

# AgeBeat



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE JOURNALISTS EXCHANGE ON AGING  
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## A SPECIAL AGE BEAT REPORT

# THE JOURNALISTS EXCHANGE ON AGING'S THIRD NATIONAL SURVEY THE AGE BEAT'S HEARTBEAT STEADY DESPITE AGEIST MEDIA ECONOMICS

By PAUL KLEYMAN

“Although all newspapers do stories that bear on aging—the local senior center, the presidential candidates’ positions on Medicare reform, prescription-drug benefits—regular, consistent coverage of aging issues is often minimal,” the *Columbia Journalism Review* reported last spring (“A Beat Comes of Age,” by Mary Ellen Schoonmaker, March–April 2001). After noting that about 50 newspapers around the country have recognized aging as “a full-fledged specialty,” Schoonmaker observed, “The age-beat audience is not only older people, but also middle-aged readers who are caring for their parents and starting to think about the last part of their lives.” Currently, 16 journalists at daily newspapers dedicate 75%–100% of their time to the coverage of aging. (See box: “Full-Timers on the Age Beat.”)

Explaining the sheer dynamism the topic of aging, Schoonmaker quoted award-winning age-beat writer Maureen West of the *Arizona Republic*: “A reporter must delve into economics, psychology, culture, law, education, ethics, politics and medicine, even real estate development and city planning, to do a proper job.”

Reporters who enter the realm of the age beat find that the subject area has more variations than a gene. Especially for journalists in print and noncommercial electronic media, the focal topic of aging remains of compelling interest, despite the setbacks that usually accompany economic downturns. The recession, compounded by the understandable national absorption with the events of September 11 and the subsequent anthrax scare, curtailed newsroom attention to ongoing social concerns in 2001. Yet, the

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results of the Third National Survey of Journalists on Aging show a steady heartbeat for the age beat in American media. Not only did more journalists return their questionnaires than in the previous two surveys—152 for the current survey compared with fewer than 130 previously—but the findings show that this dynamic new beat, which emerged only in the past decade, will not fade, in spite of resistance to devoting resources to the subject in many media quarters.

Among the primary findings are the following:

- That 95.5% of participants had “experienced aspects of issues in aging” themselves or through their families, and 98.4% of those affected personally by facets of aging said their experience had affected their journalistic perspective.

- Although editors and producers in many media outlets equate issues in aging mainly with healthcare coverage, only half of stories listed by survey participants as important ones they had written or planned to cover were on health concerns. The rest related to the full range of interests that keep attracting journalists to the story of aging, from love to money.

- Respondents indicated growing requests by news managers for more stories about aging boomers, and half of responding participants said they define their beats as starting with age 50. Yet, questionnaires showed that almost six in 10 of their stories relate to people 65 or older, and less than one-third focus on the boomer generation. This difference suggests that while journalists are keeping one eye on the threshold of middle age and the boomer market—their primary attention continues to be on the myriad effects of old age on individuals, their families and society.

### Selling Audiences

Lawrence K. Grossman, a former president of NBC news and of PBS, has written of the dynamism of the age beat: “One of the biggest and most important stories of our time—indeed, one of the miracles of the 20th century—has been mostly ignored so far by the nation’s mainstream media. It is a little known fact that the equivalent of an entire generation has been added to the average person’s life [expectancy]” (*Life in an Older America*, edited by Robert N. Butler, et al., New York City: Century Foundation Press, 1999). Furthermore, he said, “Journalistically, the most interesting aspect of the ‘grown-ups’ movement’ is that it represents not a special interest beat, or what in the current media jargon is called a ‘niche’ beat, but one of the most important gen-

eral-interest beats of the coming century.”

Issues of aging and longevity compose an exciting beat that has proved fulfilling for reporters and of keen interest to a growing demographic group with large amounts of discretionary income. This, one might expect, is a sure-fire formula for lucrative media attention. Grossman, however, suggested otherwise during a workshop for journalists at the International Longevity Center in New York City in November 2000. He addressed the fact that mainstream media outlets avoid serving older audiences. He observed, “Politicians and

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## Full-Time on the Age Beat

Journalists on staff at daily news organizations who responded to the JEOA’s Third National Survey dedicated, on average, 50.4% of their time to aging, slightly more than the 47% of time that daily staffers reported in the JEOA’s Second National Survey in 1997. As of late fall 2001, there were 16 daily-news reporters assigned full time or nearly full time (75%–100%) to the age beat. Following is a list of the news organizations for which they work:

*Arizona Republic*  
*Atlanta Journal & Constitution*  
*Cleveland Plain Dealer*  
*Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*  
*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*  
*Newark Star-Ledger*  
*The Oklahoman*  
*Orange County Register*  
*The Oregonian*  
*Richmond Times-Dispatch*  
*Sacramento Bee*  
*St. Petersburg Times*  
*San Diego Union-Tribune*  
*Seattle Times*  
*Tampa Tribune*  
*Wall Street Journal*

About 35 additional daily news organizations have reporters who cover issues in aging a part of their work. Among them are the following: *Charlotte Observer*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Detroit Free Press*, *El Paso Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *National Public Radio*, *Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, Mass.), *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Scripps Howard News Service*, *Washington Post* and *Wichita Eagle*. About 30 more, like the *New York Times* and *Newsday*, have a regular columnist on aging.

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campaign leaders will pay anything to get 1,000 voters out among the aging, but in advertising terms, and in consumer terms, aging people are death in a sense. This is because the costs per thousand that advertisers are willing to pay broadcasters are staggeringly low compared to what they will pay for the 18–49 group. Broadcasters (and it's also true of newspapers) are in business not to provide programs or content but to sell audiences to advertisers, so they go where the money is. The question is: Why is it that the television networks still keep going after that young crowd and discriminate so heavily against the older crowd?"

The desire of television networks to search for the fountain of youth was asserted repeatedly by Jeff Zucker, president of NBC entertainment, in a *New York Times Magazine* cover story about him (Sept. 16, 2001). "If we're going to survive, we have to attract younger audience," stated the bald, 36-year-old Zucker in "The Stunt Man," a title drawn from his successful creation of programs such as *Fear Factor*, in which contestants perform skin-crawling stunts, such as eating insets or lying in a coffin with rodents.

Later in the article writer Lynn Hirschberg quoted *West Wing* creator Aaron Sorkin, who commented, "All executives have these fake rules—no politics or baseball shows ever work or, most of all, it has to be young." Hirschberg continued, "Zucker has, in fact, developed an evolving set of rules. He wants young. He wants a promotable element. He loves catch phrases ("You are the weakest link. Goodbye.") and running gags." Still later in the piece, Zucker defends his penchant for reality-based programs: "Our reality works and I think that we should stress that we're the only network that's aging down this summer."

Although it may be easy for journalism professionals to dismiss the arbitrary biases governing prime-time network entertainment programming, Zucker's rules reflect how the entrenched ageist attitudes among media decision makers are affecting the relative invisibility of older people in media from sit-coms to news magazines. Both the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and Screen Actors Guild (SAG) have commissioned studies showing the older writers and actors find it increasingly difficult to get work in Hollywood. For example, SAG released figures in 2001 showing the actors 60 or older make up 5.6% of the television population, about one-third the percentage of this age group in the national population.

SAG member Ed Asner, age 72, told Associated Press reporter Cadonna M. Peyton (Nov. 28, 2001) in the non-sense style of his character Lou Grant, "With my gray and balding head, I don't work so much. If I didn't

fight vigorously to produce or stick my nose into areas I have never worked in before, I would probably have to go. But I ain't going." As for newsrooms, one reporter at a national news organization commented anonymously for this report that until recently he dealt with a "no prune-face rule" aimed at minimizing pictures of older people.

### Gatekeepers

How broadcast rules operate to "age down" network news divisions is described in "Broadcast News: Attitudes Toward Featuring Elders and Responding to an Aging Audience," an article published in the American Society on Aging quarterly journal *Generations* on the theme "Images of Aging in Media and Marketing" (Fall 2001). Guest editor Maria D. Vesperi, a past president of the Association of Anthropology and Gerontology, interviewed independent media consultant Callie Crossley, a producer for ABC-TV's *20/20* for 13 years. In discussing the continual focus on audiences between ages 18 and 49, Crossley explained that the demographic balance of a story can be altered by the two senior producers, who must vet any piece, or by the main "gatekeeper" with top authority for the program. Crossley stated, "If my boss is offended because two of the main characters are older and he thinks they don't have to be, he has the power to remove them, or to trim them down." She also noted that with the sole exception of CBS's *60 Minutes*, "In terms of presenters and anchors: Hugh Downs, they didn't have any problems squeezing him out. In network television, you reach a point where you are too old to be credible."

Elsewhere in this interview, though, Crossley noted that "the only time older people are given their due respect is when it is time for experts, experts, experts. Gatekeepers do not believe that the personal stories of older folks draw in the viewers in the ways that the personal stories of 15-year-olds do." Such a moment for older experts came following the Sept. 11 attacks, she said. At least sometimes, experience counts.

In the realm of daily newspapers, journalist Hans Bergström reflected the apparently irrational chase for youth in "Age in the Press." Bergström conducted the study as a fellow at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, in Cambridge, Mass., which published it in the fall of 2001. (To access this article visit [www.shorensteincenter.org](http://www.shorensteincenter.org). Bergström compared the coverage of issues in aging during January 2001 at the *Boston Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Dagens Nyheter* in his native Stockholm, Sweden. His research included extensive interviews with writers and editors at U.S. newspapers. Bergström concluded, "In their market strategies newspapers are paying nearly no interest to readers in the upper-middle ages, in spite of the fact that this is the fastest-increasing

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# Experience Counts: Key Survey Findings

Results from the Third National Survey of Journalists on Aging show that most reporters covering issues in aging are women (60.7% of respondents) who have been professional journalists for 22.4 years (compared to 21.1 years in the 1997 survey) and have produced stories on aging during the past 8.5 years (comparable to the 8.6 years four years ago) for at least part of their editorial work.

The study found that 95.5% of participants had “experienced aspects of issues in aging” themselves or through their families. More strikingly, 98.4% of those who have been touched personally by facets of aging agreed that their experience had affected their journalistic perspective. This figure represented a significant jump over the results of the JEOA’s 1997 Second National Survey, in which 89.6% affirmed that their personal experience informed their perspective, rather than compromised their objectivity, a traditional concern in journalism.

The survey provides a virtual photo-montage of the age beat in seven categories: *daily newspaper staff* (39 respondents), *columnists* (24), *freelance journalists* (22), *professional-press writers and editors* (18), *senior media journalists* (25), *magazine staff* (11), and *broadcast professionals* (13). It must be noted that because the questionnaire was designed for use by journalists in different situations, individual respondents did not answer all questions. Also, those returning questionnaires often declined to reply to some questions. Therefore, the number of respondents often vary from question to question.

Here are other key findings for the overall sample:

- News organizations that continue to equate stories in aging with health reporting, with occasional attention to retirement issues, need to wake up and smell the demographics. Only half of the key story subjects noted by reporters in the survey related to healthcare, mental-health or health-policy issues. The questionnaire asked participants to list at least two story topics they had covered in the previous year and two more they planned to cover in 2001 that “you feel are especially important.” Following is a breakdown of the 394 listed subjects:

**Health** issues constituted about half (195 topics, or 49.5%) of the subjects.

**Retirement** stories (41, or 10.4% of the total) ranked next in responses, for example pieces on the debate over privatizing Social Security, older workers (“tapping retirees’ experiences”) and volunteers, taxation, and the financial future of the boomer generation.

**Housing** concerns came next with 24

responses (7%), across such topics as rising home-heating costs and affordable assisted living options.

**Longevity** stories (centenarians, anti-aging supplements and so on) were listed a dozen times (3%).

**Other subjects** spanned from the expected (the elder vote, fraud protection or cemetery scams, elder abuse) to subjects many news managers may not anticipate (older gamblers, aging of the prisons, creativity, the spiritual benefits of gardening, substance abuse among elders).

- Editors and producers tended to want more stories on the boomer generation in 2000 than in 1999. Of the 87 journalists who replied to the question on this concern, 37 (42.5%) said news managers want more about boomers. Another 45 reporters (51.7%) said they were expected to produce the same proportion of stories involving boomers as in the previous year, and five respondents were asked to do fewer baby-boom stories.

- At what age does “aging” begin? Half of respondents to this question (44 of 88) chose age 50 as their starting point. The age of 55 was a distant second selected by 19 (21.6%) reporters, followed by 13 (14.8%) indicating age 65, and 12 (13.6%) who marked age 60.

- What ages do these reporters actually cover? Almost six in 10 (58.3%) stories by respondents in all categories focused on people age 65 or older. The 75 reporters who gauged the percentage of their coverage devoted to stories on boomers averaged 30.7%. This is the same proportion of coverage on boomers as in the second JEOA survey four years ago. The remaining fraction of coverage relates to age-related issues for younger people.

- Although 79% of journalists cover public-policy issues (98 of 124 respondents), such as Social Security and Medicare, only a little more than half (55.8%, or 67 of 120 respondents) said they feel “adequately enough informed about these issues to discuss them in reporting.” In addition, 87.6% of reporters (106 of 121) said they would like more background information on covering these topics, a response suggesting that even those who feel knowledgeable recognize that following public-policy issues demands continuing education. Furthermore, almost four in 10 respondents (38.8%, or 45 of 116) felt that “most other reporting” they see or hear on policy issues is “accurate and balanced,” although 82.9% said such reporting at their own news organizations was accurate and balance. Also, three-quarters of reporters (58 of 79, or

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group of readers. The focus, instead, is on meeting threats from the Web and reaching out to the young, those supposed to be the hardest-to-get readers.”

An additional focus of Bergström’s report was on how newspapers regard senior members of their editorial staffs. He found that “newspapers try to dispose of upper-middle-age journalists, irrespective of their expertise, in order to be able to recruit younger people.” Midcareer journalists interviewed for the study echoed one who expressed concern that this trend “in editorial leadership is not good for journalism.” Bergström is no ivory-tower academic, though he does have academic credentials in economic and health policy, but is himself a prominent mid-career journalist. He came to the prestigious Shorenstein fellowship program as an editor and columnist for *Dagens Nyheter*, which has a daily circulation of 370,000 readers, and in May 2001 was appointed the paper’s chief editor.

Despite the impediments to the coverage of aging from the suites of news management, the strong response to JEOA’s Third National Survey and ongoing reports of newsroom developments demonstrate the staying power of the age beat. Since the JEOA began in 1993, anecdotal reports have continually reaffirmed that the loss of a reporter on aging in one quarter becomes offset by the addition of others elsewhere.

For example, in mid-2001 Don O’Briant was appointed to the full-time “Generations” beat at the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. O’Briant’s beat covers issues for all ages, an approach taken by several papers. He noted that stories on the health concerns of elders by Patricia Guthrie, who has included aging as a portion of her healthcare beat for several years, will overlap with his news and feature pieces. Also, in December 2001, National Public Radio brought in Joseph Shapiro, a veteran reporter on health and aging at *U.S. News & World Report*, to cover health, aging and disability, while *The Gazette* in Colorado Springs, Colo., assigned Lou Gonzales to start its new senior beat. Initially, she will cover aging at least half time. Overall, the number of daily-news journalists devoting 75%–100% of their time to the coverage of aging by late 2001 was 16, a 60% net gain since the JEOA’s Second National Survey in 1997.

## KEY FINDINGS

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73.4%) said that they are consulted by others at their news organizations for their “knowledge or advice about issues in aging,” such as for wire stories or pieces by other reporters at their organizations.

- Editors and producers wanted more of a hard-news orientation to stories on aging in 2000, according to about two-thirds (64.7%) of respondents to the question about it. This response was most relevant to daily reporters, among whom 25 of 34 respondents (73.5%) said they were being asked to tie stories to hard news. Often, this means reporters were having to work harder to sell editors on allowing them to spend time developing stories on more complex subjects or ongoing concerns like death and dying or chronic care that tend not to precipitate breaking news. Also, five of eight (62%) magazine journalists, six of 14 (42.9%) freelancers and all four broadcast journalists responding to this question said they had to orient more of their stories to hard news in 2000 than in 1999.

- Some respondents reported that there were more “soft” new stories on aging, such as caregiving, at their news organizations, as well. This situation was true of nearly a third of those answering this question (21 of 66, or 31.8%), but only about a quarter of the daily newspaper reporters. More than half saw no change in the number of soft stories on aging at their news organizations, and 15.2% said their were fewer such stories.

- Websites are now a staple of article distribution, with 83 reporters stating that their pieces had been carried on the sites of publications owned by news organizations for which they wrote pieces. Among dailies, 34 of reporters (87.2%) indicated that their articles were run on their papers’ sites. Another 14 journalists said they had placed stories on independent websites.

# Survey Method and Characteristics

The JEOA's Third National Survey questionnaire was mailed in two waves in September and November 2000. It yielded 152 usable replies, plus seven other responses that were not counted for various reasons, such as that the respondent indicated he or she was no longer covering issues in aging or now worked in a public-affairs capacity.

The questionnaire was sent to the mailing list of the JEOA. As with the previous two surveys, this was a convenience sample, not a scientifically weighted random sample, of journalists who had been added to the list over time. The overall list totaled 649 names, of which 79 were weeded out. These included editors and producers who cover aging and others, such as editors of major journalism reviews or important national publications, who are not reporters on aging and would not be expected to reply. This left 570, so the overall response rate of those completing usable questionnaires was 26.3%. This number compared with just under 130 respondents to the previous two surveys and, given a somewhat larger list, represented a slight increase in response over the past surveys by 1 or 2 percentage points. A total of 112 respondents filled out the questionnaire by hand and returned the mailed survey instrument, and 40 filled out the survey tool in its online version, an option that was offered for the first time.

The survey included 22 multipart questions with a total of 64 individual items, plus room for the respondent's name, news affiliation, title and contact information. All of this was printed on both sides of an 8 1/2-x-11-inch page, which was folded once to present four easy-to-fill-out sides. Ease of response was a necessary feature in order to maximize the return rate among busy journalists. An important limitation of this approach, however, was that the survey questions applied to journalists in seven disparate categories, each of which deserves more detailed attention and study than was possible given the survey project's minimal resources. For example, some questions applied only to participants in certain categories, such as editors and publishers in the senior press or freelancers. Other questions did not apply to all of those who responded and drew comments or question marks. The survey researcher apologizes for any confusion this may have caused for some respondents and appreciates the patience of all who completed and returned their questionnaires.

The JEOA hopes that the three surveys published in 1994, 1997 and 2001 will eventually provide helpful background for journalism or gerontology researchers in academic or other research centers. The coverage of crosscutting social issues in American news and information media receives too little attention. A priority should be closer study of the age beat, women's beat, children's beat, diversity issues and other emerging areas with a broad social impact. A better understanding of these general-impact beats—those that may not rouse immediate interest among a wide range of people but that affect every family, community and institution—can yield crucial insights for our society in the 21st century.

Much remains to be understood about the roles and responsibilities of the media as they struggle to balance heightened financial demands with an increasingly complex society: Who is responsible for disseminating what information on vital subject areas, and through which media outlets at what level of quality? In this era of publicly-held media consolidation, the corporate need for pursuing stockholder interests only increases the demand for protecting the public interest in what remains the only American industry whose purpose is constitutionally guarded in the Bill of Rights. Scholars in the ivory towers and media institutes need to do more than react to current mainstream media trends. Their charge is to delve more deeply into the division perceived by vast numbers of Americans between what is reported to them and what they experience in their lives and communities. Mass longevity, with its wide-ranging effects, is such a development. The critical link between the media industry and the public good is the reporter, who is—by definition—the eyes and ears of any news organization. The age beat is among the emerging story areas that have tickled the nose for news and storytelling passions of working journalists. To date, however, news executives and many directors of media programs have tended not to listen very attentively to reporters in the field about compelling developments with greater social than financial implications. This national survey of journalists on aging and the two preceding studies are offered by the Journalists Exchange on Aging in the hope that they will give future investigators with better survey-research skills and resources than we can offer a modest head start on this important area of journalism research.

# SEVEN AREAS OF MEDIA COVERAGE

Following are primary findings of the *Journalists Exchange on Aging's Third National Survey* for each of the seven categories of media represented by respondents, ranging from staff members at daily news organizations to those in broadcast.

## The Role of Dailies

The economic bias against older audiences for news and information has been pervasive, the four years since the third JEOA survey data was collected has also seen a major downturn in the American economy. This downturn is especially evident at daily newspapers, dailies which continue to be the main thermometer for checking the health of the age beat. Daily newspapers and news services have editorial staffs large enough to allocate reporting time and resources across the full range of community-information priorities perceived by publishers and news managers. Because of the need to fill large news holes relative to other media, dailies tend to develop stories and frame their importance both for the public and for other news formats, like magazines and broadcast media. Although there are exceptions to this generalization, such as the fine work done by public-radio news operations or the groundwork on stories in aging turned by reporters in the professional- or special-interest media, daily newspapers continue to be the main conduit of coverage for most interest areas. Just ask any commercial television or radio news director where he or she gets most story ideas each day.

Of course, the Internet has offered an important new prospect for expansion in all areas of coverage, but the economic decline of the past year has shown that the Web remains too financially volatile for its long-term place in the world of news to be well understood at present. Wide-ranging topics like aging, children or women may bob

in and out of sight on the news horizon in various media depending on financial or editorial currents, but the very well-being of those beats—not to mention the visibility of stories in these areas—essentially depends on newspapers.

Other economic slumps affecting newspapers in recent years have led to some curtailment in the growth of the age beat. For example, JEOA's Second National Survey showed increasing demands on age-beat reporters to cover non-age-related stories. Still, the number of daily-newspaper reporters dedicated to the topic at least part time remained stable and eventually rebounded. For example, data for the second JEOA survey were collected in the fall of 1996 in the midst of a drop in the media economy, especially for newspapers. At that time 10 dailies employed reporters assigned full time on the age beat, with another at NPR news. This number soon dropped to 7 or 8. By early 2001, though, the number had climbed to 17, a figure that has declined slightly to 16 in late 2001, though not all returned their questionnaires. (Two left their jobs and at this writing one has been replaced on a partial age beat, while another had to argue to sustain the age beat but was able to continue on it full time. Meanwhile, another paper appointed a full-timer on the age beat.) Besides the reporters now writing full-time or almost entirely on aging (75%–100% of their time), perhaps another 20 newspapers in the United States assign reporters to devote about half of their time to stories on aging. Also, 15–20 more have a reporter who dedicates a smaller but ongoing portion of his or her coverage to older people.

In the JEOA's Third National Survey, 31 of the total of 39 daily news reporters who returned questionnaires represented papers averaging 248,000 daily circulation, plus national entities including Cox and

Scripps Howard newspapers and wire services, as well as *USA Today* (circ. 1.8 million) and *Christian Science Monitor* (circ. 100,000). Papers ranged from *The Pioneer* in Bemidji, Minn. (11,000) and the Danville, Ill. *Commercial News* (20,000) to the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* (each with a cool million). Some other papers represented were the *Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, Mass.), *Newark Star Ledger*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, *Charlotte Observer*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, *Wichita Eagle*, *El Paso Times*, *Seattle Times*, *The Oregonian*, *Sacramento Bee*, *Orange County Register*, and *Arizona Republic*.

The daily staff reporters who responded produced an average of five stories per month, ranging from 30 to less than one. They devoted on average 50.4% of their time to aging. (This figure was slightly higher than the 47% for all respondents besides those in the senior press or writers of senior columns, categories in which journalists presumably devote 100% of their work to stories about aging.) Furthermore, over half of these daily staffers spent 50%–100% of their time on aging (16 respondents), with 11 of these respondents dedicating at least 75% of their time to themes on aging. In essence, though, the age beat continues to hold its own in a daily-newspaper market hit by rising paper costs and diminished advertising—although major media-corporation stock prices mostly remained buoyant, even following the events of Sept. 11, 2001.

Asked whether aging was their primary assignment, 54% (20 respondents) of the 37 reporters answering this question said it was. The other 17 covered aging regularly in the context of health or medical beats, feature writing,

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financial reporting and so on. Regardless of their primary focus, out of 27 reporters who identified their main concentrations, six (22%) were based at news desks and three (11%) each covered social-service issues, family issues, or health/medicine. In addition, two (7.4%) each were feature writers, focused on demographics, or wrote about education. And one reported on economic and social policy, were general assignment reporters for a Washington, D.C., bureau or a local paper, and one was assigned to enterprise projects. (The total exceeds 100% because of multiple answers by some, reflecting divided areas of coverage.)

### Columnists

The 24 columnists returning questionnaires wrote a column a week on average (4.3 pieces per month, with a range of from 1 to 9 columns) for newspapers, chains or news services (Scripps Howard, Copley, Tribune Media and Associated Press). Two columnists self-syndicated their pieces to multiple papers. Newspapers represented ranged from the *New York Times* to the *Contra Costa Times* (a Knight Ridder paper across the bay from San Francisco). Some others were *Newsday*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Hartford Courant*, *Hernando Today* (a subsidiary of the *Tampa Tribune* in Florida), and *San Diego Union-Tribune*. A third of the columns (8) were general interest, three were on retirement or personal finance, two focused on lifestyle issues and others that were indicated were on real estate, humor, healthcare, spirituality and social and political topic areas.

Of those responding to a question about their working status, 20 said they wrote on a freelance basis, and two others were editorial staffers. This group falls into two categories: Thirteen columnists have been professional journalists and 11 have had other careers, usually in the field of aging. This is why this group had three members with Ph.D.'s and two with master's

degrees. Among these writers, one has been in the news game for 63 years, six others for 50 or more years and four for 40–45 years. The entire group indicated that they devoted three-quarters (75.3%) of their editorial focus to those 65 or older and a quarter to stories relating to boomers. A modest percentage of their stories also related to younger people (13.7%) or had intergenerational content (8%). Five members of the group had also written books on aging.

Of those who work regularly with one media service or outlet, whether staff or freelance, almost half (11) said they are consulted by others at the news organization “for your knowledge or advice about issues in aging (e.g., for wire stories or pieces by other reporters).” Nine others replied that they were not consulted. In all, 15 said they felt they should be consulted, and one said he did not believe this was important.

### Freelancers

Freelance writers on aging may scribe columns (though not exclusively), keyboard work for service professionals or press the record button for audio or video productions. Overall, 22 of the 24 questionnaires from freelancers (91.7%) in this survey came from journalists who primarily submit their work for written presentation to general audiences. One example of respondents in this group was the husband-and-wife team of photographer Ed Kashi and writer Julie Winokur, whose major “Aging in America” project yielded exposure in a New York gallery exhibition, the *New York Times Magazine* and publication in many other outlets. Another was John F. Lauerma, who has been a stringer for *Newsweek*, coauthored the widely distributed book, *Living to 100*, and has been a regular contributor to *Harvard Magazine*. (In 2001, Lauerma took a staff job as health writer for the *Springfield (Mass.) Times-Union*, where he has written numerous series or substantial articles regard-

ing elders). Some others are Elizabeth “Betsy” Pope, who has written for *New Choices*, the *St. Petersburg Times* and many more; John Cutter, former age-beat writer for the *St. Petersburg Times* and now frequent contributor to the *New York Times* and columnist for Copley News Service; and Ellen Hoffman, author and retirement-finance writer for *Business Week* in print and online.

This group includes seven authors of 18 books on aging. They produce an average of 2.4 articles per month in a variety of media: nine write for magazines and seven for newspapers, nine write columns, six write online, three produce stories for news services and four for senior-press outlets, two are paid for public speaking, one works in radio and one in television. On average, members of this group create stories for four media outlets. Eight of them write mainly on aging, and 14 focus on other subjects.

The questionnaire asked their main areas of concentration. With some giving multiple answers, 11 write on health; five write features on a range of human-interest subjects; three focus on social issues; two each draft stories on finance, news developments, spirituality and caregiving. Other topics mentioned were the arts, demographics and garden design.

When asked, “If you freelance, do you find more/fewer/the same opportunities to place stories on aging” than in the previous year, 10 (45.5%) said more, nine (40.1%) said the same and only two (9.1%) said they had fewer opportunities. Overall, freelancers indicated that 51.6% of their work related to issues in aging.

The freelance market for stories on aging parallels the overall interest in tapping the market for aging boomers. Freelancers said that 47.3% of their stories on aging related to people 65 or older, and 33.8% were focused on boomers. For the most part they indicated that editors they worked for wanted only slightly

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more emphasis on boomers than in the previous year. Six respondents (27.3%) said their editors wanted more on boomers, 13 (59%) said that editors expected the same boomer coverage as before, and only one freelancer (4.5%) was asked to write fewer boomer stories.

Asked if editors wanted more of a hard-news orientation on stories, six (27.3%) said yes, while 36.4% said no (the rest did not reply). Only four freelancers (18.2%) had requests to do more “soft” stories during the previous year; eight (36.4%) were asked to do the same amount and two (9.1%) had been told to seek fewer soft story angles.

Half of these freelancers had written stories for websites or stories developed first for other media, six survey participants (27.3%) said they had expanded articles for the Web version, and six had been compensated additionally when pieces appeared on the Web. In addition, they were generally pleased with or indifferent to the quality of the piece as it appeared on the Web; none was displeased. Half also had originated new works for websites. Only one was not paid for this work. Of the 10 who were paid, four said the compensation was better than “comparable work for other media,” four said the amount was the same and only two found lower figures on their Web checks in the mail.

### Professional Press

Of the 18 respondents from media aimed at professional audiences, such as physicians, administrators and service providers in aging, two are freelancers and 16 are editors of publications ranging from *Aging Today* to *Older Americans Report to Employee Benefits Plan Review*. These are the workhorses of journalism. Often their work is arbitrarily dismissed by mainstream media institutions as representatives of “trade media” assumed to be beholden to narrow advertiser or special interests. But this attitude has not kept pace with the expansion of

special-focus journalism in the past quarter century. Each media outlet requires individual evaluation. The work of journalists on aging is watched carefully by mainstream-media journalists as an important source of in-depth background on issues and the latest angle on trends and developments in the field covered. The staff journalists in this group work regularly on six magazines, five subscription newsletters, three news-and-feature papers and three online services. Three members of this group are authors who have generated a total of nine books on aging.

Members of this group generate (write, edit, process) a mean of 5.5 stories on aging per month, ranging from an editor who handles 80 stories monthly to a writer who produces a feature on aging every two months among other subjects covered. Nine of them (half) primarily cover issues in aging, five (28%) are mainly health or medical journalists, two focus on retirement and one writes on disability issues.

Two-thirds of the work by these respondents (64.5%) is centered on older people, ranging from 5% to 100%. Of 50 “especially important” stories that these journalists had produced in the previous year or planned to do in the coming year, 32 (64%) were on health topics. Two-thirds (67.5%) of their output regards people age 65 or older, and only 23.3% relates to boomers. One editor of a publication dealing with assisted living noted that her stories mainly involve people 80 or older, a group little covered by mainstream media unless the focus is on boomers caring for older parents. Asked about the degree to which their media organizations wanted stories on aging boomers over the past year, none indicated being asked to produce more “boomer-centric” stories. All of these respondents said they were doing the same proportion or fewer pieces on boomers.

A third of respondents in this group have originated articles for websites. Of the small number who

responded to questions on compensation, the reporters were split between those who said their payments were either as good as or lower than what they were paid for comparable print pieces. None indicated receiving better compensation than for print articles.

In addition, half of this group had received education or training on issues in aging, primarily at seminars or conferences in the field. Almost half (44.4%) said they are consulted by others at their news organizations for their knowledge and advice on issues in aging.

### Senior Media

Most of the 25 representatives of the senior media, 21 (84%), work on local senior papers or magazines aimed at older consumers. (The other media include a freelance column for a senior paper, a regional online service, a news service, and a group of health service papers distributed through hospitals and health organizations around the United States.) These respondents included 15 editors (60%) and eight publishers or editor-publishers (32%).

The senior newspapers and magazines have an average circulation exceeding 63,000, ranging from 10,000 to a half million. Because many have multiple editions, the largest with 14, these publications average 5.3 outlets. Some of the publications represented were *Senior News* (Dundee, Ill.), *Fifty Plus Magazine* (Myrtle Beach, S.C.), *Best Times* (Memphis, Tenn.); *Spectrum* (Sacramento, Calif.), *Senior Beacon* (Washington, D.C.-area), *Beacon* (Grand Junction, Colo.), *Your Life Magazine* (Duluth, Minn.), and Canada's *Forever Young*, which has several editions across the country.

A dozen questionnaires from this group said their publications carry stories on their own websites (7) or independent Internet sites (5). Also, these respondents generate stories for print syndication (4), TV or cable (2) and radio (1).

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Only 11 responded to questions regarding what age they consider the starting point for their audiences, and most circled age 50 or 55 (10), while one set the starting age at "40-plus." None listed age 60 or 65. A little under two thirds (64.5%) said they had increased coverage of stories related to boomers, and the rest responded that there had been no change. None had reduced the number of boomer-directed stories. Half of the senior-media respondents (13) said their audience had grown in the previous year, eight said it had remained the same and none said it has shrunk.

Only about a third of this group indicated having undergone training or education in aging (30.8%), mostly in seminars. Also, 100% of those responding to the question on whether they need more knowledge in this area said yes, adding that they would be interested in attending journalism seminars to learn more about issues in aging.

Of the 67 "especially important" stories listed by respondents for the past year and the year to come, 38 (58.2%) were health related. As with the other groups of journalists, article subjects were widespread. The topic listed most often, caregiving, received only seven mentions, followed by prescription drugs (5). Among the other stories included were affordable long-term care, the rise in heating costs, the 2000 presidential election, alternative and complementary medicine, older people without medical insurance, foster grandparents, senior transportation issues, taxes affecting seniors, older drivers, spirituality, financial conflicts that might affect AARP's objectivity, ageist stereotypes, elder abuse, artificial joints and genetic research. The senior press is a terrific repository of story angles and ideas.

#### National Magazines

Although only 11 people responded in this category, they reach gigantic audiences. The bimonthly *Modern Maturity* and its sibling, the monthly news and fea-

tures tabloid *AARP Bulletin*, reach 21 million AARP members. Among other publications represented were *Prevention* (3 million), *U.S. News & World Report* (2.2 million), *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* (1.25 million), *Consumer's Digest* (1 million), Reader's Digest' *New Choices* (600,000) and the Wall Street Journal's *Encore* (350,000).

Nine of the respondents said their stories have been carried on their publications' websites, and one had placed stories with an independent online news service. Four had done stories on aging for radio, three for television and two for print syndicates. Also, two were book authors. In addition, four members of this group said they had originated stories for independent websites. Four respondents were the top editors of their publications.

Among this small but varied group, three focused mainly on health issues, three on financial and economic concerns, one on science-technology coverage, one indicated a concentration on social policy and one is an investigative reporter.

In addition, four said their coverage of aging had increased in the previous year, with six indicating it had not changed. None said their coverage of aging had decreased. On average, members of this group devoted 50.7% of their editorial time to stories on aging, ranging from 100% to 15% of their schedules. The proportion of time this group spends on elders, boomers or younger people is comparable to the overall percentages discussed elsewhere in this report. Seven (63.6%) of the group said they or their editors wanted more or the same amount of coverage of elders, and none said they were asked to produce fewer such articles. However, five (45.5%) noted that they were being asked to produce stories on aging with a harder news orientation than previously.

About two thirds of this group (63.6%) have had at least some education and training on aging at seminars or through journalism fellow-

ships, and two individuals have advanced degrees, one in psychology and one in gerontology. Only one respondent said he was uninterested in attending seminars or conferences for journalists on aging. A key issue for working press in this regard is the support that editorial staffers receive from management. They were asked how news managers have responded to their requests to spend the company's "time and resources covering conferences in aging." The nine who responded (81.8%) said either "with enthusiasm" (four respondents) or "with acceptance" (five people). None in this group responded "with reluctance" or "refusal."

All but two members of this group write on public policy issues (81.8%), and every respondent but two of those said they felt adequately informed on these concerns. All who write on these issues said they would like more background on them, however.

#### Broadcast News

Broadcast news continues to be the weakest link on the age beat. This is not a negative reflection on the 13 excellent news and feature journalists who responded to the survey. Instead, this problem has to do with the general disconnection between the large audiences attracted by television and radio and minimal resources these media devote to newsgathering compared to news organization mainly generating print.

A notable exception is public radio, which often has a reporting staff large enough to dedicate some reporters to specialized perspectives on a subject like aging. Shortly after survey respondent Wendy Schmelzer e-mailed her questionnaire, at the end of 2000, she announced that she was resigning her long-time staff position as the National Public Radio Science Unit's full-time reporter on aging to pursue a degree in geriatric social work. Schmelzer said she would continue to develop pieces for NPR News as

an independent producer. At the beginning of December 2001, Joseph Shapiro announced that he was leaving *U.S. News & World Report* after 19 years to cover aging, health and disability for NPR. Shapiro has long been devoted to issues in aging and focused on long-term care for one year in the late 1990s through a Kaiser Health Foundation fellowship.

Unfortunately, NPR is virtually the only game in national radio town where serious daily news coverage is concerned. (However, in 2001 Madge Kaplan produced excellent segments on aging for "Marketplace," which is nationally syndicated by Minnesota Public Radio, and WBUR-FM in Boston.)

Radio clearly dominated the small group of electronic-media respondents to the JEOA Third National Survey, up from 11 in the Second National Survey in 1997. Nine survey participants (69.2%) were primarily in radio. Of this group, four address their work to national audiences and five to local or regional listeners. Besides Schmelzer, the national group included veteran independent producer Connie Goldman, whose human-interest features on aging are carried via PRI; and two producers of syndicated programs: Carole Marks, coproducer-host of "Touch of Grey," broadcast weekly on about 40 local stations from its base in Mystic, Conn.; and Hedi Headley, whose show, "Your Second 50 Years" is distributed to 50 radio stations from the program's headquarters in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Local-regional radio respondents ranged from Sylvia Pepper, whose twice monthly half-hour show on aging has long been a fixture on noncommercial KPFA in Los Angeles, to David A. Doyle, host-producer of an independently produced, live weekly talk show on a music station in Brookfield, Wisc.

All four television representatives addressed national audiences. They were: Dale Bell and Harry Wiland, coproducers of a major series on caregiving to appear on PBS, via KCET in Los Angeles, in the fall of 2002; Lisa Aliferis, a San Francisco-based producer for NBC's *48 Hours* who has long produced health-related stories, some on aging, for national audiences; Murrey Jacobson, a producer for the "NewsHour with Jim Lehrer"; and Bailey Barash, an Atlanta-based independent television producer (and magazine writer) focusing on aging. She is a former executive producer for the CNN Science Unit.

As for those who cover issues in aging regularly in electronic media, eight in the survey group (61.5%) indicated that aging is their primary area of coverage, and five (38.5%) said it was not. Three electronic-media respondents (23%) said their coverage of aging had increased in the previous year, five (38.5%) said the amount had remained the same, and three (23%) circled "decreased." (Two did not answer this question.)

Consistent with those in the other media categories, those in electronic media generally defined their beats as starting at age 50. One

each indicated a focus starting at age 55 and 65. Also, John L. Hess, a media and socio-political commentator for WBAL-FM in New York City (and past *New York Times* writer) circled no age specification but jotted, "I combat generational distinctions." As in other media groupings, this group of survey participants devoted on average 59.2% of their work to issues involving people age 65 or older.

In terms of outreach to other media, although one respondent indicated being a regular contributor to an online news outlet, only three respondents had placed stories on their news organization's websites or originated stories for independent websites

Eight members of this group (61.5%) had some education and training in aging, among them two with master's degrees. One had done postgraduate study, another earned an advanced certificate in gerontology, one directed a program for retired volunteers. Several had received journalism fellowships in aging to attend seminars on the topic.

In this group, seven of 10 who responded to the questions on public policy coverage said they do cover issues like Social Security and Medicare. Only five (half) said they feel adequately informed on these topics, and nine said they would like more information. In this group, half said they feel reporting they see or hear in other media is balanced and accurate, slightly more than electronic-media respondents four years ago.