

Older Women and the Media

by Marlene Sanders

The 50 plus age group is the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. The net worth of seniors is five times more than that of other Americans. And, seniors control 48 percent of all discretionary spending. Yet, if one were to speak only about the images of older women on television, where I have spent most of my adult life as a news correspondent, producer, news executive, and in recent years, narrator, this would be a very short presentation, since we are virtually invisible.

Most U.S. programming is directed at people between the ages of 18 and 49. Not only that, but with the distraction of video games, the Internet, and special-interest cable stations, there has been a drastic falloff in the desirable age group's TV viewing. Still, programmes that attract young audiences are worth so much more to advertisers that they would willingly pay more for commercials. Shows attracting older audiences are cheaper to advertise and are generally viewed with derision. One highly rated programme that ran for over 10 years was cancelled at the height of its popularity because the audience was deemed too old, and the time sold, not profitable enough. That show was *Murder, She Wrote* that starred the over-60 actress Angela Lansbury.

Although several studies have debunked the idea that older people are set in their ways and do not try new products, the young people in advertising agencies who make the crucial decisions continue to believe that it is true. They consider young families to be more easily swayed by brand appeal. As an observer said, the actual programmes are simply filler between commercials.

Let's look at how older people are portrayed in dramas, soap operas, and magazine format news. From an analysis of programming monitored in 2000, these are the facts:

- Men outnumber women on the screen;
- Only 3 percent of both men and women characters portrayed were elderly; and
- Older women were much less likely than older men to be portrayed as working outside the home.

Members of the senior caucus of the Screen Actors Guild interviewed complain of shrinking opportunities. Few soap operas have characters representing grandparents, aunts, doctors, lawyers, neighbours, or sales people; the world of soap is composed of young adults, usually in romantic situations not at all in tune with the real world.

The overall message about aging on television, when we are there at all, is decidedly negative. A study by the

American Association of Retired Persons in 1996 noted that while older men have been barely visible on TV, older women have been virtually invisible. Those that do appear are defined by traditional social roles—their marital status and their relationships with their families. In terms of economic status, the most of the women are well off.

Women are more likely to be portrayed positively when they are under 64. The "positive qualities" included: sweet, pleasant, giving and caring. The negative images were: slow, feeble, cranky, and repetitive. Older women were seen as significantly less successful than older men; among characters over 65, nearly half of the men were successful people, but only 26 percent of the female characters achieved their goals.

"Ageism is one of the last remaining 'isms' that can be openly expressed in our society," one expert said during a hearing of the U.S. Senate Committee on Aging in September 2002. He cited expressions such as "geezer," which are often paired with the term "greedy" to refer to older people's pressure for drug subsidies and other government benefits.

Certainly the image driven into the minds of TV viewers is not a wonderful one of aging. This no doubt contributes to many forms of age discrimination that account for the lack of women's progress on the job market. I have a theory—that old people remind others of their mortality—something that they do not want to see.

A few comments are in order about the news end of the business, the area I know best. Women anchors and network reporters make up about one-third of current staffs. In recent years, several star anchors have been allowed to age, as have a handful of street reporters. This is progress. But the women stars around 60 look fabulous! Most could pass for somewhere in their 40s. They do not fit the stereotypes of aging. But can they continue to look that good indefinitely? Will they be allowed to appear when they are as craggy-faced and grey as some of the men? Will their years of experience trump the aging process? Stay tuned.

Source: Paper presented at the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) Expert Group Meeting on "Participation and Access of Women to the Media, and the Impact of Media on, and its Use as an Instrument for the Advancement and Empowerment of Women," Beirut, Lebanon, 12 to 15 November 2002