inadequacy in some younger audiences. The often superficial characterisations on TV fail to project a realistic image of all groups in society – however, it is only older people who appear to be targeted for ridicule and used as a ploy to promote the (often exaggerated) delights of youth.

This youthful ‘empowerment’, and the devaluation of old age has negative repercussions for all age groups. Davis and Davis (1986) cite Seefeldt’s research which found that children stereotyped older people, identifying them as sick, tired and ugly, with the characteristics of old age viewed with horror (p.51). The authors implicate television programming for these stereotypical assumptions, and also blame the dearth of older people on TV for young people’s views on ageing. They refer to Jantz et al’s findings that out of 85 half-hour segments on children’s TV, there were only four child-elderly interactions, and that older people were also rarely seen in cartoons or Saturday morning programming (p.52). A negative view of seniors narrows the worldview of young people, creating an undercurrent of misunderstanding and fear. Davis (1980) observes that ‘when the common image of
ageing available to children is a media-projected image of impotency, young people have good reason for fearing old age’ (p.11). The middle-aged also may come to fear the inevitable. Increasingly granted status by the media as the generation long conditioned by consumerism and the pop culture, baby-boomers have been sanctioned to follow youthful trends and to stave off the physical encroachment of age. This group will be the first to enter old age conditioned since birth by television’s graphic celebration of youth and its dismissal of old age. The transition may be a difficult one – there is no reason to believe that negative portrayals will change when boomers lose their status as active wage earners.

The imperative to appeal to youth sees the popular media labelling the retired and oldest old as extraneous to the system, both vicariously through omission and blatantly through negative stereotypical portrayals. Karen Ross (2000) sought the views of older audiences in relation to aged representation, interviewing 228 individuals in the UK, and finding widespread dissatisfaction. For example, respondents were unhappy with advertising which stereotyped old age by presenting only products related to decline and disability. ‘Adverts which are broadcast during late mornings and early afternoons are often for products and services such as retirement homes, stairlifts and incontinence aids…Not only is this grossly patronising but commercially naïve’ (section 3.1). The author also found that televised ‘specials’ such as game shows and quiz shows which segregated older people were a particular cause for concern for this age group. ‘Older people end up looking like old fools who are either hankering after their lost youth or bemused by the strange protocols of the game show…old age as not fully functioning or lost in the modern world plays with the same kinds of assumptions which drive ageist humour’
(section 3.2.1). The caricatured elder is widespread on television, with some of Ross’s (2000) respondents pointing to characters such as ‘Victor Meldrew’ in ‘One Foot in the Grave’ as epitomising a stereotypical view of older people as ridiculous and intransigent. Other examples of negative portrayals on Australian TV might include the stern harridans in ‘The Weakest Link’ and ‘Judge Judy’, Homer Simpson’s father in ‘The Simpsons’, Raymond’s father in ‘Everybody Loves Raymond’, and the mother in (an early Australian production) ‘Mother and Son’ – all use stereotypical assumptions about older people as cynical, bitter, stubborn or demented.

Whilst stereotypical portrayals are common, there are fragmentary examples of positive characterisations. One genre that has been credited with depicting older people positively is the daytime soap opera. Cassata’s (1985) study found older people were represented as influential, respected, involved and active (p.11). Whilst heartening, this may simply reflect the fact that the bulk of the preferred youth audience is not at home, and the desire of sponsors to reach those that are. However, in my own film-going experience, kudos must be given for positive female aged representation in sporadic popular films – in ‘The Matrix’, for example, the ‘oracle’ was played by a late middle-aged black woman; as the fount of wisdom, this (albeit brief) characterisation turned several stereotypical assumptions on their heads. Similarly, in ‘The Minority Report’, the inventor of a radical system which helped the police track down criminals was also a quite senior and homely woman. Whilst only token appearances, these portrayals of ageing females sent out a message that strength and wisdom are not only the domain of young, white males.
However, positive portrayals of ageing females in both popular film and TV programming are rare, with a history of poor representation of this group. Bazzini et al (1997) studied 100 top-grossing motion pictures spanning 5 decades and found few portrayals of older women and ageist stereotypes of both older male and female characters, with a particular emphasis on negative female stereotypes. Older females were perceived as unfriendly, less intelligent, poorer and less attractive than their male counterparts. The authors suggested this may be linked to the cultural stereotype that ‘what is beautiful is good’ (para. 31). Furthermore, the study did not find an improvement in aged stereotypes in more contemporary films, and the authors suggest that the media may be to blame for the ‘depletion syndrome’, where therapists have found that many older women feel worthless and hopeless (para. 35).

In regard to media representation, older women are a particularly disaffected group when we consider they outnumber older males in the Australian population, with more than twice as many females in the over 85 age group (2001, ABS cat. no: 3201.0). Quite obviously most of the old people watching television are females, yet research indicates they are seeing a negative reflection, or failing to see any representation of their experience at all.

When a count was made of portrayals of the over 65s on U.S. television, Davis and Davis reported in 1986 that more than 90 percent were male, with women portrayed with increasing sexlessness as they aged, whereas men were often still deemed as sexually alluring (p.46). The authors went on to make the rather disturbing comment that ‘as men are conditioned to see older women as second-class citizens through their portrayals on television, they will have difficulty being supportive of the unavoidable consequences of ageing in their mates’ (p.48). More recently, in her
interviews with older TV viewers in the U.K., Ross (2000) found that many respondents were concerned by the gendered dimension of older representation. The author summarised interview responses with the comment that ‘women need to be young and beautiful to be on television; older women are assumed to be off-putting to a young audience because they are unattractive, or older women have nothing to offer’ (section 3.2.3). If we couple these cultural stereotypes projected by the media with advertising aimed primarily at women to stave off the effects of age, then the message seems to be that to be old and female is particularly unfortunate. It can be likewise assumed that if older women belong to another minority group, the effect will be compounded.

The media has long been accused of negatively portraying minority groups. Goodall et al (1994) have written about the marginalisation of ethnic people in the Australian media, for example, commenting that ‘the representation of non-Anglo Australians in ads has usually been limited to comic stereotypes…Anglo-Australian culture is given precedence over Aboriginal culture…Aboriginal history and culture…are trivialised or denied’ (p.77-78). In a similar fashion, gay people have traditionally been either ignored or caricatured in the media. In this light, as ethnic, coloured, gay or indigenous people age, it can be assumed that their social isolation is heightened. Riggs (1998) writes that older members of ethnic groups and older homosexuals are categorically shunned on TV ‘if American popular culture downplays the existence of elders generally, it virtually ignores those who might not be heterosexual whites’ (p. 125). It can be argued that any kind of representation, however inadequately portrayed, at least acknowledges the existence of groups, whereas universal media ostracism fails to recognise their validity. This is poignantly illustrated by one of
Rigg’s native American interviewees who was not overly concerned at the stereotypical image of Indians as the ‘enemy’ in western movies. She commented, “It was nice to see one’s race portrayed heroically” (p.152).

Riggs (1998) interviewed a number of native American, gay and ethnic older people to ascertain their views on television representation of their social groups. Whilst some emphasised that they enjoyed TV and could empathise with a wide variety of characters, there was a sadness that older gay, black or ethnic characters were virtually invisible in the media, and when portrayed, were stereotyped negatively. Many called for a natural integration of characters reflecting their experience into mainstream programmes and films, seeing such intermingling as a positive step for society (p.142). Riggs (1998) concludes her section on minority elders with the observation that none of her interviewees expressed vociferous anger at their marginal cultural position, but many voiced disappointment at television’s tendency to ignore or stereotype them. She writes ‘at the same time, they hoped for better things from a medium that they found to be powerful and potentially liberating for them in its image construction’ (p.162). Their hopes may reflect the wider views of older people; if some express little ‘vociferous anger’, this might reflect a sense of powerlessness, and the power of the media to ascribe social status, little of which is accorded to elders.

- **Social Status, Self Concept and Worldview**

Television can be seen as the dominant communicator of our cultural stories, providing the symbolic material from which we construct a sense of self, social status and an understanding of the wider world. As an illustration of the point, Fiske
(1991) equates the textual narratives of TV with folk culture which incorporate meaning into our cultural lives (p. 107). If we accept this view, then the way groups are represented in the media becomes a matter of concern. Researchers who have looked at the image of older people in the mass media have found that stereotypical representations dominate, and that this age group is often underrepresented. Swayne and Greco (1985), for example, looked at 814 commercials on American prime time TV and found that only 3.2 per cent of the commercial population were seniors. A later study by Robinson (1998) painted a similar picture, with those over 65 accounting for only 5 out of every 100 characters in adverts across the mass media (p.65). From the perspective of female representation, George Gerbner (1993) reported to the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists that in the 1990s, women on television were younger than in the 1980s, and grew more evil with age. On a similar note, Lauzen and Dozier (1999) found that popular mature female characters in programmes such as ‘Cybill’ and Murphy Brown’ had been replaced in the late nineties by younger characters such as Ally McBeal and Dharma in ‘Dharma and Greg’. In more general terms, Wober and Gunter (1988) report that on (U.S.) TV ‘about 70 per cent of older men and 80 per cent of older women were held in low esteem…foolish, incompetent, eccentric’ (p.136). In later research, Signorielli (2001) found that older representation in the 1990s had improved little from the 1980s, with older people seriously under-represented, and when depicted, often relegated to minor or comic roles (para. 17).

When older people are represented positively there is often a sense they are behaving perversely, creating what Kubey calls ‘reverse stereotyping’. Davis and Davis (1986) refer to Kubey’s analysis:
Older people are often seen riding motor cycles, dancing with abandon…These “exotics”…are seen doing things thought to be extraordinary for older persons…when such reverse stereotypes are presented in prime time comedy it is intended to be comical, it is accepted as a joke, and thereby negative stereotypes continue to be reinforced (p. 49).

In a similar vein, a story of an ‘unusual’ older person is sometimes shown for light relief at the end of the news – perhaps an older woman jumping from an aeroplane (usually designated as a ‘grandmother’, with cultural connotations emphasising the atypical behaviour). Whilst these images may be inspiring for some, there is often a patronising tone and sense of the ridiculous as this particular person is shown deviating from the ‘norm’. Writing about the coverage of ageing issues in the media, Cutter (2001) criticises the categorising and segmentation of age groups, observing that the media swing between portrayals of happy, healthy, wealthy elders and stories about frail, poor, demented elders. The author believes the media should keep a sense of proportion, and show realistic and relevant portrayals of all across the lifespan (para. 13). If older people are depicted as frail or incompetent as a general rule in the media, and faintly ridiculous if they are seen to defy this conventional image, then the self-concept of elders can be narrowed. Levy (2001) also warns of the danger of implicit ageism as society absorbs cultural assumptions about the aged, pointing to Banajis’ (1999) survey which found 95 per cent of participants had negative views of old people (para. 2). Ageist assumptions may also be directed inward, with ageing self-stereotypes possibly having a negative effect on cognitive behavioral and health outcomes.

The notion of ‘ageism’ in the popular media can be extended to include the focus on youth and the implied message that only young, productive and affluent people can participate in a system that directs lifestyle choices. The media, and commercial
television in particular, offer rich rewards for those who respond to consumerist directives, promising enhanced lifestyles, improved self-esteem and higher status. If the media simultaneously project the message that old people are irrelevant to the system, then it can be argued that formulating a coherent and socially relevant sense of self becomes problematic – the notion of ‘successful ageing’ is based on the premise that older people can keep up with trends and new technology, accommodate new lifestyles and take on new challenges. Johansson (1994) sees lifestyle choices as elemental in the construction of self:

The development of lifestyle repertoires is…intimately related to fundamental existential issues, such as the reflexively organised construction and reconstruction of self-identity and life history, the creation of meaning in life and the development of a sense of ontological security. The conspicuous and imaginative character of lifestyle offers individuals a wide variety of means to strengthen and develop their self-identity and body awareness (p. 268)

The commercial media offer exciting lifestyle possibilities via the brands and logos of advertised goods, and the successful role models promoting them. However, with its emphasis on youth, commercial television offers older people limited lifestyle options, reduced or negative social roles and little opportunity to access positive role models.

Marketers defend the youthful orientation of television with the assertion that older people respond positively to younger models, basing this premise on research which has found older people do not necessarily identify with age cohorts. Bradley and Longino (2001) report that several researchers have found healthy, active older people in particular, perceive themselves to be 75 to 80 per cent of their actual chronological age (para. 15). In an atmosphere of ‘anti-ageing’, many elders might find it difficult to equate subjective self-assessment with culturally projected
representations of old age. They may feel reluctant to identify with negative projections, identifying with younger portrayals, not because they are in denial, but because younger characterisations better reflect their experience. Old age is often taboo in Western society, and as Cole and Thompson (2001-2) point out, popular culture divests itself of the taint of decay associated with ageing because ‘it is an offence to the reign of biotechnology and to postmodern dreams of a timeless, placeless, instantaneous now’ (para. 5). Most programming and advertising is aimed at a youthful audience, and when directing products to older people, marketers seek to develop and promote products that please older people without becoming associated with old age. However, Katz (2001-2) warns that this masking of age denies the reality of the ageing process, and may create a negative self-image (para. 13).

Some researchers have also accused the popular media of generating a negative worldview in some viewers. Television discourse has been criticised by some for its focus on negativity and problems, which may create anxiety for older people, increasing a sense of vulnerability and isolation. The media often use violent or sensational stories to attract the attention of younger viewers, and they bring the world’s problems into our private living spaces, persuading us to deal with and take a stand on issues in distant locations. Thompson (1999) writes ‘living in a mediated world…carries with it a new burden of responsibility which weighs heavily on the shoulders of some’ (p. 234). The mass media focus on all that is negative about the human condition, particularly in news and current affairs stories. Lowe (1995) writes ‘the media’s world of current events is a world bedeviled by disasters, conflict, accidents, inhumanity, despair, aggression and suffering. It is a construction
of the world that describes the human condition in the bleakest, most existential terms’ (p. 43). Giddens (1991) sees an emphasis on global concerns as stressful. ‘No amount of bracketing out is likely altogether to overcome the background anxieties produced by a world which could literally destroy itself…there is a good deal of evidence to indicate that unconscious fears…are prevalent among sectors of the population’ (p. 183).

Whilst TV brings the world into our homes, a sense of isolation may be heightened, rather than relieved by global stories, and we may feel the need to retreat into smaller and safer environments. Similarly, local stories about crime exaggerate the true picture, creating anxiety out of proportion to actual crime statistics. Gunter (1987) cites Gerbner’s (1978) findings ‘while 30 per cent of all characters and over 64 per cent of major characters monitored in prime time programming over a ten year span were involved in violence as perpetrators, victims or both, United States census figures during the period indicated that in actuality only one-third of one per cent of individuals tend to get involved in violence’ (p. 20). Here in Australia, and more recently, Linden (1997) informs us of research carried out by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research on society’s fear of crime. Results indicated that the media have created an unrealistic view of the risk of becoming a victim of crime, with, for example, more than one in four respondents believing the risk of their homes being broken into was over 38 per cent, when in fact the risk is less than 6 per cent. The author quotes the director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics as saying, “When public perceptions of crime risk were so highly exaggerated…fear of crime can seriously reduce the quality of an individual’s life” (p. 24).
If television communicates a sense of the outside world as unduly dangerous, then the concept of ‘successful ageing’ may be compromised. Positive ageing is underpinned by imperatives to be physically and socially active, yet television programming can generate a climate of fear and vulnerability, and may encourage older people to stay within the relative safety of home, or to retreat to the sanctuary of age-specific housing enclaves. In addition to a disproportionate focus on crime, TV promotes a sense of who holds power and authority in society – most often young, white males. Older people are rarely depicted as wielders of authority, and are often seen as victims in fictionalised drama and in news and current affairs. Gunter (1987) writes ‘cumulative exposure to these recurring patterns of portrayed violence and victimisation may result not only in viewers learning about the power structure of the world of television drama, but through a process of generalisation to a television-based colouration of their outlook on reality’ (p. 7). Fictionalised violence often accompanies dramatised accounts of good versus evil – moral fables which comfort the viewer with the message that authorities will always gain ascendancy over the anti-social. However, in tandem with the media-generated dictum that ‘good will always find a way’ is the message that older people, in particular, are powerless in the face of ‘burgeoning’ crime – stereotyped as ‘feeble’ and ‘victim’, the overall effect on older people may be to feel alienated from society and vulnerable to its miscreants. Whether television is able to generate fear and mistrust, or to colour the self-concept and worldview of audiences has long been the subject of debate. Some of these arguments about TV’s ‘effects’ are considered in Part Two.
CHAPTER THREE

THE TELEVISION/VIEWER INTERRELATIONSHIP

• The Question of ‘Effects’

According to the symbolic interactionist Mead, we do not ‘stand above’ authoritatively projected values to form our own judgements, because meaning is given and not open to individual interpretation (J.D. Lewis, 1991, p.253). The hypotheses of media ‘effects’ researchers echo this philosophy, with many considering that television projects authoritative messages and universal values in its capacity as cultural storyteller. Early effects research revolved around these observations, and focused particularly on the hypothesis that programming affects audiences uniformly, leading to predictable and observable behavioural outcomes, particularly in relation to violent programming. However, most studies failed to provide conclusive evidence of universal effects, due at least in part to inadequate methodology and a narrow behaviourist focus. Contemporary effects research, most notably represented by the ‘cultural indicators’ paradigm, takes a wider view, exploring the question of effects from a semiological stance. Many studies have indicated a generalised association between heavy TV viewing (three hours a day or more), and an acceptance of media-projected values and stereotypes. This perspective postulates that heavy viewers across the demographic spectrum share a similar worldview, with media-generated values often overriding wider social influences.

Other media analysts discount this idea of television’s power to influence viewers’ perceptions of self, others and the outside world, and posit the ability of people to
subjectively analyse TV messages. The ‘uses and gratifications’ model considers the viewer to be active in making viewing choices and in accepting or rejecting material – a position quite at odds with early ‘effects’ researchers who failed to consider that audiences could be active participants in the viewing process. In essence, the ‘uses and gratifications’ perspective considers the audience to be in control, shifting the power from television into the hands of the viewer. Taylor and Willis (1999) acknowledge the importance of this model which ‘marked a realisation that audiences were not empty vessels…instead, audiences selected what they wanted to see and hear…In this way the model was the first to acknowledge the idea that audiences could be active’ (p.162). In addition to an ability to make discerning viewing choices, the uses and gratifications perspective sees the viewer as able to reject messages which contradict subjective views, and to reinterpret messages according to psychological needs. Hodge and Tripp (1986), for example, have documented the ability of audiences to reinterpret messages subjectively, finding that Australian Aboriginal children identified with American Indians and Negroes on TV, indicating a capacity to relate to the exploits of media characters irrespective of the characters’ personae (p.140). From the uses and gratifications perspective, if our own group is underrepresented or portrayed negatively, our capacity to imaginatively improvise may override this, as we accept ‘second-hand’ representations of our experience. Older people who report disappointing representation of their age cohorts on TV nevertheless enjoy similar programming to younger viewers (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Ross, 2000), which seems to indorse the view that we have a capacity to project our ‘selves’ into fictional characterisations and reinterpret meaning to correspond more closely to our own life experiences.
Whilst viewers may be able to identify with diverse characters and imaginatively adapt storylines, there are some who criticise the uses and gratifications perspective for failing to consider television as an ideological agency and powerful projector of our cultural ‘norms’. Of particular concern is the perspective’s rejection of the idea that we are shaped by the social world. ‘People are, on the one hand, shaped and determined by the social world, instilling them with certain “values”, “interests”, “social roles” and “associations”, and yet, when it comes to watching TV they appear to suddenly develop the ability to “select” and “fashion” what they see and hear in accordance with their interests’ (Lewis, 1991, p.15-16). Broadcasters align themselves with this view of the discriminating viewer and are vocal in their assertion that audiences are active participants in the viewing process, rejecting the idea that programming has any direct influence. However, Woodfolke-Cross (1983) points out that networks do take credit for the pro-social effects of ‘public interest’ messages they insert occasionally into programmes. She writes ‘broadcasters cannot simultaneously take credit for ‘pro-social’ messages and declare that any other messages have no impact because they are merely part of the “entertainment”. If we believe entertainment to be “harmless”, it becomes all the more effective as a carrier of propaganda’ (p.87). The author and other critical observers consider that the uses and gratifications model fails to recognise television’s capacity to influence social values and cultural expectations.

At the forefront of theoretical approaches to the perennial concern about effects is the ‘cultural indicators’ paradigm, a component of which is ‘cultivation analysis’ that posits heavy and regular TV viewing encourages generalised views that can override individual variables. Research from this perspective has indicated that television
generates dominant ideological and social messages that cultivate attitudes seen across the social spectrum. Rather than focussing on behavioural effects on particular groups (as in early effects research), cultivation analysis researchers examine the universal themes of television discourse and how they might influence heavy viewers from all walks of life. Morgan and Signorielli (1990) clarify the cultivation analysis position:

The substance of the consciousness cultivated by television is not so much composed of specific attitudes and opinions as it is by broad, underlying, global assumptions about the “facts of life”…its socially constructed version of reality bombards all classes, groups and ages with the same perspectives at the same time…what makes television unique…is its ability to standardise, streamline, amplify and share common cultural norms with virtually all members of society (p.14)

At the heart of this approach is the theory that those who watch TV for long periods rely on mediated discourse to make sense of the world, whilst those who are lighter viewers are more likely to be exposed to more diverse experiences.

However, there is opposition to this critical view of television as a persuasive ideological device. Hartley (1992), for example, writes with some justification that earlier critical effects debates were based on a fear of popular culture, with elitist critics having a nostalgia for outmoded ‘higher’ forms of culture. He goes on to extend the notion by presenting the argument that ‘individual effects are small beer compared with the social effects of widespread belief in them; effects which include forms of censorship, licensing, restrictive legislation and moral policing’ (p.14). Hartley considers it no longer necessary to ‘fret’ about television’s ‘supposed’ effects, seeing this concern as an attack on the socio-technological medium of communication *per se*. He writes ‘contemporary preoccupations with television’s individual, behavioural, psychological effects are, historically, a symptom of the
post-medieval world’s suspicion of visual images, not an explanatory framework’ (p.14-15). Hartley and others, such as Fiske (1986) dismiss the idea of ‘effects’, seeing the nature of TV texts as ‘polysemic’ (or open to interpretation), arguing that texts need to be ‘polysemic’ in order to reach diverse audiences to allow for individualised or subversive readings (p.194). From Hartley’s perspective, ideological and cultural messages relayed by the popular media – in relation to lifestyle choices, behavioural norms or the status of older people, for example – need to be viewed within the context of free speech, and the capacity of viewers to read texts subjectively.

• **Power Relations**

Whilst texts can be seen as ‘polysemic’ and interpreted or reinterpreted according to subjective status, producers try to ensure that viewers decode preferred meanings. Dahlgren (1998) questions the extent of the polysemy of media texts, and considers that Fiske makes too much of the ability of viewers to reinterpret programming and resist the hegemonic power of TV (p.300). Rather than presenting open texts, TV can be seen as proffering universally accessible messages that cut across social boundaries, particularly in relation to advertising. Even if viewers choose to reject advertisers’ advances, overarching cultural messages may be absorbed in relation, for example, to trends, accepted lifestyle options and expected modes of dress or behaviour, creating an homogenising effect on audiences. In fictional programming also, producers work hard to convey dominant messages in order to elicit similar responses from diverse audiences. Kuby and Csikszentmihaly (1990) write that whilst viewers have different backgrounds, needs and expectations, the same viewing experience will produce similar effects ‘these media are often powerful enough that
once involved in an effectively produced drama…most viewers will care at exactly
the same time whether the protagonist survives, whether a victim is rescued, and
whether the villain is vanquished’ (p.175). In the mediated relationship between
producer and viewer, although there are no guarantees that messages will be received
as intended, some see the popular mass media as powerfully persuasive.

Asa Berger (1991), for example, writes that Marxists consider the power of the mass
media as hegemonic, with a pervasive intermeshing of political, social and cultural
forces which display the commonsense realities of the world:

The works carried by the mass media can be seen…as not merely
carriers of ideology that manipulate and indoctrinate people with
certain views. The media, as unwitting instruments of hegemonic
domination have a much broader and deeper influence – they shape
people’s very idea of themselves…they shape people’s world views
(p.50)

Both advertising and programming seamlessly present a cultural montage and
graphically illustrate to individual viewers who they are and how they should live –
but the media direct most of their attention to the concerns and consumer ‘needs’ of a
relatively youthful audience, relegating older people to obscurity. The virtual
marketplace becomes a virtual meeting place for a privileged group, limiting the raw
materials from which older viewers can shape ideas about themselves or enjoy a
positive public profile. Commercial television projects the same messages to all
viewers, creating a superficial sense that all are offered the same choices and
freedom to gain social acceptance through consumer choices. However, this hides
the reality that whilst media messages are universally accessible and seen by many
across the social spectrum, this very universality might create disaffected groups who
are rarely or inadequately addressed.
Ostensibly speaking to all, the popular media veils any biased orientation in an effort to appeal to a wide audience. For example, Taylor and Willis (1999) write that the social reality of working-class people is often sidelined, and point to a Glasgow University textual analysis of The News that found a suppression of working people’s concerns. Strikers were depicted as disrupting society, with management striving to provide a service to the public (p.35). The construction and placement of news stories often reinforces the system whilst seemingly siding with the best interests of viewers. There are many arguably cynical, certainly token attempts made to win audience approval whilst failing to adequately portray group realities. Programmes like ‘A Current Affair’ often have stories that seem to take the side of ‘the battler’ against questionable business people. These stories can be seen as currency to win the allegiance of viewers who are then showed promotional programme segments presented as ‘informational’ storylines – goods and services which gain legitimacy when projected by a programme seen to have exposed charlatans. Taylor and Willis (1999) write that Gramsci sees hegemonic power as achieved not simply through the imposition of ideology, but by the presentation of the dominant ideology as best able to fulfill the interests of all in society. The benefits of capitalism have to be continually emphasised in order to win approval through a process of negotiation.

Whilst there is some room for dissent, television discourse takes place within a capitalist framework – the system may appear to be challenged on occasion, but opposition is subdued and the status quo maintained. Kellnor (1998) comments ‘although specific politicians, corporations and business practices can be criticised,
television does not undertake criticism of the capitalist system in terms of any positive alternatives (such as socialism) and rarely questions fundamental capitalist values’ (p.41). Indeed, there is a view that the media have subverted the nature of capitalism in a relentless quest to create individualised consumers. Kellnor cites Bell’s (1976) argument that television and the mass media ‘have been instrumental in promoting a new consumer ethic and hedonistic lifestyle that contradicts the older capitalist-Protestant production ethic with its emphasis on hard work, saving, delayed gratification, the family, religion and other traditional values’ (p.38). Asa Berger (1991 echoes this view when he writes ‘advertising has replaced the Puritan ethic…as the chief means of motivating people to work hard’ (p.43). If the mass media have subverted traditional values to promote a hedonistic culture, many who can remember a less aggressively consumerist, individualised society may consider themselves an anachronism. In addition, if television is seen as an ideological force that perpetuates the working/consuming cycle, then older people will be largely superfluous to commercial TV’s needs.

Another view discounts this notion of television as a hegemonic and ideological power, and sees TV as primarily a site where people can enjoy the dramatisation of everyday life. Windschuttle (1988) censures critical theorists who focus on TV’s ‘effects’, dismissing out of hand the ‘ideological control’ theory, labelling some left wing views as ‘pretentious’ or ‘idealistic’ (p.162). Hartley (1992) considers that television provides a democratic arena and place where the masses can have a voice and enjoy the enactment of ordinary experiences. According to Hartley, TV plays a positive cultural role and has a ‘bardic’ function that renders into symbolic form the conflicts and preoccupations of contemporary culture (p.11). Hartley’s view of TV
as a ‘democratic arena’ is influenced by the early and now repudiated approach of effects theorists who often conducted studies based on the fear that television would distract people from ‘higher’ cultural pursuits and project a constant stream of mindless entertainment. Early effects research gave little recognition to the popular media’s ability to inform, entertain or graphically portray everyday concerns. Television allows us to witness the joy and pain of others and laugh at our collective cultural foibles. These shared insights create a virtual community binding people together – a particularly important function for those, like the frail aged, who may have reduced opportunities for wider social interaction. However, Hartley’s view of TV as a site for ‘the masses’ and for the ‘enactment of everyday experiences’, projects a sense that audiences are a uniform aggregation ‘out there’, and that television adequately represents their experience.

Hartley’s assessment gives little acknowledgment to the complexity of viewers or the diversity of subjective experience. Some would respond by countering that if TV fails to represent individual experience, then viewers are free to reinterpret texts to fit in with their own reality. Fiske (1987) illustrates the view that we can reinterpret limited textual portrayals, with the example of Hodge and Tripp’s (1986) earlier mentioned research into the reading of texts by Australian Aboriginal children who aligned themselves with black American Negroes and Indians. ‘When they supported and identified with American Indians in their fight against white cowboys, they knew…that they were being obtuse or awkward in reading a western in this way’ (p.71). Nevertheless, it can be argued that in making an oppositional reading, the viewer is still aware of the dominant reading and may assimilate projected messages – in this case, that coloured minorities play a subordinate role in society or
represent the evil ‘other’. (An obvious additional message is that there are few Aboriginal heroic portrayals to emulate). A correlation here might be that older people may be able to identify with a variety of younger characters and reinterpret texts in a resistive manner to more closely relate to their own subjective reality. However, even if able to do this, older people as rational and critical observers must be aware of the preponderance of youthful role models, and absorb the overriding cultural bias towards youth. Lewis questions the assumption that a resistive reading of texts indicates that dominant meanings have been deposed or rejected, warning that ‘the popular/resistive reading may be in opposition to a dominant ideology…but it works in league with the TV text, not against it’ (p.69).

Our capacity to resist dominant messages can be seen as limited in relation to the power of television to relay clear social and ideological precepts. Parenti (1992) writes ‘rather than being rationally critical of the images and ideologies of the entertainment media, our minds – after prolonged exposure to earlier programmes and films – sometimes become active accomplices in our own indoctrination’ (p.5-6). The author highlights the point with observations about our inability to reject consumerist messages, and Shrank’s findings that 90 per cent of (U.S.) adult viewers consider they are personally immune to TV advertisements whilst simultaneously accounting for 90 percent of all sales of advertised products (p.6). Asa Berger (1991) also considers our ability to make choices as limited in the face of ideological directives, considering ‘our illusion of autonomy makes us all the more susceptible to manipulation’ (p.47). This view of TV’s ideological power can be extended to hypothesise that television might also influence our view of self and others. We can speculate that older people, after a lifetime of watching primarily youth-orientated
programming, might internalise projected cultural stereotyping which fetes physical
energy and perfection, and belittles or ignores the positive benefits of age. Those
such as Hartley (1992) and Windschuttle (1988) who emphasise television as a site
of resistance to ideological control, and champion the populist notion of TV as the
‘voice of the people’, risk sidelining the principal role of TV as an instrument to
promote consumerism, and sidelining the concerns of groups inadequately portrayed.

If we keep in mind that commercial television (here in Australia at least), is primarily
a tool to promote capitalism and encourage consumption, then it becomes clear that
the effective transmission of ideology will be of greater concern to networks than fair
representation of groups and the complex analysis of social issues. If viewers
reinterpret texts (as in Hodge and Tripp’s findings in relation to Aboriginal
children’s textual readings), this may be less an indication of the power of audiences
to subvert the system than simply a reflection of the inadequacies of the medium.
Many viewers are less than happy with the scope of the popular media, despite their
popularity. Parenti (1992) reports that the National Association of Broadcasters
refused to publish a 1983 (U.S.) study that found audiences were overwhelmingly
critical of programming, which was seen as often irrelevant to their needs (p.204). In
this light, Hartley’s (1992) view that television is the place where the ‘masses’ can
have a voice and enjoy the enactment of everyday experiences falls a little flat.
Parenti, and others such as Webster and Phalen, (1997); Barr, (2000); and Signorielli,
(2001), argue that commercial TV networks offer limited programme choices,
focussing instead on projecting clear ideological messages across class borders.
There is also criticism of inadequate and stereotypical portrayals of groups whose
members are (according to Hartley), seeing their life experiences ‘enacted’. The
capacity of viewers to imaginatively project their own experiences into banal or insubstantial television productions may come less from a desire to sabotage preferred meanings than from a need to modify texts that fail to acknowledge their presence or experience.

- **TV and the Individual**

  Whilst television texts and imagery often fail to adequately portray viewers’ reality, the self can nevertheless be enriched by the viewing experience which provides graphic and up to the minute stories, providing us with a panorama of local and global events. In addition, fictional and factual enactments of the human experience provide the raw materials from which we can learn about the world and construct a sense of who we are and our place in society. Programming and advertising speak to us about our cultural identity, providing reference points which enable us to keep up with trends and lifestyle options. These messages benefit sponsors, but also offer continual opportunities for reinventing the self. Giddens (1991) illustrates the point when he writes ‘consumerist messages from the mass media influence our sense of self and encourage a fluidity to notions of self, we may change our physical appearance, hair colour, clothes, become fatter or thinner according to media messages’ (p.128). There is a sense of unlimited possibilities as new fashions emerge each season and innovative products are offered to enhance our lives. Thompson (1999) considers the self in modernity as dependent on mediated symbols that provide continuous and changing possibilities from which individuals can formulate self identity, but warns ‘the more the process of self-formation is enriched by mediated symbolic forms, the more the self becomes dependent on media systems which lie beyond its control’ (p.214).
This lack of control over our symbolic world may limit the development of self-
identity when our moral authority emanates from the mass media. Television stars
and sporting heroes are often ‘significant others’ in our lives, and often retain media
status (despite sporting foul play or lifestyle indiscretions) to benefit sponsors’ best
interests. Superficial or materialistic messages given out by media celebrities, and
revelations about corruption in high places may undermine collective moral
frameworks as authoritative and charismatic figures fail to live up to their ‘heroic’
status. Taylor (1990) sees the importance of agreed-upon moral frameworks in the
formulation of self identity ‘frameworks provide the background…for our moral
judgements…to articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral
responses’ (p.26). Goffman (1990) sees those that society places on a pedestal as
influential in the formulation of moral frameworks ‘in most stratified societies, there
is an idealisation of the higher strata…not merely a desire for a prestigeful place, but
also…for a place close to the sacred centre of the common values of society’ (p.45).
In modern Western societies there is perhaps less of an emphasis on aspiration
towards a higher class than towards those our culture idealises – media stars have
arguably become the principal ‘significant others’ in our lives and the manifestations
of our collective values.

In media dominated societies there are few symbolic representations of the ‘wisdom
of age’, and the traditional values often associated with older people. The lionisation
of sporting ‘heroes’, wealthy movie stars and ‘easy on the eye’ TV personalities,
perhaps most graphically illustrates our admiration for youthful energy, physical
perfection and material success, with those deemed most successful granted
authoritative status by the media to promote lifestyle options and consumer goods. If our collective cultural values and sense of self are formulated with reference to ‘significant others’ in the media, and predominantly limited to the television arena, then overriding messages – such as the need for material status – might override other moral voices. In this climate, material goods will develop a cultural role as demarcations of value ‘goods…take on tremendous importance as carriers of social meaning for people because they are so closely tied to the construction of social identity’ (Taylor and Willis, 1999, p.204). From this perspective, those who are marginal to the media-projected cultural ideals of youth, physical beauty and material wealth which delineate social position, may be designated by others as devoid of status. The old, poor, sick or unemployed, and those disinclined or unable to acquire the consumer goods which represent the ‘status’ bestowed by illusory media stars, become distanced from mainstream values and concerns.

In this light, debates in the literature which seek to demonstrate older people’s capacity to consume, can be seen as validating seniors as part of the consumer society. Thomas and Wolfe (1995), for example, question the more generally held view of older people as less impulsive and more discerning consumers, arguing that ‘there may be no age-related differences between younger and older consumers in willingness to try new products or switch brands’ (para.24). There is no doubt that recognition of older people as viable consumers, and an increasingly positive profile in advertisements would raise the level of media representation of seniors. Such legitimisation may improve the status of older people in the eyes of a society dominated by material goods, but, according to Katz (2001/2), reduces them – and everyone else – to consumers, classified according to a capacity to spend money.
Katz warns that ‘the literature on marketing to older adults is a prime example of how the post-modern agenda for timeless positive aging is aligned to new frameworks for growing older based on consumerism’ (para.11). Poorer people across the lifespan are disadvantaged by a focus on the self as consumer, but older people are perhaps at a particular disadvantage if identity relies to a large degree on consumer choices. A rejection of fashion and lifestyle dictates by young people may be seen by peers and society at large as rebellious, or even heroic, when old and worn T-shirts and jeans are used as a political statement. If older people are similarly unwilling or unable to follow media-generated trends this may be seen, conversely, as denoting disengagement, being ‘out of touch’ or senile.

If the popular media, and in particular the consumerist ethos of commercial television constitute the matrix for identity development, then many must come to feel they are outsiders. Some observers, such as Shane (2001) argue that television alienates viewers from their communities, with TV speaking to us in isolation, providing advice and ‘friends’ without the need for true intimacy. Rose (1989) highlights the isolation of modernity, and laments the loss of ‘positive’ culture in the face of a modern emphasis on individualism. He cites Reiff’s view that ‘advanced industrial communities are no longer culturally positive. Individualism rules, the links that once bound each person into the chain of all members of the community have been severed’ (p.216). Mediated culture has to a large degree replaced traditional ‘positive’ culture – however, whilst individualism and materialism are promoted by the commercial media, so too is a tribal affinity between younger viewers who are offered advice and ‘friends’, while older viewers are ignored. Those not addressed are alienated from the mediated community and distanced from
a source of self-identity and self-esteem. If our communities have become severed by individualism in modernity, then those who are dependent on TV to maintain a limited sense of community and social engagement, and who are not included in media stories, become doubly marginalised.

Viewers may also come to feel alienated from society when the media continuously depict the outside world as ‘dangerous’. However, whilst ‘cultivation analysis’ researchers in the U.S. consistently find that viewers have a misplaced fear of crime, viewers in the U.K. and Europe have more realistic responses. This seems to relate to the disproportionate amount of violence U.S. viewers are watching. Signorielli and Morgan (1990) give an indication of the amount of violence on (U.S.) TV with the example of Greenburg et al’s (1980) analysis of dramatic series during three seasons of programming. Violence, defined as physical aggression, occurred more than 9 times per hour between 8 and 9pm, more than 11 times per hour between 9 and 11pm and more than 21 times per hour on Saturday morning children’s programmes (p.87). Signorielli and Morgan see the impact of violence on TV from a ‘cultivation analysis’ viewpoint:

The theory can be summed up as follows. The convergence of research indicates that exposure to violence occasionally incites some viewers to commit and/or imitate specific violent actions and that some people may become desensitised to violence. For most viewers, however, television’s mean and dangerous world tends to cultivate a sense of relative danger, mistrust, insecurity, vulnerability, dependence, and – despite its supposedly “entertaining” nature – alienation and gloom (p.88)

In more up to date research, Signorielli (2001) found that overall, fewer TV characters in the 1990s were involved in violence, but that one third of all characters observed hurt someone or were hurt themselves (para.15). Hendricks and Hendricks (1986) report incidentally that seniors are the least likely victims of crime, yet
‘despite this fact, some 25 per cent of the elderly claim crime as an issue of personal concern’ (p.294).

Research analysis from the U.K. and Europe is less emphatic about the correlation between TV violence and fear of the outside world. Wober and Gunter (1988) report that U.K. studies have failed to replicate the U.S. findings of cultivation analysts that indicated high levels of insecurity in heavy TV viewers (p.23). They also indicate that similar studies in Sweden and the Netherlands failed to replicate American findings. Researchers commented that television plays a smaller social role in Holland, and violence on TV is regulated to project anti-violence messages; similarly, in Sweden, very little violence is portrayed on TV (p.29). The authors, however, point out that Pingree and Hawkins estimated U.S. audiences watched at least twice as many violent acts on TV as European viewers. Interestingly, in 1980, Pingree and Hawkins chose to analyse the responses of school children from here in Perth Western Australia to discover if U.S. findings were relevant to Australian viewers. They found that the relationship between total viewing time and TV-biased responses about the incidence of violence was high. Wober and Gunter (1988) write ‘Pingree and Hawkins’ results suggest that the effects of television programming on conceptions of social reality may extend beyond the culture in which that content is produced’ (p.28). American programmes are popular in Australia as a recent local newspaper report indicated. In defiance of the waning popularity of U.S. shows around the world in favour of locally produced dramas and sitcoms, Australian networks continue to fill the airwaves with American-produced shows. ‘Channel 7’s Tim Worner said the network would continue developing Australian TV but it could

In light of the dominance of American programming on Australian television, it is interesting to extend comparisons between U.K. and U.S. studies. Wober and Gunter (1988) found that in addition to a lesser fear of crime amongst U.K. viewers, analysts could not match extensive U.S. research that found endemic underrepresentation and stereotyping of older people on TV, and a negative view of old age amongst the public at large. The authors comment ‘overall, the interpretation was developed that…television viewing related – if at all – in a positive way with perceptions of the chronological definition and character attributes of old age’ (p.140). This difference perhaps relates to the fact that only 14 per cent of U.K. programming is imported (compared, incidentally to around 45 per cent in Australia). Other possible reasons for the more benign U.K. findings are suggested by the authors, and include tighter institutional control which ensures a ‘climate of decency’, and an atmosphere that ‘is not a strident one in which the interests of minorities or weaker (though sizeable) segments of society are brushed aside if they get in the way of what may be a war between marketing powers’ (ibid). This ethos contrasts with the U.S. media experience, highlighted in a film by Michael Moore ‘Bowling for Columbine’. The documentary not only illustrates how audiences are maintained in a state of fear, but also how minorities are denigrated in the U.S. media. How the media represents society and culture may influence how people make the transition to old age - as we age and increasingly lose our sense of social position, media assessments of self and society must have particular resonance. In the next chapter I will examine how TV might impact on the contemporary imperative to age ‘successfully’.
CHAPTER FOUR

TELEVISION’S ROLE IN ‘SUCCESSFUL AGEING’

• The Focus on Ageing Successfully

Before exploring television’s role in the positive ageing process, there follows a brief overview of the concept of ‘success’ which dominates contemporary approaches to ageing. Initially, debates about the process of ageing in the post world war two period engendered two key paradigms – activity theory and disengagement theory. Both sought to ‘solve the problem’ of adjusting to role loss in old age from quite different perspectives; activity theory stressed the importance of maintaining physical and mental activity to optimise well being, and disengagement theory hypothesised that retired people withdraw from previous roles and activities in a process that prepares the individual for death, and society for the loss of the individual. During the 1960s and 70s theorists largely discredited the concept of disengagement and championed activity as the locus for solving the ‘problem’ of adjustment in later life, thus shifting the emphasis to positive ageing. This view has come to dominate gerontological practice, displacing disengagement theory and its implications of decline and loss, and relegating it to the periphery of theoretical discussion. Debates about positive ageing converged in recent years into the widely accepted paradigm ‘successful ageing’ which proposes a range of strategies to encourage ‘success’ based on activity, optimal mental and physical function and social engagement.

Rowe and Kahn, the main proponents of ‘successful ageing’, see the concept as encompassing multidimensional issues in relation to the biological, social and
behavioral sciences. Three main components of ‘success’ have been defined – ‘low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life’ (1997, para. 3). Many applaud this shift away from the association of age with social alienation and decline which the disengagement theory promoted, and point to positive implications. For example, Minkler and Faden (2002) write

the concept of successful ageing has been helpful in focussing renewed attention on health promotion, and disease and injury prevention, as a means of adding life to years and not merely years to life. Multiple well-designed studies of successful ageing similarly have made a real contribution to clarifying many health-promotion and disease-prevention strategies that can help ensure a healthier old age (para. 3)

Rowe and Kahn (1997) see the absence of disease and maintenance of functional capabilities as important, but it is their combination with active engagement – seen primarily as interpersonal relations and productive activity – that signifies the essence of successful ageing (para. 4). They base the need for social connection on Durkheim’s suicide study, which showed isolation as a predictor of morbidity and mortality (para. 26).

However, whilst Rowe and Kahn’s successful ageing paradigm is based on sound sociological, psychological and scientific theory, and has heralded a welcome shift towards ‘positive’ ageing, there are some who sound a distinct note of caution. There is a growing view that the focus on encouraging ‘successful’ ageing alienates those older people who through unexpected illness, genetic predisposition or socio-economic position may fall short of the prescribed optimal ideal. The paradigm gives scarce acknowledgement to the ‘unpredictable role of the genetic dice’, and of institutional and social factors which influence our lives. Minkler and Faden (2002)
argue that whilst health and lifestyle can be related to individual life choices, successful ageing proponents often fail to acknowledge the fact that we may be powerless in the face of age-related disadvantage. Writing from a disability perspective they comment:

> Without concomitant action to substantially improve the “response-ability” of people with disabilities...calls for greater personal responsibility for health are likely to have limited appeals...it is ironic that the successful ageing model’s emphasis on the critical role of intrinsic factors, such as individual choice...is not supplemented by an equal emphasis on the role of extrinsic factors. The latter would include such factors as poverty and inaccessibility and in other ways deleterious environments (2002, para. 14).

On a similar note, Baltes and Baltes (1998) point to the social constraints on ageing well ‘on the socio-cultural level...support structures for the optimisation of old age are underdeveloped. There is a dearth of social roles...that society offers to older citizens’ (para. 15).

Some gerontological researchers have theorised that a capacity to adapt to life’s circumstances provides a deeper and more meaningful indication of successful ageing than fulfilling Rowe and Kahn’s ideal formula for success. Baltes and Baltes (1998), for example, emphasise the power of psychological reserves to ‘outwit reality’. They see old age as a time when we are ‘continuously adjusting our standards of expectation’ (para. 15). A capacity to adapt to adverse social and physical realities is well documented – von Faber et al (2001) illustrate the significance of adaptation with a defining study of 85+ age groups in Leiden, The Netherlands. They found that whilst 45 per cent of participants registered optimal scores for subjective well being, only 13 per cent had optimal scores for physical, social and psychocognitive functioning according to ‘successful ageing’ guidelines.
The authors concluded that Rowe and Kahn’s dominantly held view of successful ageing, based on objectively measured states of being, was only one way to measure positive adjustment to ageing. Many of the Leiden respondents reported a strong sense of well being despite limitations, leading the authors to observe that success in old age is reliant on a process of continuous adaptation.

This capacity to adapt to adversity is referred to as the ‘disability paradox’ – a phenomenon that is found in all age groups and demonstrates the human ability to adapt to circumstances (von Faber et al, 2001, para.32). The authors theorise that this capacity is related to several factors – in the Leiden study, self assessment of well being was related to personality, early life experiences and religious and cultural influences (para. 19). Social contact was deemed by many respondents as important for well being, which reflects Rowe and Kahn’s model, yet the authors note that ‘some participants were content with few social activities and preferred to be left alone to do things they enjoyed…it was inappropriate to classify these participants as less successful because of their scores for social functioning’ (para. 24). Researchers in Leiden concluded that the dominant model of successful ageing ignored the value of adaptation to limitations, and they commented ‘the absence of limitations and losses does not constitute one’s success at old age, rather, success is measured by the way these limitations and losses are integrated into one’s attitude to old age’ (para. 33). Whilst Rowe and Kahn’s measure of mental, physical and social function provides a sound basis for predicting success in old age, adaptive qualities and subjective self-assessment need to be factored into the equation.
• How Television Might Facilitate ‘Successful Ageing’

In the light of calls for a broader conception of what it means to age ‘successfully’, it seems prudent to explore television’s place in the ‘immediate settings’ of older people, and to reassess the interpretation of ‘active engagement’. Rowe and Kahn’s (1997) interpretation emphasises the need for face to face interactions and productive activity, and fails to assess the value of ‘passive’ activities (such as watching TV). Research has demonstrated that television plays an important role in the social, physical and cultural environment of older people (Hilt, 1997; Riggs, 1998; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999), and can be seen as a means by which the frail and housebound adapt to their situation and ‘actively’ engage with society. Katz (2000) questions the often narrow professional interpretation of activity based on physical movement and interaction, an interpretation which often devalues passive activities in a quest to ‘codify everyday conduct in institutional and recreational environments’ (para. 2). A similar utilitarian approach is taken by the welfare state, according to Katz, which has ‘encouraged neoliberal policies and market-driven programmes to “empower” older individuals to be active to avoid the stigma and risks of dependency’ (ibid). In a notation to his article, Katz extends the notion of activity by quoting Lawton’s (1993) observations of housebound older people. Many maintain links and continuity with society by ‘looking at photographs or iconic representations…and watching the activity of others…Such mechanisms as fantasy, reminiscence, onlooker behaviour and passive social behaviour may supplant the more active forms’ (note 5).

This observation of the ability of frail aged people to maintain meaning and links with others can be aligned with the role of television in older people’s lives. TV can
provide the means to view ‘iconic representations’, the ‘activities of others’, and to utilise ‘fantasy’ and ‘reminiscence’ in order to give meaning to life and to engage with society. Empirical and theoretical evidence points to increasing dysfunction in the oldest age group (the over 85s), and Baltes and Baltes (1998) suggest strategies of adaptation and compensation for loss in order to optimise life quality (para. 21). Here it can be argued that television has an important function in relation to emotional well being and social connection. Whilst viewing TV can be seen as a passive, physically disengaging experience, some describe the viewing experience as a communal ritual which ‘connects’ audiences through shared experiences as it elicits a range of emotions. Johansson (1994) writes ‘popular culture is an important site of people’s passions and desires…it provides sites of relaxation, privacy, pleasure, fear, passion, desire and emotion…It engenders laughter, screams, tears…Popular culture therefore seems to work at the intersections of the body and emotions’ (p. 280). Television programmes can provide the raw materials for later contemplation, and compelling and emotive stories may help to facilitate the evolution of a self that is socially and emotionally, if not physically, connected with others.

The correlation of successful ageing with activity and productivity detracts from the realm of the metaphysical and the value of ‘passive’ pursuits. Katz (2000) writes that a pioneer in geriatrics, Nascher (1922) advocated contemplative as well as physical forms of stimulation, and that another pioneer in ageing studies, Hall (1922) found in his seminal study that older people valued contemplation and mental activity above physical activity (para. 10). This view reflects Tornstam’s (1989) theoretical concept of ‘gerotranscendence’ which proposed that older people
naturally developed a desire for solitude and contemplation, a theory at odds with the tenets of activity theory and successful ageing. With its echoes of the discredited ‘disengagement theory’ and its New Age parallels, ‘gerotranscendence’ has not been considered seriously in the West, although it has proved popular in Scandinavia. Jonson and Magnusson (2001) criticise the perspective in the same manner that others have criticised the unidimensional perspective of successful ageing (section 9, para. 3). Yet despite its limitations, the authors comment that the theory offers a new dimension to the concept of ageing which detracts from the Western emphasis on physical and social activity ‘gerotranscendence theory…emphasises difference and positive development in old age without denying that many old people are frail and dependent’ (section 7, para. 5).

How the frail and dependent come to terms with decline and loss, and balance these with functioning abilities is at the heart of calls for a reappraisal of the concept of successful ageing (Scheiat et al, 1999; von Faber, 2001; Minkler and Faden, 2002). Whilst many of the oldest old are unable to be as active or productive as positive ageing guidelines recommend, a large body of research demonstrates that we continue to need a degree of social-emotional connection with others, and continue to grow and evolve throughout the lifespan (see for example, Chappell and Orbach, 1986; Hendricks and Hendricks, 1986; Coleman and Bond, 1990). There is a corresponding view amongst a number of media analysts that television plays an important role in the socialisation and enculturation processes, and many argue that television is a powerful influence in the development of self. Gerbner et al (1986), for example, write that TV is ‘the primary source of socialisation (as it) cultivates our predispositions’ (p. 18), and Hartley (1992) considers TV to have a ‘bardic’ function.
in the telling of our cultural stories (p.11). Our ‘cultural stories’ are retold and embellished to elicit emotional responses from audiences encouraged to empathise with characters who convincingly dramatise our fantasies, fears and experiences. An emotional connection is manufactured as our lives are projected on the screen – a roller coaster ride with the enactment and resolution of dramatic plotlines serving to ameliorate our own emotional dilemmas, and the gains and losses of fictional characters mirroring our own existential experiences.

Loss in particular is a theme that may resonate with older viewers. Loss looms large in the lives of seniors– loss of work role, income, family commitments, physical capabilities or the death of peers are factors that go hand in hand with the ageing process. Yet Coleman (1990) points to the remarkable adaptive qualities of many seniors ‘older people cope well with loss…The capacity to adjust to life’s changes does not appear to be diminished in later life but rather enhanced’ (p.90). Television may play a significant role in adapting to loss and change – Gauntlett and Hill (1999), for example, report that respondents in their study of audiences cited the positive role of television in the grieving process when a loved one passed away (p.192). Smith (1986) hypothesises that TV reduces negative life experiences by substituting others’ experiences ‘thus minimising painful private rehearsals for one’s own problems’ (p.111). Programmes repeated from previous decades may also alleviate a sense of loss in relation to social roles or youthful opportunities by providing nostalgic reminders of how things ‘used to be’, illustrating past cultural and social achievements and projecting a sense that the past is still relevant to the present. (Here world war two films come to mind or documentaries where modern families take on late historical personae and relive past eras, often illustrating how
well people coped in those days). Gauntlett and Hill (1999) observe that ‘reminiscence about the past contributes to the maintenance of self concept and self esteem in old age’ (p.206). This relates to Erikson’s (1950) concept of ‘ego integrity’, a view which sees older people as needing to feel a sense of achievement about the past in order to develop meaning and integrity in old age (ibid).

Television’s ability to depict human experience across the temporal spectrum illustrates and validates the past experiences of older viewers, but perhaps more importantly, TV also graphically illustrates the here and now. Commercial networks are keen to provide viewing experiences that resonate with targeted youthful audiences, and therefore predominantly project contemporary images and story lines using fresh-faced actors. The adaptive qualities associated with age may allow older viewers to empathise with younger characters as story lines replay universal themes of human joy and suffering. Although older viewers may see few positive peer portrayals, they nevertheless can watch the actions and concerns of protagonists in factual and fictional contexts, perhaps assuaging loss or loneliness, and encouraging a sense of social engagement. Hilt (1997) mentions Kubey’s (1981) thesis of ‘substitution’ which holds that older people will tend to substitute mass media communication for lost opportunities to interact personally with others (p.14). Similarly, Davis (1980) writes that television provides companionship and the opportunity to ‘interact’ with others ‘this video companion offers a vicarious substitute for the friends who have departed and for the social experiences which reduced mobility has lessened’ (p.44). Television’s capacity to provide representative social interaction, coupled with up to the minute reporting of events
provides not only a window on the world, but an instantly accessible panoply of ‘friends’.

- **How TV Might Impede ‘Successful Ageing’**

Conversely, onscreen ‘friends’ can be overshadowed by characters and stories that generate fear and threaten our sense of security. Gunter (1987) writes that the ‘cultural indicators’ project found discrepancies between portrayals of criminal acts against minority groups and real life events ‘while women, ethnic minorities and older people have tended to be underrepresented in peak-time television drama programmes…they tend to be overrepresented as the victims of violence on television’ (p.7). The cultural indicators paradigm considers heavy viewers to be particularly influenced by dominant TV messages – one of which is that certain groups in society are weak and vulnerable. As mentioned earlier, crime is a pervasive theme in television fiction and non-fiction stories, comprising a considerable portion of prime-time output and non-rating periods alike. Gunter (1987) for example, reports that soap operas, popular with day-time television viewers, often depict murders and violent crime, and he notes that murders occurred in soap operas even more often than ‘matters involving premarital and extramarital sex’ (p.116). A telling indictment indeed. In addition, the slow pace of soaps ensures that crimes ‘take months or even years to resolve’, ensuring ‘a relentless focus on the impact of crime’ (ibid).

In his book ‘The Culture of ‘Fear’, Glassner (1999) points to the mass media in America as the main perpetrators in a culture that encourages a distorted focus on
crime, and the propagation of unfounded fears. In regard to the nation’s elderly, he asserts that

some become so isolated, studies found, that they do not get enough exercise and their physical and mental health deteriorates. In the worst cases they actually suffer malnutrition as a consequence of media-induced fear of crime. Afraid to go out and buy groceries, they literally waste away in their home. The pattern becomes self-perpetuating; the more time elderly people spend at home, the more TV they tend to watch, and the more fearful they grow (p.45)

Glassner writes that this state of affairs is regrettable considering that people over 65 are actually about sixteen times less likely than people under twenty-five to be victims of crime. The media encourage the notion that young people ‘make sport of victimising old folks’, even though violent crime against older people has dropped 60 percent in the last twenty years in America (p.46). A misplaced fear of the world outside the confines of home may lead to mistrust of others and a distorted view of society as hostile.

Johansson (1994) considers basic trust to be an essential element in the development of self, with trust accumulating ‘as a kind of capital’ in response to interactions with others (p.273). If we consider the viewing experience as a series of ‘interactions’ with people on the screen, and as a means by which many frail aged engage in ‘onlooker behaviour’, then violent programming may colour the worldview of some viewers, even if lived reality does not mirror the hostile TV world. Writing from a ‘cultural indicators’ perspective, Gerbner et al (1986) report that a commonality of outlook, or ‘mainstreaming’ occurs in viewers which can even override lived experience. ‘Mainstreaming means that television viewing may absorb or override differences in perspectives and behaviours that stem from other social, cultural and demographic influences’ (p.31). If a number of older viewers develop a mainstream
perspective of society as ‘mean and dangerous’, then trust in others is diminished. When a climate of fear is generated, some may place their trust in authoritative figures that offer respite from danger – real estate agents promoting walled and fortified housing estates, for example, benefit from a collective impression of society as dangerous. Morgan and Signorielli (1990) observe that ‘fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated…more susceptible to deceptively simple…measures and hard-line positions…They accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities…That is the deeper problem of violence-laden television’ (p.102).

A relentless media-generated view of society that amplifies the crime rate and possibility of becoming a victim hides more pressing social issues in relation to ageing such as isolation or poverty, according to Glassner (1999). The author sees the media as providing ‘an endless cache of stories about villains and victims, stories in which real people in their real complexity and the real dangers they and the larger society face can be glimpsed only in the shadows’ (p.49). Some older people who feel afraid and vulnerable make the decision to move to retirement villages in order to feel more secure, yet this can be a simplistic solution which may exacerbate other social issues more relevant than a media-generated fear of crime. In exchange for a greater sense of security, aged enclaves can limit privacy, freedom and social integration, with some researchers accusing them of compounding negative issues in relation to ageing. Friedan (1993) reports that research has linked aged housing villages to ‘symptoms of senility…which may actually represent an escape hatch for older people who have been isolated from society’ (p.60). She mentions Jacob’s study of 5,600 village residents that found the vast majority failed to avail
themselves of organised activities, with 25 percent never leaving their homes (p.59).

Moore (1985) also mentions the many restrictions associated with aged enclaves, where, for example, often grandchildren are not welcome – she describes them as ‘hermetically sealed environments in which the whole lifespan is not represented’ (p.153).

An area of social inquiry which explores the implications for society when various age groups are segregated, is ‘age integration’ studies. Uhlenberg (2000) writes ‘we think that age segregation is neither natural nor benign. We expect that careful study will uncover a range of significant social forces that influence how much age segregation or age integration occurs’ (para. 6). Television has been accused of ignoring or stereotyping older people which in effect segregates them from younger populations. Davis and Davis (1986) see TV as failing to encourage positive cross-generational interactions, and write of the effect of negative older portrayals on the worldview of children:

> It is estimated that a typical child has watched between 10,000 and 15,000 hours of television by the time he is 16. Children draw on this mediated experience for information to acquaint themselves with the world. There is reason for concern about children’s attitudes towards older persons which goes beyond their acceptance of the negative stereotypes…Questions have been raised about…the effect of such conditioning on productive intergenerational relationships (p.52)

Karen Ross’s (2000) research report found many older viewers were aware of this damaging segregation and ‘said they would like to see more programmes which portrayed positive and beneficial relations across generations’ (section 3.5, para.2). However, with the commercial networks keen to draw the attention of economically viable viewing sectors, positive portrayals of intergenerational connections are less
than a priority as productive populations are addressed at the expense of less commercially attractive viewers.

The general focus of television on audiences of working age means that older viewers in particular have limited cultural resources from which to develop a positive self-concept. Harwood (1999) examined the role of television in identity formation and found in his research that young adults sought media portrayals that reinforced their sense of belonging to a group, strengthening emotional and social ties with peers. Harwood’s research was based on ‘social identity theory’, which looks at how individual self concept is related to membership of a particular group, and how individuals view media messages which positively portray “in-group” members. It has been suggested that we receive self-esteem from favourably comparing our in-groups with relevant out-groups. For example, Harwood (1999) writes that young people may gain self-esteem through positively contrasting their youth with negative impressions of older adults (para. 8). This desire to see peer groups portrayed positively was found in all age groups, with both older and younger viewers seeking out programmes with lead characters of a similar age to themselves (para. 10). This line of research points to a strong connection between self-concept and positive cultural projections of peer groups. Harwood considers TV a prime source of cultural identity ‘television viewing choices may serve identity reinforcement functions (and)...may enhance one’s sense of belonging in a group and be important to overall self concept’ (para. 28). In this light, relegation to a media-designated “out-group” may limit opportunities to enhance self-esteem and opportunities to feel part of a valid social group.
When people are denied adequate social recognition, then a subculture can emerge as marginalised individuals become disconnected from mainstream affairs. In addition to portraying few positive cross-generational interactions and often ignoring the existence of older viewers, television has also been accused of negatively stereotyping older adults as incapable, irrelevant or overly dependent (Moore, 1985; Davis and Davis, 1986; Wober and Gunter, 1988; Friedan, 1993; Robinson, 1998). Coleman, Bond and Briggs (1990) observe that ‘labelling’ encourages the development of a subculture when members of society have specific ideas about others, leading the labelled group to ‘take the same attitude towards himself as others take towards him…Individuals construct pictures of themselves according to the general, typical and predominant views of themselves as shown by others’ (p.33). If older people picture themselves as marginal to a society structured predominantly for younger people, then the achievement of integrity and self-esteem will be compromised.

Erikson’s (1950) ‘integrity theory’ is based on the need for a positive self-assessment, and advocates accepting ‘the reality of one’s own disintegrating body (and) transcending the greedy, shallow values of one’s own society’ (Friedan, 1993, p.122). Tornstam’s (1989) ‘gerotranscendence theory’ also considers old age as a time to reject material values and refocus on the transcendent (Schroots, 1996, table 1, para. 21). However, integrity and spiritual awareness may be difficult to attain in a society dominated by popular culture, consumerism and the exaltation of youth. Coleman (1990) writes of the implications of a negative cultural assessment of old age from the perspective of Erikson’s integrity theory:

The implications for a notion like ‘integrity’ are clear. There can be no guarantee that society is organised so as to encourage older
people to develop the qualities subsumed under this term. Successful ageing depends on the satisfactory resolution of issues raised earlier in life, but this internal development is itself dependent on the opportunities and encouragement provided in the present environment (p. 80).

One dominant aspect of older people’s environment is the mass media which encourage people to hold on to the perceived benefits of youth for as long as possible, but Friedan (1993) warns of the danger when older people don’t break through to the ‘strong face of age’. Studies have found that ‘those who hold most tenaciously to certain values of their youth were the most likely candidates for psychiatric breakdown in age’ (p.119). This implies the need for a positive cultural evaluation of age, and for individual acceptance of and adaptation to the ageing process.

It may be difficult to adapt positively to the ageing process in the face of an overwhelming cultural emphasis on youth and materialism. Whilst integrity theory and gerotranscendence theory advocate the transcendence of ‘shallow’ social values and a more spiritual view of life, the adaptation process takes place in the here and now, and is grounded in social and cultural reality. It is probable that older people do not spend any more time than others on existential meditation or on contemplation of the past, (like the rest of us, they are contemplating their situation while watching the box). Writing from a Meadian perspective, Orbach and Chappell (1986) remind us that ‘the present is the locus of reality throughout life…For whose who are old, the locus of reality is still their present and its chief referent is the emergent events of the time’ (p.85). The tenets of positive or successful ageing stress the need for a connection to the here and now and social engagement with others – one outcome of which must be that older people formulate a sense of self with reference to
contemporary social perceptions of age and ascendant cultural values. The view that older people should transcend dominant social values denies the reality of all ages living in a media-dominated society projecting universal messages, many of which encourage the assessment of others according to a youthful orientation and the embracing of consumer trends.

If people are judged, and are aware they are being judged, by a media-generated benchmark based on consumerism, then older people are marginalised. Bengston et al’s (1986) research into social values across generations found that whilst the three age groups assessed (young adult, middle-aged and grandparents) surprisingly shared many values, the grandparents valued ‘consumerism’ far less than the middle-aged group (p.326). Kreitler and Kreitler (1987) also found that older people were less entranced by a consumer lifestyle, were more comfortable with self-presentation and less likely to experiment with image than younger people (p.351). This seems to suggest that many older people have ‘transcended’ the cultural directive to be obsessed with trends and self-image, but the price may be high. People who are unable or unwilling to centre their lives around consumption may be judged negatively (or simply dismissed) by a consumerist society keen to be close to Goffman’s ‘sacred centre of the common values of society’. Media-generated consumerist values are pervasive and aimed primarily at youthful audiences, indirectly implying that older people are not expected to keep up with trends. It is, perhaps, a moot point as to whether older people become less consumer focussed because of an evolving ‘wisdom’, reduced financial circumstances or because they are no longer encouraged to buy – but the core issue here is how this existence on the periphery of a consumer society affects the development of self.
Featherstone and Hepworth (1990) write of the skewed focus of a consumer society that lauds youthful attributes at the expense of acknowledging older people’s reality:

It is clear that in a society such as ours in which consumerism and material values are regarded as absolutely central, images of youthful beauty and energy will receive prominence…(but) within a consumer culture there will be little attention given to the problems of how to live in a post-active old age (p.274)

Commercial television welcomes all into its fold, yet legitimises only a segment of its audience with positive portrayals and adequate recognition. Whilst this favoured inner circle has extended to an acceptance of middle-aged viewers, with some positive and sympathetic characterisations (such as the youthfully jeans-and-sneakers-clad Seinfeld), this does little to legitimise the validity of old age.

Featherstone and Hepworth (1990) view positive middle-aged characterisations as compounding a fear of ageing as middle age is ‘distanced from old age and a sense of urgency is promoted as time is running out’ (p.269). The implied message, that old age is to be avoided at all costs (quite literally – expensive rejuvenation products feature prominently in adverts) pays little regard to the self-identity of older viewers.

Coleman (1990) writes that a strong sense of identity and self-worth is important in later life when so many roles are lost (p.117). He describes self-esteem as dependent on ‘the ascription of positive qualities to oneself, implicitly by comparison with others or…by reference to some standard’ (p.119). If that standard is based on an ability to consume, and takes as its reference points an assumption of youth, vitality and economic worth, then the self-worth of older viewers may be compromised.

With self-esteem dependent on a comparison of self to others, then how groups are portrayed in the popular media is of particular importance and warrants close evaluation.
CHAPTER FIVE

AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE AND RESEARCH STRATEGY

- **The Nature of Commercial Television in Australia**

  National free-to-air commercial television comprises channels 7, 9 and 10, all of which provide a similar mix of U.S, U.K. and Australian-produced programming. These networks are regulated primarily to ensure that a proportion of airtime is reserved for Australian productions, which should project our ‘cultural identity’.

  Since the 1960s, content regulations have been seen by governments as a way to ensure networks meet social and cultural responsibilities – to reflect our national identity and promote Australian enterprise in media productions. Cunningham and Jacka (1996) emphasise the dominant rationale behind content regulations, which from their inception, have been unequivocally cultural in nature. Economic arguments about the fostering of an industry...are secondary...While earlier positions were anxious about the sinister effects of exposure to American culture...later ones dropped this anti-American discourse in favour of a positive one about the importance of Australian content in fostering a sense of national identity, by showing ourselves to ourselves (p.64)

  There was also an understanding that the airwaves were public property leased to licensees, who in turn, were given a social contract obliging them to provide local programming, uphold community standards, and fairly represent social groups. In return, broadcasters gained exclusive control of the airwaves in a highly protected commercial environment, with above average profits and barriers to entry for competitors (Flew, 2002; Turner and Cunningham, 2002).
Most importantly, content regulations require networks to broadcast an average of 55 per cent Australian programming. Based on the Broadcasting Services Act 1992, and revised in 1999, the High Court defines an ‘Australian’ programme as one that ‘will contain Australian content if it shows aspects of life in Australia or the life, work, art, leisure or sporting activities of Australians, or if its scenes are or appear to be set in Australia, or if it focuses on social, economic or political issues concerning Australia or Australians’ (Productivity Commission Broadcast Inquiry Report, 2000, p.386). (An addendum to these guidelines was the 1998/99 ‘Blue Sky’ High Court decision, which allowed New Zealand-produced programmes to be considered as Australian content). The national broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, are not bound by these content regulations, but operate under government charters. The ABC, whilst airing a great deal of British programming, is also required to show programmes ‘that contribute to a sense of national identity…and reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community’; the SBS is directed to ‘provide multilingual and multicultural…television services that…reflect Australia’s multicultural society’ (Cunningham and Jacka, 1996, p.57).

It can be seen that whilst the commercial channels attract the lion’s share of viewers, overall, Australian free-to-air television provides a wide-ranging service, with the capacity to reflect our national diversity and aspects of the wider global community. With its mix of U.S., U.K., Australian and international programming, O’Regan (1993) considers Australian television to be outward-looking and ‘not as inwardly focused as British, U.S. and Japanese services’ (p.18). British TV networks are required to broadcast 86 per cent domestic product, and the U.S. airs almost exclusively American programming on free-to-air TV. Cunningham and Jacka
(1996) write ‘non-American material is rarely seen in quantity (in the U.S.), then usually on cable networks which receive ratings in the 0-2 per cent range’ (p. 168). The eclectic mix of programming offered here in Australia arguably helps to situate us more squarely within the global village, giving views of different cultures and ameliorating the reality of our geographical isolation. The international focus of the SBS in particular, keeps viewers in touch with the rest of the world, and British programmes (shown here predominantly on the ABC) have been hailed as ‘quality’ television, with both the BBC and commercial ITV producing programmes guided by public service ideals. The BBC, for example, is obligated to inform, educate and entertain free of state or commercial control (Cunningham and Jacka, 1996).

The American TV industry does not operate under such a public service mandate, and many media analysts have criticised U.S. television for explicit violence, overt commercialism and inadequate or stereotypical representation of minority groups (Morgan, 1990; Strinati, 1992; Glassner, 1999; Barr, 2000). There has also been criticism of aggressive exporting practices, with countries obliged to import large quantities of often poor quality programming in return for trade agreements. In ‘The West Australian’ newspaper (Oct. 4, 2003), for example, the Australian Film Commission voices concern about the possible loss of ‘the nation’s cultural identity’, with the U.S. free-trade negotiators wanting ‘an Australian commitment banning quotas on new and emerging digital television’. According to the report, Australia is the world’s most open market for U.S. programmes, with 69 per cent of imported programming coming from the U.S. (p. 42). Both Australia and Canada import many American programmes (shown here primarily on the commercial channels), and align themselves with the American culture. O’Regan (1993) considers the U.S.,
Canada and Australia as projecting an undifferentiated image to the world ‘the promise of Australia is of a latter day ‘America’. Certainly waves of Australian immigrants from Ireland, Croatia, Vietnam, Italy, England and Lebanon (to name a few) saw Australia, Canada and the U.S. as interchangeable destinations’ (p. 19). Both the Canadian and Australian media have to pay for this alignment, with America demanding a high price for television products; Canada and Australia ‘pay more and they buy more…when adjusted for population, Australia paid four times as much per half-hour Hollywood series as the U.K’. (O’Regan, 1993, p.65).

Regulators in Australia have been mindful of the need for commercial networks to make a profit in a country with a limited market, and strive to ensure a viable industry. Indeed, Barr (2000) has criticised the Australian Broadcasting Authority for moving away from traditional broadcasting regulation into insuring ‘the marketplace can achieve its objectives’ (p.230). The Productivity Commission (2000) itemises programme costs in 1997-98, reporting that commercial broadcasters spent $801 million on programming, with $553 million of this spent on Australian productions (indicating that whilst expensive, U.S. imports are much cheaper than locally produced programmes) (p.180). In regard to profit margins, Kim Dalton (2002) (Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Film Commission) reports the total revenue for commercial channels from 1990 – 2000 as $3.3 billion, with $2.8 billion advertising revenue. Expenditure was $2.5 billion, producing a surplus of $803 million across the sector (p.3). Profit margins are high, due mainly to advertising revenue – Cunningham and Jacka (1996) write that Australia allows more advertising time per hour than any other country except Canada, and that in per capita terms ‘Australia has the second highest advertising spend in the world (after the U.S.)’
Australian regulations stipulate a maximum 15 minutes of non-programme material in any specific hour during prime time, and 16 minutes at other times (Productivity Commission Broadcasting Inquiry Report, 2000, p.138).

In order to maximise audiences, advertisers often align themselves with American programming in order to attract the coveted 18-39 demographic group, seen as adventurous and willing to try new products. Stockbridge (2000) reports that younger audiences particularly enjoy U.S. films and shows, which perhaps explains why Australian producers often supplement U.S. imports with copies of American formats. Channels are able to fill Australian quotas with cheaply produced American-style programmes, showing ‘ourselves to ourselves’ from a decidedly U.S. perspective. The screening of large numbers of U.S. and U.S. style programmes perpetuates O’Regan’s view of Australia as a surrogate ‘America’, and the allure for networks of relatively cheap and popular U.S. programming makes it clear why successive governments have tried to maintain an Australian cultural identity through content quotas. Commercial networks have not fought regulation with much gusto (perhaps understandably in light of their capacity to ‘Australianise’ popular U.S. formats), recognising the desire of audiences to ‘interact’ with other Australians. Taken across the age spectrum, Australian programmes are often popular, particularly with the over 45 age group (Bonner, 2000; Turner, 2000). The content quota system can be seen as balancing the commercial viewing experience, which might otherwise be overwhelmingly dominated by cheaper U.S. imports, popular with young audiences, but less appealing to older viewers.
Rationale for Analysis of Australian-Produced Programming and Advertising in Relation to Aged Portrayals

Whilst many countries broadcast more local content than Australia, 55 per cent of total commercial programming nevertheless represents a sizeable proportion of daily airtime. These programmes often have broad appeal, enabling us to see ourselves reflected in factual and fictional stories that present political and cultural stories for our appraisal. Local productions encompass a range of genres including news and current affairs, sport, chat shows, drama, game shows, lifestyle and reality TV programmes, which combine to present a composite picture of our cultural and social concerns. One of television’s most important roles, according to O’Regan (1993), is to foster a sense of citizenship and social identity. Television projects our values, memories, customs and solidarities, creating common experiences that bind us together and show us who we are (p.81). I would add that advertising is an integral part of this projection, where fellow Australians at work, home and play display the goods and services deemed essential to our lives, providing cameos of who we are and what we do. Advertising seamlessly conjoins programme segments to produce a fluid viewing experience, with images insinuated into the entertaining or informative features of the programme. If commercials are a part of the viewing continuum, then an analysis of how groups are portrayed within Australian produced programming should include commercial ‘breaks’. The roughly 15 minutes an hour of advertising can be added to the 55 per cent local content requirement to give a wider picture of how Australians are represented. At least 80 per cent of ads must be produced here (Productivity Commission, 2000, p.391), and can be seen as supplementing TV’s role as transmitter of our national and social identity.
If we think of television as promulgating a sense of who we are and how we fit into the national image, then how various groups are portrayed presents fertile ground for sociological research. Research in the past has explored gender issues in relation to Australian TV (Linden, 1997; Brown, 1990), class issues (King and Rowe, 1990; Windschuttle, 1988), and the representation of ethnicity (Goodall et al, 1994). The portrayal of older people has received little attention here, although research in America points to a negative image of ageing on U.S. TV (Deets, 1993; Thomas and Wolfe, 1995; Osborn, 2001; Signorielli, 2001). British research also highlights areas of concern in relation to older portrayals (for example, Gunter (1995) reports that older men in advertising have more authoritative roles than females, and Gauntlett and Hill (1999) and Ross (2000) report older people see TV as focused primarily on youth). However, the overall consensus seems to be that British television represents age more fairly than the U.S. (Wober and Gunter, 1988; Gunter, 1995). Analytical data from both countries have relevance here in light of the overall mix of programming – our national identity has historically been tied to Britain and the U.S., and programmes from these countries reflect cultures interchangeable in many ways with our own (O’Regan, 1993). In regard to the commercial channels, as pointed out earlier, up to 45 per cent of total programming is from the U.S., therefore American findings have particular application here. Having said that, it is perhaps within the context of Australian TV productions that we most clearly see our reflection.

Television provides a ‘common public or civic culture for a disparate population’ (O’Regan, 1993, p.81). Our ‘reflections’ may not coincide with our own reality, but TV endeavours to provide a generic national identity and sense of community often
seen as lost in the modern world. However, Rose (1989) and Giddens (1991) have argued that in modernity, technically mediated experiences distance us from meaningful social discourse. Mindful of the often solitary nature of television viewing, and the individualised focus of advertising, producers aim to create shared experiences and a unified sense of belonging – as the jingle for ‘Australia’s Funniest Home Video Show’ enthuses “Australia, Australia…this is you!” The question of course arises, that if we cannot find ourselves represented within this celebration of national solidarity, then will we feel distanced from it in a post-modern environment already labelled by some as isolating. How, or indeed if, we are portrayed on TV has been seen as highly significant in the assessment of self (Rahtz, Sirgy and Meadow, 1989; Bazzini et al, 1997; Rahz et al, 1998, Harwood, 1999; Osborn, 2001). Significantly, Rahtz et al (1998) found that older people who are heavily reliant on television experience negative social-psychological effects such as concern for well being, low morale ‘and a greater belief that the elderly are usually not respected by society’ (para. 48). Older viewers watch more TV than other groups, and how they are portrayed may have significant relevance to how they perceive themselves and how the rest of us perceive the concept of ageing.

How we deal with the process of ageing is of particular contemporary concern, with governments and professionals advocating policies, social support strategies and lifestyles choices that encourage ‘positive’ ageing. The over 65 demographic is growing, with baby boomers adding to numbers which are projected to double by 2051 here in Australia to about 25 per cent of the population (ABS, 3201.0, 2001). To put this into perspective, in 1901 in Australia, there were 151 thousand people over 65 years, and by 2051 there will be over 6 million (ABS. 3101.0, 1999).
Seniors are attracting increasing attention from researchers and policy-makers concerned about the social and economic ramifications of an ageing society. From a media perspective, some in the U.S. and U.K. have questioned the economic rationalism of advertisers and producers who continue to focus on the youth market (Champlin, 1995; Rubel, 1995; Conaway, 1997). Other researchers have interviewed or surveyed older TV viewers to evaluate their perceptions of the media (Willis, 1995; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Ross, 2000), and some have looked at older representation in the media (Friedan, 1993; Signorielli, 2001; Harwood and Anderson, 2002). In view of the burgeoning numbers of older people in Australia, and professional exhortations to encourage positive and successful ageing, it may be wise to extend this research. This exploration of the representation of old age on Australian commercial television provides one reference point for possible future research, by positioning TV portrayals of seniors in relation to positive ageing recommendations.

- **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical paradigms pertinent to this thesis have already been articulated. To reiterate, a brief synopsis follows of perspectives considered relevant to the issue of media representation of older people. *Successful Ageing Theory* (Rowe and Kahn, 1997) promotes the view that positive outcomes in old age are achieved through the maintenance of physical and mental health, and active social engagement. An aspect of the theory is an emphasis on the positive outcomes of social connection for older people, and some media researchers have responded to this by pointing to television as a means by which older or frail aged people can engage with society (Davis, 1980; Hilt, 1997; Robinson, 1998). There is also a view amongst some
researchers that as we reach out to engage with others via the media, television becomes a significant site for projecting group and self-identity. Social Identity Theory (Abrams and Hogg, 1990) hypothesises that we seek out positive cultural representation of our peers to formulate and reinforce our self-image. Harwood (1997) extended this concept to the media, finding viewers gained self-esteem when their groups were represented positively – from this perspective, how older people are portrayed on TV will have an impact on self-identity, a fundamental element of successful ageing in relation to mental health. Portrayals of various groups on television have been analysed in relation to the Cultural Indicators Project, with Cultivation Theory based on the hypothesis that heavy viewers of television, especially those with reduced social interactions, develop a view of the world based on mediated images (Gerbner, 1990). Cultivation Analysis research has shown that older people are represented negatively on TV (particularly in the U.S.), generating concerns for the emotional well being of older viewers.

SUCCESSFUL AGEING – A discussion about successful ageing concepts, and the role TV might play in ageing positively has been covered in chapter four. For the purpose of my own research into older representation on Australian television, of particular interest is how these portrayals might impact on well being in relation to self and group image, and on the view of old age in the wider viewing public. The concept of positive ageing can be extended to encompass all age groups – we are all ageing and travelling inexorably towards elderhood. How our culture projects old age to younger people will have an impact on their view of elders, and perception of their own ageing process. Whilst accused widely of celebrating youth and fostering an ‘anti-ageing’ culture, the popular media have been credited with promoting a
view of middle-aged people as still young and viable (Blaikie, 1999; Katz, 2001/2). An increasing middle-aged presence is emerging on TV, youthfully dressed and with authoritative roles, taking the sting out of the ‘crisis’ years, and giving them renewed legitimacy. However, retirement still represents a rigid cultural divide, with those on the wrong side depicted in the popular media (according to U.S. research), as stereotypically ready for the knacker’s yard (Deets, 1993; Friedan, 1993; Elazmer et al, 1999). Positive ageing messages trumpeted by state and professional bodies will be diminished if media images negate expert prescriptions for successful ageing.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY – Tajfel (1978) defined social identity as ‘that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’. In recent research into social group portrayals on prime time U.S. television, Harwood and Anderson (2002) found that the over 65s were ‘strikingly underrepresented’. Referring to a related paradigm ‘Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory’, the authors note that media representation may influence the intergroup relations, strength and influence (or ‘vitality’) of various groups. From an individual perspective, Harwood (1999) theorises that identity is reinforced and enhanced by watching TV programmes with strong peer roles, which may be of particular importance to self-concept (para.28). According to Social Identity Theory, much of our sense of self emanates from group allegiances, and many of us are influenced by cultural assessments of our groups. Younger people are arguably more able to align themselves with a variety of groups (they may consider themselves as a mother or teacher rather than as ‘young’ for example). Those over
65 are often defined simply as ‘old’, with physical decline, loss of work role, parental role and social status presenting fewer opportunities for wider group alignments. Ironically, authoritative directives to *age successfully* reinforce the unidimensional group orientation of the over 65s – with the overwhelming cultural emphasis on retired people’s chronological status, how this group is portrayed in the media becomes significant.

CULTIVATION ANALYSIS – A quote from Morgan (1990) succinctly reveals the underlying philosophy of the Cultural Indicators perspective. ‘The symbolic environment of any culture reveals social and institutional dynamics, and because it expresses social patterns it also cultivates them’ (p.226). Cultivation Analysis research (the main focus of this paradigm), over a long period in the U.S., has found that heavy exposure to television cultivates similar values and beliefs across demographic boundaries. Cumulative exposure to TV – with heavy viewing seen as three hours a day or more – has been found to be of greater significance than the class, age, ethnicity or gender of the viewer, or the particular genre of programmes watched (Morgan and Signorielli, 1990). Significantly, international research has indicated that heavy viewers of TV display uniform attitudes when a high proportion of U.S. programming is a national feature (Morgan, 1990). Content analysis of U.S. television programmes has found consistent messages which exaggerate the level of violence in the community, reinforce gender stereotypes and underrepresent or negatively portray minority groups (Wober, 1998; Glassner, 1999; Signorielli, 2001). In relation to the representation of older people, Gerbner and Signorielli (1979) and Gerbner et al (1980) in the U.S. reported the overall message on TV was a celebration of youth, with ‘serious’ underrepresentation of elders. Signorielli’s
later (2001) findings displayed little change, with particular marginalisation in prime time (para. 18). British research from the Cultural Indicators perspective reveals a more benign view of TV – Wober (1998) writes that minorities are portrayed fairly in the U.K., with concerns related mainly to the small amount of imported U.S. programming. However, Cumberbatch et al (1999), in their examination of programmes across five channels, were concerned about the underrepresentation of older people, and a gender imbalance favouring male portrayals.

- **Research Questions and Methodology**

RESEARCH QUESTIONS – The aim of this research is to ascertain how the over 65s are acknowledged and represented on free-to-air commercial television in Australia, in a research environment dominated by U.S. findings. As the main exporter of programming throughout the world, U.S. research findings have relevance across national borders, but have particular implications here in Australia in light of the numbers of imported American programmes. U.K. research also has some relevance to the issue of older portrayals, however, in view of the limited nature of British exposure on the commercial channels, has less application to this study. My research focus is the 55 per cent of airtime committed to Australian produced programmes and the predominantly Australian produced advertisements which dissect them. An analysis of local content will add to current U.S. and U.K. research, creating a composite picture of older portrayals across the three cultural perspectives which comprise the commercial viewing experience here. This specifically Australian examination of older representation on commercial TV will be guided by three main research questions:

- RQ 1 – To what extent are the over 65s acknowledged on television?
RQ 2 – How are the over 65s portrayed in relation to role typing?

RQ 3 – Do older portrayals reflect the diversity of this group?

These questions go to the heart of concerns about social status, group identity and self-esteem which media researchers have highlighted, and findings can be aligned with gerontological concerns that older people age ‘successfully’. A predominantly qualitative approach is taken in order to answer these questions, with Rowe and Kahn’s (1997) guidelines for positive ageing informing the analysis (see chapter four). Quantitative data provide a fundamental reference point for further discussion - in addition to providing an overall tally of older people sighted, quantitative data provide specific information in relation to numbers of advertisements with older representation, numbers of ethnic older people and the male/female ratio of portrayals.

WHAT WAS ASSESSED – Programmes for analysis were chosen from across the three commercial channels, representing a variety of genres, timeframes, and well established formats. Each was either aired daily or several times a week nationally, which allowed for consecutive recording and gave an indication of popularity. All programmes were broadcast and recorded between July 1st and September 26th 2003, during cooler months when audiences are higher (Given, 2000), and genres were chosen which have been reported as having broad appeal, especially with older audiences (Davis and Davis, 1986; Turner and Cunningham, 2000). Ross (2000) illustrates the programme preferences of older viewers in her research report (3.1, p.9). Table 4 shows that news and current affairs top the list, with drama second, soaps third and lifestyle programmes fourth in popularity. When reviewing the Australian content aired at the time of my analysis, current affairs, soaps and
lifestyle were well represented, whilst Australian drama was not – in this light, I chose three out of the four most popular genres to analyse during prime time. Ten hours of lifestyle and soap opera were recorded, which I felt was a reasonable representation of these genres, and fifteen hours of current affairs programmes – a longer time period in light of their number one position on Ross’s table. I then sought to balance this time period (35 hours) with morning TV (dominated by ‘chat’ shows). With variations in programme lengths, this resulted in 38 hours – a total of 73 hours of programming and advertising. Advertisements within programmes were recorded as part of the process of viewing Australian content, with portrayals analysed concurrently.

CODING STRATEGIES – Representations were coded according to categories based on perceived age over 65; gender and ethnicity; major or minor role; signifiers such as dress, manner, dialogue; and production techniques such as settings, props and camera angles. Perceived age was based on obvious physical signs, retired status or verbalisation of age. All viewings of people seemingly over 65 were noted and counted, with roles assessed as major or minor according to factors such as time on screen, dialogue, position on camera and relationship to other characters. In relation to the assignation of negative/positive/neutral roles, a qualitative approach was taken to avoid narrow labels that might limit assessment. For example, Harwood and Anderson (2002), when looking at groups on TV utilised four variables when assessing roles – facial attractiveness, dress, personality and story function – with a four point scale ranging from 1 = negative to 4 = positive. It was decided that whilst this strategy might be helpful in the assessment of roles, this methodology was inappropriate for my own study. A judgement on ‘facial
attractiveness’, for example, is a subjective one, and may have little bearing on whether a portrayal is negative or positive. As an illustration, one segment in a ‘lifestyle’ programme depicted several ‘unattractive’, poorly dressed older men with few demonstrable ‘personality’ attributes; nevertheless, they could be seen as representing seniors positively, displaying stamina, determination and specialised expertise. The rationale for this study’s designation of each role as positive, negative or neutral is explained in more detail in chapter six.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY – Whilst a frequency count was made of sightings of older people in advertisements and programming, no attempt was made to count other age groups for actual population comparisons (see Robinson, 1998; Cumberbatch et al, 1999 for comparisons which found inadequate representation in the U.S. and U.K.). Early in the analysis it became clear that the vast majority of adverts and programme segments had no older representation, making the counting of other age groups superfluous. Clearly the overwhelming commercial TV population comprised people from 16-39, with rare views of middle-aged people, and only sporadic older portrayals. Whilst counting other age groups in advertisements or programmes with older representation may have provided some useful comparisons, this was not undertaken because many older portrayals comprised individual interviews in programme segments (on morning chat shows and current affairs programmes in particular). Rather than counting the individual ages of all characters seen during the analysis period, I chose instead to focus on a qualitative analysis of older portrayals, and relate these to the roles of younger people included in the relevant advert or programme. (See Appendix 1 for portrayal descriptions and an extended analysis of the most positive and negative portrayals).
The primary aim of this study is to provide an initial piece of research to assess how older people are portrayed on popular Australian TV channels. Consideration was given to supplementing findings with an ethnographic exploration into how older people themselves feel about the way they are portrayed. However, due to the study’s subsequent findings that indicate Australian commercial TV to be a hostile site for older people, and in light of similar findings in relation to U.S programming (which constitutes a great deal of popular programming here), I was keen instead to explore the implications for civil and human rights. In addition, with government and healthcare agencies promoting positive ageing messages, I wanted to research key questions that emerged – are these bodies aware of this cultural marginalisation and have any policies been put into place to address mediated ageism? I also wanted to discuss how negative cultural representation might impact on the well being of the most vulnerable older people in care. This extended debate into the issue of ageism on TV is continued in Part 4.

Finally, and to sum up, it should be pointed out that a wide range of Australian programming was analysed to gain an overview of portrayals, with no particular genre analysed comprehensively, and that with the study’s predominantly qualitative nature, quantitative findings are limited. However, Hansen et al (1998) write that content analysis has been criticised for its quantitative character, and ‘should be enriched by…other more qualitative approaches’ (p.91). A qualitative approach best suits the purpose of this study, which aims to achieve an in depth (if limited) view of older representation in Australian productions. This groundwork will provide one wide-ranging platform for future research, particularly ethnographic exploration which would add to the debate about how cultural marginalisation might impact on successful ageing. Wimmer and Dominick (1997) caution that ‘content analysis
alone cannot serve as a basis for making statements about the effects of content on audiences… To make such an assertion, an additional study of the viewers would be necessary’ (p.115).
CHAPTER SIX

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PROGRAMMING AND ADVERTISING ON COMMERCIAL TELEVISION – REPORT ON FINDINGS

• Quantitative Findings – Programming

During 73 hours of Australian programming on commercial TV, 116 people seemingly over 65 were noted, with an additional 2 group scenes comprising many older people, which made individual counting too difficult. Counting strategies were straightforward during ‘lifestyle’ and ‘current affairs’ programmes – each segment presented a new story, with any older people noted in each story counted once. Because morning ‘chat shows’ sometimes repeated the same ‘advertorials’ during each long-running programme, any older portrayals were counted each time they were aired. In each episode of the soap opera ‘Neighbours’, if the older character ‘Harold’ was a part of the story line, this was classified as one sighting. Of the 116 individual sightings, 78 were male (67.2%) and 38 female (32.8%), with the two group scenes having a fairly even mix of males and females. All representations appeared to be of Anglo-Celtic Australians, with no obvious signifiers such as accent, skin colour or other observable traits indicating ethnic variation. When divided into day time (9-11.30am) and prime time (6.30-8.30pm) viewing segments, during 38 hours of morning chat shows, 55 sightings were made of older people (38 male and 17 female) within 19 out of 20 programmes viewed. During 35 hours of prime time TV, 61 sightings were made (40 male and 21 female) in 31 out of 65 programmes. Breaking down the prime time data by genre, during 15 ‘lifestyle’ shows there were 21 representations during 10 hours of programming (plus one group scene), comprising 17 males and 4 females; 10 hours of soap opera
saw one male character in 7 out of 20 programmes; and 15 hours of ‘current affairs’ revealed 33 sightings (plus one group scene) in 16 out of 30 programmes, with 16 of these male and 17 female. Tables 1(a) and (b) illustrate these results:

**Table # 1 (a/b) – Total Individuals and Male/Female Ratios by Genre**

(a) – Morning TV (9-11.30am)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Number of Portrayals</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morning Chat</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>38 (69.0%)</td>
<td>17 (31.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) – Prime Time (6.30-8.30pm)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Number of Portrayals</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17 (81.0%)</td>
<td>4 (19.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap Opera</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7 (100%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Affairs</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>16 (48.5%)</td>
<td>17 (51.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUB TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>40 (65.6%)</td>
<td>21 (34.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL (a/b)</strong></td>
<td>73</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>78 (67.2%)</td>
<td>38 (32.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Quantitative findings – advertisements**

During 73 hours of Australian-produced programming, a total of 2,145 advertisements were counted, with 142 portraying one or more older persons, representing 6.6% of all adverts reviewed. 205 men and women seemingly over 65 were noted, 146 male (71.2%) and 59 female (28.8%), with 2 non-Anglo portrayals (0.9%). When divided into day time (9-11.30am) and prime time (6.30-8.30pm) viewing segments, during 38 hours of morning ‘chat’ shows, 147 older people were sighted in 96 out of 1006 advertisements, representing 9.5% of total advertising. During 35 hours of prime time TV, 58 older people were seen in 46 out of 1,139 advertisements (4.0% of total advertising). These data can be broken down further...
into analysis by genre: there were 17 adverts out of 342 during 10 hours of ‘lifestyle’ programmes with older representation (4.9%); 10 adverts out of 325 during 10 hours of ‘soap opera’ (3.1%); and 19 adverts out of 472 during 15 hours of ‘current affairs’ programming (4.0%). An examination of the gender of 147 roles during 96 advertisements during morning TV ‘chat shows’ revealed 106 to be male (72.1%), and 41 female (27.9%). During prime time, 58 older portrayals in 46 adverts comprised 40 males (69.0%), and 18 females (31.0%). Segmenting prime time again by genre resulted in 23 sightings of older persons during ‘lifestyle’ shows – 16 male (69.6%) and 7 female (30.4%); 12 sightings during ‘soap opera’ – 7 male (58.3%) and 5 female (41.7%); and 23 sightings during ‘current affairs’ – 17 male (73.9%) and 6 female (26.1%). Table 2 (a/b) summarises these findings:

Table # 2 (a/b) – Number of Advertisements with Older Portrayals, Number of Older People Sighted and Male/Female Ratios

(a) – Morning TV (9-11.30am)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Total Number of Adverts</th>
<th>Number of Adverts with People 65+</th>
<th>Number of Older People Sighted</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morning ‘Chat’ Shows</td>
<td>1006 [38hrs]</td>
<td>96 (9.5%)</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>106 (72.1%)</td>
<td>41 (27.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) – Prime Time (6.30-8.30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Total Number of Adverts</th>
<th>Number of Adverts with People 65+</th>
<th>Number of Older People Sighted</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>342 [10hrs]</td>
<td>17 (4.9%)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16 (69.6%)</td>
<td>7 (30.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap Opera</td>
<td>325 [10hrs]</td>
<td>10 (3.1%)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7 (58.3%)</td>
<td>5 (41.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curr. Affairs</td>
<td>472 [15hrs]</td>
<td>19 (4.0%)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17 (74.0%)</td>
<td>6 (26.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUB TOTAL TOTAL (a/b)</td>
<td>1,139 2,145</td>
<td>46 (4.0%)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>40 (69.0%)</td>
<td>18 (31.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (a/b)</td>
<td></td>
<td>142 (6.6%)</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>146(71.2%)</td>
<td>59 (28.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **Qualitative Analysis**

A qualitative assessment of findings is organised around each programme genre reviewed, and fore-grounded by a brief analysis of programme formats and advertising to provide an overview of the viewing experience. Older roles noted within each genre were assessed with positive ageing ideals in mind, and judged as positive when older characters engaged naturally with other age groups and displayed attributes such as good health, physical fitness and mental competence.

As mentioned earlier, Rowe and Kahn (1997) outline the main aspects of successful ageing as low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life. Most significantly, the researchers emphasise the importance of combining high physical and mental functioning with social engagement. The overriding message is that if people can maintain physical and mental health whilst actively forging ties with the wider community, then the ageing process will be a positive one. Government agencies and health care givers promote this viewpoint through policy-making and community education projects – the task of this qualitative analysis is to find if the popular TV channels support these guidelines. Roles judged as being counter to these guidelines were assessed as negative – portrayals of older people that emphasised death and decline, portrayed frailty, incompetence, senility or other negative stereotypes clearly negate these messages. Whilst the analysis of positive or negative portrayals is open to interpretation, Rowe and Kahn’s assessment of successful ageing provided the guidelines for this particular analysis. Neutral roles were often very brief, or more rarely, displayed both negative and positive elements making a specific judgement difficult. During this chapter, roles are referred to in conjunction with a reference number to allow the reader to refer to the ‘List of
Portrayals and Evaluation Rationale’ for a more detailed appraisal. In addition, p#1; p#19; p#38; a#34; a#23; a#12 are extended analyses of the most positive and negative portrayals during the analysis period (Appendix 1)

MORNING TV

‘Chat’ Shows – ‘Good Morning Australia’ / Channel 10 / 9-11.30am Monday to Friday and ‘Mornings With Kerri-Anne’ / Channel 9 / 9.30-11am Monday to Friday.

- Programming : 55 older people sighted (19 after discounting for repetitions)
- Advertising : 96 with older representation (18 after discounting for repetition). 38 hours of programming time reviewed.

These long-running ‘chat shows’ dominate the morning time slot with similar ‘infotainment’ formats, and are aimed at a wide adult audience. Programme segments noted during the study included discussions about children and teenagers’ issues, numerology, astrology, up-coming sports events and book, film, c.d. and show promotions. In-programme ‘advertorials’ promoted household equipment, mobile phones, and computers and featured older people in promotions for the ‘abswing’ gym equipment and for ‘magnetic therapy’ products. Older people were also noted in several media personality interviews which constituted the majority of older representations. The overall image gained of older people during programming was a positive one, although this was not matched by adequate representation. For example, stories about baldness and the depiction of women in magazines presented opportunities for the inclusion of older people, but centred on younger people’s concerns. Advertising ‘breaks’ presented commercials for items such as cars, household goods, children’s needs, telephone services and groceries. Older people were noted in a fairly diverse range of adverts promoting products such as insurance, dishwashing detergent, a children’s puzzle and funeral services, although the overall image of old age was a negative one. In total, 9.5 per cent of
adverts featured older characters, with advertisers acknowledging older viewers most often during this genre. This level of acknowledgement can be aligned with ozTam audience statistics for ‘Good Morning Australia’ (Appendix 2) which show the over 65s to be a large viewing demographic. However, it can be seen that very few people across all age groups are watching morning TV when figures are compared with prime time TV audiences.

- **Programme portrayals**

After discounting for ‘advertorial’ repetitions, 17 segments featured 22 older people, with 12 of these presenting positive images of the aged, one negative and 4 neutral. The 12 segments with positive representations depicted 13 people – 10 male and 3 female, with all projecting a capable and competent view of old age. Most of these characters appeared to be in their mid-late 60s, representing the ‘young’ old, although notable exceptions were an interview with Val Jellay (p#7), film promotions for Charles Tingwell, who we are told is 80 years old (p#4/5), and a brief image of Sean Connery who looked to be in his 70s (p#6). Additional positive representations comprised several other personality interviews (p#2/3/8), a brief view of a car enthusiast (p#9), a blood donor (p#11), a woman promoting a charity (p#10) and an authoritative Tony Barber extolling the virtues of magnetic therapy under-blankets (p#12). The ‘abswing’ advertorials were often repeated, and sometimes featured a man and woman in their late 60s, who actively demonstrated the gym equipment in two variations of the segment. This was a positive view of fit and active older people, and whilst somewhat marred by the host’s patronising tone at times, these portrayals represented the most favourable images of older people during this genre analysis (p#1).
Neutral portrayals featured positive elements, but were either very brief or displayed negative characteristics which prevented a positive evaluation. Two obituaries (p#16/17) depicted positive achievements in youth, but only briefly mentioned later achievements, and for obvious reasons did not portray an aspirational view of ageing. P#15 similarly dwelt on a retired footballer’s past achievements, with no reference to later accomplishments. The fourth neutral assignation was given to an actor who was able to describe his role in an up-coming play, but whose interview was marred by the host’s demeaning comments about his age (p#14). The only negative segment noted in the analysis period was an advertorial for ‘magnetic therapy’ products, repeated quite often, and featuring five older people (p#13). These men and women declared relief from use of the product, yet one was seen leaning on a stick, and one had difficulty stuttering his lines – all were assigned a variety of ailments which were headlines across the screen as they spoke. This image of old age detracted from the generally positive representation of older people, and provided a stark contrast to the other advertorial for the ‘abswing’.

- Advertising portrayals

1006 advertisements during the analysis period revealed 96 with older representation on morning television. Discounting for repetition, 18 distinct adverts with older characters comprised 4 that had positive portrayals, 9 negative and 5 neutral. Of the 18 adverts, 7 were aimed at older viewers themselves, 5 at young viewers specifically and 6 at general audiences. Looking at the positive images, 2 were aimed generally, promoting toffees (a#2) and fast food (a#4), and featured male characters integrated naturally within a wider group. The other two positive portrayals were aimed at, and exclusively featured older people – one advert
promoted insurance and presented a vibrant group of older people (a#1), and the other promoted financial services, with a group of female lawn bowls players (a#3). Neutral roles noted in adverts comprised a spokesman for diabetes (a#18), a background male in a car advert (a#16), a workman in an advert for paint (a#17), and male and female actors impersonating famous people (a#14/15). Again, neutral designations denote brevity, or paradoxically depict both positive and negative elements – for example, whilst the spokesman for the group with diabetes was articulate and ‘in control’, the relationship between older people and chronic illness prevents a positive designation.

Turning to negative representations noted during morning television chat shows – five of the seven distinct advertisements aimed at older viewers had representations that can be judged negatively in light of positive ageing directives. Three of these were for funeral services (a# 6/7/8), one for will planning (a#5), and one for denture repairs (a#11). None of the older actors had any dialogue, and were background, helpless characters dependent on professionals and younger people to guide them and to promote the advertised service. Other negative characterisations comprised the inept tree lopper (a#9), the ignored parents (a#10), the interfering mother-in-law (a#12) and the senile old lady (a#13). Three of these four negative portrayals depicted older people in a stereotypically negative light whilst concurrently empowering young women, and the fourth (a#13) similarly, spoke to children with deference at the expense of older people’s dignity – an apparently senile and demented old lady destroys a room with a hammer; the inference, perhaps, that children would never behave that way. Several of the negative portrayals featured people who looked to be 70+, whereas most positive and neutral roles featured
actors in their 60s. In addition, positive and neutral roles were predominantly male, whereas negative portrayals had a fairly even mix of males and females.

PRIME TIME TV

‘Lifestyle’ programmes – (‘Better Homes and Gardens’ / ‘Room For Improvement’
Channel 7 / 7.30-8.30pm / Monday to Thursday
- Programming : 21 older people sighted (plus one group scene).
- Advertising : 17 adverts with older representation (11 after discounting for repetition). 10 hours of programming time reviewed.

‘Lifestyle’ programmes within the analysis period were shown 4 nights a week on channel 7, and encompassed programmes featuring home improvement ideas, garden makeovers, the improvement of homes to sell at auction, and one with a holiday destination format. Whilst sightings of older people during programming were infrequent and often brief or background appearances, two segments projected particularly positive images of older people, and no representations were judged negatively. In general terms, however, older people seem to be peripheral to the lifestyle improvement concept, with limited acknowledgement of the over 65s as home improvement or gardening aficionados. None of the media experts, advisors, workers or spokespeople were older people, although two or three commentators were middle-aged. The ‘experts’ within this genre were mainly armies of young, enthusiastic men and women who transformed the properties of families or couples – none of the people receiving help were seniors. Advertisements shown during these programmes covered a wide spectrum, encompassing household goods, food, stores, cosmetics, cars, insurance, phone services, DIY stores, sports equipment and holidays. It was noted that adverts in this genre were particularly inclined to portray older people negatively, often with older characters shown as stooges or foils for competent, more powerful young people. 7 adverts out of the 11 had negative
representations of old age, with all of these aimed at young audiences; 2 were positive portrayals and 2 neutral - the advertisements with positive and neutral representation were aimed at general audiences, with no adverts noted which were aimed specifically at older viewers. There is an irony in this negativity and lack of acknowledgment of older people when ozTAM figures reveal the over 65s to be keen viewers, particularly older women (see Appendix 2).

- **Programme portrayals**
  
  Six segments viewed in this genre depicted older people positively, and 4 segments had neutral portrayals. Of the 6 stories involving positive older representations, all except one exclusively featured older males, with the other story featuring a large group of older males and females. Two stories portrayed the over 65s in a particularly positive light (p#19/23). The first (p#19), presented the exploits of a group of retired builders who were actively utilising and passing on their combined ‘wisdom’, and p#23 featured many older passengers on a ‘rail cruise’, seen to be actively engaged with their surroundings. The other positive views of older people encompassed the brief ‘dad of the year’ contenders (p#18), prospective home-buyers (p#20/21), and a retiring gardener displaying his achievements (p#22). Neutral portrayals were more likely to feature older females, in very brief background roles – p#24 and p#26 provided fleeting glimpses of three women and a man who were incidental to the story-lines, and p#27 saw a ‘grandmother’ who told us she was ‘only providing support’ for her granddaughter who was the focus of the story. P#25 provided a brief, background view of a ‘father of the homebuyer’, again peripheral to the main characters in the segment. Of the 10 stories with older representation, only 3 presented older people as the main focus, with all other
portrayals background characters, sometimes caught on camera accidentally, and often incidental to a more youthfully focussed story line.

- **Advertising portrayals**

342 advertisements analysed revealed only 17 with older characters and 11 after discounting for repetition; 2 of these presented positive older portrayals, 7 negative and 2 neutral. Looking at the adverts with positive representation, one (a#2) has previously been mentioned, leaving one other positive image – an advert for ‘red meat’ that can arguably be analysed from either a positive or negative perspective (a#19). However, whilst quite obviously a ‘reverse stereotype’ and a comedic representation, I chose to see this as a positive portrayal of fit, active older people who are ‘in control’. Negative portrayals included 3 already mentioned previously (a#9/10/12), leaving 4 for assessment. One of these was a particularly ageist portrayal of an incompetent used car buyer (a#23), 2 featured demanding and ‘fussy’ parents (a# 20/22), and the last an ‘out of touch’ record collector (a#21). Neutral portrayals included one seen before (a#15), and a brief image of an older man from Mexico (a# 24). The overall image gained of older people during advertisements in this genre was a negative one, with a range of ageist stereotypes enabling advertisers to empower younger people with messages which place them very much at the centre of events, and ‘in control’. This observation, in tandem with an underrepresentation of older people, gives cause for concern in light of the large numbers of older people watching these programmes.
‘Soap Opera’ – (‘Neighbours / Channel 10 / 6.30-7pm / Monday to Friday and ‘Home and Away’ / Channel 7 / 7-7.30pm / Monday to Friday)
- **Programming**: 7 sightings of one character in ‘Neighbours’
- **Advertising**: 10 adverts with older representation (8 after discounting for repetition). 10 hours of programming time reviewed.

Both ‘Home and Away’ and ‘Neighbours’ aired 5 days a week for half an hour on channels 7 and 10, with both dramas primarily featuring teenage protagonists enacting confrontational interactions with peers and extended family members.

‘Home and Away’ in particular, focuses on teen concerns, with story-lines revolving around the family and school, with ‘Neighbours’ following a similar format, but one which extends at times to portray the day to day concerns of older characters. These are often parents or relatives who facilitate the raising of issues associated with teen angst, such as relationship or communication difficulties. One older character seemingly over 65 was noted, who similarly served to highlight the concerns of his teenage granddaughter who (during the analysis period), had come to live with him.

Not surprisingly, with these overwhelmingly youth-orientated story lines, advertising was almost exclusively directed at youthful audiences. Adverts included promotions for toys, cosmetics, take-away food, tertiary education and apprenticeships, with most adverts featuring the under 25s. 10 adverts were noted with older representation, revealing 8 for analysis after discounting for repetition. One was classed as a positive portrayal, 3 negative and 4 neutral - 4 were aimed at young people, 3 generally and 1 at a specific group (nurses). Perhaps understandably, no adverts were aimed at older viewers, although interestingly, ozTAM figures to hand indicate that 65+ females represent a keen audience for ‘Home and Away’ (Appendix 2).
• **Programme portrayals**

An older character, ‘Harold’ (p#28) was noted in 7 out of 10 episodes of ‘Neighbours’ during the analysis period, with his role that of grandfather to Skye – a girl of about 15 who had come to live with him because of problems with her parents. This role was assessed as a positive one, with Harold an integral part of Skye’s story, with communication problems a focal point of their relationship. Whilst Skye considered Harold to be ‘out of touch’ and unable to understand her point of view, he was seen to show concern for her welfare and to make repeated efforts to communicate. However, the focus was always on Skye’s concerns, with no attempt by the producers to incorporate Harold’s issues as an older person – his role seemed to be simply to highlight the inability of older people to understand the dynamics of growing up. For example, the focus during the 2-week viewing period centred on Harold’s concern that Skye might be taking drugs, and so he discussed this with friends, searched her bag and tried to manipulate a friendship between her and the ‘nice’ boy next door. Much of the emphasis was then on Skye’s anger at her grandfather’s lack of trust. A positive, major older role was tempered by the way his presence predominantly facilitated the airing of youth concerns.

• **Advertising portrayals**

8 distinct advertisements with older portrayals included only 1 positive representation – the character ‘Harold’ from ‘Neighbours’ urged viewers to vote for the ‘Senior of the Year’ (a#25). This particularly positive government inspired perspective on ageing was overshadowed by 3 negative representations of older people, with a#26 depicting a ‘dangerous’ older lady driver, a#27 utilising 2 dependent older characters to promote nursing recruitment, and a#28 presenting a
trenchantly ageist view of a senile older female in an advert for sweets. Four other adverts which featured older actors projected a more neutral view of old age, with a#14/15/16, as already noted elsewhere presenting brief or detached views of older people, and a# 29 depicting an older Italian man utilised as a backdrop for a liaison between a young couple in a car advertisement. Again, older people were overwhelmingly used as props to promote messages to younger viewers, and whilst the overall image of old age was not entrenched in negative stereotyping, there were few examples of commercial messages which included older people as natural and integral social members – an important observation in a genre which spoke almost exclusively to young people about cultural ‘norms’, expectations and social interaction between generations.

‘Current Affairs’ : (‘A Current Affair’/ Channel 9 / 6.30-7pm / Monday to Friday)
‘Today Tonight’ / Channel 7 / 7-7.30pm / Monday to Friday)
- Programming : 32 older people sighted (plus one group scene)
- Advertising : 19 adverts with older representation (10 after discounting for repetition). 15 hours of programming time reviewed.

These current affairs programmes, aired nightly on channels 9 and 7, present a variety of segments which feature family and relationship problems, individual difficulties with business or government bodies, and promotional ‘stories’ about products and services. Older people were noted in 21 out of 117 distinct segments, with these story lines related mainly to individuals fighting business or bureaucratic intransigence. Although fairly visible within this genre, the overall image of older people was a negative one, with seniors often portrayed as victims, incompetent, senile or dependent on younger people. This contrasted with the image projected of young or middle-aged people, who whilst often also ‘victims’, were shown as articulate, independent and often able to fight their own battles. The image of older
people in advertisements was a more positive one, although representation in 19 out of 472 adverts in total reveals unambiguous underrepresentation of this age group. Surprisingly, only one advert was aimed at older viewers within a genre which is particularly popular with the older demographic (see Appendix 2). Most adverts shown were for general items such as food, household goods and services, and stores, although many seemed to target young females with products for makeup, magazines, shampoo, skincare, hygiene products, weight loss products and the McDonald’s ‘healthy’ meal – all of which featured young women exclusively.

- **Programme portrayals**

33 older people were noted in 21 story segments, 16 of whom were males and 17 females, indicating an equal male/female ratio in stories. 19 of these portrayals were considered negative representations of old age, 8 were deemed positive and 6 neutral. Looking at positive roles, 3 segments featured males who looked to be in their late 60s in major roles – an interview with a retired ‘shark expert’ (p#29), a customer supporting his real estate agents (p#30) and an interview with a retired accountant (p#32). Other positive representations comprised one with a concerned older female who was a member of a resident’s group (p#33), a couple decrying government lack of support for supporting grandparents (p#31) and a mixed walking group with a dominant male speaker and a female commenting about council charges (p#34). Neutral portrayals encompassed a brief view of a motorist (p#48), a male in a comedic role in a story about the rising birth rate in a town (p#50) and 4 customers in a supermarket promotion (p#49). These were considered neutral portrayals due to brevity or because the positive inclusion of older people in story lines was diminished by negative overtones. Positive or neutral representations were
male-dominated and diverse, with roles which at times projected authoritative, articulate and central male figures. Conversely, female roles were more peripheral to story lines, predominantly as group members or shoppers. All of the positive portrayals were of people in their mid to late 60s.

In contrast, many of the negative portrayals noted were in stories which featured the ‘old’ old. Of the 19 older people shown in a negative light, 16 of them were over 75, with 11 of these female and 8 male. These representations can be categorised in three ways – as comedic and senile; peripheral to more ‘important’ younger people; or as powerless, dependent victims. The ‘silly and senile’ older people noted were a Queensland forest dweller (p#35), the spiritual healers and their patient (p#37), the two inventors (p#38) and a retired politician (p#47). All were ridiculed by the interviewers in stories which centred on the stated age of the characters and the incongruity of their actions – a reporting technique reserved for the over 65s. Characters who were marginal to stories which focused on younger people included the balding older woman in a story about a younger woman’s problem with her hairdresser (p#36), a brief view of 3 distant older women in a story about vitamin D deficiency (p#39), the victim of arsenic poisoning from playground equipment (p#45) and 2 background shoppers in a story about the psychological ploys used by supermarkets (p#46). Whilst the ‘baldness’ story did briefly include an older person’s perspective, this segment and the other 3 in this category centred on young people in stories which utilised older people as background props, whilst the viewer was encouraged to consider the story from a youth-orientated perspective. However, when older people had major roles in stories which focused on their concerns, most representations depicted them as dependent, frail and powerless victims. These
representations included a brief view of a confused customer (p# 40), the woman who injured herself (p#41), the woman who died after taking the wrong medication (p#42), the angry, sobbing man who was fighting the justice system (p#43) and the sobbing man who was losing his home (p#44). Most of these people had their stories told by younger people or professionals, whilst the camera focused on their frailty and pain.

- **Advertising portrayals**

472 advertisements saw 19 with older representation, which, when discounted for repetition revealed 10 for analysis. This was the only prime time genre which included advertising directed at older viewers – however, one advert aimed at this group and shown twice indicates the level of disinterest of advertisers. Of the other 9 adverts with older characters, 4 were aimed specifically at young audiences, and 5 at general audiences. Further analysis revealed 5 positive, 1 negative and 4 neutral portrayals – whilst only one service was advertised for older viewers, there did seem to be an effort on the part of advertisers to portray older people in a relatively positive light during this genre, perhaps an indication of advertisers’ awareness of the large number of older viewers. (However, 19 out of 472 adverts depicting older characters indicates only a token acknowledgement of this group). Positive representations were noted in the one advert aimed at older people for insurance (a#30), and also in the government advert to promote awareness of the pharmaceutical benefits scheme (a#31), the frozen potatoes commercial featuring an older cook (a#32), the car advert with an older mechanic (a#33) and the soymilk promotion which included older women (a#34). Neutral portrayals included the insurance and car adverts already mentioned earlier (a#15/16), a car advert with a
background older character (a#35) and an insurance advert with an older male shown briefly amongst other age groups (a#36). One negative portrayal was the insurance advertisement assessed previously (a#9). Of the 10 adverts analysed, 9 featured older males, and 1 older females.
CHAPTER SEVEN
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

• Research Questions

Acknowledgement of older viewers (RQ1)

PROGRAMMING

Older people were acknowledged most often during morning TV, perhaps reflecting a belief by producers and advertisers that many are free to watch at this time. Prime time programmes viewed during the analysis period displayed sporadic acknowledgment of older viewers, with some programmes more likely than others to present segments or story lines with older representation – Neighbours, A Current Affair, and the lifestyle programme The Great Outdoors revealed a higher level of acknowledgement than others. Recognition of older people’s concerns included current affairs stories about difficulties with bureaucracy (p#31/34/43/44), the heritage builders and train cruise passengers on lifestyle shows (p#19/23), and ‘Harold’ in Neighbours illustrating some of the issues which might concern grandparents (p#28). However, younger people were the focus of most stories and when older people’s issues were aired, they were often marginal to younger people’s concerns, or their stories were told by younger people, possibly to maintain the interest of younger viewers. It was also noted, incidentally, that none of the free-to-air channels aired any programmes aimed specifically at older viewers during the analysis period.

Qualitative UK audience research into the viewing preferences of older people would at first glance seem to obviate the need to acknowledge older viewers or
specifically address their concerns. Gauntlett and Hill (1999) report an interest in programmes aimed at younger viewers, and that many older people dislike programmes aimed exclusively at their age group (p.180/201). Similarly, Ross (2000) and Willis (1995) found many older viewers enjoyed youth-orientated quiz shows, soap opera, sports programmes and shows directed at children and teenagers (section 3.1). However, both surveys found older viewers felt sidelined by the popular media, and also sought out programmes with older lead roles such as ‘The Antiques Road Show’, ‘Only Fools and Horses’, ‘Inspector Morse’ and ‘A Touch of Frost’ (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999, p.175). Ross’s survey points to the desire of older viewers to see their peers depicted naturally amongst other age groups, within programmes aimed widely (section 3.2.1, para. 6). This desire for acknowledgement within the context of the wider community, and gravitation towards programmes with significant peer roles is perhaps explained by Harwood’s (1999) U.S. research, which found social identity gratification and enhanced self-esteem when viewers watched programmes with positive cohort representation (para. 27). This Australian research found little acknowledgement of older people as natural and integral members of society, and few examples of positive older representation, particularly in relation to older females. The imbalance of male / female roles is discussed later in the chapter under ‘diversity in representation’.

ADVERTISING

Analysis of the advertisements within 73 hours of morning and early evening TV revealed an average of 6 per cent with older representation. This level of acknowledgement was eroded by the utilisation of older characters to project a commercial message to younger people, with characterisations which often had
ageist or stereotypical elements. After discounting for repetition, 36 distinct advertisements with older representation included 20 aimed at young audiences (15-39s), and only 8 aimed specifically at older viewers. All of these 8 were shown during morning TV, with one repeated during prime time. In total, 9.5 per cent of advertising in the morning featured older people, due mainly to repetitious adverts directed at older viewers; in contrast, only 4 per cent of adverts in prime time featured older people. Relevant to this finding is Karen Ross’s (2000) U.K. survey which found older people (whilst comprising a significant percentage of morning TV viewers), preferred to watch TV in the early evening (82 per cent) as opposed to morning (8 per cent) (section 3:3.1, para. 2). A compelling argument can therefore be made that a significant section of the viewing public is underrepresented in advertisements during prime time – at 12.4 per cent of the Australian population (ABS. 3201.0, 2001), this research indicates a need for 3 times as many older portrayals to achieve a fair representation of this group.

Similar but less damning reports of underrepresentation of this group in advertising come from the U.K., with Carrigan and Szmigin (1999), for example, finding only 16 per cent of print advertisements featuring the over 50s (with a U.K. population of 25 per cent) – however, they do report that virtually all representations were positive (paras. 19/20). In the U.S. more serious underrepresentation of older people in advertising is reported widely (Ursic et al, 1986; Swayne and Greco, 1989), with Robinson (1998) more recently reporting that only 5 per cent of people seen in advertisements were over 65, leading him to comment that this ‘places the older population at a point of near non-existence in advertising’ (p.65). Having said that, the author did find that 16.2 per cent of TV adverts targeted older people, which
represented a fair percentage. In comparison, this research found that out of 2,128 advertisements in total, 61 were aimed at older people (2.8 per cent), with only 1 advert (repeated once) in 35 hours of prime time aimed at older viewers. Adverts for older people were seen overwhelmingly during morning TV and comprised messages about insurance, wills, funerals, financial services and denture repairs. A brief analysis of the corporate messages to older people in Australia indicates a presumption they are (or should be) preoccupied with getting their affairs in order, and planning for their imminent demise. They are predominantly urged to prepare for the inevitable, with information about funerals, wills and insurance dominating the messages to older viewers. Presumably older people should not be concerned about the everyday products invariably and often inexplicably associated with youth – cars, leisure activities, clothes, food, household needs and personal care products to name a few.

Role Typing in Programmes and Advertisements
With Older Representation (RQ2)

PROGRAMMING

Older representation during Australian-produced programming was more likely to feature the ‘young’ old – ‘Harold’ in Neighbours (p#28), the heritage builders in a lifestyle programme (p#19), and the media personalities on morning chat shows (p#2/3/8/12/14/15), for example, seemed to be in their mid to late 60s, with several portrayals seen as positive representations of age. People over 75 were less visible and more likely to be shown as frail and dependent, particularly on current affairs programmes. In general terms, however, the image of old age during programming was a less negative one than that generated through advertising. The ‘young’ old were at times portrayed positively – as walkers, builders, actors, fitness enthusiasts and concerned grandparents, presenting characters who were actively engaged with
society. However, they were also quite often associated with negative conceptions of ageing – the anti-social recluse (p#35), the inventors who could not be taken seriously (p#38), the shopper arriving the day before opening time (p#49), the discredited spiritual healer (p#37) and the frail ‘magnetic therapy’ users (p#13) are some examples of ageist stereotypes which portray older people as demented, inept or plagued with ill-health. The over 75s were typecast even more narrowly, with most of the few portrayals focusing on decline – 2 obituaries (p# 16/17), and several tearful and frail victims of bureaucracy (p#41/43/44) generated the predominant images of late old age.

Whilst commercial television programming in Australia presented a mixed bag of positive and negative older portrayals, there was a clear indication that older people rarely held authoritative, credible major roles, with most representations background to younger people, or dependent upon them to justify their presence. Authoritative roles included Tony Barber’s presentation of magnetic therapy products on one morning chat show (p#12), and the various actors who were encouraged to describe their achievements (p#2/3/5/7/8). However, most of the older representations were peripheral to younger people’s presence and concerns, as in most of the often brief portrayals of older people in lifestyle programmes. One example, already mentioned, was the ‘grandma’ of a young woman on a ‘shop till you drop’ excursion who indicated she was there simply for company or support for her granddaughter who was part of a large group of young female shoppers (p#27). ‘Harold’s’ role in Neighbours also seemed to be a facilitating one which served to highlight his teenage granddaughter’s angst (p#28). Similarly, many of the older people interviewed in current affairs programmes had their story told predominantly by
younger people or community members who voiced their concerns and opinions, and many were peripheral to the focus of stories, as in the vitamin D issue (p#39). The positive and often repeated image of ‘Mikey’ demonstrating the ‘abswing’ (p#1) was nevertheless dominated by more youthful and vocal presenters, demonstrators and spokespeople for the product – and the older female demonstrator was treated at times as an almost farcical addition to the group.

U.K. and U.S. research into the roles given older people on television have some correlation with these Australian findings. Harwood and Anderson (2002), in the U.S. found older people were more likely to be portrayed negatively than younger people, and Cumberbatch et al (1999) report that across all channels in the U.K., older people are particularly underrepresented in prominent roles. However, both pieces of research report some positive findings which are less evident in this analysis of Australian programming. Cumberbatch et al (1999), for example, revealed older people on U.K. television were more likely to experience positive interactions, or to be portrayed as achieving something, and more likely to interact with other age groups than young people. Harwood and Anderson (2002) report that whilst their U.S. analysis pointed to underrepresentation of older people ‘the study revealed no difference in role presence that is attributable to age, sex or ethnicity (which) contrasts with Robinson and Skill’s (1995) suggestion that older adults tend to appear in peripheral roles’ (para. 25). These findings are at variance with this analysis, which found few indications of credible major roles for older people on Australian commercial TV, infrequent examples of positive inter-generational interactions, a barely visible older female presence and no recognition of ethnic diversity.
ADVERTISING

As in programming, it was noted that most adverts with older portrayals depicted the ‘young’ old. In the few portrayals of the ‘old’ old (75 or older), the image was overwhelmingly negative – they promoted wills and funerals to their peers, for example, and were demented and senile in adverts aimed at young people. Indeed, the overarching image generated of old age was a negative one when all older roles were examined. In advertisements aimed at older people (after discounting for repetition), 8 adverts revealed 5 with negative images, with the dominant theme in relation to old age emerging as *disengagement* – the old lady arranging her will (a#5), and the sombre man in a wheelchair in a funeral advert (a#7), for example. The powerless, voiceless, embarrassed man with the broken dentures (a#11) may not have epitomised disengagement from life, but this advert, and others aimed at older viewers, ultimately presented characters disengaged from the positive, powerful roles given to younger people, and the day to day consumer items and Epicurean delights offered to this group. This alienation from ‘legitimate’ audiences is highlighted most obviously in the way old age is represented in adverts aimed at the younger demographic (15-39). Out of 20 distinct advertisements with older representation aimed at this age group, 14 had negative older characterisations, most of which served to emphasise youthful power and consequence. These portrayals were often major roles accentuating ageist stereotypes which included the interfering mother-in-law, the inept older man, and the senile and demented old woman. Positive older characters were far more likely to be seen amongst other age groups in adverts aimed at general audiences – the man briefly buying toffees (a#2), the three men extolling the virtues of McDonald’s (a#4), and the women in the soymilk advert (a#34), for example. These positive images, however, were overshadowed by
the more strident negative images of old age directed both at old people themselves, and also towards young viewers.

Robinson (1998) found a similar propensity in the U.S. for advertisements aimed at young people to have negative older representation; however, he also reports that those adverts aimed at older viewers depicted them positively (p.55-56). Overall, Robinson’s (1998) research found 93 per cent of older portrayals in adverts to be positive (p.32), creating interesting comparisons with this Australian research, where only 27.7 per cent of adverts with older people were deemed positive representations, and where 62.5 per cent aimed at older viewers were seen to have negative older portrayals. In relation to advertising aimed at younger audiences, it was noted in this study that young women in particular were empowered by contrasting negative older portrayals (Finish dishwashing detergent (a#12), QBE insurance (a#9), Campbell’s soup (a#20) for example). This positive view of authoritative young women represents a hollow feminist victory for fair representation – less celebratory are the images of older women in adverts, virtually invisible and almost invariably depicted negatively. U.S. research indicates a similar picture of older female underrepresentation and negative portrayals in the popular media (Friedan, 1993; Bazzini et al., 1997; Markson and Taylor, 2000; Signorielli, 2001). Examples of ageist older female roles in this research include the nervous, inept driver in the QBE advert (a#26), the domineering mother-law in the Finish and Campbell’s soup adverts (a#12/20), and the demented old ladies in the Skittles (a#28) and Smuzzle adverts (a#13). Older men were also shown negatively, with the funeral adverts (a#6/7/8), QBE insurance (a#9), Holden used cars (a#23), and denture repairs (a#11) adverts depicting older men as powerless and inept.
However, older males were more likely to have neutral or positive roles, which in tandem with a much higher older male profile translated into a view that older men fit more naturally into the scheme of things.

**Diversity in Representation of Older People (RQ3)**

**PROGRAMMING**

As previously mentioned, this research has found an overall ratio of 67.5 per cent older males to 32.5 per cent older females in Australian programming, a ratio that compares unfavourably with Harwood and Anderson’s (2002) study of prime time drama in the U.S. which found ‘no significant over or underrepresentation of men versus women at the extremes of the lifespan’ (para 18). This would seem to indicate the emergence of a more balanced approach to older portrayals on American TV. In the U.K., a 70% : 30% gender imbalance was recorded by Cumberbatch et al (1999) favouring older males, a similar finding to my own. However, older female roles appear to be quite diverse on U.K. television, with Ross (2001) reporting viewer satisfaction with characters such as Cilla Black, comedienne Barbara Windsor (section 3.2.3); soap opera stars Peggy Mitchell, Dot Cotton and Pauline Fowler, cooks Fanny Craddock and the Two Fat Ladies (3.4); and news presenters Julia Sommerville and Anna Ford (3.2.3). While news programmes were not assessed in this Australian analysis, Lindon (1997) has made the point that they are usually hosted in Australia by older men with ‘character’, or women under 40 who are ‘easy on the eye’ (p.15). In regard to ‘authoritative’ older female representations in this study, only one character was noted - in an interview on a morning chat show. The actress Val Jellay described her achievements on stage and screen, incidentally describing how she had been ‘killed off’ in the soap opera
Neighbours, and voicing her dissatisfaction about the lack of older female roles available on Australian television. Other roles accorded older women in this research were often brief, minor appearances, shown as background shoppers or part of a group, for example. When in significant roles, they were often portrayed as frail, dependent victims. Male roles displayed a greater diversity, with several describing or displaying achievements - as inventors, builders, a successful gardener, footballer, politician, and shark expert, for example.

It is interesting to speculate as to why retired men are accorded a level of authority and ability not bestowed upon their female counterparts, noted in both programming and advertising. Markson and Taylor (2000) found older women to be peripheral to older men in their analysis of films, and see this as a reflection of deep-rooted cultural ideals, where ‘a woman’s essence lies in her youthfulness (as) a symbol of her procreative potential’ (p.156). Another view might be that producers and advertisers mercenarily prefer to direct their stories and products at older men, perceived to have been the main breadwinners before retirement, and therefore assumed to still control the finances. Lauren and Dozier (1999), in their U.S. analysis of female representation in prime time TV, point to the structuralist theoretical position of Gitlin and Turrow (1983) ‘who suggested that the business imperatives of television overwhelm most creative influences….For the most part, the creative community bows to the greater power of their employers, who, in turn, are driven by market forces’ (para. 5). Advertisers and producers may consider older women to be physically unattractive, but are more likely to consider them a financially unattractive group with even less ‘value’ than older men. Whatever the reason, older women are patently ignored by programmers and advertisers, with the
obvious consequence that ethnically diverse older women are perhaps the most alienated group on TV. Harwood and Anderson (2002) quote Jackson (1985), who named the problems experienced by multiply disadvantaged groups as “double jeopardy”.

All of the older men and women noted in the analysis period were seemingly of Anglo-Celtic ethnicity. Whilst it is difficult to determine ethnic background in a diversely multi-cultural society, there were no obvious traits such as skin colour or eye shape, or any variation in accent which would indicate any racial or ethnic diversity. Several researchers report a widespread failure of TV producers to portray ethnic diversity (see Goodall et al, 1994; Riggs, 1998 for example). More recent findings in the U.S. indicate a trend for improvement in ethnic representation, including older ethnic portrayals. Signorielli (2001) found that TV in the U.S. provides ‘a rather good estimate of the racial composition of the United States’, and whilst most ethnic characterisations were young ‘2.5% of the minority characterisations were elderly, compared to 3.3% of the white characters’ (para. 11). Harwood and Anderson (2002) report similar findings in their analysis of prime time TV, noting ‘the current data provide no evidence of differential presence of various ethnic categories across the lifespan’ (para. 19). They also found that Black and Asian characters did not differ in the TV population from their actual presence in the U.S. population (para. 17). Whilst ‘hybridisation’ has occurred in Australia with intermarriage among different cultures, as a multicultural society with a Black indigenous population and close ties to Asia, the population remains ethnically diverse – a fact not recognised by commercial television.
ADVERTISING

Ethnic diversity was almost as elusive during advertising as during programming. Two older people seen of non-Anglo ethnicity were Italian and Mexican men representing their own countries, with no multicultural or indigenous portrayals of older Australians noted. O’Regan and Cunningham (2000) point out that Australia is the largest immigrant nation after Israel, with 40 per cent of the population born overseas or having at least one parent born overseas, and a third of households in Sydney and Melbourne speaking a language other than English in the home (p.202). Given the cultural diversity of Australia, it would seem appropriate (and economically prudent) to portray national identity realistically on commercial television. However, this medium steadfastly portrays a white Anglo-Australian image to the nation and the rest of the world, a policy which might be explained by Goodall et al’s (1994) view that this is the ‘sentimental core’ of Australian social life. The authors quote a TV producer as defending this racial idealisation, “It is not that Australian families are like that, but that everyone wants to be like that (and) purchase the product to seek a share of the lifestyle, power and security the images hold out” (p.74). This view reflects O’Regan’s (1999) observation that multicultural critique defines ‘Australian’ as Anglo-Celtic, which is ‘the point of reference for the ‘melting pot’” (p.115). There may be a presumption within media circles that the Anglo-Celtic culture and identity represents a Utopian ideal. However, O’Regan and Cunningham (2000) write that whilst many immigrants enjoy mainstream media, many also feel alienated by it. The authors point out that ethnic minorities report ‘widespread dissatisfaction with…monocultural maintenance…the failure of existing television services to address ethnic minorities’ (p.203). Older people without an Anglo-Celtic background are invisible indeed within the popular media
in Australia, a situation which is mirrored in Riggs’ (1998) U.S research. The author reports serious underrepresentation of immigrant and indigenous older Americans, and interestingly, that many were ‘living the American dream’, and were unwilling to critique the culture (p.125/148).

Almost as elusive as ethnically diverse older people in this study were older females, with a startling similarity in ratios across programming and advertising which always favoured older male representation. In reality there are more older women than older men in Australia, with this discrepancy rising with age, until by age 85 there are twice as many females (ABS. 3201.0, 2001). A longer life expectancy for women suggests delayed physical decline and a more robust constitution, yet older males on average were found in this research to be portrayed as more socially visible, active and engaged – giving professional advice, climbing a tree, fixing or buying a car, for example. Women, on the other hand, were portrayed as socially invisible and often passive – taking advice about a will, displaying senile dementia or waving from a car. Whilst few older portrayals overall were positive, older men were more likely to be accredited with physical and mental competence, and shown as a much more dominant presence in the community, at odds with social reality. Underrepresentation of older women seems to be a particular feature of Western popular media culture – from a viewer’s perspective, Ross (2000), in her U.K. report to Carlton Television, found some survey respondents expressed dismay at the lack of older women on TV (section 3.2.3, para. 1). In the U.S., Harwood and Anderson (2002) cite Gerbner’s earlier (1980) research which reported that older male characters on U.S. television were far more numerous than older women and were shown as active and mature, whereas older females were portrayed as dependent
(para. 8) – observations which tally with this Australian study twenty-five years later.

The underrepresentation of social groups is not addressed in the Australian Broadcasting Authority’s code of practice for commercial television; however the authority does clearly ‘advise’ networks to portray groups fairly. The *Commercial Television Industry Advisory Notes* are ‘designed to help and encourage industry employees to understand and be responsive to community concerns about privacy and the portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, cultural diversity, women and men, and people with disabilities’ (section 1, clause 1.2.3). In relation to advertising standards, the *code of ethics* states ‘advertisements shall not portray people in a way which discriminates against or vilifies a person or section of the community on account of race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, sexual preference, religion, disability or political belief’ (appendix, section 1). Neither directives would seem to carry much weight, with the ‘advisory notes’ simply recommending the industry is receptive to public complaints, and the ‘code of ethics’ rejecting ‘discrimination’ or ‘vilification’ – concepts that are open to interpretation. This research has found manifest underrepresentation of older people, in both programming and advertising, with many representations of old age displaying ageist stereotypes. It would not be unreasonable to adjudge this as ‘discrimination’ or ‘vilification’ of older people. Failure to recognise the chronological diversity of viewers through underrepresentation, and failure to represent the diversity of older men and women through monocultural and gender-biased portrayals, points to unethical practice. In addition, the propensity of advertisers to portray older people
negatively, particularly when addressing younger viewers, points to the impotence of the ABA’s code of practice in ensuring ethical standards and fair portrayal.

- **Commercial Television’s Priority – Citizens as Consumers**

The Advisory Notes and Code of Ethics appear to have had little impact on the way retired people are portrayed and acknowledged by the commercial media in Australia. Networks make judgements of worth about citizens primarily according to their status as consumers, with valid consumers seen as those who are both youthful and gainfully employed. However, while commercial television predominantly addresses only youthful consumers, the television medium is the prime locus for all citizens to receive information and share concerns, and the goods and services promoted on commercial TV provide for the day to day needs of citizens as they go about their business. The concepts of consumerism and citizenship therefore become intertwined. O’Regan (1993) writes that television is a vehicle for civic ideology, providing common undertakings and ideas that unite populations ‘television is then in the business of fostering a sense of citizenship, social identities and creating and representing a common cultural and political core’ (p.81). If we couple this concept with the more pragmatic purpose of commercial TV – to bind populations together as like-minded consumers – then those not addressed become doubly marginalised, disenfranchised from both the cultural arena and marketplace.

It must be said that the media’s need to treat us as consumers is seen as ‘undemocratic’ by some, including Chadwick (1998, para. 28). Chadwick considers the overwhelmingly consumerist ethos of the popular media to be harmful,
detracting from the primary role of the media as ‘hosts of the civic conversation’ (ibid). Interestingly, Stacey and Osbourne (1998) reply to Chadwick’s article from the perspective of older TV viewers, pointing out that healthy civic conversation is ‘almost totally missing from media content with reference to older people’ (para. 5). They remind us that older people are underrepresented and often depicted as incompetent, and add ‘this age discrimination renders a large section of the adult population largely invisible and represents a symbolic devaluing (my italics) and belittlement of older people’ (para. 2). I would add to this report that a lack of ‘civic conversation’ in regard to older viewers compounds the undemocratic nature of television which fails to address older viewers either as citizens or as consumers.

There is irony in the observation that in order to attain a degree of recognition within the mediated ‘civic conversation’ older people must first be recognised as valid consumers. This recognition would grant older people a degree of status as viable citizens within the flawed democratic arena of the commercial media.

My analysis of Australian content on commercial television has clearly demonstrated that older people are rarely addressed as, or considered to be ‘consumers’, a practice that results in severely limited and often negative representation in advertisements, which is often echoed in programming. As reported, advertisements directed at older viewers during the analysis period were all for ‘peace of mind’ services which in my view compounds the sense of older people as separate from mainstream audiences. There is an implication that seniors are not viable members of the ‘consumer society’, and should primarily concern themselves with putting their affairs in order and planning for their demise. Whilst the adverts directed at older viewers were all for valid and legitimate products – funerals, wills, financial planning, insurance and
denture repairs – these were not balanced by advertisements for products and services which constitute the stuff of everyday life, or for the more indulgent pleasures offered to younger people. In tandem with this, it was also noted that in advertisements directed at young audiences, older characters were often depicted as inept or comedic characters, effectively divorcing older participants and viewers from the consumerist message. These strategies create an overall sense of disengagement from society – however, the notion of ‘disengagement’ as a theoretical concept has lost favour in contemporary times. The idea that retired people naturally separate themselves from society in preparation for death, and for mutual benefit, has been replaced by the concept of engagement and active ‘successful’ ageing.

Central to Rowe and Kahn’s (1997) guidelines for positive ageing is the now widely held belief that ageing people should be actively engaged in maintaining mental and physical health and social interaction. According to the authors, successful ageing is reliant on productive activity, varied interpersonal relations, high cognitive and physical functioning and avoidance of disease and disability (para. 3). A review of this analysis of Australian content indicates little support from TV advertisers and producers in the portrayal of active, capable and socially integrated older people; indeed, many portrayals emphasise decline and there is an overriding ethos of social disengagement. Whilst it should be acknowledged that ‘engagement’ is a subjective term and that some older people are unwilling or unable to actively engage with society along the lines recommended by Rowe and Kahn, there is much evidence that social integration and interaction are important elements during the ageing process, in particular, cross-generational interaction (Ulenberg, 2000; Riley and
Riley, 2000). Uhlenberg (2000) writes that one benefit of integrating various age groups is ‘the potential for increased mutual understanding…ageist stereotypes…are nurtured in an environment of high segregation…When social institutions are structured to encourage segregation, the status quo may seem natural and comfortable to many of those involved’ (Paras. 7/18). Australian commercial TV is an institution that effectively segregates older people from the cultural arena and virtual marketplace, a policy that may have far-reaching implications for positive ageing outcomes.

Allied to positive ageing are the issues of inter-group dynamics, group affiliation and self-esteem. Whilst some older people have indicated little desire for programmes and products aimed specifically at them, there seems to be an overwhelming desire for widespread positive inter-generational portrayals across the media, and dismay at the lack of acknowledgement of older people from advertisers (Deets, 1993; Willis, 1995; Riggs, 1998; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999, Ross, 2000). The dominance of young people within the popular media and their status as viable citizens and consumers, confers a level of social acceptance and status not granted to older people, and enables them to ‘interact’ with peers, have role models and gain self-esteem through observing positive portrayals of group members. Writing from a Social Identity Theory (SIT) perspective, Harwood (1999) notes ‘viewing younger characters on TV may serve to reinforce notions that younger people are powerful in society, that they are valued by an important societal institution, i.e., the media’ (para.12). A lack of visibility in the popular media impedes opportunities for older people to experience group allegiance, and the depiction of older people as comedic and irrelevant alongside celebratory portrayals of younger people, projects a sense
that age and youth are antithetical. In this light, Carrigan and Szmigin’s (1999) comment that ‘how older people are featured in advertising has implications for the psychological well being of such people’ has deep significance (para.24)

As previously noted, many U.S. commentators have pointed to the buying power of older people and questioned the reasoning of advertisers who ignore or negatively stereotype older viewers. Thomas and Wolfe (1995), for example, write ‘those aged 55 to 64 have the highest per capita spending…householders aged 65 to 74 have a high percentage of income that is discretionary’ (para. 12). Similarly, Conaway (1997) informs the reader ‘not only do these consumers watch the most television, they also control 77% of the nation’s assets’ (para. 2). It seems highly likely that a broader recognition of the buying power of older people would shift the emphasis away from youth and result in positive portrayals of older people across advertising and programming. However, there is a view this increased ‘status’ as valuable consumers may not contribute significantly towards more positive ageing in relation to life satisfaction. Whilst older viewers are demonstrably watching a great deal of advertising, a higher recognition of them as ‘consumers’ may encourage a more materialistic view of life. Some researchers report findings which indicate that a materialistic focus often fails to generate a sense of happiness and contentment. Lunt and Livingstone (1992) write that whilst ‘the material conditions of consumer society constitute the context within which people work out their identities’, their research found little evidence of a correlation between material acquisition and life satisfaction (p.24). In a similar vein, Sirgy et al (1998) concluded that heavy viewers of television were dissatisfied with their quality of life, and that a materialistic consumer orientation created dissatisfaction.
Although consumerism has been seen by many as incompatible with ‘true happiness’, there is a concurrent view that positive cultural representation in the popular media generates acceptance, respect and individual self-esteem (Lunt and Livingstone, 1992; Gerbner, 1999; Harwood, 1999; Harwood and Anderson, 2002). If an acceptance of older viewers as consumers translates into more positive representation across the popular media, then philosophical debates about the effects of consumerism on ‘happiness’ must also acknowledge the possibility of complex and wide-ranging media effects in relation to self-esteem and the representation of groups. Research described here has demonstrated a generally more conspicuous and benign picture of older representation on TV in the U.S. and U.K., perhaps due to the more lucrative numbers of older people in these countries, and a higher profile of the problem of ageism in the media. The over 65s in the U.S. comprise 35 million people (12.4 per cent) which is a sizeable market in numerical terms, and in the U.K. 10.8 million people (18 per cent) must also have a significant market appeal. In contrast, whilst Australia has a similar percentage of over 65s to the U.S., 2.4 million older people appear to hold little interest to marketers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; U.K. Census, 2001; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Advertisers in Australia appear to be profoundly uninterested in older viewers and flagrantly solicit young people’s attention almost exclusively, with many unambiguously ageist messages in this analysis of Australian programming and advertising defying the more mixed finding of others in the U.S. and U.K. It seems that whilst U.S. and (to a lesser extent) U.K. research indicates underrepresentation of older people, and a decided emphasis on the ‘youth’ culture, an overriding impression is gained that older people enjoy a more conspicuous, and
on balance, more positive presence on TV in the U.S. and U.K than in Australia, and that older viewers are addressed more often as *cogent fellow consumers*. There is a view that the addressing of individuals as ‘consumers’ disempowers people, for example Asa Berger (1991) writes ‘one thing advertising does is divert people’s attention from social and political concerns’ (p.44). And Katz (2001/2), from the perspective of older people, points to marketing strategies which are beginning to ‘define, segment and empower a new consumer-orientated older population’, but cautions that unrealistically youthful and active older portrayals on TV contribute to an ‘anti-ageing’ ethos, where the realities of ageing are hidden (para. 15). Some would argue that these perspectives, and those mentioned earlier that question whether materialism brings happiness, diminish the argument for a higher older profile in advertising. However, the reality remains that in capitalist societies individuals are frequently addressed and evaluated in consumerist terms. Those who are not, effectively become marginalised from mainstream concerns and sensibilities.

In light of this study’s findings that the marginalisation of older people from the wider ‘family’ of consumers promotes an ethos of ‘disengagement’, I would challenge the notion that ‘consumerisation’ would disempower older people. Indeed, commercial television’s non-acceptance of older people as consumers, and resultant focus on youth has social equity implications. The empowerment of young people and alienation of seniors divides the lifespan into viable and non-viable sectors, and encourages a culture of anti-ageing arguably more profoundly than one which might depict older people as unrealistically youthful consumers. Katz’s (2001/2) critique of marketers who seek to ‘consumerise’ older people has little
relevance in Australia where older people are rarely addressed as consumers, and where the ramifications of this translate into a sense that older people are irrelevant and marginal social members. In my analysis, even when a higher profile on morning TV is taken into account, this fails to project a sense that older people are valid consumers. Advertising during 38 hours revealed 59 out of 1,006 aimed at older viewers, all of which were for ‘peace of mind’ services - no tangible products were aimed at this group in the analysis period (although in-programme promotions on morning chat shows utilised older people to sell the ‘abswing’ and ‘magnetic therapy’ products). That older viewers are virtually not addressed in prime time advertising and not offered tangible, life enhancing products projects a sense they are not only non-consumers, but by association, are marginal and irrelevant social members.

At the heart of concerns highlighted by this Australian analysis is the strong indication that when advertisers do not consider the over 65s as viable consumers, this translates into limited representation and negative stereotyping which extends into programming, thus diminishing older people’s status as ‘virtual citizens’. There also appears to be a formulated strategy to ensure that younger audiences are kept ‘on-side’ during programmes, which often projects a sense that they are the most valued citizens. In contrast, older people are often negatively stereotyped, used for ‘entertainment’, or to promote youth issues in both programming and advertising – with older people used as ‘entertainment’ most often in advertisements aimed at younger viewers. Stockbridge (2000) writes that the 16-39 year-old age group has become the Holy Grail of commercial television, and he points out that channel 10 has the smallest audience share, but is also the most profitable commercial network
because it specifically targets the lucrative youth demographic (p. 192). Channels 9 and 7 are increasingly following suit, and trying to win greater approval from younger people. Groves (2003) writes in ‘Variety’ ‘Seven is less interested in olderskewing...dramas as this web rejigs its schedule and marketing to boost viewers in the 25-54 demo, especially 25-39’ (pA15). The three popular commercial channels can be seen as taking advantage of the tribal instincts of youth – to align themselves with peers, follow trends and experiment with mutually attractive lifestyle options. In the process a ‘virtual citizenry’ is created which precludes the membership of less consumer-orientated social groups, particularly retired people who are seen as irrelevant to the capitalist system.

Those deemed superfluous to the system are not only excluded from its concerns and activities, but may also be judged as unworthy. Perhaps the most fundamental precursor for ‘positive ageing’ is social acceptance – in order to engage with society, members must feel they are valued, respected and accorded the same rights as other citizens. If we accept that the popular media are instrumental in the way we perceive older people, and if the image projected is often an ageist one, then this must have an impact on older people’s sense of social inclusion. Whilst this thesis has analysed possible links between self-esteem, well being and media portrayals, it can be argued that Rowe and Kahn’s (1997) emphasis on the primary importance of physical activity and social involvement – which gerontologists and governments promote as essential – are also undermined by overriding mediated messages which say in essence “why bother?” In Part Four I explore the recognition and response of governments and seniors’ organisations to the issue of mediated ageism, looking in particular at how various government bodies in Australia have acknowledged the
importance of fair portrayal of older people, and if links are made between healthy, positive ageing and cultural representation. If the popular media are hijacking authoritative strategies to encourage positive ageing, then how governments and professional advocates are responding is worthy of assessment.
CHAPTER EIGHT

NEGATIVE MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF OLDER PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA: REPORT ON GOVERNMENT RECOGNITION AND RESPONSE

The United Nations called on states to take an holistic approach to ageing during the ‘International Year of Older Persons’ in 1999 to provide for the physical, emotional and cultural needs of ageing populations. Utilising the theme ‘Towards a Society for All Ages’, the year was celebrated ‘in recognition of humanity’s demographic coming of age and the promise it holds for maturing attitudes and capabilities in social, economic, cultural and spiritual undertakings, not least for global peace and development in the next century’ (‘International Year of Older Persons’, 1999). The General Assembly declared its appreciation for the contribution that older people make to their societies, and an awareness of the scientific research that has disproved many stereotypes associated with ageing, and it called on states to provide opportunities for capable older persons to ‘participate in and contribute to the ongoing activities of society’ (‘United Nations Principles for Older Persons’, 1999, p.2). Five core principles were outlined which were seen as basic rights to ensure positive ageing – independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and dignity. Elements of these which might relate to this thesis include the rights of older people to remain integrated in society, to have access to the cultural and recreational resources of society, and the right of older people to be ‘treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status, and be valued independently of their economic contribution’ (p.4).
**Federal Concerns**

In response to the U.N.’s call for a comprehensive and wide-ranging approach to ageing populations, the Parliamentary Advisor to the Australian Delegation addressed the U.N General Assembly’s 55th session. Addressing the chairperson, Colin Hollis M.P. listed Australia’s objectives for the International Year which were

- To encourage mutual responsibility between the community and older people
- To recognise the significant contribution of older people to communities and families
- To build partnerships involving government, business and the community to better meet the needs of older people
- To improve understanding among the young of older people and their contribution to Australia; and
- To promote greater responsibility by families and individuals in planning for, and responding to, the needs of people as they age (‘Australian Mission to the United Nations’, para. 4).

It was recognised that all levels of government needed to be involved in these objectives in a partnership approach, to ensure that outcomes were sustained into the future, and in order to ‘achieve longer-term cultural change’ (para.6). In addition, Mr. Hollis reported that a ‘strategy to promote business and community partnerships was also launched to further strengthen the linkages across society. One important part of this worked to address stereotyped images of older women and to promote a positive and celebratory community approach’ (para.7).

Following this declaration of objectives for the International Year of Older Persons, the federal government formulated a forward-looking strategy which sought to deal
comprehensively with positive ageing issues, and to provide information for the states to devise strategic plans for their own ageing populations. Commissioned by the federal minister for aged care, Bronwyn Bishop, the ‘National Strategy for an Ageing Australia’ (2000) comprised several discussion papers that dealt with independence and self-provision, healthy ageing, world class care – and apropos this study – a report titled ‘Attitude, Lifestyle and Community Support’. The final discussion paper in the series, this report lists as its aims

- To examine attitudes to older people and ageing and inform the community about existing attitudes
- Seek to commence to change community attitudes to ageing and older people
- Give examples of positive ageing and associated benefits to individuals and the community
- Explore possible options to address the emerging issues as our society ages

(Section 1.1, p.2).

There is also acknowledgement that older people have a great deal to offer, but have few opportunities to utilise their capabilities. ‘On the one hand, older people are considered to be sources of valuable knowledge, experience and support. On the other hand, they are considered to be invisible within the community. This seems to be a result of an interaction between changes in family and social patterns and modern media styles and activity’ (Section 2.3, p.6).

It is important at this point to reproduce section 2.4 of the Strategy in order to clarify the federal government’s views on the role of the media in the formation of attitudes towards seniors

2.4 Media Influences – Older people feel very strongly about the way they
are portrayed and perceived in many sections of the Australian Community. They hold particular concerns about the use of unrealistic stereotypes in the media and the flow-on effect of this in promoting negative attitudes towards older people. In many cases, older people are portrayed in stereotypical or negative ways, and are frequently shown to be frail, defenseless victims. This can lead to the formation of inaccurate and irrelevant attitudes. In addition, these negative images portrayed by the media can undermine older people’s self-confidence and the confidence that younger people hold in them.

Numerous analyses over the last twenty years in the United States of America have documented that older characters are present on television in smaller numbers than they are in the population as a whole. Despite older adults’ growing numbers this situation does not appear to have improved in recent years. While there is no similar research in Australia, it is doubtful that the situation is much different in Australia as the majority of drama programmes on Australian commercial television originate in America. In view of its pre-eminent role in the distribution of information and opinion formulation in society, the media has a responsibility for accurately reflecting issues associated with older people and ageing. In terms of editorial content in news bulletins and current affairs coverage, it is important for reporters to be aware of these issues. This depends to a degree on the priorities of the medium, so a commitment from editors and advertisers is vital. Programming decisions are important – documentaries, feature stories and drama programmes which heighten an appreciation of older people, are amongst the most powerful educative tools. The media (particularly television and radio) are also in a powerful position to educate the public about ageing, through community
service announcements – often in partnership with community groups and government agencies…The 1999 International Year of Older Persons addressed this issue by producing several television advertisements which portray older people as having initiative and experience which they are willing to share with the community as a whole…Of course, it has to be noted that there are realistic limits on what can be expected from commercial stations in discharging their community obligations to the many interest groups in the community. There is no requirement that broadcasters provide any amount of airtime for community service announcements and if they do it is up to them to determine which groups or community interests they will support in this way. There is nothing to stop shareholders and community groups from lobbying and developing persuasive cases for their interests to be presented by way of community service announcements (p.6-8).

There are some very clear messages here – not least the call for media reporters to be aware of the issue, and that ‘a commitment from editors and advertisers is vital’. The call for groups to lobby for community service announcements also has some merit - however, in light of my research findings, echoed here in the Strategy, I would argue that distinct, infrequent and event-focussed messages, aligned with governments or organisations, might serve to create a sense that older people are a charitable concern, segregated from the mainstream. The natural integration of older people into programming and advertising would be more empowering than novelty appearances, and would break down established barriers created by the dominant youth culture. Perhaps in recognition of the need for more integrated and widespread representation of older people, the concerns raised in the National Strategy inspired
the initiation of a media awards event, administered in partnership with the organisation ‘Older People Speak Out’. A media release at the time read in part:

Building on the momentum of the 1999 International Year of Older persons to promote positive and realistic perceptions of older people and ageing is one of the government’s longer term aims…The Commonwealth Media and Advertising Awards will recognise excellence in portraying older Australians and their issues as they really are, with as much diversity and achievement as the rest of the community (‘National Media and Advertising Awards for Excellence in Portrayal of Older Australians’, 2000)

Prizes were given for positive portrayals in a range of categories, including daily suburban and regional newspapers, magazines, radio, TV programming and advertising.

It can be seen by this initiative and the forgoing statements by Bronwyn Bishop, that the federal government, in its response to the International Year of Older Persons, has acknowledged the role of the media in the well being of older people. The ‘National Strategy for an Ageing Australia’ provided the main impetus for the states to formulate long-term policies – however, before examining state responses it should be noted that two other reports at the time might have been influential in the development of state strategies to promote positive ageing. The ‘Commonwealth, State and Territory Strategy on Health and Ageing’ (2000) focuses primarily on the physical welfare of aged Australians, and was developed by the Healthy Ageing Taskforce comprising senior officials from all the states and territories. Whilst particularly concerned with health issues, acknowledgement is given to the complexity of the term ‘healthy ageing’, and the concomitant need to break down stereotypes, promote emotional well being and encourage positive perceptions of ageing. The report also points out that older people should be seen as an important market force ‘they have particular needs and often make significant contributions to
the economy through their combined expenditure as consumers’ – thus linking health concerns with older people’s status as consumers. An ‘area for action’ in the Strategy on Health and Ageing is the establishment of plans ‘to highlight the contribution of older people, and the role of groups such as the media and advertisers in shaping positive attitudes to ageing’ (p.15).

The other key report that might have influenced state responses to the International Year of Older Persons was a review of healthy ageing research. Commissioned by the Commonwealth Office for Older Australians on behalf of the Community Services Minister’s Advisory Council, its brief was to determine information needs for commonwealth and state policy development on healthy ageing (Kendig et al, 2000, p.1). This report provided information on research already undertaken, and areas in need of further investigation. An initial statement in the review reads ‘commonwealth and state research on ageing and older people is directed overwhelmingly to matters concerning aged care. While this work is crucial to provide better for the minority of frail older people, it does not recognise that the vast majority of older people (are) fit and can make substantial contributions’ (section 1.9, p.6). Clearly this review acknowledges the need for a complex and comprehensive perspective on healthy ageing. However, whilst the report acknowledges that ‘promoting healthy ageing requires a better understanding of the psychological and social factors that impact on health’, no mention is made of the possible impact of negative media representation. Interestingly, one ‘priority topic area’ for proposed research is listed as ‘measuring and changing community attitudes…This is fundamental to promoting physical and psychological health in old age’ (p.16). The priority topics listed appear to direct states to areas seen as
particularly important for further research and the development of policy to promote healthy ageing.

Additional priority research topic areas in the review are listed as well being, independence and activity, social and cultural diversity, health concerns and intergenerational relations. In regard to intergenerational relations, the authors write ‘the experiences of younger cohorts can set the basis for experiences in later life (they need) knowledge to help dispel negative myths of ageing’ (p.35). It is surprising that the authors do not call for research into the effects of media representation in view of these guidelines for topic areas, particularly in light of Bronwyn Bishop’s clear acknowledgement of the concern within older populations of negative media stereotyping, and U.S. research findings into older portrayals on TV. A more positive and diverse representation of older people on television might impact positively on the health of older viewers and help to dispel negative myths which may influence young people’s perceptions of ageing. However, what this report and the Commonwealth, State and Territory Strategies on Health and Ageing highlight, is the need to dispel the negative stereotyping and mythology surrounding the concept of ageing, and the role that cultural attitudes play on the health and welfare of older people – both of these points were also highlighted in the key ‘National Strategy for an Ageing Australia’, which emphasised the role of the media in generating negative cultural stereotypes.

- **State Responses**

All of the states and territories devised long term action plans in response to federal reports to maintain the momentum of the International Year of Older Persons, with
the degree of prominence given to media representation varying from state to state. The Northern Territory for example, focussed primarily on the health and transport needs of isolated and indigenous older people, whereas the Victorian government gave some degree of prominence to media issues. This is perhaps most clearly articulated in a ministerial discussion titled ‘An Age Inclusive Society’ (‘Ministerial Round Table’, 2002). An adjunct to the state’s long term plans for its ageing population, this discussion highlights the role of the media in promoting negative attitudes and presents proposals for action. In general terms, factors seen as impacting on the development of an age inclusive society are listed as language, media, intergenerational activity, ageism, community/culture, mature age workers and health issues. Under the heading ‘media’, relevant issues are listed as follows:

- Australian media, unlike U.K., don’t consider older people worthy of interest
- Perhaps media interest is increasing, however stories about older people seem to still need the “wow” factor – e.g. “still!” “At her age!”
- Media will never be interested in ageism per se but in interesting stories about colourful, fulfilled older people who buck conventional views of growing old. These examples add colour, champions, and provide opportunities for connectedness – give us role models to identify with
- Increased employment of older people in the media and film industry provides older people opportunities to represent themselves
- Stereotypes beg the question “who is doing the representing?” (‘Ministerial Round Table’, 2002, p.1).

This acknowledgement of the impact of television portrayals promoted a further discussion during the ‘Round Table’ to explore ways to promote positive images and
foster stronger intergenerational ties. With regard to promoting positive images, the report states:

Attitudes, actions and behaviours of the community at large can either impose limitations on senior Victorians, or enable senior Victorians to lead active and fulfilling lives in the community…Media and advertising generally portrays ageing as the loss of youth, beauty, vitality and mobility. Younger people are led to devalue and deny ageing and this can lead to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of older people…People readily accept ageist stereotypes. It is accepted that with age it is inevitable that you will forget things, that you are bound to have deteriorating health, and that you will be less physically active. As individuals, this view becomes self-limiting when we use it to describe our own ageing (p.1).

Under the heading ‘Developing stronger intergenerational relations’, the report goes on:

Our communities can be strengthened through valuing the attributes of age. Older people can impart their skills and achievements gained through a life of experience. Then wisdom, leadership and guardianship can become a key ingredient to the cohesiveness of our communities if we can learn to value and harness these attributes…Devaluing old age impacts on the way younger people view their own ageing. This results in younger people fearing the worst of old age, and as a culture, we fall into the trap of denying the ageing process, becoming anxious about growing old and limiting our experiences of older people (‘An Age Inclusive Society’, 2002, p.1-2).

Other Victorian responses to federal concerns about cultural representation have
included an earlier forum held in Melbourne in 2000 (‘Act Your Age: Age Futures in Broadcasting’), and a key report issued recently titled ‘The Media and Positive Ageing’. The forum, organised by the Victorian Department of Human Services brought together representatives from older people’s groups and media advertising organisations. The purpose of the forum was to address cultural stereotypes and find ways to inform media executives about the economic value of the emerging baby-boomer market. Extracts from this forum were presented in the document ‘Who’s Watching You Tonight?’ (2002) by the Office of Senior Victorians, which is forwarded by a message from Minister Christine Campbell, who describes the impetus for publication:

In developing ‘Who’s Watching You Tonight? – Australia’s new Audience and how to capture it’, the Victorian Government is not looking to the industry to develop and/or define programmes as ‘older people’s programmes’. We are simply looking to broaden the range of media images to include people of all ages – to represent the reality of life and society in Australia today (p.7)

The document records extracts of the views of various panel speakers at the forum which included Val French, from ‘Older People Speak Out’, who called for greater inclusion of older people in the media; Jean-Marc Segati, Managing Director, Senioragency International, who described the consumerist aspirations of baby-boomers, and Jan Russ, Casting Director, who criticised the dearth of opportunities for older actors (pp 6/15).

This strategy to encourage media producers to include positive views of older people is one that is echoed across the country – however, a recent report ‘The Media and Positive Ageing’, published by the Office of Senior Victorians, lists several innovative strategies that address the issue of media stereotyping from a wide perspective (‘Media’, 2004). Actions implemented include the establishment of a
‘television and theatre industry task force to advise on strategies to further stimulate more age balanced programming in film and television and better representation of older people in all forms of media.’ Other projects undertaken have been the ‘sponsorship of Seniors Cinema at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image at Federation Square to showcase new films depicting positive images of ageing; support for live performances of a proposed new television drama featuring seniors living in a retirement village, and the establishment of a grants programme to support new Victorian producers on ageing issues’ (p.1). This report also encourages older people to email ‘Seniors Watch’ with examples of good and bad representation, calling for examples of

- What works – what you consider to be positive depictions of older people
- What doesn’t work – what you consider to be inaccurate or discriminating representations
- Language use that accurately describes older people; and
- Language use that is ageist and derogatory (p.2).

Like Victoria, Queensland also responded in clear terms to Bronwyn Bishop’s call for recognition of the role of community attitudes in positive ageing. In ‘Our Shared Future: Queeensland’s Framework for Ageing 2000-2004’, one area for action is pinpointed as ‘Community Participation’, with the observation made that ‘negative attitudes towards older people and ageing limit opportunities for older people to participate in the community’ (p.15). Recognition is given that ‘media and advertising industries play a particularly important role in shaping perceptions and can assist this process by avoiding the stereotypes that lead to negative attitudes’ (ibid). The Framework lists governmental achievements in relation to media
representation, which include the development of a television video and accompanying resources kit to provide positive images of frail older people, the ‘Don’t Call Me Granny!’ resource booklet for media personnel and an intergenerational ‘Respect’ media campaign on buses and billboards (p.15-16). The state government also commits to ‘continue to promote positive images of older people and growing older through marketing campaigns’ and to ‘continue to influence the media and advertising industries to portray more realistic and accurate images of older people’ (p.16-17). Also acknowledged by this state is the role of the media in fear and crime. ‘Reasons for the relatively high fear of crime amongst older people include the way in which crimes against older people are reported by the media, as well as the sense of personal vulnerability which some older people feel’ (p.21).

Queensland’s ‘Don’t Call Me Granny!’ resource was an initiative of the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care, and targets communication professionals in a bid to avoid ageist language and practices. Available both on the Web and by post, the introductory message by the Minister, Anna Bligh, calls on those working in the media to acknowledge their role in improving the status of older people as a response to U.N. calls for action during the International Year of Older Persons:

> In your day to day working life you can help to achieve one of the key aims of the International Year – to improve community attitudes towards older people and growing older. Through your work you have the ability to shape community perceptions about older people. To reduce negative stereotyping we all need to pay greater attention to accurate and positive portrayals of older people. ‘Don’t Call Me Granny’ gives us the tools to do that (p.3)

The resource goes on to list the myths associated with ageing and suggest the appropriate language to use when describing older people. It also calls on reporters
to produce stories about a broad range of seniors’ concerns, avoid stereotyping, and show ‘how older people with a disability continue to get the most out of life’ (p.11). Advertisers are encouraged to show seniors as active, worthy of respect and ‘taking part in the mainstream of life’ (p.12).

Another publication, by the Queensland Department of Families is available to the general public by post – ‘Ageing: Myth and Reality’ (2002) presents colourful photographs of seniors accompanied by information about the realities of old age, with myths noted as

- Older people are all the same
- Growing old means becoming sick and disabled
- Older people are an economic burden on society
- Older people are more likely to be lonely
- It is common for older people to live in poverty
- Mature age workers are slower and less productive
- Older people are asexual
- Older people don’t participate in many activities
- Older people are more likely to be victims of crime

All of the myths addressed in the booklet are listed here in light of the introduction which points to the media as the main propagators. After commenting that negative images and attitudes persist in society, the introduction goes on:

The media, through articles and advertising, bombard us with ways to avoid ageing and look younger, but conversely, how to live longer. Media portrayals of old age are often couched in terms of frailty, senility, poverty, powerlessness and loneliness. Our vocabulary for describing older generations is limited and does not take into account the differences that exist between people (p.4)
This publication attempts to diminish the negative mythology disseminated by the media, and educates readers about the reality of age and ageing.

The Western Australian government’s Five Year Plan for Western Australia’s Maturing Population (‘Time on Our Side’, 1998), also accuses the media of propagating negative aged stereotypes. In its review of community attitudes to ageing, and under the heading ‘How can the government and the community improve the portrayal of seniors in the media and advertising?’ the initial draft of the plan observes:

Community attitudes are profoundly influenced by the print and electronic media. There is a great need to break down the seniors’ stereotypes we (as individuals and a community) read, see – and tend to believe. These stereotypes suggest that older people are frail, dependent and at risk. The portrayal of seniors in media and advertising leaves little room for individuality. It encourages the myths about old age even though those myths are contradicted by what we can see is the reality of the everyday lives of older people we know. These myths that get promoted are the result of a youth-orientated culture (p.4)

The report goes on to mention that people consulted during the drafting of the Discussion Paper ‘repeatedly stated that media images of older people are generally negative and reinforce stereotypes of frailty, incompetence and insecurity…it is important that media and advertisers take responsibility for reinventing their images of older people. When they do, the private sector might just have a chance of attracting this lucrative and expanding market’ (p.4).

One key initiative that evolved from the Western Australian plan was the publication ‘A New Age for Business: Opportunities in the Mature Market’ (2000). Here businesses are alerted to the potential of the emerging baby-boomer market, with the government offering statistical information, research findings and links to
departments and organisations ‘to encourage the private sector to prepare for our maturing population for the benefit of both mature people and business’ (p.4). Initiatives proposed in the report include the provision of research findings about consumer needs and attitudes, and the development of age-friendly standards for products and services (pp.6/7). This publication, whilst not addressing media representation per se, nevertheless represents a grass-roots attempt to raise the awareness of business and marketers to encourage greater recognition of older people as consumers – a strategy that would, by association, improve media representation of this group. More directly, the Office of Seniors Interests has also implemented the ‘Western Australia Media Awards’ (2001), which ‘recognise and reward journalists, photographers and advertisers for the positive portrayal of seniors in the media’, with the aim of the awards ‘to challenge negative stereotypes, strengthen relationships between the generations and show older people as active, valuable and contributing members of the community’ (p.1, para.3).

The New South Wales government has also engaged the media in an effort to challenge negative stereotypes with a report distributed by the Seniors Media Network Council ‘Language and Older People’ which echoes Queensland’s ‘Don’t Call Me Granny!’ and Victoria’s ‘Who’s Watching You Tonight?’ The Network Council asks media professionals a series of questions which include

- Are older people depicted as individuals or just stereotypes?
- Are ages or terms such as ‘pensioner’, ‘granny’, or ‘oldie’ used to describe older people?
- Are older people portrayed as victims or burdens on society?
- Are older people portrayed as senile?
Does the image present as active and useful or spent and passive? (p.5).
The document challenges the myths associated with old age, and lists the ‘Don’ts and Dos’ for media personnel to follow. ‘Don’ts’ include

- Don’t talk about the problem, or the burden to society, of an ageing population
- Don’t assume that enthusiasm for new ideas and an interest in new technology is the exclusive preserve of the young
- Don’t refer to an older person as a pensioner. It defines the person by their source of income

‘Dos’ include

- Do let older people know that you value their wisdom and experience
- Do try to treat older people as living human beings and not imagine that because they have lived longer than you have, their lust for life is in some ways dead

‘Language and Older People’ reflects the concern of the NSW government that negative social attitudes impede positive ageing. This concern is articulated in the ‘NSW Healthy Ageing Framework 1998-2003’, where it is stated that ‘the purpose of this framework is to work towards replacing negative stereotypes with more accurate, positive images’ (p.14). This recognition of the importance of countering negative images of ageing can be traced back to the origins of the Seniors Media Network Council which published the report ‘Language and Older People’.

Significantly the Network Council, supported by the NSW government, actively responded to negative media images several years before the International Year of Older Persons. Hill and Leonard (1994) report in the Australian Journal on Ageing that research in association with the Healthy Older People Programme (HOPP) in
1990 indicated ‘a nexus between negative stereotyping and health outcomes’ (p.138). As a result, the NSW Office on Ageing and the Eastern Sydney Area Health Service recruited fifty older people to survey newspapers and news programmes on radio and television, finding a high degree of negative aged stereotyping. The Seniors Media Network evolved from this, with government departments and local seniors deciding that they should work together to become more involved in confronting media attitudes. Hill and Leonard (1994) conclude their article by noting ‘this project demonstrates an effective partnership between older people and two government agencies in beginning to challenge the negative stereotypes in the media that older people perceive to be a pervasive influence on their self-esteem, health and well being’ (p.140).

Research that informed the ‘Tasmanian Plan for Positive Ageing 2000-2005’ also found that older people considered negative media images to impact on their health and well being. Under the heading ‘Community Attitudes’, it is noted that

the community expressed an overwhelming concern about the negative attitude towards older people and the ageing population. The consultation highlighted the need for greater acknowledgement of the skills and achievements of older people, greater respect for older people and a far more positive portrayal of older people in the media, marketing and advertising (p.10)

Going on to list the action plans of the government, proposals include the development of a ‘communication strategy to promote positive attitudes to ageing and older people involving the production of posters and information kits’, and also the sponsorship of a ‘positive portrayal of older persons’ category in the Media, Marketing and Advertising annual awards. Suggested initiatives for local government, businesses and community organisations include the development of
links with local media to provide ‘interesting articles and information on older people and intergenerational activities’, and also the provision of ‘feedback to the media and advertisers when negative images of older people are portrayed’ (ibid).

The South Australian and Australian Capital Territory plans for their ageing populations focus primarily on health, welfare, housing and employment issues, although both see community attitudes as an important aspect of healthy ageing. The ‘Strategic Plan for Human Services for Older People in South Australia 1999-2004’ declares

> the right of every South Australian to enjoy full citizenship, from birth until death, irrespective of age or frailty. The ongoing and increased participation of older people in all aspects of community life will increase their dignity and independence providing the foundations for optimal health and well being (2000, p.6)

The plan goes on to assert that the foundations for optimal health and welfare include ‘improved community attitudes towards ageing and older people’, with number 16 in ‘Moving Ahead Actions’ proposing ‘to co-ordinate the promotion of positive images of older people in the media’ (p.18). Similarly, the ‘ACT Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing Strategic Plan 2003-2005’ states ‘social attitudes and perceptions of ageing can influence the well being of older people, whether through direct discrimination or through negative attitudes and images’ (p.2). The Strategic Plan sees one key focus area as the promotion of positive images of older people in the community, with a strategic priority to ‘encourage media outlets to promote and portray positive images of older people’ (p.10). Implicit in both of these plans is a recognition that the health and welfare of seniors is influenced by community attitudes to ageing, which are in turn, shaped to a large degree by media images.
Discussion

Clearly there has been wide recognition, from both federal government and state government departments, of negative media portrayals and a failure to recognise older people as valid consumers, with this recognition extending to an appreciation of the possible impact of cultural alienation on health and welfare. Strategies to address these issues vary from state to state, but rely mainly on informing business and advertisers about the misconceptions associated with older people, and providing information about marketing opportunities. To this end there have been discussion groups, reports tabled and award events held to encourage greater awareness within the business and media worlds of social responsibilities towards older media users, and the economic benefits of acknowledging older people as active consumers. Queensland’s ‘Don’t Call Me Granny!’ reminded professionals in the industry of their responsibilities by reiterating elements of the Code of Ethics for Journalists, and the Code of Practice which ‘asserts that advertisers will be responsible in the portrayal of age and respect people’s essential dignity’ (p.4). Other state departments took a more ‘bottom line’ approach, with Western Australia’s ‘A New Age For Business’, for example, pointing to the economic benefits of tapping into the expanding older market ‘these seniors will be well educated, have a sound asset base, disposable income and be discerning consumers who demand a full and active lifestyle’ (p.1). These educative strategies represent two differing yet complementary approaches – they appeal to quite different sensibilities yet both strategies appear to acknowledge links between media respect and recognition, and positive ageing.

Other strategies taken by state departments seek to counter negative stereotypes and
mythology at a more practical level. Victoria’s sponsorship of Seniors Cinema, 
grants programme and establishment of ‘Seniors Watch’ to monitor views about 
portrayals, represent a comprehensive approach to the issue (‘Media’, 2004). 
Similarly, strategies proposed during the Victorian ‘Ministerial Round Table’ (2002) 
include the lobbying of the Australian Broadcasting Authority ‘for a more 
sophisticated local content quota system that includes consideration of local 
programming that is inclusive of older people’ (p.3). Another recommendation was 
to ‘encourage local media, including press, radio and television, to provide specific 
opportunities for older voices to be heard – e.g. “Seniors Page” in local newspapers’ 
(ibid). ‘Queensland’s Framework for Ageing’ proposed similarly practical initiatives 
to deal with media-generated aged stereotyping, with several indirect approaches 
including plans to ‘maintain a resource library of positive photographic images of 
older people; implement community awareness campaigns to address the issue of age 
discrimination (and) encourage students to develop positive attitudes towards older 
people (by) developing relevant curriculum materials that provide opportunities for 
students to develop these attitudes’ (p.17). These strategies can be seen as a ‘second 
line’ approach – whereas several state departmental initiatives seek to educate the 
media in a ‘first line’ preventative strategy, the empowering of older people and 
public education initiatives seek to counter negative stereotyping after the fact.

Looked at in conjunction, however, state responses to federal concerns about ageist 
attitudes are comprehensive and display an understanding of the role the media play 
in shaping community values and personal well being. The federal minister’s 
assertions about negative media stereotyping are based on U.S. research findings 
which are considered to be relevant in Australia due to the high level of U.S.
programming (‘National Strategy for an Ageing Australia’, p.6). My research has found that Australian programming and advertising displays an even more ageist agenda, reinforcing ministerial observations and giving additional weight to strategies and proposals that seek to address concerns about media generated cultural attitudes. Whether state strategies and initiatives will have an impact on media producers may not be clear in the short term – exhortations to take advantage of the ageing baby boomer market may not have an effect until demographics indicate commercially viable numbers of retired people, for example. Certainly, when my 2003 analysis of Australian commercial television took place, there were no indications that the states’ well-established long term plans, and the actions undertaken in light of recommendations, had influenced producers to accord retired people adequate recognition – as viable consumers or integral social members. There were no indications that appeals to recognise the market potential of older people had registered with business executives, or that an appeal to reporters to be mindful of codes of practice had resulted in realistic portrayals of active, contributing elders – advertisers’ attitudes could hardly have been worse pre 2003.

The breadth and scope of governmental responses to the matter of media representation of seniors indicates a recognition that the popular media are powerful capitalist enterprises that need to remain flexible and responsive to social concerns. There is also an implied concession in Queensland’s ‘Don’t Call Me Granny!’ report that media professionals are not abiding by codes of practice, pointing to their ineffectuality. If comprehensive state and federal strategies – devised in response to U.N. directives – do not appear to have influenced commercial TV producers to portray older people fairly, this may indicate the need for regulatory change. It is
worth here briefly augmenting previous comparisons between U.S., U.K. and Australian regulatory processes, which might help to explain why networks have been tardy in responding to governmental recommendations. As reported in chapter seven, Australian commercial television is guided by Advisory Notes and an advertising Code of Ethics. Outlined in these is the expectation that networks should be responsive to community concerns about cultural diversity, with advertisements not ‘portraying people in a way which discriminates against or vilifies a person or section of the community on account of…age’. These advisory notes and ethical guidelines demonstrate an expectation that networks should remain responsive to public sensitivities within a self-regulatory framework.

Governments advise and guide networks to fulfill social obligations – strategies that are reflected in the state plans to address negative media representation. State plans advise reporters of acceptable language to use when including older people in stories, and businesses are advised of the market potential of older consumers. These guidelines provide information without any regulatory requirement to comply. This laissez-faire approach shadows the U.S. governmental line which has historically left the media to its own devices. During the 1980s, television in the U.S. had no guiding ethical code, leading to fears that the government might step in to regulate the void. Networks responded to concerns with the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) issuing a new ‘Statement of Principles of Radio and Television Broadcasting’, which encouraged broadcasters to write their own policies, with guiding principles ‘advisory rather than prohibitive.’ In relation to broadcasters’ policies, the NAB noted that
• They should be centred in individual stations or corporations, rather than a network organisation like NAB

• Since there is no provision for monitoring and enforcement on the national level, any concerns about ethics should come from individual stations and listeners/viewers

• The decentralisation of ethics may be indicative of a pluralistic society where values and mores reflect distinct group perspectives, rather than a national standard (‘Ethics and Television’, p.1, para.8).

Whilst U.S. networks are guided by self-regulated codes of practice, which are informed by local viewers’ concerns, U.K. television, in contrast, operates in a highly regulated, centralised environment. Several independent bodies, including the Office of Communication (Ofcom), have been appointed by the U.K. government to ensure that well-defined standards are upheld. Extracts from a comprehensive list detailing Ofcom’s codes of practice include the requirement of the Broadcasting Act 1990, which obliges Ofcom to do ‘all it can to secure that every licensed service includes nothing in its programmes which offends against good taste or decency or is likely to…be offensive to public feeling’ (‘Ofcom Website’, section 1.1). There is a requirement for ‘respect for human dignity and treatment of minorities (and) similar considerations apply to the treatment of other less obvious and vulnerable minorities including older people’ (section 1.8). Section 6 goes on to require that no harm or offence is imparted in advertising, and states that Ofcom ‘does not judge cases simply, or even primarily, on the number of complaints received. It makes judgements about the likelihood of widespread offence as well as taking into account the possibility of deep, usually unintentional, offence to sections of the audience.
which have particular vulnerabilities’ (section 6.1, 6.2). In addition, ‘advertisements must (my italics) not prejudice respect for human dignity or humiliate, stigmatise or undermine the standing of identifiable groups of people’ (section 6.6). Offences against regulated standards may result in a hearing involving any complainant, the TV licensee and Ofcom (Appendix 3).

It seems that U.K. TV producers and advertisers are cogently made aware of their social obligations and the repercussions of non-compliance. U.K. media researchers would seem to demonstrate the efficiency of regulations, with a general acknowledgement that older people are portrayed, on the whole, quite fairly (Wober and Gunter, 1988; Cumberbatch et al, 1999). Indeed, this is alluded to in the Victorian ‘Ministerial Round Table’ discussion paper (2002), when it is noted that ‘Australian media, unlike (in the) U.K., don’t consider older people worthy of interest’ (p.1). Whilst Australian government departments clearly recognise that Australian commercial TV underrepresents and negatively stereotypes older people – as indicated by the plethora of strategies devised to counter the problem – many of the initiatives appear to have had little impact on Australian-produced programming and advertising. Australian content represents an area where television executives and advertisers could respond to governmental concerns, to counteract underrepresentation and negativity in U.S. productions. This has not to date eventuated, and it may be that without the clearly enunciated regulatory requirements that inform the U.K. media, government attempts to modify advertisers’ unwavering focus on the youth market will have little impact. In a self-regulatory environment, it may be that marketers will not accord older people recognition as valid consumers and citizens until baby-boomers have swelled their ranks – and most importantly,
demonstrated that they have carried over with them a materialistic fervour and impetuosity from their consumer-orientated youth. In the meantime, if the government is unwilling to regulate the industry in the style of the U.K., then activist and older people’s organisations will have a role to play in lobbying the media and promoting older people’s cultural and social rights.
A review of older people’s organisations in Australia reveals a number of key institutions operating at both national and state levels that work closely with governments to highlight the needs of seniors. In the U.K. there is a particularly strong emphasis on social welfare, with high profile seniors’ groups operating as charitable concerns, whereas in the U.S., older people’s organisations have a more militant agenda, often encouraging wide involvement in the lobbying of less welfare-orientated governments and corporations. The organisations reviewed for this chapter cover a range of high profile groups that are actively working on behalf of older people, and represent the face of seniors’ activism. These professional, highly organised groups consider the way older people are portrayed in the media to be an issue of concern, and have developed various strategies to deal with negative cultural representation. Professional lobbying is necessary because seniors are a diverse group whose wide dispersal has historically hindered united political action – activism at a grass-roots level rarely occurs due to a range of complex issues that impede group cohesion and active campaigning. Some of these constraints are discussed in this chapter, before a review of Australian, U.S. and U.K. group actions taken to counter negative media portrayal, and a final discussion of these strategies.

- Social, Physical and Cultural Constraints on Activism in Later Life

It may be that at the heart of the political dissociation between older people is the lack of empathy that an already diverse group may have towards other ‘old’ people. As reported in earlier chapters, there is a schism between how older people view
themselves, based on a stable inner world, and how others in society view them, based on observable decline and community attitudes. Those who have not attained old age and view it from the outside are prey to simplistic assessments based on visual cues and stereotypical assumptions – in this way the over 65s are labelled as the ‘other’. This distancing must seem perplexing to people who do not consider they are ‘old’, and who still align themselves with many of the concerns of younger people, with an ‘inner youthfulness’ not diminishing the impact of ageism, but poignantly compounding it. Hendricks and Hendricks (1986) view the essence of ageism as our collective inability to see ageing people as extensions of ourselves ‘part of the myth, a fundamental if implicit element of ageism, is the view that the elderly are somehow different from our present and future selves and therefore are not subject to the same desires, concerns or fears’ (p.34-35). Older people generally do not see themselves as distinct, altered beings, and see biological decline as a mask or disguise that hides their true inner self. One can imagine that many older people would react to ageism in the media with bewilderment rather than a sense of shared grievance.

Simone de Beauvoir (1972) dedicates much of her in-depth analysis of old age to this dichotomy between the existential and corporeal. Drawing on the experiences of philosophical and literary figures, she portrays a clear sense of the bewilderment of people confronted by the realities of physical change and cultural hostility which conspire to rob ageing people of their essential identity. She writes ‘since it is the Other within us who is old, it is natural that the revelation of our age should come to us from outside – from others. We do not accept it willingly’ (p.288). Those amongst us deemed ‘old’ therefore may have a very different internal world than
others might imagine, and we may choose to describe ourselves with epithets unrelated to chronology – as Australians or Anglicans, but more importantly, as Ageless. De Beauvoir, for example, tells us that Goya’s self-portrait, painted at the age of seventy, displayed the features of a fifty-year-old (p.301). Wagner may have had a similarly sanguine view of himself when he saw his image in a shop window and declared angrily, “I do not recognise myself in that grey-head: can I possibly be sixty-eight?” (p.299). Proust, likewise, when revisiting a group of friends after many years, saw them as ‘made-up’, and he had the feeling he was attending a fancy dress party, “The transformations that all these people had suffered made me aware of the time that had passed for them…I was overwhelmed by the revelation that time had passed for me too” (p.290).

If many ageing people consider biological decline as a false representation of the inner self, then the bonds between those within the aged cohort will be tenuous. Add to this the overwhelming diversity of this group and the corresponding lack of a shared focus, and it can be seen that collective action would be difficult to organise. Bond and Coleman (1990), for example, point out that ‘elderly people are not an homogenous group, they reflect the diversity of class and social and political interests…It is therefore difficult to envisage how such a diverse group can organise themselves politically to work in their own common interest’ (p.286). The authors go on to observe that older people are difficult to organise politically because they have no focal point as do other groups, such as industrial workers or students – a point reiterated by Blaikie (2002). ‘Older people are…segregated among themselves according to income, health status, gender and ethnicity. Meanwhile, retirement itself acts to disperse and disconnect individuals who were once
collectively focussed around workplace matters’ (p.96-97). It is perhaps this lack of a focal point that primarily militates against united action – younger people develop tribal associations, centred around educational institutions or the workplace, but people often become isolated in old age and lose the support and bargaining power that previous associations accorded. The amorphous group ‘older people’ is one apparently without profile or allegiance.

A lack of cohesion amongst older people born of diversity and wide dispersal inhibits the development of a united political voice. Blaikie (2002) sees this as a stumbling block to the formation of radical older groups in the future, pointing to the failure of Rose’s (1965) vision of an ‘aged counterculture’ to eventuate. Rose had postulated that ‘all that would be required for ‘the elderly’ to transform themselves from an observable social category to an active cultural group was self-conscious identification with their peers.’ Blaikie responds by observing ‘in the decades since, the limitations of such thinking have been manifest in the failure of this cultural model to materialise…it is abundantly clear that older people no more form a monolithic category than do members of any other group’ (p.96). If we add to this lack of solidarity the material and physical constraints associated with old age, it becomes clear why grass roots collective action amongst this cohort is rare.

Inadequate community facilities, a lack of transport and monetary concerns are a daily reality for many older people. For the frail in particular, dealing with the day to day concerns of how to transport home the shopping or how to do home and garden maintenance become primary concerns. Declining mobility and a low income present ongoing practical challenges that must detract from more abstract concerns such as lobbying for social rights. The practical constraints often
associated with old age compound diversity and dispersal to further inhibit the development of Rose’s ‘aged counterculture.’

The shared cultural history of the present older cohort also has a significant bearing on the lack of collective action or militancy of this group. This generation, whilst diverse, shares some fundamental cultural experiences and basic values – Midwinter (1992), for example, reports that older people are the least likely consumers to complain or even ask for advice:

The counting of blessings in small coinage, the looking back not in anger but in calmness, the offering of thanks for small mercies: these are part and parcel of the mood of an older generation which has been battered by world wars and depressions…There is an unwillingness to make a fuss and an ignorance about how to make a fuss which is frustrating for the more direct consumer activist (p.8)

There is a belief that ageing baby-boomers will be more demanding of their ‘rights’ as consumers and citizens in old age. While this remains to be seen, it is clear that their often more conservatively minded parents are less critical and more grateful for the material goods and lifestyles that their children take for granted. In regard to television, its emergence, as witnessed by a generation tired of war and deprivation, heralded a new era of happiness and prosperity. Regardless of its ageist agenda, older people may feel reluctant to criticise a communications medium that holds such a symbolic place in their cultural histories, particularly if they have come to rely on it in their declining years as a symbol of social connection, if not inclusion.

Allied with this observation is the view that some older people, particularly the more wealthy groups, embrace consumerism and the associated lifestyle options. Writing from a U.S. perspective – where it should be emphasised that older people appear to be acknowledged by marketers far more than in Australia – Blaikie (1992) writes
that the over 50s are segregated into various groups according to age and lifestyle choices. He theorises that this creates social networks where like-minded people can develop a sense of identity through consumer choices:

The truth of this observation is evident in the analysis of consultants whose ‘psychographic’ segmentation defines evermore specific niches within the post-50 population – Woopies, Jollies, Glams, Primelifers, GoGos, NoGos, Retire Aware, Wind-Down, Lifestyle Adjustment, Leisure Years and so on. Against the strictly individualistic interpretation of consumerism, the lifestyle enclave suggests a degree of collective support through shared endeavour (p.104)

In addition to shared buying patterns presenting a degree of opportunity for solidarity, for consumer-orientated older people the benefits of material status and enhanced lifestyles militates against the idea of activism, particularly in relation to the commercial media.

However, whilst some older people’s consumer-driven lifestyles detract from what Blaikie terms ‘a cohesive moral agency’, and many other older people are impeded from lobbying for their social and cultural rights, a number of high profile seniors’ organisations advocate on their behalf. Phillipson, back in 1982, compared the strategies of groups in the U.K. and U.S., making this comment about U.K. organisations that appears to be still relevant in both the U.K. and Australia today ‘the form in which lobbying is carried out – via conferences, seminars, research papers etc – tends to exclude broad sections of the elderly. Very rarely are attempts made to organise around demonstrations or on campaigns involving the elderly within local communities’ (p.137). U.S. groups, on the other hand, have a history of radical community based action against less welfare-orientated governments which can be traced back to the 1930s when less than 5 per cent of older people had access to pensions (p.134). Midwinter (1992) points to fundamental differences in political
processes between the U.S and U.K. which explain why seniors’ groups have traditionally lobbied for their rights more aggressively ‘after all, the creators of the American Constitution consciously turned their backs on the British oppressor and instead leaned heavily on the French science of the age. For example, there is much more ‘sectionalism’ or ‘interest group liberalism’ in American political life’ (p.21). The more welfare-based political climates of the U.K. and Australia have not encouraged the development of a highly politicised older population.

- **Organised Resistance to Ageist Media Portrayal**

There is little indication of a radical agenda within Australian seniors’ organisations, where most groups work closely with governments in an effort to inform policy making and provide information to members. The large umbrella group ‘Council on the Ageing’, for example, ‘works as an advocate for older Australians by providing information, policy analysis, publications, referral and advisory services, consultation and representation’ (‘The Origins of Australian Coalition ’99’). Another group, ‘Older People Speak Out’ describes itself as an organisation of communications professionals who carry out research, advocate, educate, lecture and consult on behalf of older people, with their Consultative and Research Forum having ‘a broad representation of well-known older people’ (‘Older People Speak Out’). Certainly there is an impression generated here that a broad section of the older population is excluded, reinforcing Phillipson’s (1982) observation about U.K. groups. However, with the complex issues that impede older activism, the professionally organised agenda of high profile seniors’ groups in Australia can be seen as reflecting practical expedience. In regard to negative media portrayal, seniors’ organisations have worked to devise strategies to counter stereotypical
representation, often in collaboration with government departments, creating a distinct impression that the issue is largely out of the hands of TV viewers and in the hands of professional advocates.

**Australian Organisations**

The Council on the Ageing (COTA) has a long history of providing advocacy for seniors, organising conferences, research reports and reflecting seniors’ needs to government, service providers and the media. As early as 1992, COTA recognised that media representation of older people was an issue, producing a booklet as an educational resource for journalists titled ‘Older People and the Media: Working Together’. Inspired by COTA’s philosophy which includes the declaration that older people have the right ‘to live free from discriminatory attitudes and behavior based on negative social attitudes to ageing’ (p.2), the 24 page resource defines ageism, dispels negative myths, and suggests ways that COTA can assist the print and TV media to portray older people positively. Journalists are advised, for example, to use appropriate language, by avoiding statements such as ‘despite her age’, or ‘amazing for his age’, and labels such as ‘grandmother’ or ‘grandfather’. Included in the resource is a statement by Louise Anike from the Older Women’s Network, who highlights the particularly negative portrayal of older women in the media. She comments that newspapers and magazines rarely show older women, and when they do ‘they assume all older women to be stereotyped, domestic grandmothers’ (p.11).

COTA later went on to facilitate a coalition of non-government organisations in preparation for the 1999 International Year of Older Persons, with the resultant
‘Australian Coalition ’99’ seeking to ensure that the Year would engender

- Maximum participation and involvement of older people themselves
- Engagement of organisations of older people
- Promotion of the *UN Principles for Older Persons* (*The Origins of Australian Coalition ‘99’* p.24).

Several large organisations combined their resources to devise strategies that would educate and motivate older people to be involved in the International Year, and the Commonwealth Government recognised the coalition as the ‘official focal organisation for non-government organisations’, and provided economic and active support. The Australian Coalition’99, in conjunction with similar overseas organisations, worked in partnership with government bodies ‘to achieve a full realisation of the United Nations principles on healthy ageing by and for older Australians through promoting: independence; participation; care; self-fulfillment and dignity’ (ibid). Amongst the many issues deemed relevant to the International Year was the need to devise strategies to deal with negative media portrayal (p.28).

One clear response to this call came from the ‘Positive Ageing Foundation’ (PAF), established during the International Year of Ageing Persons to research and promote successful ageing. This organisation seeks partnerships with ‘high profile clients’ and ‘specialised partners’ to further the positive ageing cause, and from this perspective, created the ‘Journalist’s Toolkit on Ageing’ in conjunction with Bond University. Pearson (2002), professor and head of journalism at the university, describes the project in a paper available on the PAF website (‘Sensitive or Sanitised? Guidelines for Reporting Age’). He reports that the Toolkit is based on the New South Wales Ageing and Disability Department’s booklet ‘Don’t Call Me
Granny!’ and is a comprehensive web-based reference source which seeks to help journalists and media professionals to avoid ageist reporting. The media are described as having an important role in shaping community attitudes about ageing, with negative images having an ‘adverse impact’ on older people’s sense of self and the way they are treated in real life (p.3). Journalists are reminded of the established ethical guidelines, and the media advised to ‘treat age as seriously as it does race, religion and ethnicity’ (p.6).

The organisation ‘Older People Speak Out’ (OPSO) has also opted to directly engage the media in response to calls for strategies to counter ageism. ‘An independent, free-spirited group with the experience, knowledge and qualifications to speak out on older people’s issues without fear or favour’, OPSO has established both a state (Queensland) and national Media Awards event in conjunction with government departments (‘Older People Speak Out’). The purpose of each event is to ‘recognise excellence in the reporting of the over 50s and their issues, helping to break down the stereotypes and consequent social problems,’ with awards for positive reporting in the print media, TV news and current affairs and for intergenerational journalism (ibid). The United Nations Association of Australia also promotes a similar event, the ‘Media Peace Awards’ with a wide range of categories including the ‘Promotion of Positive Images of the Older Person’. Over time, the basic categories of best television, radio, print and children’s sections have been supplemented by awards for the promotion of indigenous, multicultural, women’s and environmental issues, with the inclusion of an award for the promotion of positive ageing in 1999 (‘Media Peace Awards’ 2003).
While Australian organisations have dealt with ageism in the media primarily by working with governments to educate journalists, high profile U.K. organisations have commissioned research reports, some in association with TV networks, for public examination. ‘Age Concern’, the U.K.’s largest organisation for seniors, has commissioned perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of older portrayals, a strategy that can be seen as reflecting the group’s mission statement to ‘campaign on issues such as age discrimination…and work to influence public opinion’ (‘Age Concern’). Cumberbatch et al (1999) examined how the over 60s were portrayed across five TV channels, with the results of the analysis presenting both positive and negative findings. From a positive perspective, seniors were more likely than younger characters to be portrayed as economically active and achieving something, and only 1 per cent of older characters ‘were used by the programme makers to highlight any stereotyping, prejudice or discrimination’ (p.54). On the negative side, older people were seen less often on television than in the real world, and were more likely to be portrayed as eccentric or sexually inactive. In commissioning and publishing these reports widely, Age Concern is informing both the television networks and the general public about how the industry is meeting its regulatory requirements, and highlighting any discrimination for public discussion.

‘Help the Aged’ has also commissioned a comprehensive analysis of the issues related to the media portrayal of seniors, in conjunction with the Centre for Policy on Ageing (Midwinter, 1991). The central aim of Help the Aged is to promote equality and social rights, with the organisation’s website stating unequivocally ‘every day older people are discriminated against on the grounds of age and are
effectively thrown on society’s scrap heap. Treating older people as second-class citizens is degrading’ (‘Help the Aged’). Midwinter’s (1991) report points to the propensity for media journalists and broadcasters to treat older people as ‘second-class citizens’ with a series of interviews revealing a degree of discrimination. Nial Dickson, a radio correspondent, for example, describes the attitude of some journalists. ‘There is still a depressingly high number of stories in the press which patronise elderly people and portray them as mindless victims capable only of boarding the next bus for an OAP outing’ (section 2.6, p.14). Konrad Syrop (journalist) had a similarly blunt view, seeing the political issues of pensions and health care as the main reasons for negativity in the media ‘until society finds new, useful roles for the elderly, most of the popular media will be tempted to look at them through the same old patronising spectacles’ (section 2.1, p.8).

In response, Midwinter (1992) reports that Help the Aged, again in conjunction with the Centre for Policy on Ageing, devised a code of practice for journalists which calls for balance in reporting, less emphasis on chronological age and less use of epithets such as ‘pensioner’. Unlike the guidelines devised for journalists by Australian organisations, this code is reproduced in a widely available format which would encourage public awareness and discussion. The code suggests alternative descriptions related to status that do not rely on chronology – the ‘First Age of childhood and socialisation, the Second Age of full time employment and family rearing, the Third Age of active independence, and the Fourth Age of decline and dependence’ (p.26). In his earlier (1991) report, Midwinter concedes that newspaper staff may use epithets like ‘pensioner’ in a neutral context and as an ‘intensified shorthand’ to create an immediate image – however, describing someone as ‘in their
Third Age’ takes little longer, and projects connotations of activity and involvement in stark contrast to the connotations associated with ‘pensioner’. As Midwinter (1991) goes on, the use of ‘pensioner’ as a descriptive term is ‘largely damaging and falsifying in tone’ and fails to present the person’s complexity (p.44).

**U.S. Organisations**

U.S. group ‘The National Council on the Ageing’ has also devised a list of guidelines for the media. Focussing primarily on the older person as a consumer, this organisation conducts research and advises business on how to better serve seniors. Geneva Mathieson, Executive Director, lists these guidelines for media professionals

- Show older people in current environments and with current mindsets
- Don’t portray institutionalism as the inevitable adjunct to old age
- Don’t give the impression that old people are separated from and neglected by their families
- Combat the fallacy that emotional or mental departures from the norm by elderly people are evidence of ‘senility’
- Don’t exaggerate symptoms of mental confusion manifested by older people
- No cheap jokes about sex in old age
- Old people on park benches or rocking-chairs are not prototypes of older people, most of whom are busy, active and useful
- Portray the growing significance of elderly people as a political force
- Continue an advocacy role on behalf of deprived elderly people in a ‘fast-paced’ society too ready to ignore or victimise them
• Among programmes depicting violence, don’t dramatise the muggings and murders, for paltry gain, of old people by youthful gangs or bullies
• Portray older people as personalities, not stereotypes (Midwinter, 1991, p.56).

The Gray Panthers have taken a different approach to the issue of ageism in the media, seeking less to educate media producers than to raise public awareness and encourage older people to lobby for change. The development of the Media Watch Taskforce in 1975 placed mediated ageism on the public agenda, with the resultant documentation of negative stereotyping encouraging the National Association of Broadcasters to include age discrimination in the Media Code of Ethics. These achievements are given prominence in the group’s chronological calendar, alongside other achievements such as the elimination of forced retirement at 65, giving an indication of the level of importance the Panthers place on positive cultural representation (‘Gray Panthers Information’). The later ‘Gray Panthers Media Guide’ provides a checklist for TV viewers to recognise ageism, and asks questions such as
• Are older people depicted as intruders or meddlers in other’s relationships?
• Are older people ridiculed for showing sexual feelings?
• Are older people patronised and treated like children? (Midwinter, 1991, p.54).

This group seeks to raise public awareness and involvement in its quest to eliminate ageism, and has a particularly strong history of activism in the fight for social justice. Maggie Kuhn has described the guiding principles of the organisation which would have contributed to successes such as the Media Watch Task Force ‘we are the risk takers; we are the innovators; we are the developers of new models. We are trying the future for size – that is our role’ (‘Gray Panthers Information’).
Another American organisation that seeks to encourage the widespread involvement of older people in eradicating ageism is the International Longevity Centre – USA. The president, Robert N. Butler (who coined the term ‘ageism’) sees one purpose of the ILC – USA as helping to ‘deepen’ the coverage of journalists who rarely have time to understand the issues associated with older people (‘International Longevity Centre – USA’). Butler also makes it clear that older people themselves should fight for social equality. In the preface to a paper by Palmore (2004) which is available on the group’s website, Butler has this to say, “By promoting the ongoing engagement of older persons in all aspects of society and delivering the message that “ageism is out”, the bond between generations can be strengthened and the groundwork laid for the new longevity” (p.1). Palmore’s paper highlights some of the misconceptions that fuel ageism, and lists actions that can be taken to counteract this ‘social disease’ that he sees as originating primarily from the media. Proposals for action include ‘boycotts of companies with ageist practices’, and organising ‘watchdog activities to ensure that the media, agencies and businesses do not discriminate against older people’ (p.5). Palmore concludes his paper with this observation ‘if concerned citizens vigorously pursue such actions, we should be able to substantially reduce, if not totally eliminate ageism in the future’ (ibid).

Combating ageism is the principle concern of AARP (formally known as the American Association of Retired Persons) which has forged links with countries around the world to achieve this purpose. The International Affairs Sector assists in ‘the continuing campaign to remove negative stereotypes about persons in countries where these exist…and to find ways to engage governments and the media in this effort’ (‘AARP – history’, p.9). Operating on a professional level with the
organisation of seminars and global research, AARP also trains volunteers to lobby effectively at legislative, regulatory and governmental levels ‘to inform the public and business leaders about the realities of ageing’ (p.7). One recent international seminar saw Lisa Davis reporting on AARP’s survey of media portrayal in the U.S. and U.K. (‘AARP – NGO World Forum on Ageing, 2002’). Davis reports that newspapers and magazines have become much more aware of older readers/consumers in recent times, with many providing an ‘age beat’. However, the 50+ population are not adequately served, and journalists often reduce older people to stereotypical images – portrayed either as ‘powerful, wise and wealthy or as helpless, poor and selfish’ (para 4).

AARP itself has long worked to counter the print media’s predisposition to ignore or stereotype older people, most notably within its own production ‘AARP Magazine’ (formally Modern Maturity). In an analysis of the magazine across thirty years of production, Roberts and Zhou (1997) found that ‘the majority of characters in the advertisements…were portrayed as capable, important, healthy and physically and socially active’ (para.1). This finding contrasted with advertising directed at older people in the wider media, and reflects AARP’s high standards and strict guidelines – the authors report that AARP Magazine has the toughest advertising standards of any publication, with many adverts rejected if they present a negative statement on ageing. Significantly, advertisements for medical or therapeutic goods are often excluded to ensure that a balanced view of ageing is projected (para. 7). With 35 million members receiving this magazine, it can be said that AARP effectively presents a positive view of old age in opposition to often negative images in the wider popular media. However, the organisation sees the representation of older
people across the media as a critical issue, and works to promote positive portrayals more widely. This view is expressed by Horace B. Deets, executive director, in a speech to the UCLA Television Conference in 1992, “I am interested in the relationship between maturity and the media. And my interest lies primarily in seeing older Americans portrayed realistically on television” (p.1).

Additional Voices – ‘Senioragency’ and ‘The Cultural Environment Movement’

Fair media representation is clearly an issue of concern for seniors’ groups and is a concern that has been taken up by two quite different organisations, adding powerful voices to the cause of older people’s cultural rights. One advertising agency that has related the issue to the marketing potential of ageing baby-boomers is ‘Senioragency’, which defies the mainstream, youth-orientated attitudes of many other agencies. Seeking to build on the emerging U.S. style of market segmentation which formulates ways to target and serve the needs of ageing populations, Senioragency has established advertising agencies across Europe, in Israel, Tokyo and Sydney, promoting the idea that older people are viable consumers, and will become a significant market force. Jean-Paul Treguer, at the Paris headquarters, explains that boomers will have a very different attitude to consumerism than their parents, whose first twenty years of life were marked by war and depravation. In contrast, boomers’ early lives were marked by abundance and prosperity (‘Senioragency, Who’s Who,’ question 3). Treguer goes on to challenge the continuing strategy by other agencies to market almost exclusively to youth, arguing a need to realign this approach as consumer-orientated boomers enter old age (ibid, question 4).
Senioragency’s Sydney consultancy base shares the same philosophy as its Paris headquarters, with the Australian Internet site declaring that ‘culturally Australia follows Europe and America in being unable to effectively depict baby-boomers in its advertising and marketing’ (‘Senioragency Australia’). On this website the consumer-orientated attributes of boomers are listed - for example, ‘baby-boomers are used to being at the top of the hill, not over it,’ and ‘unlike their parents who were finishing up at 55, many of them are just starting out.’ Marketers are advised that Senioragency Australia can help them target this ‘audience’ by making their products attractive to the over 50s – the agency can assist by

- Keeping the tone straight, focussed and literate
- Building a brand which is truthful, transparent, ethical and socially aware
- Giving your brand weight, because this is an audience that understands the value of a product’s integrity and heritage
- Communicating through genuine empathy and real life examples
- Targeting communication so it does not comment adversely on boomers’ age or politics
- Ensuring your advertising is informed
- Making sure your brand stands for something, rather than merely existing (p.2).

Whilst clearly focussed on maximising profits for marketers, the business strategies of this advertising agency may give an indication of things to come. Recognition of older people as valuable consumers will undoubtedly result in positive representation across the popular media.

A community based organisation in the U.S. that is concerned with the representation of older people in the here and now is the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM).
Organised in response to the ‘corporate control of the cultural environment’, CEM has a broad agenda, with a particular concern about the promotion of media violence and ‘inequitable and intimidating marketing formulas’ (Duncan, 1999). Launched in 1996 as a result of 30 years of Cultural Indicators research that has consistently revealed high levels of violence on TV, and often negative portrayals of minority groups, George Gerbner and his researchers decided that an independent citizen voice in cultural policy making was needed to lobby for reduced violence and fair representation on television. CEM has worked to build coalitions between groups world wide – media councils; students and parents groups; women’s youth and aged groups; environmental, consumer and legal groups, for example, have worked with CEM to promote the cultural rights of citizens, particularly the rights of marginalised people (Gerbner, 1999). In order to give disadvantaged people a ‘role and voice in a freer cultural environment’, CEM has worked to promote media literacy, disseminate research and organise public discussion. Of particular interest to this chapter are the organisation’s action plans and declarations of cultural rights that relate to older portrayals, as detailed during the Founding Convention of the organisation (Duncan, 1999).

Fifteen working groups highlighted issues and presented recommendations for action at the Founding Convention, based on topics such as the portrayal of violence, religion, ethnicity and women. Group nine dealt with the subject ‘children, youth, ageing and the family’, with the speaker emphasising that audiences need to be empowered to challenge and alter ‘the present landscape of the media’. It was also declared by the group that ‘senior adults have the right, as well as all people, to be portrayed in realistic ways in all media’ (Duncan, 1999, p.57).
Group two, in looking at ways to alter the media, saw the need to promote portrayals of older people interacting positively, and models of multigenerational interaction. This group also felt it was important to ‘influence mainstream media to more accurately represent real people within the continuum of human life and to create media that support a healthy cultural environment’ (p.158). As a result of these recommendations, and the recommendations of the other working groups, a twenty-five point Agenda for Action was devised, with number twenty-two proposing the establishment of ‘an award category for productions, including children’s programmes, that promote portrayals of older adults, especially women, as vital productive persons in realistic, believable situations with the full range of human emotions, hopes and desires’ (p.170).

The Agenda for Action was backed by the establishment of The People’s Communication Charter and the Viewer’s Declaration of Independence. The Charter sought to establish standards for cultural policy making, drawing on various U.N. declarations and resolutions whose signatories recognise that ‘communication is basic to the life of all individuals and their communities’ and ‘stereotypical portrayals misrepresent all of us and stigmatise those who are most vulnerable’ (Duncan, 1999, p.177). The U.N. declarations and resolutions that were drawn upon included Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UNESCO Declaration on Fundamental Principles Concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media To Strengthening Peace and International Understanding (Duncan, 1999, p.176). Several articles were drawn up based on the Communication Charter and Viewer’s Declaration, including article one (respect) ‘people are entitled to be treated with
respect, according to the basic human rights and standards of dignity, integrity, identity and non-discrimination,' and article fourteen (harm) ‘media should resist...stereotypic images that distort the realities and complexities of people’s lives’ (p.180).

Discussion

Blaikie (2002) has this pertinent comment to make about the level of power and influence held by older citizens:

Despite the reciprocal relationship between state policy and interest group activity, the last half-century has not seen older people gaining great influence within the political process...change can be brought about less by chipping away bureaucratically at the policy agenda and rather more by raising consciousness within the civic environment (p.105)

From this perspective, community based organisations like the Cultural Environment Movement, that encourage diverse social groups to confront the issue of negative media images, would have more impact than seniors’ groups that lobby for fair older portrayal in isolation. The close association of seniors’ groups with governments, particularly in Australia, ‘chips away bureaucratically at the policy agenda’, but fails to engage the wider community in an issue that affects us all. The engagement of the wider community in considering mediated ageism is particularly important in Australia and the U.S., where a poorly regulated media has been shown to have little concern for older viewers and consumers. Gerbner (1999) reports that the shared agenda of the Cultural Environment Movement is encouraging citizen participation in media policy making. ‘In this way we share experiences, lessons, and recommendations and, thus, gradually move towards a realistic democratic agenda’ (conclusion).
The Gray Panthers is another example of an organisation that has acknowledged the value of integrating various perspectives in the drive for cultural and social rights. The group’s website declares that ‘The Gray Panthers is a national organisation of intergenerational activists dedicated to social change. We are age and youth in action…Gray panthers work on multiple issues that include: Peace, Jobs for All, Housing, Anti-discrimination (ageism, sexism, racism)’ (‘Gray Panthers Information’). It is interesting to note the association that some organisations make between social and cultural rights and the concept of peace. Other examples include the United Nations Association of Australia’s ‘Media Peace Awards’ event which links the notion of ‘peace’ with the fair representation of groups (‘Media Peace Awards 2003’). The United Nations has also drawn an association between global peace and recognition of the rights and abilities of older people (‘International Year of Older Persons’, 1999). In addition, George Gerbner (1999) chose to declare the aims and philosophy of the Cultural Environment Movement in the journal ‘Peace Review’. Whilst in this case the issue of media violence may have been the dominant incentive to align the group’s aims with the concept of peace, there is arguably a deeper understanding of the word at play. ‘Peace’, according to the Oxford Dictionary, means ‘a state of harmony between people; freedom from civil disorder.’ The ageism, sexism and racism that the Gray Panthers are dedicated to eradicating distance people from each other and drive many to fight for equal rights – in this fundamental sense, ‘peace’ is not possible in a segregated environment.

Whilst the Gray Panthers and the Cultural Environment Movement have lobbied for fair representation of older people in the media from a wide agenda base that incorporates multigenerational issues, sexism, and peace amongst others, most of the
activist groups lobbying for older people’s social and cultural rights do so from a more narrow platform. Seniors’ organisations generally focus squarely on issues that have relevance to older people, and direct their resources towards educating older people, governments, business and the general public about age discrimination. U.K. groups focus particularly on influencing public opinion and government policy, U.S. groups on empowering older people to lobby effectively and Australian groups on promoting positive ageing through liaison with governments and business. In regard to media representation, all acknowledge that mediated ageism denies older people their cultural rights, with each country again addressing the issue from differing perspectives. U.K. groups have commissioned detailed research projects for wide audiences; U.S groups have commissioned reports, held seminars and provided strategies and education to empower older people, and in Australia, organisations have produced guidelines for journalists and worked with governments to establish media awards events. All of the strategies taken reveal a broad understanding of the relationship between cultural representation, social attitudes and the well being of seniors. However one criticism I would make is that Australian organisations – in a media climate that is particularly hostile towards older people – have not utilised aspects of U.K. and U.S. initiatives to more purposefully highlight and combat ageism in the media.

Media awards and guidelines confront or reward the media ‘in house’, with little publicity or wider community involvement. One key aim of Bronwyn Bishop’s ‘National Strategy for an Ageing Australia’ was to work towards informing the community about existing attitudes to ageing, and seeking to change these attitudes. There is little evidence in Australia, unlike in the U.S., that organisations are raising
'consciousness within the civic environment’, with most simply ‘chipping away bureaucratically at the policy agenda’, to again quote Blaikie (2002). Senior’s organisations and government bodies, alone or in co-operation, have devised many strategies to deal with negative media attitudes, with little apparent impact, and with few initiatives involving the inclusion of the wider public or encouraging older people themselves to be active lobbyists. Older people, for various reasons, have historically been difficult to rally to the cause of demanding equal rights – however U.S. strategies, which involve the wider community and encourage older people’s involvement, appear to have given older people’s social rights a high public profile. The Cultural Environment Movement in particular, which has based its demands for a fair media environment on human rights declarations, and drawn on wide community and intergenerational involvement, has raised the issue of mediated ageism into the civil rights domain. Whilst U.K. groups operate in a more benign, regulated media environment, major research reports which have been made widely available, also work to give the topic public prominence. In light of my research, which points to an ageist agenda within the ranks of marketers and TV producers in Australia, seniors’ organisations would benefit from combining their own strategies with U.S. and U.K. approaches in order to position the topic of mediated ageism more forcefully on the civil rights agenda.
CONTEMPORARY CITIZENSHIP: CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE MEDIATED CULTURAL ARENA

- A Modern Re-evaluation of Democratic Civil Society

The Oxford Dictionary defines civil rights as ‘the rights of citizens to political and social freedom and equality’ - ideals which are fundamental to democratic societies. However, Thompson (1999) considers the original model of democracy, derived from assemblies in classical Greece, to have little bearing on mass contemporary societies. The author questions the relevance of the traditional model of ‘publicness as co-presence,’ pointing out that the problem extends beyond the difficulties of scale ‘the development of communication media has created a new kind of publicness which is very different from the traditional conception of public life’ (p.236). According to Thompson, the public forum is now accessed from the confines of home, and the commercialisation and globalisation of the vast contemporary media has shifted the locus of concern about freedom of expression from the state to the corporation. The modern, pluralist view of democracy acknowledges this shift of power away from the individual and into the hands of various organisations, or ‘interest groups’, with some arguing that business interest groups dominate the political arena. Giddens (1989) has this to say ‘the interest groups referred to by pluralists….are not equivalent in their power. Business interest groups in particular usually have far greater sway over government policies than others...Business enterprise supplies an overall framework in the context of which political processes occur’ (p.311). In this environment, and perhaps of particular relevance to media corporations, Thompson (1999) warns ‘a laissez-faire approach to economic activity is not necessarily the best guarantor of freedom of expression, since an unregulated
market may develop in a way that effectively reduces diversity and limits the capacity of most individuals to make their views heard’ (p.239).

If ‘publicness’ is now principally occurring in a mediated space, and business corporations have a disproportionate influence on governance, then the role of the popular commercial media looms large. As mentioned earlier in chapter three, Hartley (1992) considers television to be a democratic arena, providing a space for the masses to have a voice and view the enactment of their everyday experiences. However, the nature of this ‘democratic’ space needs to be reviewed, with Thompson (1999), for example, pointing out that mediated publicness is non-dialogical ‘producers generally produce media messages for an indefinite range of potential recipients, and recipients generally receive these messages under conditions which do not enable them to respond, in any direct or discursive manner, to the producers’ (p.246). Whilst acknowledging the aspect of audience participation in shows like ‘Big Brother’ and ‘Australian Idol’, the predominantly one-sided mediated forum thus differs markedly from the original democratic ideal of participatory discussion. Talking with friends and family about programmes allows for a degree of involvement and discussion, but hardly constitutes a level of control or participation, and those denied fair representation are distanced further from proceedings. Thompson (1999) points to the connection between mediated publicness and ‘struggles for visibility’ in modern societies, and he posits the idea of ‘deliberative democracy’, where all individuals are able to formulate ‘reasoned judgements through the assimilation of information and differing points of view’ (p.255). Seeing the media as the principal means by which citizens can articulate views and acquire information, he writes ‘the cultivation of diversity and pluralism in the media is
therefore an essential condition of the development of deliberative democracy, not an optional extra’ (p.257).

The television medium provides few opportunities for viewers to articulate views, but as a principal forum for citizens to share experience and acquire information, the concepts of freedom of expression and association become relevant. Murdock (1999) contends the rights of expression involve the rights of listeners as well as speakers, and he highlights the argument that all deserve the freedom to have a sense of identity and belonging within a society which enables groups and individuals to be adequately recognised. The author goes on to ask the question, “But what if the construction of one identity requires the dismissal or denial of others?” (p.9). What immediately comes to mind in the context of this thesis is the popular media’s promotion of youth at the expense of the aged – the basic rights of expression and association are undermined for older viewers who are denied a sense of belonging to the ‘virtual citizenry’. Murdock (1999) writes that historically, the aims of major capitalist companies were antithetical to the extension of citizenship, and ‘if people were to become full citizens they had to have access to the material and symbolic resources that secured social inclusion and facilitated participation’ (p.10).

Governments responded by providing social welfare, and the provision of public service broadcasting addressed the need of the public to access information and entertainment without commercial bias and constraints (ibid). However, in Australia at least, it is the commercial networks which provide the virtual market square where most citizens ‘gather’, and this space fails to offer older people a sense of participation and social inclusion.
• **Ageism, Discrimination and Citizenship**

The term ‘ageism’ was coined by Butler in the late 1960s, and has been defined by two camps – structural and cultural. Phillipson (2002) describes structural ageism as focussed upon institutionalised discrimination ‘arising from the management of the economy in capitalist societies’, with low status ‘regarded as a characteristic of a public sphere devoted to the pursuit of profit and the maintenance of capital’ (p.46). Cultural ageism relates to ‘the internalisation of negative images about ageing, especially in relation to changes in the body’ (p.47). In essence, ageism can be seen as ‘the notion that people cease to be people, cease to be the same people or become people of a distinct and inferior kind, by virtue of having lived a specified number of years’ (ibid). Midwinter (1992) extends the concept of ageism when he points to society’s tendency to turn a blind eye to ‘favourable discrimination’, which, nevertheless, segregates older people:

An example of this might be concessions, whether these be...High Street bargains or half-price hairdos, cinema seats, ...or, most demeaning of all, ‘yesterday’s’ bread and cakes. Naturally these are seductive, especially where many old age pensioners are short of money. Yet they are divisive and certainly discriminatory. Were Pakistanis or Italians to be offered such treats, it might well be defined as illegal (p.3)

Central to this ‘discriminatory’ process is the cultural assumption that the retired or ‘pensioners’ are marginal to, and dependent upon, mainstream society.

It can be seen that social discrimination does not emanate exclusively from media images. Gerontological concerns about dependence, and governmental policies to ‘pension off’ older workers can also be described as ‘favourable discriminations’, which, nevertheless, serve to segregate and marginalise older people. In particular, the label *pensioner* is a pervasive tag given both individually and as a group
designation, and one which promotes a degree of cultural ageism, with its social connotations of powerlessness and reliance on others. Writing about the lack of militancy within older ranks, Midwinter (1992) states ‘certainly the pensioner ambience does not help. The inference of state charity militates against the proffering of undue criticism by its recipients, as does the insidious practice of concessions and cut-price offers’ (p.9). The popular media, however, is in a powerful position to counter both ‘favourable’ and ‘unfavourable’ discrimination through positive and adequate portrayals of older people. The provision of pensions, gerontological directives to age ‘successfully’, the promotion of concessions, or offers of cut-price stale bread all serve to paint a picture of older people as vulnerable and needy citizens. These are nevertheless understandable, even philanthropic positions, but when compounded by negative media images, a profound ethos of social marginalisation is projected. Whilst many people become marginalised from the system – through unemployment for example – few are as comprehensively disassociated from the social, economic and cultural mainstream as retired people, a disparate group unified by society’s response to biological decline.

Pervasive age discrimination detracts from positive and authoritative messages which seek to promote the ‘new reality’ of old age – that older people are valuable citizens who are ageing ‘successfully’ on many levels. Midwinter (1992) reports to the Carnegie Inquiry into the Third Age on media discrimination, and how the ‘new reality’ is compromised:

The way in which older people are portrayed (or, as some of the evidence suggests, not portrayed) by popular vehicles of communication has an extreme impact on the public and self-image of old age. To the extent that this is discriminating and disadvantageous, it mitigates against the hope that older people might be able to enjoy and participate in what might be termed
Midwinter goes on to ask if ‘a gap exists between the reality, the new reality, of old age, and the old perception of old age’, and whether the ‘gatekeepers of the communications systems are playing back to their listeners, readers and viewers an outworn but quickly recognised image’ (p.18). The ‘new reality’ of old age is based on the premise that all can age successfully, utilising recommendations for physical and psychological health in lifestyles based on activity and engagement. The shared experience of older people is, perhaps, as profoundly marked by these authoritative directives and social expectations as the negative images projected by the media, creating parallel yet conflicting cultural assumptions – society suggests older people are at once in control of their destiny, and simultaneously, socially impotent.

Midwinter (1992) considers a ‘reasonable’ representation of older people in the media to be essential to ensure a sense of integrated citizenship, but considers regulatory mechanics for quotas as ‘synthetic’, favouring guidelines and codes of practice to encourage fair representation. He cites the code of practice developed by The Centre for Policy on Ageing in the U.K., for broadcasters and journalists to avoid age discrimination – the ‘ABC and D of good usage’. In part these are as follows:

A…AGES : It should be accepted that, for most purposes, actual ages are poor indicators of personality, temperament, ability or almost anything else

…Chronological age should never be quoted in the press or on the media unless some assured relevance attaches to so doing

B…BALANCE : It should be accepted that certain characteristics, for good or ill, are no more likely to be exhibited by older as opposed to other people

 Older people
should be represented in a balanced manner, that is, by and large, exhibiting the same mix of qualities and characteristics as the population at large

C…CONCEPT: Very importantly, the press and media should grasp and make manifest their comprehension of the new reality and understanding of older age …Those working in the press and broadcasting should first…acquaint themselves more clearly with the new reality and understanding of old age, and, second, utilise that concept as a frame of reference for their own work in this field

D…DISPLAY: It is generally accepted that, for many reasons, social, cultural and practical, older people are not as visible in the newspapers, on the radio and on the screens as, pro rata, they should be…Those working in the press and broadcasting should regularly check, in preparing material for dissemination, against the touchstone of a large proportion of the population being in this age group (p.26-27).

The efficacy of codes of practice and guidelines is debatable, and may depend on the context and setting, and the support of media regulatory bodies. Television producers have long argued that they reflect the views and values of society, and in this light, legislation in the form of age discrimination laws may add clout to guidelines and codes. However, interestingly, age discrimination laws – which would ostensibly indicate a society’s rejection of any discrimination on the grounds of age – seem to have little bearing on how older people are represented in the media, pointing to media regulatory bodies as the more powerful arbiters of media activity. Whilst an analysis of Australian-produced programming and advertising indicates widespread age discrimination, the 2003 Age Discrimination Bill is touted as leading the world. ‘The development of comprehensive national age discrimination legislation, that protects persons of all ages in a range of areas of public life, puts
Australia at the forefront of international initiatives to eliminate age discrimination’
(Attorney-General’s Department, 2004). In contrast, the U.K. is in the process of
formulating legislation to comply with a European Standard (by 2006), which will
only relate to employment issues; similarly, U.S. legislation, enshrined for many
years, only relates to discrimination in employment. The Australian national Age
Discrimination Bill is based on input from a ‘Core Consultative Group’, comprising
a range of community organisations, and public response to an ‘Information Paper’.
The Bill deals with discrimination against both younger and older Australians, in
cultural and social, as well as economic contexts, broadening the scope of the Human
Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission with wide-ranging powers.

The legislation is linked to the National Strategy for an Ageing Australia, with the
Attorney-General’s (2004) memorandum advising that

as with the development of age discrimination legislation, the
Strategy recognises that all Australians, regardless of age, should
have access to employment, training, education, housing,
transport, cultural and recreational opportunities, and care services
appropriate to their diverse needs, and be able to participate fully
in the cultural, social and economic life of Australia (p.4)

Whilst the U.S., and impending U.K. legislation applies to productive older people
and their rights in the workplace, Australian legislation is more wide reaching, and
could be applied in various contexts. The legislation contends all Australians should
‘be able to participate fully in the cultural, social and economic life of Australia’,
which, when seen from a media perspective, can be interpreted as the right of all to
be fairly represented, socially visible and acknowledged as valuable to the system.
Even though often labelled ‘non-productive’ or ‘dependent’, all older people are
consumers, and contribute at some level – many do voluntary work, many have
investments and capital tied up in homes, and those in care generate work and profit
for those in the industry. The Australian Age Discrimination Bill is important because it recognises the worth of non-working older people, and the rights of those considered to be ‘non-productive’. In essence, the ‘new reality’ of old age is more fully recognised.

- **Social Rights and the ‘Non-Productive’ – From Global to Institutionalised Senior Citizens**

Phillipson (2002) offers perhaps the ideal scenario to ensure the ‘new reality’ of old age is recognised, and all experience equal rights, when he suggests older people would benefit from the idea of ‘cosmopolitan citizenship’. Proposed by Delany (2000) as a contrast to national citizenship, Phillipson considers it an important philosophical idea which

offers the basics for combining concerns about social exclusion with ideas about new social roles for older people...political communities should widen their ethical horizons until the point is reached where no individual or group interest is systematically excluded from moral consideration. Such an approach would challenge the construction of old age as a form of ‘otherness’, a central feature behind ageist stereotyping (p.55)

If ethical horizons may take time to shift, ‘physical’ horizons are rapidly expanding as national sensibilities blur in the face of globalisation. According to Phillipson (2002), there are shifts in the idea of national citizenship which indicate a move towards transnational agendas, with a redefinition based on universal human rights. He calls for a ‘postnational’ model of citizenship in light of this new era of globalisation, and reminds us that ‘ageism’ was defined with reference to identity rooted in national histories, with citizenship ‘the internal or domestic face of nationality’ (p.50). However, the agenda of transnational corporations has a variable impact on older citizens.
Transnational organisations promote both human rights and the capitalist agenda – from a positive viewpoint, the U.K. government has been forced to comply with a European Union directive and provide legislation to outlaw age discrimination in the workplace. Conversely, according to Phillipson (2002), globalisation can restrict the development of social welfare, and global finance can restrain political agendas, with the author warning ‘there is the danger of a new ageism driven by the agendas of transnational forums seeking to enhance private markets’ (p.52). Whilst the idea of ‘cosmopolitan citizenship’ based on universal human rights has broad appeal, market-driven agendas indicate an ongoing place for the concept of ‘national citizenship’, where nations protect people from the negative repercussions of unilateral corporate zeal, to ensure the social welfare of citizens. Right and Left views on the issue of social welfare are noted by Murdock (1999) – according to radical liberals ‘the social entitlements of citizenship are as important a consideration of progress as the opportunities for choice which require entrepreneurial initiative and an innovative spirit’. Conservatives counter with the argument that ‘the civic or social virtues…may well undermine the ‘vigorous virtues’ associated with the free-market – self-reliance, self sufficiency, entrepreneurship, ambition – and so weaken the essential conditions of personal freedom’ (p.8). This Right wing reduction of citizenship to buying and selling leaves little room for those without the vigour to jostle in the marketplace, and might explain why many Western commercial TV corporations have such disdain for older citizens.

In light of the ‘free-market’ diminution of social equity and welfare concerns, and the contemporary role of the popular media as both a market and civic forum, it can be argued that the promotion of civil and social rights is compromised. Whilst the
state enacts laws and devises policies to promote social rights and responsibilities, it is the media which contextualises these in reports and dramatisations. Murdock (1999) sees television as the ‘pivotal theatre of discourse’ which engenders civic involvement ‘the fact that the relationship between liberties and loyalties, rights and responsibilities are matters of continuing contrast makes the organisation of television central to the constitution of contemporary citizenship’ (p.8). From this perspective, the democratic rights of citizens need to be considered from the vantage point of the mediated market square. Murdock (1999) lists the four basic sets of cultural rights that support full citizenship:

1. **Right to Information**… Citizens have rights of access to the widest possible range of relevant information about...the actions, motivations and strategies of significant social, political and economic actors

2. **Rights to Experience**… Citizens have rights of access to the greatest possible diversity of representation of personal and social experience

3. **Rights to Knowledge**… Access to information and experience offers ‘thick descriptions of the world’, and ‘structures of feeling’ based on empathy and the capacity to view the world through other people’s eyes

4. **Rights to Participation**… (people are) Demanding the right to speak about their own lives and aspirations in their own voice, and to picture the things that matter to them in ways they have chosen. These claims to participation in the making of public meaning raise difficult issues of representation (p.11-12).

Viewing these cultural rights from the perspective of retired people, it becomes apparent that commercial TV in Australia provides very little in the way of social capital to engender a sense of integrated citizenship. Whilst ostensibly providing
information and opportunity for experience, knowledge and participation, a closer view reveals a degree of superficiality. In relation to the ‘rights to experience’, access to the ‘greatest possible diversity of representation’ is denied, with youthful characters dominating TV screens. Similarly, the ‘rights to knowledge’, which should enable viewers the opportunity to ‘view the world through other’s eyes’, is likewise limited to primarily youthful vistas. In particular, the ‘rights to participation’ – where citizens demand the opportunity to speak about their lives and to be represented in the cultural domain – are manifestly lacking in view of the disregard of older people by commercial TV producers. Murdock (1999) cites Dahlgren’s (1995) view of the responsibilities of producers and the role of television:

> It must demolish the accepted divisions between mass and minority, mainstream and margins, and develop forms of representation, participation and scheduling that promote encounters and debates between the widest possible range of identities and positions. It must draw continuously on the domains of advocacy developed by particular social groups and movements, and bring ‘dialogic, contesting voices’ into the centre of the common domain (p.16)

In this way, TV might become a truly democratic forum, and the social and cultural rights of older people to be seen, heard and respected would be acknowledged.

Having said that, Midwinter (1992) considers the assumption that older adults deserve respect as itself ageist ‘either all persons should be respected or, from the other angle, all persons should earn respect: the notion that...people are entitled to respect, solely on account of age is ageist in the extreme’ (p.5). However, the ‘lack of respect’ for older people, which is palpably exposed on Australian commercial TV in particular, emanates not from a considered judgement of worthiness, but from a dismissal of leisured, pensioned lifestyles seen as anathema to ‘free-market’ values. Indeed, producers and advertisers accord most respect to high earning and spending
younger people without moral judgement – a similarly ageist assumption of worth. Working consumers have a ‘prestigeful’ place in Western societies, and older people needing social support, and with ‘non-productive’ lifestyles are often considered a burden. Australian popular TV fare reflects this view by ignoring or denigrating the lifestyles and activities of retired people, and by giving detailed attention to the minutia of young people’s lives. Quite obviously, respect for older viewers needs to be accorded less for longevity than for recognition of the cultural rights and social worth of those not in the work force, to encourage fair representation.

A dismissal of the ‘leisured’ lifestyles of older people creates a sense that valid citizenship is associated with working nine to five. However, while leisure is associated with freedom from obligation, relaxation and contemplation, this need not relate to stagnation. The freedom to spend time considering day to day events, or to reminisce – often denied busy working people – may enhance a sense of social involvement and place in history. Klieber and Ray (1993) consider that leisure also offers opportunities beyond the contemplative, and they emphasise socially integrative and generative characteristics. ‘The leisure (schole) of Plato and Aristotle was the context in which citizens sought to cultivate the civility necessary to exercise the rights of citizenship most responsibly and effectively’ (p.114-115). Even those least able to exercise their rights as citizens – those in care due to advanced old age and frailty – can utilise leisure time to engage with society, and overcome boundaries to the outside world. Unruh (1983) writes:

A social world’s population is not restricted by where people are physically located…what does matter is where their attention is directed and from where personal identity is derived…For social worlds…the crucial determinant of boundaries is the cognitive identification of the people involved. If individuals perceive themselves as integrated, are viewed by others as such, or
engage in actions that link them into the concerns of a social world, then they are at least marginally integrated (p.32-33)

In the final chapter, I examine the role of television in the nursing home, and how it might influence the ‘social world’ of the most marginal citizens.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

DISEMPOWERED CITIZENS: TV AND CONTRACTED SOCIAL WORLDS

The frail aged may experience a compelling sense of social disconnection and impotence when homes, local communities and established lifestyles are relinquished in the move to a managed care environment. Many freedoms are lost as formally independent citizens place their lives into the hands of authoritative figures who plan and structure new, dependent lifestyles which are managed to ensure standards of care, creating an efficient yet isolating and disempowering environment. Goffman (1961) describes the nature of total institutions – including nursing homes – which all segregate people from the outside world. ‘Their encompassing or total character is symbolised by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, (and) high walls’ (p.15). In addition to the physical reality of confinement, the author goes on to describe the day to day lifestyles of inmates, which are marked by loss of control:

Each phase of the member’s daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together…all phases of the day’s activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials (p.17)

It is within this regimented setting that I would like to explore the role of television in the day to day lives of older people in care, and argue the rights of residents to full access to the medium, and opportunities to see older people portrayed as valid and valued citizens.
• **Television as a Means to Retain Control and Mastery for Institutionalised Older People**

Whilst only 7 per cent of retired people overall are in care, this figure rises to 31 per cent of people aged 85-94, and 58 per cent of those aged 95 and over (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4109.0, 1999). This represents a significant percentage of the oldest old, and supports the need for an investigation into how television might influence positive ageing in this group. Hajjar (1998) sees the role of TV in the nursing home as a topic that has been virtually ignored, and she writes that

> while medical care has taken precedence in the design and operation of nursing facilities, the social needs of long-term care residents have received much less attention. Television has slipped into this void, and television use has become the single most prevalent activity, a situation that is met with a kind of reluctant acceptance by most caregivers (p.1)

The author interviews and observes several frail inmates of a nursing home in the U.S., presenting intimate observations of how television shapes and influences daily life. A recurrent theme is the use of TV for mastery and control over an environment with little scope for decision-making, privacy and self-expression. Examples include ‘Eileen’, who gains status through her ability to converse about current topics of interest ‘the knowledge she gathers from her news consumption…allows her to spend much of her day engaged in conversation’ (p.72). Residents create bonds with each other through shared viewing activities, and conversely, are able to signal to roommates the need for some quiet personal time by switching on a favourite programme.

In addition to television’s ability to provide both the means to engage with others and organise private time, it also provides a key means by which institutionalised people can deflect the omnipresent scrutiny of authoritative figures. Foucault (1980)
describes the medical gaze as ‘the visibility of bodies, individuals and things under a system of centralised observation’ (p.146). Drawing on the concept of Bentham’s ‘panopticon’, Foucault sees those under medical care as residing in a prison-like environment, where patients are under constant surveillance and rendered powerless by the authoritative gaze of powerful overseers (p.147). Hazim (2002) argues that Goffman and Foucault’s views of the institution have less relevance in contemporary times, where nursing home ‘inmates’ have become residents, clients and citizens. He writes ‘in other words, while the walls of incarceration remain, their impregnability weakens and the line dividing those inside from those outside becomes finer and blurred’ (p.208). Nevertheless, the physical constraints of institutions, the loss of power and subjection to scrutiny remain features of confinement regardless of the designation of older people as ‘inmates’ or ‘clients’. One way residents can assuage Foucault’s bleak assessment, and ‘blur’ the line between institutional walls and the outside world, is to employ the services of television. TV can be seen as a principal means by which those in institutions can achieve a degree of control over their environment and counteract the ubiquitous gaze of overseers, by providing a ‘panopticon’ to survey the outside world. The watched can become the watchers, with their own means of surveillance and opportunities for knowledge gathering and observation. The colloquialism of TV as ‘a window on the world’ has particular resonance for institutionalised older people.

The use of television as a surveillance tool is highlighted by Winick (1988), whose survey of the role of TV in everyday life reveals a marked dependence on the medium, primarily for surveillance of the outside world. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Winick’s survey – which sought to assess the reactions of 1,614 people in the U.S.
whose televisions had broken down – found retired people and the socially isolated responded particularly negatively to life without TV. For some respondents, the loss of their television was a particularly painful experience, with 24 per cent experiencing ‘extreme discomfiture akin to the reaction of mourning after the death of a beloved person’ (p.222). In addition, 39 per cent experienced substantial disruption with anxiety and unhappiness, and 29 per cent experienced moderate disruption – only 8 per cent experienced little disruption. The six basic functions served by television to account for this sense of loss were found to be, in order of importance: 1. Surveillance and information 2. Relaxation 3. Conversation 4. Social cement 5. Punctuation of the day and week 6. Companionship. The surveillance function was especially important for two groups: those who spent most of their time at home, and those whose occupation brought them into contact with others (223-224). The inference here is that those in isolation needed a link with the outside world, and those who had contact with others could use information garnered from programming to stimulate conversation. Those in nursing homes are at once socially isolated and in close contact with fellow residents, and so may benefit particularly from the surveillance/information function of TV, which facilitates a sense of integration, both with the outside world and within the institution.

A narrow definition of the concept of ‘social integration’ is criticised by Unruh (1983) who questions the propensity for gerontologists to focus on numbers of resources, friends, relatives and involvement in social activities. The author believes these pointers fail to indicate the level of social integration of nursing home residents, and he asks ‘are there group memberships and social roles that are not impeded by institutional walls?’ (p.26). While not assessing the role of television,
Unruh indicates the integrative aspects of solitary, yet socially involved activities, reporting that his study found that ‘a social world was defined as an extremely large, highly permeable, amorphous, and spatially transcendent form of socialisation wherein actors are linked cognitively through shared perspectives arising out of common channels of communication’ (p.176). His study sought to assess the integrative aspects of various hobbies which older people engaged in, leading him to theorise that the notion of social integration can transcend the narrow association of socialisation with personal contact. The hobbies assessed included art appreciation and the collection of various objects, where seniors could follow the views and exploits of others through hobby magazines and journals. Not all older people have the economic or physical ability to engage in the ‘high investment’ activities surveyed by Unruh; however, most can utilise the television to survey their world and experience ‘shared perspectives arising out of common channels of communication’. Television provides the most ubiquitous and egalitarian means by which those who are isolated and physically dependent can retain a sense of social inclusion, or ‘mastery’ over contracted social worlds.

This capacity for television to broaden contracted social worlds and to provide a measure of control is documented by researchers who have looked at TV’s role in both prisons and hospitals. Lindlof (1986), in an examination of the use of mass media in correctional institutions, found that ‘media provide one of the few means by which residents…can exercise personal control in promoting interpersonal communication bonds or disengaging from them’ (p.353). Speculating on the reasons for high media use, and writing from Blumler’s (1979) perspective, Lindlof observes that ‘media dependencies may compensate for the deprivation of normal
expressive outlets. In incarceration, media use might satisfy inmates’ persisting cognitive-affective needs by stimulating the intimacy of their former community, by relieving isolation, or simply by introducing varieties of stimuli into a mostly unchanging environment’ (p.343). Television use was also high in a survey of 128 hospitalised patients by Rubin and Rubin (1981), who found patients utilised the medium to create links with the outside world, structure the day and relieve loneliness. As in the prison survey, the social isolation of confinement created a strong desire for mental stimulation, and a connection with those beyond institutional walls who had become estranged. ‘The confined, isolated situation seemed to produce needs to fill time and to keep in touch with the outside environment’ (p.10). Interestingly, Rubin and Rubin’s research led them to the conclusion that it is not chronological age that determines how and why TV is used, but the ‘communication, social and psychological context in which individuals reside’ (p.3). They theorise that age per se is not the factor that predisposes older people to become heavy users of media, but constraints, social worlds and particularly confinement, predispose people in general to turn to the media in order to re-engage with the outside world.

At the heart of television’s capacity to provide a meaningful link with the outside world, for older people in confinement in particular, is the concept of control. Langer and Piper (1988) consider TV to be an important tool for older people to gain a degree of mastery over their environment, but emphasise the need for mindful control ‘television is good or bad…depending on how we view it. Television can be a mindful, creative process that provides food for thought, or it can be a substitute for thought’ (p.252). Langer and Piper go on to point out that mindless activities can be harmful to health and self-esteem, and that mindful TV viewing – which requires
both choice and control – has been shown to have positive benefits (p.258). The benefits of choice and control include stress reduction, improved task performance, and an increase in self-confidence from opportunities for manipulation of objects. From an older person’s perspective, Langer and Piper (1988) describe how many live in environments ‘that have already been mastered’, where there are few opportunities to experience control. In their research in nursing homes, it was found that encouraging participants to make seemingly unimportant choices, like choosing a film to watch, resulted in ‘important improvements in intellectual and physical functioning’ (p.248). The authors praise television’s ability to provide opportunities for control ‘if simply being free to choose among random events results in an increase in self-confidence, then it is not hard to imagine how deciding carefully which of various television programmes to watch may lead to benefits’ (p.249). The physical and psychological benefits of ‘mindful’ viewing would be facilitated by the provision of televisions in rooms, programme guides, communal film sessions, and the provision of cable services to broaden choices.

The benefits of wide-ranging television services are highlighted by Riggs’ (1998) investigation into a U.S. retirement village. Whilst residents in her survey were unconfined, active retired people, their discerning use of free-to-air and cable TV was empowering on several levels which could apply to many older people in care. Benefits included mastery and control, the means to create bonds with others and the self-esteem that ensued from being informed about events. On a more profound level, ‘mastery’ involved not only the physical ability to manipulate a device and access desired programming, but also the ability to ‘master’ the realities of time and space. Riggs (1998) speculates that the participants of her survey used TV to create
an ‘alternative reality’, which was not anchored in the reality of time’s linear movement from past to future (p.95-96). Residents demonstrated a desire to live in the present ‘many used non-fiction television to participate in a community discourse that unfailingly privileged the present. They believed they ‘witnessed’ reality every day…Through television they felt unbound by geographical restrictions and more a part of the national community’ (ibid). With TV able to offer the means by which people can master the existential restrictions of old age, then the value of ‘watching TV’ in the physical confines of the institution must be magnified and needs to be adequately acknowledged. A leisure activity which is seen by many as requiring little physical or emotional investment may play a much more significant role than generally perceived.

- **Leisure in Confinement – The Value of ‘Low Investment’ Activities**

Hajjar (1998) writes that television use has long been seen as a second-rate substitute for face to face interaction, and that media theorists have often portrayed high media use as ‘solitary, unidimensional and problematic – a symptom of an unhealthy style of interaction’ (p.135). This view appears to be reflected in the attitudes of gerontologists and policy-makers, who generally consider TV viewing to be a ‘low investment’ activity. A review of an Australian government-sponsored handbook, which lists suggested activities for institutionalised older people, projects an underlying sense that television has little value. The handbook, titled ‘Recreation in Nursing Homes, Hostels and Day Care Centres – Ideas for Recreation and Leisure Activities’ (1992) lists a comprehensive range of suggested leisure pursuits, under headings such as ‘intellectual pursuits’, ‘social pursuits’, and ‘entertainment’ (Department of the Arts, Sport, The Environment and Territories). No mention is
made of the use or value of TV; indeed the introduction uses television to help paint a bleak picture of nursing home life which can eventuate when meaningful activities are not offered. ‘Their daily existence consists of facing the centre of a room, waiting. Waiting for television programmes…waiting for lunch, waiting for visitors that often don’t come, waiting for dinner, waiting for bed, waiting for death’ (p.2).

No mention here of the pleasurable anticipation of waiting for a favourite TV programme, or the social and intellectual value of the viewing process, only a sense of the futility of the exercise. This dismissal of the television medium would also seem to contradict later governmental recognition of the role of the popular media in the lives of older people, in the wake of the International Year of Older Persons (see chapter eight).

However, interestingly, the introduction goes on to give examples of residents whose needs were not adequately met, and we are told of the frustration of one woman who moved to a nursing home and was unable to watch her favourite TV programme because of rigid care routines. It is worth recording the example in full because it seems to contradict the book’s overall implied message that television viewing has little value:

Mrs. Zimmerman was a longtime fan of ‘A Country Practice’, and never missed an episode at home. Until the leisure profile was completed no-one had known this and she had not felt able to ask to watch it as people were always put to bed before then. When this information became known, Mrs. Zimmerman and two other residents who also liked watching TV in the evenings, were taken to the television room so they could view this programme. To cater for this they were put at the end of the bed list in the evenings and mornings. Friends and relatives began to drop in to watch these programmes and discuss these and other events with the residents. It has provided a focus for their conversation and has renewed an activity which gives them much enjoyment (p.9)
This would seem to graphically illustrate the far-reaching benefits of mindful television use, yet none of the subsequent and detailed descriptions of suggested activities include the use of media. All could be described as ‘high investment’ activities which require physical and mental exertion. Leisure activities have long been segregated into ‘high investment’ and ‘low investment’ pastimes, a rigid distinction which has encouraged the promotion of the obvious benefits of productive activity in the nursing home, but which has designated TV viewing as ‘unproductive’ and ‘passive’, and therefore of limited value.

Social scientists have conflicting views on the nature of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ activities, and many question the ability of observers to categorise subjective experience. Mannell (1993) describes the opposing viewpoints of social observers:

There are those who feel that the leisure and cultural behaviour of individuals and groups is simply a difference in lifestyle reflecting social values and choices and that social scientists should remain value free…on the other hand, there are those who argue that certain forms of leisure and cultural behaviour are better because they are exploratory and creative…and are superior in engaging the human intellect and engendering quality of life (p.126)

The author considers ‘high investment’ activities to be those which require ‘effort, skill, and which result in an enhanced sense of competence and worth – they involve commitment and obligation and discipline’ (p.127). In addition, these activities are associated with a sense of ‘flow’, where attention is focussed and centred on the task at hand. There is a loss of self-consciousness, feelings of control over actions and environment, and a momentary loss of anxiety, which is replaced by enjoyment (p.131). However, Katz (2000) criticises Mannell’s (1993) promotion of ‘high investment’ activities as superior ‘the overall message Mannell…gives is that virtuous commitment to high investment activities wins over pleasurable less
committed pursuits’ (para 10). Nevertheless, if we are guided by Mannell’s
description of ‘high investment’ activity, it can be argued that television viewing can
contribute to ‘quality of life’, ‘engage the human intellect’, and certainly produce a
sense of ‘flow’, even though it is considered a ‘passive’ activity. Significantly, Katz
goes on to challenge the overriding perception that ‘bodies, to be functional, must be
busy bodies’ (para 20).

There are echoes here of the capitalist/protestant ‘work ethic’. The need to fill time
with meaningful, productive activity provides the underlying ethos of managed care
facilities, a mindset that encourages the nomination of ‘passive’ activities as ‘low
investment’. However, the Federal government ‘Standards for Aged Care Facilities’
(1999) provides for subjective choice in the leisure pursuits of residents, and
documents the rights of those in care to retain control over activity choices. To quote
from the regulations – in relation to leisure interests ‘residents are encouraged and
supported to participate in a wide range of interests and activities of interest to them’,
with policies and practices providing ‘that individual interests and needs are
identified, documented and acted upon’ (standard 3.7). From the perspective of
independence ‘residents are assisted to achieve maximum independence…(and)
participate in the life of the community within and outside the residential care
service’, with policies and practices providing ‘identification of each resident’s
individual interests and preferences’ (standard 3.5). Whilst there is provision here
for the pursuit of favoured ‘passive’ activities, it is perhaps understandable that care-
giving practices favour the promotion of productive activity – practices that follow
’successful ageing’ guidelines (Rowe and Kahn, 1997). Governments and care
facilities have embraced ‘successful ageing’ in an effort to ensure older people’s
physical welfare, and to be seen as pro-active. However, successful ageing’s particular emphasis on the value of productive and active pursuits has created an environment that can be seen as overemphasising the benefit of physical activity on health outcomes.

In reality, studies reveal a complex interrelationship between mind and body in the health outcomes of older people, with evidence suggesting that social activities can confer the same kind of physiological health benefits as physical exercise. A study by Glass et al (1999), and reported in the British Medical Journal, found that whilst physical activity conferred benefits in relation to mortality rates, social activities conferred equivalent survival advantages. They note ‘this observation is important because it suggests that activities that entail little or no physical exertion may also be beneficial’ (para 16). This complex interrelationship of mind and body would indicate the need for greater recognition of the value of ‘low investment’ activities which may nevertheless provide substantial and far-reaching benefits for health and well being. Glass et al (1999) conclude their report by observing that the link between survival and social activity ‘has important implications for public policy and clinical practice…Among people in institutions these results suggest the importance of alternative programmes of activity as a complement to exercise programmes’ (para 23). The television medium can be seen as one important means by which institutionalised older people can enhance social worlds, particularly for those with mental or physical impairment which would impede physical activity. Less able residents would benefit from TV’s ability to provide ‘virtual mobility’, and entry into alternative social worlds, providing diversion and variation for those with restricted autonomy.
‘Removal activities’ may positively influence the physical and mental health of those unable to benefit from structured activities in care, according to Voelkl (1993). Removal activities are seen as those which remove people from their concerns and surroundings, and may have particular value for those whose lives have become restricted by physical dependence or dementia. Voelkl reports that many nursing home residents are frail or mentally impaired, and quotes U.S. health statistics which reveal 85 per cent of residents needing assistance with daily living – 89 per cent of these require help with bathing, 75 per cent with dressing, 60 per cent with ambulation, 49 per cent with toileting and 39 per cent with eating (p.233). Quite obviously, personal care routines would become organised and lengthy processes leaving little time for privacy or diversionary activities. Voelkl (1993) also reports that 43.3 per cent of residents have dementia, and she questions the value of organised pursuits for these residents, pointing to Carstensen and Erikson’s (1986) survey, which found that structured social activities resulted in ‘nonsensical and unreciprocated’ interaction (p.241). Mentally impaired individuals preferred to engage in low activity pursuits such as watching TV, an observation that echoes Hajjar’s (1998) case study findings. In her study of the use of TV in a nursing home, one participant had dementia, and watched a great deal of television. ‘Smiling and relaxed in her demeanour, she appears to take greater pleasure from the television than she does from her interactions with people. Perhaps this is because the conversational demand is low, and little response is required of her by the television set, which does not judge her deficits’ (p.79-80). It can be seen that television has a complex role in contributing towards ‘success’ in the day to day lives of nursing home inmates.
It may be that the concept of ageing ‘successfully’ needs to be reassessed in relation to those in care. Gerontological and governmental prescriptions to age positively, through physical activity and social interaction, have less relevance when institutional and physical limitations present impediments to achieving success in the prescribed manner. Loss of autonomy and physical and mental detriment may create an ethos of failure in the nursing home, where the culturally accepted view of ageing well has been derailed. Rowe and Kahn’s (1997) recipe for success carries with it the implied message that dependency equals failure – critical gerontologists have responded by calling for a redefinition of ‘success’ which incorporates the experiences of the oldest and disabled old (von Faber, 2001; Minkler and Fadem, 2002). In a recent essay, Holstein and Minkler (2003) query the alignment of successful ageing with productive activity and an active social life, with the implication of failure for the disabled or dependent. ‘This exaggerated emphasis on the degree to which we can control the body contributes to and denies older people with functional limitations…the dignity of their struggle to accept what they cannot change’ (para. 35). For those in care who are disempowered both by confinement and cultural assumptions of failure, television can provide a multi-faceted means by which residents can achieve a degree of ‘success’ and adapt to social and physical restrictions.

- **The Multi-Functionality of Television in the Care Environment**

One pragmatic way that television can contribute to the adaptation process is by aiding the transition from independent to dependent living, through the continuation of media routines. TV provides perhaps the most universal means by which newly institutionalised older people can retain a sense of continuity in an alien
environment. The ability to make programme choices and retain established viewing practices may provide a sense of stability and predictability for those whose routines have been disrupted and who may be experiencing a sense of loss at the demise of former lifestyles. Chiriboga and Pierce (1993) surveyed the reactions of older people whose lives were disrupted, and found that many ‘sought stability…when change was forced upon them, their first consistent response was to re-establish a new life as close as possible to the old’ (p.58). This desire for continuity of lifestyle is perhaps rooted in the need for a sense of security when biological decline limits mental and physical capabilities. However, ‘continuity theory’ discounts the idea that older people are inherently averse to change, rather pointing to the idea that ‘people make decisions based on feedback from experience, about where it is best to focus their efforts to develop skills and knowledge. People select and develop ideas, relationships, environments and activities based on their personal concepts of desired developmental direction and available opportunity’ (Atchley, 1993). TV can provide opportunities for decision-making in a highly regulated environment, and perhaps most importantly, provide a sense of continuity as previous routines are transposed into an unfamiliar setting.

For many older people, watching the TV has become an embedded and long-standing activity which is itself highly adaptive to the ageing process. Chairs can be pulled up closer to the screen, sound switched up and channels changed with a remote control, providing an easily accessible and manageable activity for frail older people. In adapting to the social and physical constraints of decline and dependence, older people endeavour to select activities which they can still master, in a process that has been called ‘selective optimisation with compensation’.
Atchley (1993) sees this as the continuation of a life-long and purposeful desire to get the most out of life, even when faced with adversity:

> People do not simply accept decrement. They try to compensate for the change so that their level of functioning remains as intact as possible. Baltes, Wahl and Reichert (1991) contend that this model of selective optimisation with compensation could be used to maintain satisfying activity even among those who are severely disabled and living in a nursing home. Obviously, to implement this model, the person would have to employ some concept of continuity in the selection of activities to optimise (p.14-15)

As a long-standing activity that can be maintained in frail old age, TV use can compensate for reduced physical function and restricted social worlds. Even quite severely restricted nursing home residents can manipulate their environment to access alternative social worlds and to enhance their own social setting.

Hajjar’s (1998) case study highlights the deceptively complex role of TV in the nursing home setting, and the way it is deployed in circumstances of forced intimacy and curtailed freedoms. For example, when the need for privacy or quiet time overrides the need for companionship, higher functioning inmates are able to co-operate and co-ordinate with roommates by employing a ‘parallel’ style of media use, where one may pull a curtain across to allow the other to watch a programme privately (p.60). On the same note, Hajjar observes ‘the television is employed strategically to define the conversational space, both including and excluding interactants. The television serves the function…of managing intimacy in a confined area’ (p.75). More often, television consumption was seen to provide opportunities for conversation or discussion, with programming providing the raw material for sharing interests and experiences. ‘Sharing media preferences, consumption patterns and practices is a group phenomenon known as taste culture…or…and an interpretive community (and) members of a taste culture are likely
to share other perspectives…Thus it is within a taste culture…that meaningful interaction is likely to develop’ (p.18). Hajjar made note of the fact that TV viewing was often a shared experience, and even when a partner was less involved in viewing a programme, there were often times when they were drawn into the experience by cues from the viewer. The author termed this ‘hitchhiking’, where roommates engaged in the proceedings intermittently. It was noted that laughter was a particularly effective cue which drew in others ‘keen to share the pleasure’ (p.95).

In light of television and video’s capacity to provide humorous interludes, it is worth briefly noting the particular benefits of humour for older people in care. McGuire and Boyd (1993) explore the role of humour in later life, and advocate its use in nursing homes to provide challenge, stimulation and arousal, with the positive advantages of shared laughter providing a ‘message of vitality and communion’ (p.165). The authors assert that humour has been shown to diffuse anger and frustration, present new perspectives, lift mood and morale and help with adjustment to a new environment. An additional benefit is humour’s ability to encourage social interaction, an observation highlighted by a study at the Andrus Gerontology Centre at the University of Southern California. Researchers devised a programme called ‘Life Enhancement Through Humour in Long Term Care Facilities’, which sought to introduce a variety of humorous activities – including the showing of old TV comedies – to assess the outcome. McGuire and Boyd (1993) report that ‘among the behavioral changes observed were greater awareness among participants of each other…expression of more outgoing attitudes, increased socialisation (and) increased sense of humour in interactions with others’ (p.170). Quite clearly
humour has an important place in the care environment – however television’s capacity to facilitate communication and social bonding with others is not limited by genre.

The way nursing home residents utilise television as a socialisation tool is documented by Hajjar (1993), who describes how TV is used to establish a presence, or to make connections with fellow residents. One participant in her study, ‘Estelle’, for example, leaves the TV on at all times as a ‘partner’ to the projects in which she engages, with media routines not only helping to structure her day, but also serving ‘as markers to other people too, demonstrating her competence and control over her surroundings, and telling others that she engages in important activities that occupy her time’ (p.69). Another resident, ‘Clark’ is keen to make social connections, and speaks ‘emphatically about the role that media play in his social life, and expresses a desire to share other people’s interests. He is aware that he uses his media activities to create bonds between himself and others, especially with Charlie his roommate’ (p.81). Similarly, ‘Margaret’ is observed to incorporate TV into her breakfast routine with her roommate ‘which might otherwise be conducted in awkward silence. And television affords them both an opportunity to reminisce about common events in their separate pasts’ (p.43). It seems that television’s main function for nursing home residents – to allow the outside community into the institution – is complemented by its capacity to establish a cohesive internal community, by helping to provide opportunities for self expression and interpersonal interaction.

A positive communal atmosphere in the institution relies not only on opportunities
for residents to express their individuality and engage with others, but also for privacy. Hajjar (1993) writes that residents have little privacy, often living in shared rooms with frequent staff interruptions ‘the use of television to create private space is essential to many nursing home residents who cite (its) ability to drown out unpleasant sounds and transcend the immediate environment’ (p.105). Arguably, successful ageing for older people in care relies heavily on maximising opportunities for control over a highly supervised environment – from this perspective, TV can be seen as less the utilitarian time filler, as suggested by proponents of activity theory, and more an important medium which provides complex benefits. Hajjar (1993) calls for greater recognition of television’s positive role in care ‘media consumption should be valued more positively for its contributions to the quality of nursing home life…(which) should lead to the adoption of other therapeutic uses for media materials’ (p.141). One issue that Hajjar fails to address, and which must be highlighted in view of her conclusion, is how underrepresentation and ageist portrayals might impact on the well being of those watching from the confines of the institution.

• ‘Symbolic Devaluation’ – Implications For Well Being

An evaluation of character portrayals of the oldest old on commercial TV in Australia reveals a consistent association of frail old age with absolute dependence, pathetic obscurity or absurdity. Whilst rarely seen, the very old are almost invariably presented as objects of pity or ridicule, in a process that juxtaposes the insignificance of old age with the importance of youth (see a#13 and a#28 in Appendix I for example). The oldest old are clearly not considered to be ‘consumers’, and therefore rarely rewarded with positive portrayals. If this negative
cultural assessment of ageing is coupled with contrasting gerontological messages that equate successful ageing with productive and physically active lifestyles, then those in care – who can no longer be active consumers or active bodies – are profoundly marginalised. The adaptation process may help to overcome this to a degree, as dependent older people adapt to circumstances and redefine concepts of activity and consumerism. Unruh (1983) writes, for example, that older people in isolation can find a sense of meaning and social integration in simple tasks ‘the inclusion of consuming as an integrating activity is intended to acknowledge and legitimise the importance of watching, reading, listening and simply being an observer for integration into social worlds’ (p.107). Television, as a vehicle of consumption for frail older viewers, redefines them as consumers of the medium itself rather than as consumers of advertised goods. And it may be that institutionalised older people are not too concerned about the lack of products offered to older people, and the preponderance of youthful faces in advertisements. However, the use of older people as negative backdrops, and the overall message conveyed – that older people are foolish and irrelevant – creates an ethos of cultural devaluation which detracts from gerontological best practice for those in care, and may have an important influence on health and well being, despite the adaptation process.

An ability to adapt may enable people to tolerate unfavourable conditions, but may not be a good indicator of well being, according to Kahn and Juster (2002) who examined quality of life in relation to public and institutional attitudes. Whilst acknowledging the capacity of older people to adapt to adverse circumstances, they argue that ‘the debate between objective and subjective definitions of well being…is
mistaken; neither objective conditions nor subjective responses are sufficient; both are needed to understand the quality of life. The environment…and community in which people live…are essential determinants of the life they lead’ (conclusion, para. 1). The authors cite Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz’s (1999) proposal for five conceptual levels for consideration in research into well being: 1. External conditions 2. Subjective well being 3. Persistent mood level 4. Transient emotional states 5. Biochemical, neural bases of behaviour (para. 7). Television consumption may have an effect on all of these proposed markers for well being, and whilst acknowledging the ability of television to have a positive effect on the lifestyles of nursing home residents, the impact of negative aged portrayals must be factored into the equation. Graphically negative representations of old age, and messages that the very old are farcical or irrelevant, culturally devalue dependent older people in particular (see also programme roles p#26, p#38, p#39, Appendix 1). The adaptive process may be compromised by this cultural devaluation which would stymie the development of positive self-acceptance. Significantly, Kahn and Juster (2002) go on to report that in a national (U.S.) survey on well being, the need for self-acceptance was equally as important for young and old respondents (para 30).

Nolan (2001) calls for aged care professionals to acknowledge the importance of positive self-assessment in the promotion of successful ageing in the nursing home, seeing social acceptance as an important component of identity development and well being. Writing in the British Journal of Nursing, from the perspectives of ‘health-related quality of life’ and ‘person-centred care’, Nolan observes that increasing frailty and disability raises existential questions about how older people can construct a viable identity:
A crucial question for professional carers is how to support them in ways that do not undermine their self-identity and capacity for self-determination. Issues of personal identity and meaning should therefore figure prominently in debates about the legitimate goals of healthcare interventions in an ageing society, raising difficult questions about the ways in which ‘success’ is to be judged, and the evidence we use to judge it’ (para 28).

The author emphasises the need for an holistic approach to the assessment of well-being in the health-care system, where a curative medical model should be aligned with environmental initiatives which address ‘I am’ questions ‘concerning what gives life value and meaning, and what is necessary to sustain or recreate a sense of identity’ (para.33). Significantly, Nolan considers that these questions should be incorporated into a definition of ‘success’ if adequate person-centred care is to be achieved. ‘Successful ageing’ from this perspective demands an holistic view of well being which acknowledges the impact of cultural attitudes on identity development. In this light, television’s negative portrayal of older people detracts from the positive role TV plays in the nursing home setting, and may negatively influence health outcomes.

An holistic approach to ageing well is similarly promoted be Martinez (2003), writing from a cybernetic perspective. He emphasises the role of culture and cultural attitudes in the ageing process, and argues that a focus on the pathology of ageing fails to factor in the role of cultural milestones, or ‘biocultural portals’, such as status in the community, sense of empowerment vs helplessness, and retirement. Martinez illustrates his argument with the anecdotal observation that whilst a man in his early 60s in an industrialised culture is preparing to wind down into retirement, a Tarahumara Indian the same age in Mexico may be running 200 miles in a competitive sport which lasts several days. He writes ‘Tarahumaras, known for their
longevity, believe that growing older makes them stronger…Retirement is not one of their biocultural portals’ (para. 6). According to the author, there is a strong association between the mental and physical health of ageing people and ongoing cultural attitudes and expectations:

Cognition, biology and historical culture co-emerge in a bioinformational field that constantly seeks contextual relevance. Cognition and biology occur simultaneously as biocognition within a context of cultural history that can only yield heuristic data about the total experience. Rather than cognitive epiphenomena of biology, cultural beliefs are biocognitions that influence the health and ageing process of the believer (para.10)

A recognition of the importance of social and cultural environments in ageing well demands a critical review of the institutions and processes which inform society of what it means to be old.

A growing recognition of the need to extend the narrow focus of ageing research and care practices signals the need for a more intense scrutiny of the role of the popular media in the lives of the frail aged. Studies show that television has a role in the creation of cultural and personal histories, which may significantly influence social attitudes and personal identity (Gerbner, 1980, 1990; Harwood, 1997, 2002). In light of calls to take a more holistic view of older people’s well being in care, and to consider the role of cultural history on individual self-identity, the disturbing question needs to be raised as to whether a lifetime spent engaging with a youth-orientated and ageist medium might contribute towards poor self-esteem in old age, and by association, poor health outcomes. Martinez (2003) challenges the often narrow view in health circles that ‘ageing is a mechanistic dance between genetics, behaviour and physical environments (where) disease can be divided between medical and psychological, and where only some diseases can be affected by stress
and none are affected by cultural history’ (para.9). The author’s earlier anecdote, relating the differing cultural histories of Tarahumara Indians and Westerners, illustrates the influence cultural attitudes can have on physical and emotional states. It may be that Australian commercial television’s judgement of retired people – as defunct consumers who have reached an ‘endpoint’, or stage of irrelevancy – presents viewers with a scenario that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is a sobering thought that some of the older people in care, who are utilising TV to improve their environment and diminish physical constraints, are continuing to access a commodity that devalues them, and may have contributed to their poor health.
CONCLUSION

Commercial television in Australia projects an ethos of communal participation not generated in quite the same way by the less popular ABC, SBS and pay-TV channels. This sense of shared involvement and identity is promoted primarily by local content, in genres such as lifestyle, drama, sport, current affairs, chat shows and in telethons and community service announcements. Advertisements add to the ambiance, displaying locally available goods and services which demonstrate our lifestyle choices and shared aspirations. Commercial TV recruits armies of young, fresh-faced individuals to speak to us about these cultural stories, presenting us with exciting possibilities and ‘matter for concern’ – the virtues and vices displayed by the heroes and villains who inform our moral sensibilities. Much research, as reported here, indicates that individuals formulate views of the world and look to see themselves included in this showcase of humanity and national identity, and those least likely to see their reflection are the over 65s – primarily because marketers consider them to be irrelevant to their needs. This has translated into near invisibility and stereotypical portrayal of older people as reported in the U.S. and U.K., but shown here to be a particularly widespread feature of Australian commercial TV. A false mythology of age is generated that equates ageing with negativity and social disengagement. In contrast, older people are encouraged by gerontologists to age positively, and most remain interested in the same issues and concerns as their younger counterparts. However, as ‘wiser’ and less impulsive shoppers, they are dismissed from the main cultural arena and ‘family’ of consumers.
Many researchers in the U.S. have sought to address this social alienation by highlighting the value of older people – particularly ageing baby-boomers – as viable consumers. This strategy has been taken up by some of the government departments and seniors’ organisations in Australia, with business informed of the buying power and economic value of retired people. When I first began researching the topic of portrayal of the aged on TV, this seemed a unidimensional approach to the issue which focussed on marketers’ ‘bottom line’ – of more concern to me in a sociological analysis were the wider concerns about how cultural invisibility and negative stereotyping might impact on self-identity and well being. However, after comprehensively analysing the association between TV portrayal and positive ageing, from U.S., U.K. and Australian cultural perspectives, and later aligning results with civil rights issues, I have become convinced that advertisers’ acknowledgement and recognition of older people as viable consumers is critical to positive ageing outcomes. This is particularly the case in the U.S. and Australia where a deregulated, market-driven media environment does not encourage adequate and positive portrayal of minority groups and those deemed as marginal to the system. This thesis has demonstrated that the overriding economic concerns of commercial television translate into a hostile environment for older viewers in Australia, and concludes that in this climate, U.S.- style approaches to encourage recognition of older people as valuable consumers will have positive ramifications for health and well being, and create a more equitable cultural environment.

Not all researchers are enamoured of this authoritative push to ‘consumerise’ older people. As reported earlier, analysts such as Chadwick (1998) question the benefits of being addressed as consumers per se – as hosts of the ‘civic conversation’ there is
an expectation that TV producers should present a comprehensive, multi-faceted view of both society and the people watching the screen. However, commercial networks will always consider audiences primarily in economic terms, and in a poorly regulated climate, will give scant attention to social equity concerns. Commercial TV in Australia appears to have a particular bias towards youth, with worrying implications for people as they age and become ignored, even ridiculed by producers. If this ostracism can be remedied by convincing marketers to acknowledge retired people as valid consumers, then a prime source of cultural ageism will be eliminated. The intimate relationship that many of us have with television, and the popular commercial media in particular, means that most of us accept the term ‘consumer’ willingly from a capitalist system that provides us with much in return. Those of us who are young enough to be included in the consumerist fold are rewarded with positive reflections of ourselves, and those excluded are shunned and parodied. The label ‘consumer’ may not provide a multi-faceted view of who we are, but the term’s association with communal acceptance, status and social inclusion presents rich rewards for ‘consumerised’ TV viewers.

Older people’s exclusion from the ‘consumer fraternity’ translates into a widespread view of them as marginal, disconnected social members – at a time when it is widely accepted that ageing people need to remain socially engaged. Gerontological research in modern times points to the critical importance of positive self-acceptance and social integration, in tandem with active and productive lifestyles. At the same time, media research, particularly in the U.S. and now echoed here, reveals that older people are rarely portrayed from a ‘positive ageing’ perspective, with many portrayals actually working against these tenets. The implications of this cultural
alienation are manifold, and have been covered at length – low self-esteem, social
disengagement, limited opportunities to empathise with peers and observe inter-
group interactions, and negative views of ageing in the wider population. Not only
does ageing positively become difficult in this particular media-dominated
environment, but the wider population is denied knowledge of the ‘new reality’ of
ageing, thus sustaining negative cultural mythologies which have long been
discredited. This denial of the presence and lived reality of the population in the
Third and Fourth Ages presents issues in relation to morality, ethics and human and
civil rights, particularly in light of mounting evidence that cultural marginalisation
affects health and welfare (Nolan, 2001; Martinez, 2003).

Respect and acceptance in modern capitalist societies often comes from consumer
choices, and significantly from the recognition and status granted to us by those who
provide those consumer choices – primarily commercial TV channels. Most prefer
to watch the commercial networks in Australia, and many are dependent upon TV –
particularly after retirement – to make sense of a complex world and to understand
and empathise with others. We utilise television to fathom the complexities of life,
but in contrast, the popular media speak to us simply as consumers. Whilst there is
unease about the way the commercial media urge us to adopt a narrow materialistic
and individualistic lifestyle (Berger, 1991), a conundrum arises with the observable
truth that those not addressed in this way are denied opportunities to develop a
positive sense of self, and denied access to ‘in-group’ concerns and sensibilities.
Popular television promises the ‘world’ and has become our primary cultural arena
and showplace – yet in return we are only perceived as customers for advertised
goods, and ostracised if we don’t show the colour of our money. Younger people do
so more often, and are seduced with flattering and exciting portrayals, stories and products.

The ‘carnivalesque’ promises of celebration attract many to commercial TV’s fold, but then producers proceed to fraternise only with the young, leaving older viewers to listen in like uninvited gatecrashers. This is particularly the case in Australia, and has been reported widely in the U.S., leading to the conclusion that TV often works to circumvent authoritative prescriptions for positive ageing. The mediated view of old age is in direct opposition to gerontological advice, and ignores, even challenges the accepted view. This appears to emanate from marketers’ perceptions that older people have no status as consumers, a stance that translates into a negative view of older people per se. In Australian advertising this position extends at times to an agenda of ridicule, where older people are portrayed negatively in order to flatter and empower younger audiences. This results in an often hostile and confrontational media environment for the largest and most dependent TV audience demographic, whose members are forced to view the world through young people’s eyes, and to see themselves ridiculed and marginalised. As reported in chapter nine, older people have little opportunity to challenge cultural discrimination, with isolation, diversity and physical restraints impeding activism – clearly this group is particularly vulnerable to the machinations of powerful media interests, or indeed, ageism from any quarter.

The national Age Discrimination Bill would seem to offer support, recognising in part that ‘all Australians, regardless of age, should…be able to participate fully in the cultural, social and economic life of Australia’ (see chapter ten), yet commercial TV
organisations often fail to grant their older viewers this basic right. This is a state of affairs that has particular poignancy for the frail aged and those in care facilities who may have very limited opportunities to participate in the social, cultural and economic milieu in the accepted sense. Television offers a degree of unrestrained access to cultural stories, news, current affairs and information about consumer goods. Definitions of positive ageing, as established by gerontologists and explicated in the Age Discrimination Bill, need to be redefined to acknowledge the role of TV in providing links with the outside world. Television viewing is an important aspect of the adaptation process for many ageing people, helping to overcome the restrictions of deep old age. Yet by denigrating and alienating older viewers, they are denied a fundamental sense of participation in Australian life – the frail aged in particular are ostracised by ageism on TV.

In conclusion, the findings of this thesis suggest Australian regulations should stipulate that local content on commercial TV must portray older people in a realistically positive light – and this must extend beyond recognition of the middle-aged baby-boomer demographic. As reported in chapter eight, a similar proposal has been made during the Victorian ‘Ministerial Round Table’ (2002) discussion, where participants called for the Australian Broadcasting Authority to provide ‘a more sophisticated local content quota system that includes consideration of local programming that is inclusive of older people’ (p.3). In addition, a greater recognition of older people as valid consumers would raise the profile of seniors across the popular media. The ‘Commonwealth, State and Territory Strategy on Health and Ageing’ (2000) has suggested a link between healthy ageing and consumer status (p.15) – an observation that is supported by additional research.
reported in this thesis. Both tighter regulations and a wider acceptance of older
people as consumers would generate a more favourable image of age and ageing in
Australia, and help to address concerns about the impact of negative cultural
representation on positive ageing outcomes.
LIST OF PORTRAYALS AND EVALUATION RATIONALE

- portrayals marked with an asterisk are expanded analyses and denote those deemed the most positive or negative in the analysis period (3neg/3pos).

Programming

MORNING ‘CHAT’ SHOWS

P#1 (positive) * The Abswing…This advertorial is shown repeatedly with slight variations. In the most frequent versions, an older man ‘Mikey’ is seen demonstrating the fitness device alongside either a male or female in their twenties. Both work their devices which demand a significant amount of muscle power, and continue to do this throughout the segment which lasts for several minutes. Mikey appears to be in his late 60s, exudes a healthy, fit and active image, and is clearly able to keep up with his younger counterpart. In the version when Mikey is with a younger woman, he is asked by a young male host if the exercise has improved his golf swing, and he answers that it has improved his stamina on the course. Positive indicators here include the obvious visible signs of strength, endurance and dexterity, and also the subtle tableau of intergenerational exchange. The camera focuses on Mikey as much as on his young female counterpart, and Mikey speaks for a similar length of time about the benefits for him – he is accorded the same respect and interest. In the segment when Mikey demonstrates with a younger male counterpart, the scenario is very similar. A young female host comments that Mikey looks “very fit”, and that he loves using the equipment. Mikey responds “I do indeed, I’m not as young as I used to be, but I still love a good workout. The Abswing tightens my stomach muscles and I’m starting to feel good about the way I look”. The young male host replies, “You’re looking better every week, I’m not joking”. In this version, Mikey is the only one addressed. It seems that the advertisers are aware of their older audience on morning TV, and this recognition has translated into a positive view of the potential older male consumer. In one variation of the advertorial an older woman, also seemingly in her late 60s, is demonstrating the equipment. Here again the image is of a fit, active and involved older person who is ably utilising the product and projecting a trim, vital and energetic view of the older
female consumer. The comments of the young male host are less positive however – she is not invited to present her views on the merits of the equipment, and the host speaks rather to her young daughter who is also demonstrating the Abswing. “We’ve dragged your beautiful mum in to sit on the Abswing, she’s a bit of a spunk”. There is a patronising tone here which detracts from arguably the most positive view of older women seen in this analysis. And whilst Mikey is granted greater recognition, is seen more often and his views of the equipment are canvassed, his portrayal is not entirely positive. There is a similarly patronising tone in one version, when the host makes the observation that “Mikey’s doing a good job, he looks almost as fit as Darren!” (muscly young man seen in previous segment). This comment, and the flippant comments directed at the older woman’s daughter, detract from an otherwise particularly positive representation of older people.

P#2 (positive) **Barry Otto, Actor**…Two cast members of a play showing in Sydney are interviewed - a young woman and a man who looks to be in his mid 60s. Both talk about the play, and the careers of both are mentioned, with the young actress dominating the interview. Barry Otto’s competent and knowledgeable persona presents a positive image of a successful older male.

P#3 (positive) **Dame Edna Everage**…The dame projects an inspirational image of an older person – witty, eloquent and internationally successful. In this segment, she promotes her show, and at 69 (as pointed out by the host), Dame Edna and her alter ego provide a stark contrast to the dominant image of older people on commercial TV, in a role which commands the camera’s full attention.

P#4 (positive) **Charles Tingwell**…Two young actors are interviewed about a film, ‘The Inside Story’, and a preview is shown. In the film, one of the actors seen is Charles Tingwell, a male actor, aged 80. After the short preview, the host speaks briefly of his long career and says, “He’s a lovely man.” A positive, though brief and background image, with the young actors dominating the promotion.

P#5 (positive) **Charles Tingwell**…The actor is this time in the studio and interviewed in relation to his role in the film ‘The Inside Story’, in tandem with the producer who relates how he came to create the film. Whilst the producer dominates the interview,
Charles is seen to be a successful, articulate individual who has a significant part in the supernatural horror film. The host makes a point of asking Charles how old he is, which can be seen as highlighting the actor’s age rather than his abilities – nevertheless, directing our attention to his age in this case serves to illustrate the capabilities of the ‘old’ old.

P#6 (positive) **Sean Connery** …A very brief view of this actor in a film promoted in a ‘Hollywood Gossip’ segment. Sean Connery, who looks to be in his 70s, is seen ‘fighting’ in the preview whilst the commentator describes the film. A positive image of a successful, popular and fit older man.

P#7 (positive) **Val Jellay** …A female actress is interviewed about her past and present exploits. She mentions that she used to be in ‘Neighbours’, but was ‘killed off’, and expresses a wish she could return to the programme. She talks about her charity work, shows, logie appearance and book she has written, and a scene is shown of her dancing. This is a positive image of a well-dressed, obviously capable woman, perhaps in her early 70s, who is articulate, fit and successful in a variety of endeavours.

P#8 (positive) **Clive James** …Clive James is an internationally famous personality, renowned for his satirical commentary. In this interview he briefly promotes his show, book and website, displaying his trademark wit and eloquence. The image is of a successful, erudite and well-informed older man in his mid 60s, who is the main focus of an interview given to promote his creative talents.

P#9 (positive) **Car Enthusiast** …This is a very brief view of an older male car enthusiast at a Sydney car show. The host of the morning chat show walks along a row of rare cars and briefly speaks to several owners. One looks to be in his mid 60s, and comments, “I love my car.” This minor portrayal is positive in that an older person is seen in an intergenerational setting as simply a ‘car enthusiast’, with no reference to his age, or the fact that he was the only older person in the show.

P#10 (positive) **Mother of the Actress** …An internationally acclaimed young actress is interviewed about her latest film, with her mother sitting beside her.Whilst the
actress dominates the interview, her mother is given some time to promote a charity, explaining she is the director of the Bone Marrow Institute. The mother looks to be in her late 60s, and presents a positive, articulate and capable image, illustrating how an older person can be productive and successful post retirement.

P#11 (positive) **Blood Donor**...In this segment, a Bali bomb victim is interviewed and promotes his book about the event. With him in a secondary role is a blood donor who has given ‘so many blood donations that he is in the Guiness Book of Records.’ His function is to promote ‘Blood Week’ as the face of blood donors in Australia. The man seems to be in his mid 60s, is well dressed and articulate, and informs viewers that he has given blood since 1957. Whilst the minor role in the interview, the man presents an inspiring, capable and caring image.

P#12 (positive) **Magnetic Therapy #1**...In this promotional segment, repeated several times, Tony Barber is the spokesperson for the products in a version which relies on the ‘expert’ advice conveyed by several speakers. In two variations, Tony speaks about the benefits of magnetic under-blankets, with a chemist, footballer and vet also extolling their virtues. Tony, seemingly in his late 60s, is the main focus of the advertorial in the company of other ‘authoritative’ voices, and presents an image of older people as knowledgeable and in control.

P#13 (negative) **Magnetic Therapy Products #2**...Several people promote the virtues of the products, with most men and women in their late 60s or early 70s. Three men and two women briefly describe how the product helped their medical problems, whilst each person’s conditions are written on the screen (‘diabetes, arthritis and back pain’, for example). Most are obviously frail and in poor health and speak very briefly, with one having difficulty speaking his lines. Whilst older people dominate the advertorial promoting products which purport to help age-related problems, the overall image of old age emphasises decline and poor health.

P#14 (neutral) **Media Personalities**...Three actors are seen sitting around a table with the show’s host, promoting a play, ‘The Visit’. One actor looks to be in his mid 60s, with the others younger men. A positive image of an older working male is tempered by the host’s comments directed to him, “I was just a schoolboy when I last
saw you act,” with the actor replying, “That’s probably right, God I’m old!” The inference seems to be that the actor should retire, detracting from the positive elements of the representation – hence the neutral designation.

P#15 (neutral) *Retired Footballer*...A retired footballer and football commentator are interviewed about their past exploits and achievements, in a segment which seems to be promoting the Collingwood football club. Both are seemingly in their late 60s and are articulate and not frail – however, the host focuses on the footballer’s past achievements, with no mention of present activities, in a nostalgic interlude. Both positive and negative elements are seen here, with a past footballer’s accomplishments recalled, but within an historical context, not as a positive illustration of old age.

P#16/17 (neutral) *Obituaries*...Two obituaries were noted – for Katharine Hepburn and Buddy Epsom. These were designated neutral in that, whilst famous people’s lives are celebrated, the segments are brief and focus mainly on youthful achievements.

PRIME TIME TV...LIFESTYLE

P#18 (positive) *Dad of the Year*...In ‘Better Homes and Gardens’, a competition promotion asks viewers to send in a video of ‘dad making something’. A variety of fathers are seen briefly, presumably taken from videos already sent in, and include two images of older fathers displaying their creations. Both men seem to be in their late 60s, with one holding a wooden truck, and one holding a violin. There is no dialogue from any of the six fathers seen with their inventions, with camera focus predominantly on the item created – however, the age of the two men is evident, with the brief presentation a natural, cross-generational image of fatherhood.

P#19 (positive) *Specialised Builders*...Five men (who look to be in their mid to late 60s), are seen in a segment of the programme ‘Hot Property’ which revolves around their creation of historic tourist huts in Queensland. We are told that the huts were earlier destroyed in a bushfire and there had been concerns that the specialised knowledge needed to rebuild them may not be available in the community. A group
of retired builders had volunteered their time and expertise to recreate the huts, and teach a small group of younger volunteers some of the skills needed to help them. The story is allocated more time than other segments on the show, and viewers are also updated about their progress during a second episode. Whilst there is little dialogue from the builders (“We are doing it as close as possible to the original”, and “Roger’s building a dunny – very important!”), the camera focuses on their labours as they roll logs and wield axes. The presenter provides the background narration and praises the men’s efforts and hard work (“You can forget about the eight hour day!”) A younger woman is also interviewed briefly who similarly praises the men’s work and explains how they were commissioned to do the job because of their talents which are now hard to find. The older men are praised from two quarters, and portrayed in a particularly positive light – as physically strong, capable and knowledgeable people who are not only demonstrating their expertise, but also a commitment to volunteer their services and finish the job to the best of their ability. The story also worked positively when the images of the hard working and knowledgeable older men were contrasted with the young ‘city folk’ in other segments who were improving their homes with little physical exertion, and delegating jobs to various trades people. This contrast served to (albeit perhaps incidentally) accord the older builders a degree of status and ‘wisdom’. Similarly, this positive image is enhanced by the way the programme producers transpose a traditional dimension into the show which is usually focused on modern technology and building methods. There is an added sense of nostalgia for lost Australian expertise, for the satisfaction of creating something by hand, and for the ‘bush’ as the locus for our cultural identity. In this way this particular representation of older men managed to convey a sense that they were ‘elders’ in the most meaningful sense of the word.

P#20 (positive) Prospective Home Buyer #1…Noted during the programme ‘Auction Squad’, this is a brief and minor appearance of a male, about 65, who is amongst other prospective purchasers of a home. Three people are asked their opinion of the area, and the older male’s reply is, “There’s been quite a resurgence over the last five years, some streets are becoming nice streets.” Whilst a brief and isolated older representation, this is a positive one in that the man gives his opinion naturally amongst other, younger home-buyers.
**P#21** (positive) *Propective Home Buyer #2*... A very brief portrayal which is nevertheless designated as positive – a male, perhaps in his late 60s, is seen at a house inspection in the programme ‘Auction Squad’, amongst other younger potential home-buyers. The man commands the camera’s full attention for 2-3 seconds, and comments that the property ‘has potential’, providing an older person’s voice as a natural accompaniment to the dominant observations of younger people.

**P#22** (positive) *Heritage Gardener*... A segment within ‘Better Homes and Gardens’ tells the story of a ‘heritage’ garden in NSW, and the elderly retired man and his wife who have helped create and nurture it. A man, about 70, walks with the programme’s host and describes how he has nurtured the garden; at the same time, he points to various plants and describes their care needs. The host ends by saying, “After 20 years, Les and Rita have decided to call it a day.” This portrayal can be seen as positive in that an elderly male person is the focus of a story which demonstrates his achievements over many years and his knowledge about the plants on view. The man is articulate, competent and has a major role.

**P#23** (positive) *NSW ‘Rail Cruise’ Train Passengers* (group scene)... ‘The Great Outdoors’ presents a story about railway holidays, with shots of passengers both in the train and at various stops along the way. Almost all of the people observed appear to be over 65, with groups seen on the train, eating a meal, at a sheep farm and winery during the trip. Many older people are seen enjoying the journey, whilst a commentator describes the attractions of the rail cruise. In addition to the many passengers, a pipe band is seen at one stop with older musicians, as passengers alight from the train. There is no dialogue from the holidaymakers who appear to be fit, enthusiastic, involved and interested in their surroundings.

**P#24** (neutral) *Herbarium Sightings*... These are very brief, background observations of two women in their mid 60s who are seen in ‘The Great Outdoors’ in a story about a herbarium in Melbourne. One is a tourist amongst many other people, and one is a demonstrator (both of whom have no speaking roles). These are assigned as neutral portrayals due to the brevity of appearances, and their periphery to the story line.
**P#25** (neutral) *Father of the Homebuyer*...A very brief view here in ‘Auction Squad’ of a man seemingly in his mid 60s toasting his child’s success at selling a home for a high price at auction. This is a minor, background observation, only seen for about 2 seconds on camera and designated neutral due to brevity and the disconnection of the man from the main focus of the story.

**P#26** (neutral) *Background Shopper #1*...This segment in ‘The Great Outdoors’ promotes the attractions of the largest shopping centre in Canada. An older couple, about 75, is seen amongst the shopping crowds pointing to a shop. This is a very brief, background representation with little relevance to the main story, which focuses on young shoppers and the products which might attract them.

**P#27** (neutral) *Background Shopper #2*...In the same episode of ‘The Great Outdoors’, a background shopper has a higher profile, but is still a peripheral character which is used to highlight the attractions of shopping for younger people. This segment promotes a store for shopping tours in Melbourne, where participants need to bring 20 friends with them in order to obtain discounts at various shops. The story centres on a young woman who is shopping for various wedding-related items, and the tour hostess tells viewers that, “You get to bring your friends, your mum and grandma.” Later in the story the young woman is seen in a store with her grandma, who looks to be in her mid 60s, and has the role of approving the young woman’s purchases (“I like the colour”). The hostess continues, “Even Cassandra’s grandma wants to help out.” This is a minor, supplementary role which has the effect of supporting and encouraging the younger shopper – whilst the older woman is acknowledged in the segment, her role is not as a shopper, but as support for her granddaughter.

**PRIME TIME TV…SOAP OPERA**

**P#28** (positive) *Harold*...The portrayal of Harold is noted in 7 out of 10 episodes of ‘Neighbours’ during the analysis period, with his role that of grandfather to Skye – a girl of about 15 who has come to live with him. Harold looks to be in his mid 60s, is active and articulate, and is engaged with the community working part-time in a café. This positive view of an older person in a major role is offset to a degree by the
nature of his role which, at the time of viewing, centres on concerns for his
granddaughter’s behaviour and his problems in communicating with her. Whilst
some older people watching might relate to these issues in relation to their own
grandchildren, there is a sense that we don’t get to know Harold and learn of his own
issues as an older person. However, whilst Harold’s role seems to be a facilitator for
the airing of teenage problems, this is a major role which demonstrates a degree of
intergenerational communication.

PRIMETIME TV…CURRENT AFFAIRS

P#29 (positive) *Retiring Charter Boat Operator*…This story seems to be a
promotion for a charter boat business, with the central character a male seemingly in
his mid 60s who explains how he is passing the business to his son, and details his
past exploits with sharks. The segment presents the man as knowledgeable,
articulate, successful and brave, with the interviewer making comments such as,
“After a lifetime spent staring death in the face, and making 120 shark films, its
finally time for Rod to catch his breath” and “40 years and 450 stitches later, he’s
still the man if you want to meet a monster.” Rod is seen on camera several times,
talking about his business and taking off his diving gear. His story is a retrospective
one and doesn’t mention his current lifestyle or plans for the future, which would
have enhanced a particularly positive older portrayal.

P#30 (positive) *Customer Spokesman*…In this segment, rival agents have threatened
a real estate agency, and the two young male owners describe their experience.
Several customers also speak on behalf of the agency, with one a male who seems to
be in his mid 60s, praising the company for saving him money. This is a brief
interview, of several seconds, with the man commenting, “It’s the sort of thing you’d
expect to find in America, not Australia.” This is seen as a positive portrayal in that
an older male’s opinion is conveyed to viewers along with those of younger people.
The man is seen to be involved, relevant, confident and prepared to speak out against
‘intimidation’.

P#31 (positive) *Grandparents and ‘Mirabelle’*…An older couple, in their late 60s,
are the focus of a story about the Sydney organisation ‘Mirabelle’ which helps
children unable to live with their drug-addicted parents. The couple, both about 65, is shown as caring, capable and active but finding it difficult to afford the costs involved with bringing up three grandchildren without the government support given to parents. The interviewer asks the man how close he was to losing the girls, and he replies, “Days…if they’re your own flesh and blood you don’t get any help” and comments that he was prepared to sell the house to raise money. The man’s wife also speaks about how difficult it has been to come to terms with the idea of ‘parenting’ her grandchildren. They are spokespersons for an issue that presumably affects other grandparents, and are seen to be articulate, involved and determined to highlight disparity.

P#32 (positive) Retired Accountant…This is a major role, with a man, in his late 60s, who is the sole interviewee in a story about the possibility of Alan Bond being part of a motorcade at the ‘football grand final’. We are told that the man’s savings were ‘reduced to zero’ through the collapse of Bond’s empire, and he gives his opinion about Bond’s status as a ‘sporting hero’. With the camera in close-up he comments, “I don’t think it would be a wise idea for him to take part in a parade like that. I think there would be too many people who would want to give other opinions rather than adulation…let sleeping dogs lie, stay in England Alan.” Here again, an older spokesperson speaks out for others, but unlike the previous ‘parenting grandparents’, the speaker has an authoritative air. The older man is speaking from the position of failed investor rather than ‘older victim’.

P#33 (positive) Concerned Resident…A group of concerned residents are seen discussing the issue of car ‘hoons’ who keep them awake at night. One person who gives an opinion is a woman, perhaps in her late 60s, who says, “You can hear the police chasing them, its just a game…lots of people do it, its dangerous to open your door, its scary and intimidating.” The woman is an integral and articulate group member who is not ostensibly speaking from the vantage point of old age – all of the group of various ages are seen as victims of police inadequacy. Neither frail nor incompetent, the woman speaks as one of several concerned residents actively trying to find a solution to their problem.
P#34 (positive) *Local Over 55s Walking Association*...A group of older walkers is concerned about having to pay the King’s Park Board to walk in the park. The principal speaker for the group is a man, about 70, who complains it is ‘a money making exercise.’ A woman, slightly younger, comments that the government should differentiate between people partying and legitimate walking groups. The wider group of about 20 people includes males and females, many seemingly over 65, who present an active, healthy and fit image of older people. Bureaucratic mismanagement is the focus of the story, with the voice-over pointing out that governments encourage old people to exercise, and then charge them to do so. The portrayals in this segment are of active, engaged older people standing together to make a political statement, in a segment which highlights an issue affecting both older and younger people

P#35 (negative) *Forest Dweller*...We are informed that a man of 74, and labelled an ‘ageing Tarzan’ is living a reclusive life in the wilds of Queensland. Positive elements in the narrative – we are told he has a remarkable physique, strength and stamina, and has great prowess in bushcraft – are overshadowed by the reporter’s methodology and often patronising tone. The man is obviously mentally ill, and has shunned society for many years making it difficult for the reporters to find him. The tone of the story becomes a ‘hunt for the quarry’, with them ‘tracking’ the man who tries to avoid them; at one stage the reporter quietly says, “We’ve got him!” in the way wildlife commentators point to a rare animal. The reporters manage to ask him if he knows that a man has landed on the moon, with the old man’s answer garbled and unintelligible. The viewer is made to feel like a voyeur at a freak show where a youthfully fit old man is nevertheless presented as an object for ridicule in relation to his mental state and unconventional lifestyle.

P#36 (negative) *Balding Woman*...A story about hair loss in women has a younger woman as the main spokesperson relating her experience. An older woman, seemingly in her mid 60s, also has a minor role in the story, and is seen in a hairdresser’s chair having her hair combed. The hairdresser relates the woman’s problems, with the older woman simply saying, “I noticed it was getting thinner.” Whilst the older woman is not depicted as frail or incompetent, she is portrayed as dependent on others to relate her story, and unable to speak for herself. This
contrasts quite sharply with the younger female, whose problem dominates the segment, and who tells us a long story about her hairdresser’s negligence. A young woman is used to highlight an issue arguably more relevant to older females.

**P#37** (negative) *Spiritual Healers and Follower*...A man and his wife, who look to be in their mid 60s, talk about their spiritual healing business, and an older woman also relates her experience as a patient. The man uses ‘psychic healing’ to deal with physical problems, and the voice-over tells us that he is ‘possessed by the spirits of dead surgeons.’ An older female patient, well dressed and articulate, praises the techniques and describes how it has helped her many times. Then an ‘expert’ describes the healers as ‘charlatans’, pointing to the placebo effect, and effectively labels them as ‘quacks’. However, it is also pointed out that the healers may believe their own rhetoric, which can be seen as creating a picture of old people as naïve, ill-informed or out of touch. This is compounded by the female patient’s proclaimed belief in the powers of spiritual healing, with all three older portrayals depicting a negative view of older people as distanced from mainstream sensibilities.

**P#38** (negative) *Inventors*...This is a promotional story for a product invented by two retired physiotherapists – the ‘Pain-Eze Plus’. The two men, in their late 70s, are obviously successful (we are told one contributed a million dollars to the project), innovative and actively engaged with society; however, a potentially positive story about older people’s abilities is marred by the negative tone of the presentation. For example, the interviewer says, “At 79 this ‘fossily ex-physio’ reckons he’s finally cracked the pain barrier.” The advertorial exudes a patronising, condescending tone not seen in segments promoting younger people’s products or issues, with the story often descending into farce. The Hallelujah Chorus plays throughout the piece, and at one stage, one of the inventors comments that the ‘Yanks’ have stolen his patent, and then asks that the comment not be used on air (presumably, when these kinds of incidents occur during promotions they are usually deleted from the final presentation). Similarly, when the inventor is seen testing the product, it doesn’t work briefly, and the interviewer looks to the camera and says, “Has Jim lost his marbles? Its not turned on!” The conspiratorial tone of the interviewer projects the message that we cannot take older people seriously – perhaps an attempt by the producers to appeal to the more commercially important younger viewers who need
to be ‘entertained’ until a story more relevant to them appears. This seems apparent when other comments by the interviewer are taken into account. For example we are told that Jim’s partner is “only 78” – spoken in a clearly sarcastic tone. Similarly, as the segment ends, the voice-over (same as interviewer) says, “As for the boys, as you’d expect, they’re just beside themselves” – cue to them standing together with serious expressions. The two older men don’t appear to be ‘in on the joke’ during the segment, but are the butt of the joke – indeed one appears to be decidedly uncomfortable with the tone of the story. The tone continues when the anchor, Ray Martin, comments at the end, “You’ve got to watch those Yanks”. There were some fundamentally positive elements to this segment – for example the older men described their product and how three professional health workers were pleased with it; they were clearly active and involved community members, and were the focus of a story that promoted their invention. However the condescending and sarcastic tone and comments of the interviewer/presenter nullified these positive aspects. He chose to make the age of the men a prime focus and then proceeded to draw on aged stereotypes to provide an ‘amusing’ piece of entertainment. The question needs to be asked if these tactics would have been used if the inventors had been young men or women. The overwhelming message that emerged was that you can’t take older people seriously, and that a story about older entrepreneurs was a ‘joke’.

P#39 (negative) Vitamin D Deficiency…A doctor talks about the issue of vitamin D deficiency in Australia, with the focus of the story on teenagers and children. During the segment, three older ladies, about 80, are seen very briefly from behind walking in the street. Whilst the commentator mentions that 70-80% of elderly people have a deficiency, those at a lesser risk constitute the focus of the story, with teenagers and children at the forefront of concerns. The older ladies are frail, walking slowly or with walking sticks, and are background, fleeting and negative images of older people. The commentary deals almost exclusively with concerns for younger people, and is seemingly directed at parents watching the programme, when arguably, older viewers should have been the prime target of the story.

P#40 (negative) Background Customer…Viewers are told about a website ‘Not Good Enough’ where people can report poor customer service. The story focuses on an insurance company seeking to distance itself from negative publicity in relation to
this website, advising viewers that the company deals appropriately with customer complaints. During a camera shot of the insurance building, an older woman, about 75, is seen very briefly entering the building. This is seen as a negative image in that an older woman is portrayed as the archetypal customer in need of assistance – she is frail, even confused as she initially walks in the wrong direction. The ‘caring’ ethos of the company is enhanced by the view of a ‘helpless’ older person in need of corporate guidance.

**P#41** (negative) *Victim of Bureaucracy #1*...This story centres on the plight of an older woman, who we are told several times is 82 years old. She is presented as defenceless, victimised by the authorities and unable to deal with the problem herself. The woman’s daughters relay the story of their mother’s battle with her local council after she fell, sued the council and lost her case. She is shown with her teddy bears and ornaments as the interviewer declares that she may lose her house, and her dialogue is brief and fragmentary – ‘I could have cried,’ and ‘I don’t want to lose the house.’ Negative elements in this story include the implication that the elderly need younger people to relate their problems and the overriding image of helplessness and victimisation. Whilst good to see older people’s issues aired, the producers seem to be directing the story predominantly to more youthful audiences via the younger spokespeople who have major roles in the storytelling process.

**P#42** (negative) *Victim of Bureaucracy #2*...This is a retrospective story about an older lady who died at 75 after taking a drug for eight years without review. The woman’s daughters describe how none of her doctors questioned her long-term use of the drug or recommended that she cease taking it if she became ill. Pictures are seen several times of the lady, from a young woman to a smiling, vibrant older woman. Here again, an older person is depicted as a victim, powerless and uninformed, and with her story (unavoidably) told by younger people.

**P#43** (negative) *Victim of Bureaucracy #3*...A local story relates to an older man’s anger at the justice system which failed to punish the person responsible for his son’s death. A man, whom we are told is 83, has the camera focused on him whilst seated, and tells his story unaided and articulately, detailing how his son was killed by another driver. He is angry because he could not ‘have his say’ in court, and a
politician is interviewed who agrees that there has been a ‘bungle’. A positive portrayal of an articulate man determined to highlight bureaucratic intransigence and ineptitude is nevertheless obscured by narrative and production techniques that emphasise the man as a dependent, powerless ‘victim’. For example, his frailty is reinforced with views of him crying, and with associated long shots of his walking aids.

**P#44 (negative) Victim of Bureaucracy #4**…A group of people is at odds with their local council’s attempts to requisition their homes, with the story centred on an older man’s experience. The affected homeowners are described as ‘battlers’, and the old man as a ‘war veteran’. He is shown feeding his dog, and also speaks to the camera saying, “It’s ruined my life,” and “If I’ve got to go I don’t know what I’ll do, I just want to live here.” Most of the old man’s story is related by his middle-aged daughter, and a young man next door is briefly interviewed also. The older man is about 80, frail, emotional and crying on camera. This is deemed a negative portrayal of older people in that, again, helplessness and frailty are emphasised. Older people are far more likely to be shown as ‘victims’ than younger people, and less likely to tell their stories unaided.

**P#45 (negative) Arsenic Victim**…This story relates to the treatment of playground equipment with arsenic, and centres on the danger to children using this equipment. A man who looks to be in his mid 70s, who worked with the wood building parks before retirement, is shown in a doctor’s surgery, and lists previous health concerns, “My skin was burning all the time and my hands were red, I had trouble breathing, swollen lips, stomach pain, shaking.” He also says, “I’m 20 times more likely to get cancer.” The man’s doctor and other ‘experts’ talk about the problem, primarily from the view of health concerns for children, echoing the approach taken in the previous vitamin D story. Older people’s problems are used as background to emphasise dangers to young people.

**P#46 (negative) Supermarket Customers**…A very brief portrayal sees two older women, about 80, in a supermarket. The story is based on information given about how customers are conditioned to buy unwanted or expensive items, and relates to a promotion for the magazine ‘Money’. Several younger shoppers are interviewed
about their shopping habits by two young women – the older women seen are background shoppers, frail, looking confused and with one leaning on a walking stick. No older people are asked their opinion, but are again used as background images, perhaps to reinforce the concept of victimised shoppers in a story seemingly aimed primarily at younger women.

P#47 (negative) Joh Bjelkie Petersen Interview…In this interview, a retired 92-year-old Queensland premier declares he is suing the crown for $338 million, wanting compensation for the Fitzgerald inquiry findings which caused him to lose money. His health is described as poor by the interviewer, and he is very frail, in a wheelchair and seen to have difficulty communicating. The interviewer asks him, “Is it about the money or how history will remember you?” Joh answers with the aid of captions that he is interested in neither, but in fair play. At the end of the segment, the anchorman informs us that Tony Fitzgerald has commented that he ‘doesn’t respond to nonsense’. This portrayal is a negative view of old age, with the general tone of the interview one of ridicule.

P#48 (neutral) Motorist…In a story about the Coles Myer company’s new petrol subsidies there is a very brief, full body view of a man, about 70, getting out of his car at a petrol station. Whilst an older person is shown naturally amongst younger motorists, this portrayal is judged neutral due to its brevity and incidental relevance to the story.

P#49 (neutral) Supermarket Customers…This segment promotes the opening of a chain of new supermarkets that offer cheaper prices. Perhaps because the producers acknowledge the relevance for people on pensions, four older people are seen in the story. At the beginning an older woman in her mid 70s approaches the store, at which point the commentator says, “Are you looking for Aldi?” and then adds, “Guess what, you’re a day early.” The older woman appears flustered and says, “I thought it was in the papers today.” The second portrayal is an older woman in a car, about 80, who is asked, “How long have you been shopping at Woolworth’s?” and, “Are you ready to give the new mob a try?” to which she answers, “Yes, I’ll give them a try.” At the end of the segment, a couple, about 70, is seen leaving the store and respond to the interviewer’s comment, “They’d better be good,” by replying,
“They’d better be!” The overall impression gained in this segment is that older customers need to be acknowledged, but their detailed views or comments are not required. The superficial acknowledgement earned these portrayals a neutral designation.

P#50 (neutral) *High Birth Rate In Country Town* … Young couples are interviewed in a country town in a light-hearted attempt to ascertain why the birth rate has jumped. Near the end of the segment a man, appearing to be in his mid 60s, is interviewed outside his shop and makes the observation that with the baby boom, he is going to ‘start again’. The interviewer asks if he has a partner, and the man replies, “No, I’m looking.” At the end, the camera shows him asleep in a chair, and superimposes a baby on his lap. This is a light-hearted piece that includes older people in the joke – however, the use of older people to add an element of the ridiculous detracts from an otherwise positive, intergenerational tableau.

**Advertising**

MORNING TV ‘CHAT’ SHOWS

*A#1* (positive) *Australian Pensioner’s Insurance Agency* … This advertisement is aimed at ‘the over 55s’, and depicts a spokesperson and group of nine male and female pensioners who stand together and shout, “We don’t pay extra, how about you?” Most, including the spokesperson, seem to be in their mid 50s, but three males at the back of the group look to be in their mid 60s. There is no representation of pensioners who appear older, with the targeted audience apparently the ‘young’ old. All in the group project a vibrant, happy and youthful image, wearing colourful clothes and smiling enthusiastically to the camera.

*A#2* (positive) *Wether’s toffees* … A brief though positive image of a man aged about 65 picking up a packet of toffees and making a short comment about them. He is the first character seen in the advert amongst a variety of people of different ages who do the same thing. This advert is aimed generally, and shows an older person as a
natural component of a mixed group. The man is wearing a colourful shirt, appears fit and competent – in fact undifferentiated from the other characters

**A#3 (positive)** *ACR Investment* … This advertisement is aimed at older viewers, with a group of older female lawn bowls players (seemingly in their late 60s) in white uniforms seen playing the game. One sends a bowling ball crashing down on the other balls, shattering them. The other women run away in fear whilst a voice-over says, “Our interest rates smash the competition.” At the end, one old lady is seen laughing at the camera, whilst the voice-over continues, “Invest, so you can relax and watch your money grow.” Whilst the sophistication of the advert leaves a lot to be desired (the stereotypical view of older people playing bowls, and the ladies scurrying away in fear), positive elements include the portrayal of older people as healthy, fit and involved.

**A#4 (positive)** *McDonald’s Fast Food* … A variety of people of different ages are seen standing outside several stores praising the company. In one view, three older men are standing together as one says, “They’re all Aussie export quality,” and “With an average of 400 sesame seeds.” The men look to be in their mid 60s, appear for several seconds, and have very similar roles to the younger characters. This representation is considered positive because older people are seen alongside younger people in an advert aimed generally, with no attempt to differentiate or stereotype characters – all seemingly represented ‘typical’ McDonald’s customers.

**A#5 (negative)** *Friedmen Lurie Singh, Barrister/Solicitor* … Wills and inheritance are the focus of this advert aimed at older viewers. A frail woman, seemingly in her mid 70s is seen briefly, as a voice-over talks about wills. She has no dialogue, but takes a piece of paper from a suited, professional young woman. An elderly couple is also seen briefly conversing with a young professional male whilst the voice-over speaks of inheritances – they look to be a similar age, but are not as frail as the old woman. Again there is no dialogue, with these characters illustrative of, and background to the message given by the unseen speaker. Camera angles are distant, with the ‘barristers’ central to the events, and the older characters seen to defer to their authoritative presence. This advertisement targets the ‘old’ old, encouraging them to plan for their demise.
A#6 (negative) Leanne O’Dea, All-Female Funeral Service…This portrayal is a man of about 70 years who is seen pruning a rose bush, and then placing roses on a coffin. It is a brief, minor role with no dialogue, with the main focus of the advertisement on the authoritative, capable funeral directors. This and other similar adverts are deemed negative portrayals due to the preponderance of messages about death and decline directed at this age group, and because these roles depict background, marginal characters with others ‘in control’.

A#7 (negative) Bowra and O’Dea, Funeral Service…A ‘funeral service’ is shown, and the camera moves to an image of a frail old man, who looks to be in his mid 70s, in a wheelchair. The man looks sad and despondent, with the role minor, brief and with no dialogue.

A#8 (negative) Pre-Paid Funerals…Here a middle-aged daughter is seen walking towards her father who looks to be about 65 and is painting in a field. She shouts to him, “How is the masterpiece going?” She then speaks to the viewer, “I’m so glad I talked to Bill about funeral planning; by pre-paying, you beat inflation and protect your retirement nest-egg and save your family the burden at a very difficult time.” The older male role is a background one, with no dialogue and distant, blurred camera angles. This advert seems to be indirectly aimed at older viewers, encouraging them to think about their funeral now, to prevent family members having to deal with it later. This method of mediating messages to older viewers follows a trend noted that many advertisements directed at older people fail to accord a speaking part to older actors – messages are often relayed through ‘professional’ or younger characters.

A#9 (negative) QBE Insurance…Here a young woman with a small child is seen with her car nearby. The voice-over tells us that she cleans and takes care of her car, and we are asked how we would feel if this happened to it – cue a man, about 70, climbing a tree next door with a chainsaw, who lops off a branch which falls on the car. The camera then focuses on the man’s face for several seconds, and we can see his discomfort in a dazed, silly expression. The young woman is apparently ‘fine’ because she is insured with this particular company. The man’s role is a major one which is used to facilitate a message (presumably to young women), that a sensible
choice in insurance will protect them from the incompetent actions of others - in this case, the rather pathetic old man next door. The young woman is shown to be capable and in control, a role reinforced by the contrasting incompetence of the old man.

**A#10** (negative) *McCain’s Microwave Meals*…This advert can be seen as a debatable addition to the list with older representation – the older people are not seen, but heard on a phone message. However, the voices are an integral part of the advertisement, and again enable the producer to present a message to the targeted audience, in this case, young women. Whilst a woman, perhaps in her 30s, is heating a meal in the microwave, the phone message plays, with the woman’s parents trying quite desperately to get her to answer the telephone. The woman eats her meal with a smile as she ignores her parent’s pleas, “Are you there?” and “Its dad here, will you please ring your mum?” A voice-over says, “You probably should take more care of your parents, but at least you can take care of yourself.” The older voices are obviously of old people, and whilst the phrases are innocuous in themselves, this representation of older people can be classed as negative in light of the inference that young people should ignore the irritating concerns of older people, seen as background to the needs of young people.

**A#11** (negative) *Denture Repair Service*…This advert is often repeated (representing 43 of the 97 adverts with older representation), and by its repetition can be viewed as projecting a prominent portrayal of old people. Whilst not an advertisement that projects a stridently stereotypical view of old age, it was nevertheless regarded as negative due to a limited and undignified representation. A male aged about 65 enters the denture repair shop with his hand over his mouth, looking sheepish and helpless. A man in a white coat takes his teeth, and returns them later, with the older man baring them for the camera. The portrayal does not present a frail image, but a powerless one, with the man only shown briefly at a distance, and with no dialogue. As noted earlier, adverts directed at older people often present them as distant, voiceless characters in need of help, and coupled with the constant repetition of this advert, an image of older people as pathetic and powerless individuals is created. The advert ends with the commentator remarking, “Emergency Denture Repairs, for your ageing smile.”
A#12 (negative) * Finish Dishwashing Detergent…This advertisement highlights a theme seen several times – that of the interfering parents, particularly the interfering mother-in-law. In this case, an older woman, about 70 years old, enters a young couple’s home and presents a cake to them at the door with a look of disdain. She then marches into the kitchen, rearranges the cutlery and bends down to look inside the dishwasher. The young woman declares that she will use ‘Finish Powerball tablets’ to clean the dishes. The older woman looks at a dirty dish and says, “you’ll never get that clean,” with a look of disgust. The young woman nevertheless proceeds to put the dishes through a wash cycle, and the scene jumps to a view of clean, sparkling dishes as the voice-over says ‘unbeatable finish, first time, every time’. A final, short scene sees the older woman’s hand (recognised with jewellery) turn a glass upsidedown – then the young woman’s hand turns it back. The negative stereotyping is apparent on several levels in this advertisement. The interfering mother-in-law stereotype is reminiscent of stand-up comedy routines thirty or forty years ago, and her persona – over dressed with heavy make-up, lots of jewellery and blue rinsed hair – is reminiscent of the old dames in pantomime. The overall caricature is of an arrogant, interfering and disliked harridan – an image with no place in modern Australia. Throughout the advert, the young couple looks very uncomfortable and annoyed, as the older woman, with a haughty exterior, looks around for something to complain about. The advert is directed at young people – particularly young women – who are in tune with the latest products and determined not to listen to their old fashioned, out of touch and domineering relative. Clearly older female viewers are not invited to consider this product, and there is no acknowledgement of them as potential consumers. As in the Holden used car advert, the only role accorded to an older character in the Finish advert is to generate humour and disdain, empowering the younger characters - and by association younger viewers – thus disempowering and alienating older viewers.

A#13 (negative) Smuzzle Puzzle…Directed at older children, this advertisement depicts a stereotypical ‘little old lady’ who behaves unexpectedly. The woman is about 80, wearing a shapeless dress with a lace collar, her hair in a bun and wielding a large hammer. Alone in a room, she proceeds to smash furniture, with action speeded up and the voice-over saying, “Solving the Smuzzle Puzzle is one of life’s most rewarding challenges, but never distract anybody when they are finally about to
finish the Smuzzle Puzzle.” The camera leaves the scene to display the puzzles, and the commentator continues (in a derogatory tone) “Get it together.” The woman is reduced to a ‘cartoon-like’ character, demented, unpredictable and ridiculous – a comical figure used to attract the attention of children with behaviour usually accredited to them.

A#14 (neutral) Enyo Dusting Mitt…In this advertisement for cleaning dusters, several people of different ages are seen with the product, including a woman, about 70, dressed to imitate the queen. The character briefly and silently waves from a limousine, wearing the dusting mitt. A neutral designation was given to this advert because whilst an older face amongst younger ones is positive, the role caricatures a famous person to attract attention, rather than portraying an older person naturally. We are drawn to the farcical and implausible nature of the performance which detracts from the older representation.

A#15 (neutral) RAC Insurance…In a similar fashion to the above advert, this is deemed neutral because the portrayal impersonates a famous character. An ‘Alfred Hitchcock’ look-alike is seen in his car that has broken down at night. He says (in the sombre tones made famous by Mr Hitchcock) “Now this is a drama.” The actor is approximately 70, and is the only character seen in a major role aimed at general audiences. However, again the farcical improbability of this role detracts from positive factors – the actor represents a famous personality rather than an old person per se.

A#16 (neutral) Daewoo Small Car…This advertisement seems to be aimed at young people, particularly women, with a young woman having the leading role. Several people stare into the distance at a car, with a very brief view of an older man, perhaps in his late 60s, sitting down, wearing a grey jacket and heavy glasses, looking up quizzically. Whilst good to see an older face, the very brief, minor role had little impact on the advert overall – the impression given was that the older man was distanced from the active, sophisticated-looking young people who dominated the commercial.
A#17 (neutral) Taubman’s Paint…Aimed at general audiences, two professional painters dressed in overalls are seen silently being harangued by a female client who keeps changing her mind about colours. One painter is a young male, another a male who looks to be in his mid 60s (although the obvious fact he is still working makes this a difficult judgement). As the age of this character is debatable, and due to the nature of the role with no dialogue or activity, it was deemed neutral.

A#18 (neutral) Diabetes Education…An advert in association with Diabetes Awareness Week sees a group of adults walking into a lift, whilst a voice-over talks about the way blood sugar levels go up or down. One female and two male people in the group look to be 65-70 years old, and at the end, one of the older males speaks to the camera, “I had my BSL checked – now I’m in control.” Both positive and negative elements can be seen here – no portrayals were frail or disabled, and the older man was ‘in control’. The group also included younger adults, which diffused the focus on age and ill-health; however, as a condition marked by poor lifestyle choices, a diabetes education advertisement aimed predominantly at older people can not be seen as a positive representation of old age – hence the neutral designation.

PRIME TIME TV… LIFESTYLE

A#19 (positive) Red Meat…Although deemed positive, others might see this representation as one that belittles or pokes fun at old people; however, when viewed within its humorous context, I found positive messages. In this advert, a ‘heavy metal’ group comes on to the stage, with players with long hair, chains and leather clothes, and proceeds to give a wild and energetic performance to an enthusiastic crowd of young people. At the end of the show they go back stage and remove wigs and clothes to reveal four very old people. The voice-over says, “Eating at least 3-4 red meat meals a week will help to sustain your vitality and well being.” This message seemed to be aimed generally, to young and old alike, and whilst perhaps a ‘reverse’ stereotype, and another example of older actors impersonating others instead of playing themselves, the humorous characterisations had positive overtones. Old people were seen to be (outrageously) active and fit, and a message was conveyed to younger viewers without resorting to aged stereotyping.
A#20 (negative) *Campbell’s Soup*…This is a similar stereotypical representation to the Finish dishwashing detergent advert – a well-dressed older couple (about 65), with the dominant female character wearing lots of gold jewellery and with an ‘affected’ accent, arrive at a young couple’s home for tea. In a hurry to provide a meal, the young wife reaches for a tin of soup. Of course they enjoy it, but when the young wife reveals it is tinned, the older woman almost chokes. They then decide she is joking, with the older man saying, “You nearly had us there!” Here again is the stereotype of older people as fussy, demanding, conservative and unwilling to try new things – the young wife has the upper hand, hoodwinking her parents-in-law into eating tinned soup.

A#21 (negative) *SGIO Insurance*…A man in his mid 60s is seen with his radiogramme and ‘Percy Faith’ record collection. He doesn’t speak, but a voice-over says, “He’s a Percy Faith fan – everyone’s different, everyone wants to save.” A camera close-up at the end sees him smiling at his record collection, which is presumably insured with this company. Whilst not an overtly negative representation (he was not shown as frail or senile for example), the message seems to be that this person’s most treasured items are rather ridiculous and old-fashioned, with the advertiser showing us perhaps the most obscure example of someone completely out of touch, but nevertheless in need of insurance. Although aimed generally, this advert would appeal to younger viewers who might laugh at the man’s ‘treasures’, but be alerted that their own, more valid items need insuring.

A#22 (negative) *McCain Frozen Roast Vegetables*…A young woman is cooking a meal for her parents-in-law, who are in the lounge room. The older man (about 65) gets up to help; with a shocked expression, the young woman says, “No you won’t,” and insists on removing him from the kitchen. She then pretends to be cooking fresh vegetables, but puts a tray of frozen ones into the oven, then serves dinner to the table. There is no overt stereotyping here, with the older couple both well-dressed, not frail or incompetent; however, the inference is that they are on a ‘different wavelength’, old-fashioned and fussy – the young woman knew they would be shocked at the concept of frozen food – only fresh, properly cooked food is expected. Here again, the young woman overcomes the demanding expectations of her in-laws by maintaining her power in the kitchen.
A#23 (negative) * Holden Used Cars…This portrayal was judged the most negative stereotype in the study, and depicts a man in his mid to late 60s. His outward appearance is positive – he is dressed in what might be described as ‘smart casual’ clothes, he is not frail, and walks cheerfully and confidently towards the camera with a younger male. This positive image quickly reverts to a negative one when we hear the dialogue and observe the facial expressions of the two men on camera. Initially the older man speaks to the camera and comments, “I don’t know how to spot a good used car, so I brought a mate along” (younger male is the car salesman). He then crouches in front of a car and says, “So I just look straight across the bonnet?” The salesman replies, “Yes!” in an exasperated tone. The older man continues, “And?” with the salesman replying, “Look for a Holden certified used vehicle!” Throughout the exchange the older man’s vacant expression and the salesman’s scowl indicate that the former is a tiresome customer, uninformed and slow to understand, while the latter is annoyed at having to deal with him. The advert goes on with the older male reading a leaflet, looking amazed and out of his depth. He then says (in a slow manner, as if he has just learnt something with great difficulty) “A-sure-sign-of-a-great-used-Holden”. The older male customer has a major role in the advert, is on screen most of the time, but is an example of an older person used as a stooge to facilitate a message to younger viewers. This is an advert that could have been aimed at general audiences, yet anyone over 60 would have been offended and felt sidelined by its negative overtones. This was not a promotion for cars particularly oriented around the youth market, but simply used cars – yet the producers focused on younger consumers at the expense of older ones. The older character was portrayed as ridiculous, stupid and incompetent, articulating his lines in a slow (clearly slow-witted) manner. The purpose of this strategy seemed to be to allow the advertiser’s message to be reinforced, and to generate ‘humour’ at the older male’s expense. The formula of the slow-witted character and his sarcastic, angry companion is reminiscent of the Laurel and Hardy comedy routines – humorous when shown in the context of cinematic comedy, but not when used to denigrate older people in order to sell cars to younger consumers.

A#24 (neutral) Real Estate Agency…People from several countries are seen, whilst a voice-over says, “The world is sold on Century 21.” One portrayal is of a male seemingly in his mid 60s, depicting someone from Mexico. This is a very brief
sighting, only 1-2 seconds, with no dialogue – due to its brevity this representation was seen as neutral, in an advert aimed generally, though note should be taken that this portrayal was one of only two seen with a non-Anglo older person.

PRIME TIME TV… SOAP OPERA

A#25 (positive) *Nominations for Senior Australian of the Year* …The spokesman in this advertisement is the elderly character from ‘Neighbours’ who says, “If someone aged over 60 makes your Australia a better place, you can nominate them for Senior Australian of the Year.” This advert can be seen as positive on several levels – ‘Harold’ (about 65) is projected as an important and integral part of ‘Neighbours’ as spokesman for the award, and the advert’s message reminds us of the positive contribution of older people, acknowledging their presence in the community.

A#26 (negative) *QBE Insurance* …The older portrayal in this advertisement is of a female driver labelled as ‘nervous’, shown in her car looking scared and tense. The elderly ‘nervous’ driver propagates a stereotypical view of older drivers which is debatable – common sense would indicate that people who have been driving for many years would be less nervous than new drivers. The advert seems to be aimed predominantly at younger viewers – the voice-over addresses ‘good’ drivers, with the camera focusing on a young man. Whilst the elderly woman (about 70), is not the only driver labelled as ‘dangerous’ (a younger mobile phone user, and driver who failed to indicate are also accused), this is the only portrayal which projects a generalised stereotypical view of a group – older female drivers are judged incompetent or ‘past it’, whereas the other two accused are simply thoughtless or overly confident.

A#27 (negative) *Nurse Recruitment* …Nurses are urged to return to their profession in this advertisement, with nurses seen tending patients – one an elderly woman seen sitting having her hair brushed, one an elderly man talking to a nurse, and the other an Aboriginal child (incidentally the only indigenous portrayal noted in the study). The two elderly portrayals are brief with no dialogue, both are smiling and not overly frail, and both about 80 years old. This advert was deemed a negative representation in light of the association of age with decline, illness and dependence. Aimed
specifically at nurses, the advert seems to be seeking to portray those deemed the most vulnerable in society to elicit sympathy – whilst a laudable concept, the result is not a particularly positive view of old age.

A#28 (negative) *Skittles Lollies*…Seen as a particularly demeaning representation, this advert aimed at young people stereotypes and belittles older people in order to sell sweets to children. A couple, perhaps in their late 70s, is seen sitting in the lounge with shawls and blankets on knees listening to an old song on a record player. The couple’s grandson (about 16) looks bored and offers them some ‘Skittles’ lollies. After trying them, the grandfather starts to manipulate the record in a ‘rap’ fashion, and the grandmother jumps up and sings in a similar style, “I’m a bad grandma.” She then rips open her blouse in front of her grandson, who looks shocked and covers her up and sits her down again. Unlike the similarly conceived ‘red meat’ advert, the stripping grandma is not in control, but made to look senile and ridiculous.

A#29 (neutral) *Daewoo City Car*…This advertisement for a small car is set in Italy, where an older man (about 70) is seen playing chess outdoors with a younger man. A car drives closely by, and a young woman’s hand reaches out to move a chess piece, enabling the young man to win, with the old man looking suitably dejected. This representation was deemed neutral because whilst the old man interacts naturally with a young man, playing an intellectually challenging game, and the portrayal has no overt negative stereotyping, the image is diminished by the purpose of the role – to facilitate the empowerment of the young female driver, and the connection between the young man and woman, in an advert directed at youthful audiences.

PRIME TIME TV…CURRENT AFFAIRS

A#30 (positive) *Australian Pensioner’s Insurance Agency*…A variation on another similar advert for this company sees the same spokesperson as before (a woman of about 55 years) who this time refers to various individuals who speak briefly on camera. Three people of about 65 years, 2 females and 1 male, make comments such as, “Everything they said they would do, they did.” All were very brief appearances,
sitting down with camera close-ups on their faces, and all were seemingly fit, capable and speaking for themselves. As in this company’s previously assessed advert, the fit ‘young’ old are targeted, perhaps giving an indication of preferred customers. A fairly positive representation of older people, given major roles in an advertisement aimed at them.

**A#31** (positive) *Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS)*…A government advertisement aimed generally, with media personality ‘Dr. Wright’ urging viewers to, ‘Talk to your doctor about your prescriptions’. This is a government promotion to encourage viewers to be less reliant on prescriptions and to take control ‘with a healthy lifestyle and exercise’. The doctor is about 70, has a major role with exclusive camera focus, and presents a professional, authoritative, articulate image of an older person as an ‘expert’.

**A#32** (positive) *Birdseye Frozen Potatoes*…Similar to a previous advert, this one sees the roles reversed, with an older man, who seems to be in his late 60s, in the kitchen cooking tea for an extended family group. He asks, “Who wants to have roast potatoes?” whilst sharpening a knife. He places the frozen potatoes in the oven, and brings them to the table, after pretending to cook the real thing. This characterisation is the major role in the advert, and shows an older person as competent, in control and aware of products available. A small boy is shown watching the older man in the kitchen, and with other family members seen briefly, an intergenerational tableau is created in an advert aimed at general audiences.

**A#33** (positive) *Volkswagen Car*…A young couple in a car stops at an old, antiquated petrol station in a remote spot after the male driver hears a mysterious ‘squeak’. An older male attendant comes out to investigate the noise, sits in the car, laughs and puts oil on to the woman’s earrings. The young couple is sophisticated, urbane and attractive, with the older man (perhaps in his late 60s) dirty and rather strange. However, the mechanic *did* find the source of the squeak, highlighting his expertise and judgement at the expense of the driver’s lack of common sense. This was a major role with no dialogue, and can be seen as a positive representation of older ‘wisdom’, although it is perhaps tempered by the character’s contrasting old-
fashioned, unsophisticated persona, and the adverts’s orientation towards younger viewers.

**A#34 (positive)** *SoGood Soy Milk*...I have chosen to highlight this advertisement for an extended analysis of positive older representation, but it should be pointed out that none of the few positive advert portrayals stood out as being particularly noteworthy. From a positive ageing perspective, none depicted older people as integrated characters who were active, socially engaged, and in control in the way that young people were depicted. However, adverts are often very short, intense messages with much less scope for complex or realistic portrayals than programming, and whilst non stood out as being equally as positive about old age as youth, this advert did display several positive features. The ‘So Good’ soy milk advert comprised several short segments showing a variety of people, male and female, involved in active pursuits such as Tai Chi and jumping on a trampoline. One person in each segment has trouble with the activity to inject a humorous tone – in the segment with older portrayals, three women (possibly in their mid sixties, and dressed in modern clothes and seen smiling and relaxed), are playing pool, and one misses a shot as they all laugh. There is no dialogue from any of the characters appearing in the promotion, and a background song repeats ‘things can only get better’. A voice-over at the conclusion promotes the benefits of soymilk for healthy bones. Whilst only a brief portrayal, this was a view of active, engaged and happy older women – a very rare sight on commercial TV – who are included with various age groups in a promotion that appears to be designed to appeal to a wide range of viewers. This natural inclusion with others projects a sense of integration which lies at the heart of positive ageing ideals. In addition, a wide range of viewers are addressed in this advert which utilises humour and positive characterisations that most of us can identify with. In a negative version of this advertisement, older women could have been targeted, and the issue of bone density highlighted as a particular problem of ageing. As it was, the benefits of the product were marketed to all in the same way. All in the advert were seen as potentially benefiting from soy milk, and all exuded vitality and an equal propensity to ‘make mistakes’ when playing their chosen sport. This created a sense of intergenerational and social connection that related well to the concepts of successful ageing. These older
characters were physically active and socially engaged, and from a wider perspective, were aligned with younger people pursuing similar activities.

**A#35 (neutral) Jeep**…Aimed at young viewers, the scene shows two young couples in a lawyer’s office whilst a man (about 65) reads a will in a droning, officious manner. One young man has been bequeathed swampland – and is then shown excitedly driving his Jeep there. The older representation is judged neutral in that an authoritative, professional character is nevertheless a very minor, background role to facilitate a message to younger people (particularly young men) who dominate the scenario.

**A#36 (neutral) SGIO Insurance**…This advertisement for insurance focuses on disasters, with a variety of people seen dealing with the aftermath of fires, cyclones and storms. An old man (seemingly in his late 70s) is seen briefly and silently sitting down next to a table with a thermos flask. We can infer from the image that he is the victim of some sort of disaster. A neutral image here in that whilst the old man looks sad, lost and powerless, this image is echoed in portrayals of other age groups, with older people not singled out in particular as ‘victims’.
APPENDIX 2

SAMPLE AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHICS

This is a brief view of the adult audiences for one of each programme in this study (no results available for ‘Mornings With Kerri-Anne’). Whilst a limited view of audience demographics, the reader can gain an indication of the popularity of genres in respect to various age groups. The information was obtained from OzTAM’s ‘student pack’ which provides prime time ratings survey results for Sydney, 2003. Morning TV results were obtained from a Brisbane, 2001 OzTAM survey. A random sample of the audiences for each programme was obtained by simply choosing the programme results which appeared first on the list.

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PRIME TIME TV

LIFESTYLE.

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13/06/03, Sydney.

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‘THE GREAT OUTDOORS’
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17/06/03, Sydney.

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‘ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT’
17/06/03, Sydney.

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SOAP OPERA

‘HOME AND AWAY’
13/06/03, Sydney.

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CURRENT AFFAIRS

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