

Age Beat



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE JOURNALISTS EXCHANGE ON AGING
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This special Age Beat report for the Journalists Exchange on Aging (JEoA) was researched and written by Paul Kleyman, with assistance from Steve Slon, Mary Johnson, Ingrid Wynden, Claudia Mon Pere MacIsaac and many participants in JEoA, who provided valuable observations and advice. We also thank the American Society on Aging and its staff for their continuing support.

JOURNALISTS EXCHANGE ON AGING SURVEY ON STYLE

"Frankly, I don't have a problem with senior," stated one newspaper reporter.

"I don't have a problem with senior after the age of 70 or in referring to the senior discount when I'm 55," qualified another.

"I HATE seniors, and so does everyone I know," declared yet another journalist.

"Get rid of boomer, even if there is no great alternative," insisted a columnist.

"Baby boomer is actually a positive term—except for the younger boomers, I can't imagine most people mind being called a baby boomer," opined a newspaper editor who once covered the age beat.

"I get letters objecting to the word old," noted a reporter.

"I don't use elderly, but it's a locally reviled term, although elder is OK," commented a veteran editor, who then advised, "Use old fart with caution."

The cacophony over what to call people in their middle and later years—including the irreverent use of such pejoratives as *old fart* or *geezer* in humorous or generationally self-effacing contexts—was evident in responses ranging in tone from somber to bemused by nearly 100 journalists who answered an e-mail survey

about appropriate editorial usage in the news and information media on issues in aging.

The goal of this Journalists Exchange on Aging survey, however, was not solely to inform reporters how to dodge unintentionally volatile usages more adroitly. The responses—86 completed survey questionnaires, plus 13 e-mail messages or appended articles about word usage in reference to older people—include many useful insights and at least a qualified consensus or middle ground in the application of many words and phrases.

The often contradictory responses should not surprise anyone familiar with the rising concern about cultural identity evident in American society and politics since the 1960s. For all of the railing in recent years against language that is too politically correct, no one

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WORDS TO AGE BY: A BRIEF GLOSSARY AND TIPS ON USAGE

Among the nearly 100 journalists who responded to the Journalists Exchange on Aging survey about the language of covering issues in aging, many referred to *The Associated Press Stylebook*, demonstrating that the AP has established one useful, though limited, guideline in this subject area. Following are a few additional rules of thumb gleaned from survey respondents and other sources. These are intended to help journalists represent midlife and older people in socially neutral language that respects their individuality without appending presumptuous labels to them, either directly or indirectly. This set of principles is a work in progress; readers are welcome to submit their own additions to or improvements on this glossary to JEOA National Coordinator Paul Kleyman at paul@asaging.org.

Preferred synonyms follow alphabetically:

boomer(s): Widely used and accepted by participants in the JEOA language survey, this term nonetheless elicits considerable cautionary notes from journalists in aging who are troubled by its overuse. Although marketers sense a growing excitement around all things boomer, reporters need to keep in mind that the term is only a temporary proxy for middle age, not synonymous with it. The 77 million boomers are a large generation born at a specific time, from the end of World War II to the beginning of the War on Poverty, usually but not always defined as from the start of 1946 through the end of 1964. Journalists who write frequently on aging and retirement advise against its overly broad and liberal application.

elder(s): Use to identify those who are discernibly in later life. *Elder(s)* can seem uncomfortable to some because of its infrequent use, as well as its tribal or group applications (e.g., *elders of the tribe*, *church elders*), but the noun is associated with positive applications and is yet to be used widely enough to be resented as a label for older people.

middle-age(d): Use descriptively (e.g., *those in middle age* or the less acceptable *middle-aged people*), but avoid references to *the middle aged*, which tends to lump people with a group label.

midlife: In his "On Language" column (May 6, 2007), William Safire favors the word *midlife*, which he traces to the "impeccable coinage source, John Keats, in his 1818 poem "Endymion." Safire anoints the term as not a euphemism but "a usefulness."

References to people in midlife are more inclusive than using *boomer(s)*, a term identifying one birth cohort. Midlife generally identifies the years between people's early 40s and early 60s, but precision is somewhat slippery. Be aware that middle age traditionally was considered to begin at age 35, when 70 was

regarded as a typical benchmark for very old age. Increasingly, the large and generally active boomer generation is likely to extend the concept of midlife well into the 60s.

Older (people, adults, individuals, Americans and so on): The top choice, seen by reporters as the more neutral and flexible general term for people in later life.

senior(s): The second most widely accepted group descriptive for older people. Do not use to describe people younger than age 65, though, and be aware that boomers may be increasingly unfriendly to this term as they approach that age.

Mostly disliked terms:

baby boomer(s): Do not use except in discussions relating to the birth years of the postwar baby boom. However much many media outlets preserve the baby fat in this generation, many grate on the gratuitous infantilization this term, in broad use, applies to the entire generation in perpetuity.

elderly: Use only as a modifier (e.g., *elderly people*, *elderly patients*) in referring to people who are discernibly old and frail. More vigorous older people tend to dislike the term when used in general reference to all people in late life. That they find it stigmatizing, as if older people are all frail, has emerged in many studies and anecdotal reports over the years. The noun *the elderly* should be sidestepped entirely. It is the most disliked descriptive term among older adults for its impersonal and stigmatizing manner of penning elders together in an image of frailty and decline.

senior citizen(s): Steer clear of this term. Although a prominent gerontologist noted that this term, initially used in a 1938 issue of *Time* magazine, was the first phrase to denote the civic position of older adults, that subtle argument in its behalf is lost to most readers. Even though *senior citizen* remains in wide use, it continues to sound euphemistically sour in the ears of many older readers.

Other terms, such as *aging* (*boomers*, *people*, etc.), *mature* and *old* are discussed in more detail elsewhere in the JEOA survey report.

A Few Good Principles

The *AP Stylebook* states: "*Elderly*. Use this word carefully and sparingly. It is appropriate in generic phrases that do not refer to specific individuals: *concern for the elderly*, *a home for the elderly*, etc. If the intent is to show that an individual's faculties have deteriorated, cite a graphic example and give attribution for it." This AP rule is the most widely cited among journalists and its general point is well taken here. However, reporters

should note that the phrase *the elderly* was among those JEOA survey respondents rated as one that they and their audience members most disliked. *Elderly* used as an adjective is acceptable, though (see below).

Gannett Newspapers adds to the AP admonition in its stylebook section on age that reporters should “be specific when possible, reserving *senior(s)* for those cases when no other descriptive will work. . . . Use accurate descriptive terms. Avoid being patronizing, demeaning or using stereotyping terms such as *feisty, spry, sweet, little, feeble, eccentric, senile, grandmotherly*, etc. Don’t describe an older individual as *active*, implying that this is some deviation from the norm. Instead describe the individual’s activities. Don’t gratuitously mention family relationships when there is no relevance to the subject: ‘Golda Meir, a doughty grandmother, told the Egyptians. . . .’”

Don’t mention a person’s age unless it’s germane to the story. A report stating that “An 84-year-old driver struck three cars during rush hour” should cite facts establishing that the driver’s age was relevant to the accident. (Who were the other drivers? Was a mechanical failure at issue? What were driving conditions?) Another example: “Rep. Nancy Pelosi, age 65, held her latest grandchild as she announced that preschool education would be among her top issues.” For group identifications, be as specific as possible, especially in first references, such as “people 65 or older.”

When in doubt, ask sources what terms they prefer.

When certain, ask anyhow.

When assured by a source that a doubtful choice is fine, such as geezer, quote the person directly if needed, and apply good sense: Qualify awkward word choices, such as geezer or other reclaimed epithets, in ways that will not result in your having to answer complaints. Keep in mind that some will grumble about any group descriptive applied to them, and that is their right. Maintain a sense of proportion about terms of identity and gauge over time how well audience response serves as a barometer of popular usage—a subject that can occasionally provide material for good copy.

Avoid words and phrases that automatically date people or convey extraneous connotations, such as *of a certain age, curmudgeon* or *feisty*. Writers who do not do so in this rapidly aging society will increasingly risk dating themselves as being immature and out of touch. Even common slang, such as *the golden years*, may carry unintended shades of meaning. The word *golden*, for instance, was once meant to convey the colors at sunset, but the connotation has

changed over the years, now also suggesting the affluence of many retirees.

Medicare and Medicaid: Know the difference—and see that your copy desk and headline writers do, too. These huge programs are not interchangeable, but people frequently confuse them with one another. *Medicare is a universally available federal program* for all people 65 or older and many people with disabilities. *Medicaid is a federal and state poverty program restricted to low-income individuals.* An intelligent article on changes in Medicaid will look foolish to knowledgeable readers under a headline about Medicare.

Be alert to political spin in phrasing associated with public policy elements of news stories. Casual use of the “burden” of Social Security or, more generally, of an aging society, plays into one side of a heated political debate. A report about proposals to reduce social spending should not then refer to “savings of \$66 billion,” when opposing parties would argue that claimed “savings” would be offset by hidden losses in money and human consequences. The neutral alternative, even for broadcast: “a federal reduction of \$66 billion.” When in doubt, reporters should—as always—consider the source and ask whether there might be another side to the story behind a word choice.

Housing types: Emulate the stylebook of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* by learning the official designations of various types of eldercare settings in each state discussed. Assisted living facilities are not nursing homes, board-and-care homes are designated by as many as 30 terms around the United States, and continuing-care retirement communities are specific kinds of developments. When in doubt, ask residents or staff about the correct term for their site. For precise definitions, check with the state licensing authority for long-term care facilities.

Avoid the gee-whiz tone in stories about older people. “At 76, Yamoto remains an active (fill in the blank: gardener, worker, hang glider, teacher, marathoner).” Without specific information and context, stating that an older person is *still* active or *remains* lively at 74 implies that the individual’s vigor is merely a vestige of his or her waning powers. References to preserved attributes can be appropriate: “At age 79, Barbara Cook’s voice has deepened and matured but surprisingly retains the freshness of her original cast recordings of *Candide* from four decades ago.” The emphasis is on the person and her skill, not on the writer’s naive sense of wonder. ♦

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seems to shy away from seeming to be overly PC—or from denying any connection to that phrase at all—when it comes to his or her own groupings. Journalists, though, have two functional concerns about identity language in their daily tasks: to write clearly without verbal speed bumps that will impede a reader's understanding of an article or an electronic news segment's informational flow and analysis, and to avoid enervating distractions that might result from reader objections.

To be sure, journalists enjoy being credited now and then for playing a role as arbiters of the language, but the reality is that a reporter's word choices mainly function to filter out extraneous content, explicit or implicit, in order to concentrate an audience's attention on the information gathered. With the exception of some columnists, bloggers and essayists, who may be rewarded for being provocative, a journalist's continual chore is to unload language of potential misapprehensions and mishaps.

As one survey respondent, "Encore" columnist and editor Glenn Ruffenach of *The Wall Street Journal*, commented, "I've never come upon a term that many/most people seem to like or can agree on. It seems the more bland, the better."

Two New Purposes

It's been said that journalism presents the first draft of history. It might be added that journalists are the first, if accidental, lexicographers. The purpose of the 10 questions in the present survey was to yield a kind of field recording of usage about generational groups. This survey was not the first about word usage on aging conducted by the JEOA. Previous JEOA surveys in 1997 and 2001 also touched on language issues. Unlike the present study, however, which focused solely on the language of aging, those broader surveys queried age-beat reporters on their coverage of issues involving later life. The language-usage portion of those surveys included only four questions regarding the word preferences of journalists and their audience members.

This JEOA survey, conducted in fall 2005, more extensively covered concerns about usage and also included two significant differences from the earlier surveys. First, the new survey specifically asked about distinguishing the language of middle age, especially regarding the boomer generation, from language describing those in late life. The origin of this distinction was largely a function of the aging of the 77 million people in the United States born in the nearly two decades following the end of World War II, who overall have not identified with the historically traditional labels.

The second new purpose of this survey was to explore the subtle biases of associated, often descriptive terms that tend to stoke the stereotypes of people in their middle or later years. For example, a parachuting ex-president in his 70s might be described as spry or feisty, terms never applied to younger sports parachutists. Such terms tend to beetle the brows of older article subjects by presenting a somewhat dismissive image of their bygone potency. Survey co-organizer Steve Slon, editor of *AARP The Magazine*, first recommended this focus for the survey during the March 2005 meeting of JEOA in Philadelphia, and subsequent discussions led to the development of these questions.

Avoiding Subtle Bias

More than a matter of image, though, the framing of particular groups by words and phrases associated with its members can also carry powerful social and political implications. "Geezers, Gerries and Golden Agers" was the headline over a *New York Times* commentary (March 28, 2004) by linguist Geoffrey Nunberg. On NPR's *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross, the erudite linguistic commentator offered a fascinating history of epithets and euphemisms for the term *elders* (a word he didn't mention). However, one term that he applied with no sense of its political connotations was *burden*. Nunberg wrote that "some people have worried that the connotations of boomer might become more derogatory as more people over 65 come to constitute a quarter of the population, increasing the economic burden of Social Security." *Age Beat Online (ABO)*, the JEOA e-newsletter, noted that conservative think tanks have "woven this dubious derogation so thoroughly into American consciousness that not only many reporters but the distinguished lexicographer have had it spun into their unconscious usage." *ABO* explained that the word *burden* in this context is a controversial editorialization among authorities on Social Security, Medicare and related old-age entitlement programs whereas, for example, massive education spending for the postwar baby boom was not commonly derided as being anything close to burdensome.

Nunberg found the *ABO* critique in a routine search he conducts to monitor responses to his columns and, to his considerable credit, he e-mailed *ABO*, "You're right—the implications of this word never registered with me." Subsequently, he altered the piece as it appears in his book, *Going Nuclear: Language, Politics, and Culture in Controversial Times* (New York City: Public Affairs, 2004) to eliminate the bias. He later said he frequently refers to this example in discussing how subtle political influence can enter widespread usage.

Although issues of political bias per se did not surface in the JEOA survey results, respondents discussed the overall negative image of many constructions

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regarding direct references to midlife and older people. The ripple of stereotyping language in everyday dissemination also has been broached by the National Center on Disability and Journalism in Boston. In November 2004, the center's executive director, Suzanne Levine, wisely advised journalism students at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, "We, as reporters, need to take the judgment from our language. We want to be accurate."

Levine often cites a list of stereotypes in reporting on people with disabilities identified by Jack A. Nelson in his book *The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), some of which echo into old age. For example, both elders and younger people with disabilities are commonly approached in reporting as being "maladjusted" or "cranky," as well as "burdensome" for able-bodied caregivers—and, by extension, for societal resources. Because attitude-laden usages about older people are sometimes embedded in established phrasing that is used at times semiconsciously by writers, this survey report aims, in part, to recommend certain principles to help reporters achieve a balanced approach and to underscore certain wording that they should avoid. However, the very fluidity of language makes any such listing useful only as a guideline to be revised frequently. More important, the intention of this report is to stimulate thought and discussion about how journalists can best represent the people, communities and issues of our aging society.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Everybody's Talking About It (Almost)

Essential questions reporters are taught in Journalism 101 are: So what? and Who cares? The JEoA language survey began with the question, "*In the past year, have you participated in a discussion about terms preferred or not preferred for middle-aged or older people?*" Reporters were then asked to "*Indicate which entity or entities you discussed this with: colleagues at your news organizations, colleagues elsewhere in journalism, friends, family members, members of your audience.*"

Of the questionnaire's 86 respondents, 84 journalists answered this question. Almost eight in 10 (65, or 77.4%) had participated in such discussions, ranging from one exchange to many in all categories. Only 19 (22.6%) had not discussed the terminology of aging with anyone.

Among the 65 survey participants who had engaged in such conversations, 37 (56.9%) of the discussions

were with nonstaff professional colleagues, 26 (40%) with friends, 23 (35.3%) with coworkers, 22 (33.8%) with readers or audience members, 13 (20%) with family members, and 13 with article sources or professionals in the field of aging. Also, five reporters said they engaged in discussions on the terminology of older ages with older people, and three did so with editors.

Most replied simply by saying they spoke about word choices on aging with "colleagues at my news organization and members of my audience." At minimum, a small number of reporters said they'd had one such exchange. For example, the *San Francisco Chronicle's* Carolyn Said recalled speaking about these word preferences "one time, with an acquaintance at a social event, who felt that the term *seniors* is derogatory and *elders* is preferable." Alternatively, Karen Zarkey, of the monthly *Senior Circuits* in St. Louis, commented, "It's always a hot topic around the publishers of senior pubs."

A few elaborated, sometimes with illuminating insights. For example, Bob Moos of the *Dallas Morning News* answered, "Yes, I recently visited with the head of our local 'senior citizens' agency, who says she's pondering a name change because of the boomer onslaught. The same is true for our city's 'Office of Senior Affairs' and our community 'senior' centers. Local officials are looking for a better alternative so that they can market their services to a younger demographic (or one that still thinks of itself as younger)."

A surprising answer came from retired *Los Angeles Times* economics correspondent Robert A. "Bob" Rosenblatt, now a freelancer on public policy trends in aging. Rosenblatt wrote, "This came up at a CMS [Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services] briefing about the new Part D benefit. CMS stopped using the word *beneficiary* to describe people on Medicare. They use the phrase *persons on Medicare* because they found out that when people hear beneficiaries, they think it refers to those who get your money when you die, beneficiaries of a will or an insurance policy. It scares and confuses people."

Terms for Two Groups

A primary change since the previous JEoA survey published in 2001 is that, with the huge boomer generation firmly ensconced in their 40s to early 60s, the language of age has begun to divide into two distinct groupings: words and phrases used to describe older people, typically from about age 65 onward, and terms for those in middle age. With the oldest boomers now on the cusp of official elderhood, where they are eligible, for example, for many services provided to people age 60 or more under the federal Older Americans Act, the news media and many marketers are especially keen to appeal to boomers in age-appropriate ways without offending them.

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Generally, no experienced writer should be surprised that in considering terms to use in referring to groups of people in midlife or older, numerous survey participants frowned on the ready-to-wear reliance on broad proxies for age. Kay Harvey of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* observed, "I think it's always good to avoid such labels by being specific—"people 55 and older," for example. The next reference can be to 'people in that age group,' and so on." But Harvey and other journalists agreed that news—and headline—writers need to use some general terms if everyday language is to function for them.

In a 2005 article, Stephen Nohlgren, reporter on aging for the *St. Petersburg Times*, quoted Janice Wassel, a gerontology professor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, who conducted a study showing that people in different age groups react differently to terms

of aging. "To the extent that society sometimes needs labels," Nohlgren wrote, "Wassel suggested *older adult* to describe someone in the later stages of life." As in the previous JEoA survey, reporters tended to agree that *older (adults, people, Americans, individuals* and so on) is the less conspicuous, more flexible term to use when specific age references cannot be applied.

Audience Preferences, Dislikes

What terms do audiences seem to prefer or dislike? Have any objected to certain words or phrases? Journalists don't always have the opportunity to engage in lexicographic discussions with their audience members, and 15 respondents to the JEoA questionnaire said they had no idea what terms their audiences eschewed. But most did at least have some indications of their audience's preferences.

The survey asked reporters to list one or two terms for midlife or older people that their readers or audience members prefer. Reporters listed 149 separate

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Paul Kleyman, national coordinator of the Journalists Exchange on Aging (JEoA) and editor of *Aging Today*, newspaper of the American Society on Aging, developed the JEoA Survey on Style along with Steve Slon, editor of *AARP the Magazine*. A selected group of journalists reviewed and enhanced the questionnaire. Approximately 550 journalists subscribing to the JEoA's *Age Beat Online* e-newsletter received the survey questionnaire in October 2005, with additional prompts following over the subsequent six weeks.

JEoA is an unincorporated network of roughly 900 journalists in all media, mostly in the United States, who cover issues in aging at least part time. The survey garnered responses from 99 journalists; 86 filled out and returned the questionnaire and 13 replied with e-mailed comments or by sending articles they had written on the subject of word usage and aging.

WHO RESPONDED

Respondents to the JEoA language survey represent a range of media forms, topical concentrations and audiences that is nearly as broad as the very arc of adulthood. The numbers included below, both for data and personal profiles, exceed the total of 99 survey participants because the results reflect the multiple roles of journalists, such as staff writers who also freelance.

As important as who responding writers are is the range of topic areas they cover. Although some survey participants are general-assignment journalists, 81 have a special focus. Of these, more than half (43) concentrate mainly on broader aging and retirement issues, one-quarter (21) write about health or science, 11

focus on business and finance, and six write primarily on family caregiving.

Among journalists indicating they were on staff with media organizations, 36 were primarily writers, 17 were mainly editors, five were columnists, and four were publishers—in some cases, editor-publishers. Among these respondents, for example, were Jennifer Boen, reporter for the *Fort Wayne (Indiana) News Sentinel*; Karen Reyes, planning editor of *AARP the Magazine*; and Lester Gingold, editor and publisher of *The Best Times*, the senior monthly serving Memphis, Tenn.

The freelancers category comprised 30 writers, nine columnists and six editors. Thirteen of the freelancers are also book authors, including Elizabeth Pope, a contributor to such national publications as *Time* magazine and *The New York Times*, and Eleanor Dienstag, an author and contributor to both general interest and specialized magazines.

Most respondents—28 who write for national media and 34 local/regional journalists—focus their work on general consumer audiences. These respondents included such journalists as Glenn Ruffenach, "Encore" editor at *The Wall Street Journal*, and Stephen Nohlgren of Florida's *St. Petersburg Times*.

Many others—such as James Berklan, editor of McKnight's *Long-Term Care News*, and Karen Zarkey, editor of the St. Louis, Mo., monthly *Senior Circuit* and former president of the North American Mature Publisher's Association, the trade group for about 40 senior-press publishers—contribute mainly to professional or specialized media. In all, 18 respondents from national media and eight from local/regional media rep-

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mentions of 15 preferences, with four respondents commenting that their audiences expressed no preference for any particular term. Among the listed words, *older* emerged as the top choice, with 37 references (25%), followed by 29 for *senior* (19%), and *elders* and *boomers* tied at 13 mentions (9%).

Which one or two terms do audiences most dislike? With 17 respondents saying they did not know, others enumerated 17 terms (including two votes against “any single word, phrase or euphemism”), with a total of 102 mentions for all words. Reporters said that the word their audience members grate on most is *elderly*, which was cited 31 times (30%). Next came *senior(s)* with 22 mentions (21%), *senior citizens* with 17 references (17%), and *old (people, folks and so on)* included 11 times (11%). Specific epithets or euphemisms tended to receive less attention, presumably because they seldom appear in

news references in the first place. For example, six reporters responded with *geezer*, five with *golden (agers, oldies)*, and two each for such words as *oldsters* and *mature (adults, people and so on)*.

A typical response came from Nancy Weaver Teichert, reporter on aging for the *Sacramento Bee*, which covers California’s capital city. She commented, “Older readers tell me they don’t have a problem with *seniors*. Most snickered at the term *mature* as a funny euphemism.” What terms do her readers most dislike? Teichert echoed many survey participants in noting, “Readers are very sensitive about the use of the term *elderly*.” Several reporters remarked that midlife and older audience members perceive the general use of the noun “the elderly” or modifier *elderly* to refer to frailty. Therefore, *elderly people* should only be applied in writing about those for whom the description is appropriate.

Objection!

Reporters’ perceptions of audience word preferences

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resent specialized or professional-audience media.

Survey participants represent 30 daily newspapers, 14 online outlets, 12 professional-audience media, nine senior publications (one national and eight local/regional), two television or video production operations, and one radio network.

DATA SUMMARY

Analysis of data and submitted material took place during 2006. Following is a list of questions and a summary of responses.

1a. *In the past year, have you participated in a discussion about terms preferred or not preferred for middle-aged or older people?*

A total of 84 journalists (98%) responded to this question. Almost eight in 10 respondents (65, or 77.4%) had participated in such discussions, ranging from one to many in all categories. Only 19 (22.6%) had not discussed the terminology of aging with anyone.

1b. *Indicate which entity or entities you discussed this with: colleagues* at your news organization, colleagues elsewhere in journalism, friends, family members, members of your audience.

Among the 65 respondents having engaged in such conversations,

- 37 did so with professional colleagues
- 23 with coworkers
- 26 with friends
- 22 with readers/audience members
- 13 with family members

- 8 with article sources
- 5 with professionals in the field of aging
- 5 with older people
- 3 with editors
- 2. *What one or two terms for midlife or older people do your readers/audience members prefer?*
- 37—*older (modifying people, adults, individuals, Americans and so on)*
- 29—*senior(s)*
- 13—*elder(s), boomer(s)/aging boomer(s)*
- 10—specific age references, such as *50-plus/60 and older/ 65 or older*
- 9—*elderly*
- 9—*midlife*
- Others: *middle aged* (6), *senior citizens* (5); *mature* (4), *baby boomer(s)* (4), *retiree(s)* (4); no descriptive at all (4); *empty nesters* (2)
- Also, 15 respondents specified that they did not know what readers/audiences preferred.
- 3. *What one or two terms do you use for midlife or older people that your readers or audience members seem to dislike the most?*
- 31—*elderly*
- 22—*senior(s)*
- 17—*senior citizens*
- 11—*old/old people/old folks*
- 6—*geezer*
- 5—*golden agers/golden oldies*
- 4—*baby boomers*
- 2 each listed “any single word or phrase that can label people,” “any euphemism,” *elders, oldsters,*

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is informative to some extent, but how often, how widely and how loudly do media consumers actually make their views known? In the court of everyday journalism, only a small but amplified number of people actually take the trouble and the time to raise objections about word choices—a decibel level generally understood to represent greater, unvocalized reaction. In the present survey, only 10 out of 86 journalists indicated that they had heard from audience members. In contrast, 68 of the respondents answered “no” or “not applicable” to this question. But reporters—and their editors or producers—know that a numerical pinch of concern from audience members can touch a nerve that not only is widely felt but also must be massaged.

The JEoA survey questionnaire asked respondents, “*In the past two years has any reader/audience member formally or informally objected to a term or terms your news organization has applied to middle-aged or older people?*”

The *Sacramento Bee*’s Teichert offered this illuminating comment: “No formal objections, but friends and

readers in their late 50s or early 60s object to some studies lumping them in with older people.” One friend became “a bit perturbed” about a story Teichert wrote on active retirees. Joking that she was “pretty darn active,” Teichert’s friend let on that she felt that she had been inappropriately clustered with much older people.

Of the 10 survey respondents who indicated receiving audience objections, four said readers remarked negatively on the word *elderly*, and another reporter in her early 60s remarked that she knew of no protests, “but, if I may speak personally, it galls me when people 55 and older are lumped as elderly.”

Bob Moos of the *Dallas Morning News* observed, “I occasionally use elderly in referring to frail older adults. And I occasionally hear complaints about the term. He added that some time ago, “one of our twentysomething reporters popped *geezer* in a story, which brought a few complaints about the word’s derogatory nature. The readers suggested that the paper wouldn’t treat younger readers so cavalierly.”

Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg commented in an e-mail to *ABO*, “*Geezer*, I think, is one of those terms that

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mature; aging (boomers/adults/etc.); older people

1 each chose *retiree, boomer(s), midlifer(s), middle aged, over the hill*

17 indicated “Do not know.”

4. *In the past two years has any reader/audience member formally or informally objected to a term or terms your news organization has applied to middle-aged or older people?*

Yes: 10; No: 44; Not applicable: 23

5a. **FOR STAFF JOURNALISTS ONLY:** *Does your news organization include references to preferred usage of terms related to the age of those in articles in its official style sheet?*

Yes: 19; No: 22

Please recall these rules and quote them if you can:

20 commented

5b. **FOR FREELANCERS:** *Have you had to heed style variations among your clients?*

Yes: 14

No: 22

NA: 6

Briefly cite key differences among them in preferred or abjured terminology, and note whether the media outlet was national or local/regional (names of outlets are optional): 13 commented

6a. *Have you noted any words or phrases that indirectly convey positive or negative connotations or stereotypes related to aging, such as feisty? What are these*

words and usages?

Yes: 42 (32 staff journalists, 10 freelancers)

No: 12 (8 staff, 4 freelance)

NA: 13 (5 staff, 8 freelance)

6b. *Have you or your news organization noted (or plan to note in the coming year) these connotative or stereotyping words in its style guide or acted in any way to avoid such usages in your copy or that of the news outlet?*

50% of all respondents commented: (Staff: 29 comments; Freelancers: 14)

Included in style guide:

Staff journalists:

Yes: 5

No: 12

NA: 7

Freelancers:

Yes: 0

No: 2

NA: 1

7. *Briefly, please add any comments about what journalists should consider in their word choices about age.*

43 responses (12 said avoid all labels)

8a. *If you could recommend one word to replace senior in the journalism vocabulary, it would be _____.*

25—*older (adult, person, etc)*

6—*specific ages: people ages _____; over 50, etc.; septuagenarian/octogenarian*

5—*elder(s)*

3—*mature adult(s)*

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JEOA SURVEY ON STYLE

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people feel they can get away with because it sounds a little old-fashioned and jocular,” adding, “It’s a word that older people sometimes use of themselves. In that sense, it’s what linguists call a reclaimed epithet.” But, he noted, “It has an ageist edge to it.”

Editorial Style Sheets

Given news organizations’ continuing attention to applying the most respectful and descriptive, as well as the least offensive, identifying nomenclature for various groups, the JEOA survey asked participants about guidelines in editorial style sheets on usage regarding aging .

The questionnaire asked staff journalists, “Does your news organization include, in its official style sheet, references to preferred usage of terms related to the age of those in articles?” Of the 41 staff members who answered, slightly fewer than half (19) answered “yes,” and 22 said “no.”

Many news organizations apply variations of the rule in *The Associated Press Stylebook*, which states of the word *elderly*:

“Use this word carefully and sparingly. It is appropriate in generic phrases that do not refer to specific individuals: *concern for the elderly, a home for the elderly*, etc. If

the intent is to show that an individual’s faculties have deteriorated, cite a graphic example and give attribution for it. Apply the same principle to terms such as *senior citizen*” (p. 82).

Although reporters should heed the general admonishment to take care in using any such term, the JEOA respondents tended to reject the phrase *the elderly*.

Stephen Nohlgren of the *St. Petersburg Times* said, “Our style book is pretty sparse on this issue. . . . It notes that words like *middle-aged* and *elderly* offend some people and advises against using them.” The paper’s notation stipulates, “In particular, do not refer to people in their 60s and 70s as *elderly*.”

At the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, says longtime reporter and editor Warren Wolfe, the style listing on *elderly* advises that the word “would be appropriate in such a sentence as, ‘The body found in the woods appeared to be that of an elderly man.’ In most cases, however, let the age of the person or persons involved carry the message.”

Additionally, Wolfe said, the *Star Tribune* stylebook includes separate entries on various kinds of senior housing “partly so we can be more precise, and partly because some reporters in the past have confused nursing homes with all other types of senior housing.” This

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Others with 1 each: *retired people; the elderly; person of wisdom, the wiser generation*

8b. *If you don’t have a problem with senior(s) please indicate this.*

45—no objection to using *senior(s)*; of these, 17 added a qualifying notation.

9a. *If you could recommend one word to replace boomer(s) or baby boomer(s) in the journalism vocabulary, it would be _____.*

3—*older adult(s)*

3—Specify age references for individuals or groups, such as over 45.

2 each—*senior, baby boomer; midlife (adult)*

1 each—*elder; aging boomer(s); middle aged; mature*

9b. *If you don’t have a problem with boomers or baby boomer(s) please indicate this.*

59 replied; 20 added a qualifying comment. Of these, 7 preferred *boomer* over *baby boomer*; 2 preferred *baby boomer* over *boomer*.

10. Additional comments: 26 (see “Selected Comments”)

SELECTED COMMENTS

Bob Moos, *Dallas Morning News*; “I guess ageism

is like obscenity. It’s hard to define, but you know it when you see it.”

Eleanor Dienstag, author, freelancer: “True, these language issues are important but, as a freelancer, it’s difficult to place stories about aging because people want upbeat, live-to-100 kinds of pieces.”

Helen Dennis, gerontologist, columnist, *Torrance Daily Breeze*: “We get stuck on language. No one is striving to be an older worker, although research and public policy reports use this term generously.”

Dan McNeil, publisher, *Senior News of Texas*: “Our society looks for easy ways to categorize people; our presumption is that most people do not want to be categorized. If we focus our language on the story and the person, we normally can totally avoid easy shorthand phrases. In fact the shorthand phrases can distract from the message of the story. . . . Each story must reach for precise communication with our readers, avoiding grouping of people into categories with which they may feel no association.”

Sue Russell, a freelance writer based in Southern California: “I think it’s ludicrous to lump fully employed folks in their mid-60s, for whom retirement is a pipe dream, with those in their 80s. It’s a whole other generation and needs to be recognized as such.” ♦

CULTURAL BOOMER-ANG

Former *Los Angeles Times* Washington correspondent Robert A. “Bob” Rosenblatt, now a freelance writer and the “Potomac Sources” columnist for *Aging Today*, joined several reporters in saying that the use of the term *boomers* or *baby boomers* should be accompanied by the precise definition: people born in the 19 years from the beginning of 1946 through the end of 1964. One reporter added, “It is a chronological, not a cultural, definition. There are lots of boomers with lots of different memories and lots of different political viewpoints.” Even though this writer is correct in recognizing the need for consistency, these dates are not universally accepted. Although those dates are commonly perceived to frame the boomer generation—as is the estimated number of U.S. births at 77 million people born in the United States during that period—scholars do not all agree.

For example, William Strauss and Neil Howe, in their books beginning with *Generations* (New York City: Morrow, 1991), use the years 1943 through 1960. Although the U.S. Census Bureau does provide national and state-level statistics on “baby boomers” using the 1946 through 1964 time span, other generational groups, such as the “silent generation” or “World War II generation,” are not designated. A search of the bureau’s website for the word *generation* or *generations* turns up nothing. At the website for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a search for generation yields several listings—for *electricity generation*, *solid waste generation* and so on, but none for demographic generations. That is, although federal agencies provide information on the boomers, they do so, presumably, in response to popular request for statistics in those years. What they do not do is define any generational cohort within a scientifically exact bracket of dates.

One survey respondent remarked, “Too many times, people think it [*baby boomer*] refers to a state of mind, whether you remember *Howdy Doody* on TV or the Beatles’ first tour of America. It is a chronological, not a cultural, definition.” However widely held, this view is clearly erroneous. As generally accepted as the years 1946 through 1964 are, those dates are agreed to for the sake of discussion. Journalists should keep in mind that the definition of the boomer cohort, by culture or chronology, is as accurate as the average BB gun and as fixed as the price of a Marvel comic book. Cultural milestones—in this case from the end of World War II until the beginning of the War on Poverty—are as close to a working definition of the baby boom as one might establish. ♦

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extensive section of the guide describes different kinds of housing for older adults ranging from nursing homes, which provide the most intensive care, to facilities with intermediate and lower levels of care, such as board-and-care homes, adult foster care homes, assisted living, independent-living apartments, and continuous-care communities that offer multiple care levels in one complex.

The Star Tribune entry on senior housing is unusually detailed and useful. Because names of institutions and home settings vary considerably around the United States, reporters should learn what they are called in their state. Every journalist, though, should take the newspaper’s general counsel to heart: “When in doubt, ask the person you are interviewing whether he or she lives in a nursing home. If still in doubt, call the facility.”

Gannett Newspapers and its flagship *USA Today* expand on this advice. Reporter Janet Kornblum forwarded the news corporation’s stylebook section on age:

“**seniors:** The preferred term, when one is necessary, to describe those over 60 years old. Again, be specific when possible, reserving **senior(s)** for those cases when no other descriptive will work. Use **elderly**, **older persons** and **senior citizens** sparingly, if at all.

“Use accurate descriptive terms. Avoid being patronizing, demeaning or using stereotype terms such as **feisty**, **spry**, **sweet**, **little**, **feeble**, **eccentric**, **senile**, **grandmotherly**, etc.

“Don’t describe an older individual as **active**, implying that this is some deviation from the norm. Instead describe the individual’s activities.

“Don’t gratuitously mention family relationships when there is no relevance to the subject: **Golda Meir, a doughty grandmother, told the Egyptians. . .**”

Wendy Bonifazi, a senior writer at *Nursing Spectrum*, included that publication’s useful style entry: “Ages: Always use figures (a 7-year-old boy, 10 years old, at age 70). Don’t list the age of an adult unless it is central to the story (for example, a person getting a nursing degree at age 80).”

Freelancers registered an expected range of requirements preferred by their many clients. Of the 42 who responded to the question, only one-third (14) indicated that at least some of their clients had preferences. Health writer Sally Lehrman noted, simply, “For national outlets: Some prefer *Baby Boomer*, some don’t ever want to use it.” Janice Blanchard singled out the editors of a textbook chapter she wrote for requiring the word *senior*, whereas Rita Campbell reported that local and regional clients she works for eschew the word.

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Of Seniors Today and Emerging

The JEOA survey asked, “If you could recommend one word to replace ‘senior’ in the journalism vocabulary, it would be _____. (If you don’t have a problem with ‘senior,’ please indicate this.)”

As in the JEOA’s survey in 1997, the preferred alternative was *older* (modifying *people, adults, individuals, Americans* and similar neutral nouns), with 25 (29% of survey respondents) designating this selection. Placing a distant second with six votes were variations on specific references to a person or a group’s age, such as *people age (50 and older and so on), over 50/60/65, septuagenarian/octogenarian* and so on. *Elder(s)* placed third, indicated by five respondents, and three journalists wrote in *mature adults*. Others with one mention each were *retired people, the elderly, person of wisdom, and the wiser generation*.

In fact, 45 respondents (52%) said they have no problem using *senior(s)*, although 17 of them qualified their answers. Many of these respondents concurred with *Boston Globe* health writer Alice Dembner, who wrote, “I don’t have a problem with *senior*, but would be open to a more creative alternative.” And syndicated columnist Frank Kaiser declared, “Since I’m one of them, I don’t care for it, but it’s the best we have.” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* columnist Betty Booker specified, “I don’t have a problem with *senior* after the age of 70 or to get the senior discount when I’m 55.” Booker is among those who indicated that they use the word *senior* but also noted that they have a preferred alternative—in Booker’s case, the adjective *mature*.

Charlotte Observer reporter Pam Kelley seemed to capture the essence of writers’ discomfort with applying a single descriptive when she commented that she is not troubled by particular words. She explained, “I think the problem is the rampant negative connotations that go with being old in our society.” Especially telling, perhaps, was the answer of Larry Fortner, editor of *Senior Reporter*, a Duluth, Minn., monthly magazine: “I don’t have a problem with *senior*, though I acknowledge that emerging seniors do.”

Boomers in Midlife and Beyond

The questionnaire asked, “If you could recommend one word to replace ‘boomer’ or ‘baby boomer’ in the journalism vocabulary, it would be _____. (If you don’t have a problem with ‘boomer’ or ‘baby boomer,’ please indicate this.)”

Only 14 participants specified preferred alternatives. Three each would replace *boomer* with a specific age reference or with *older adult(s)*. Two each listed *senior* or *midlife* (people), and one journalist each wrote in *elder(s), aging boomer(s), middle aged* and *mature*.

Typical of many of those who didn’t specify pre-

ferred alternatives, Nancy Weaver Teichert of the *Sacramento Bee* said, “I don’t have a problem with *baby boomers* except that my editors are tired of hearing about them.” Seven reporters pronounced *baby boomer* an acceptable term, and two reporters said they prefer using *baby boomer(s)* to *boomer(s)*. But three were determined to banish *baby* from the *boomer* water. For instance, Duluth’s Fortner replied, “I don’t have a big problem with *boomer*. But they ain’t babies anymore. Now they’re aging *boomers*.” Fortner was one of 59 respondents (an impressive 69%), who said they have “no problem” with using the word *boomer*, but he was also among the 20 who qualified their answers.

The range of responses on the use of *boomer* or *baby boomer* extended from a small number who felt, as one put it, that they are positive terms, to author, blogger and scholar Margaret Morganroth Gullette, who remarked, “Get rid of *boomer* even if there is no great alternative. *Boomer* is too laden with stereotypes to be used at all.” Although editors and newswriters might object that they’d have to invent a replacement word were *boomer* to be banished, Gullette does add an important caveat for any writer applying the term. She urged journalists to keep in mind that the term “ignores the diversity among 76 million people.” Jim Berklan, editor of McKnight’s *Long-Term Care News*, agreed. Writing that he would discourage the use of *boomer* in an article’s first reference, he stressed that “boomers are not one homogenous group. Those of us personally at the tail end of this demographic are acutely aware of this fact.”

Boomers are also likely to become increasingly aware of terms that have become somewhat controversial among gerontologists. Much of the discussion about the longevity of the healthier, wealthier boomer generation has been accompanied by such phrases as *productive, successful* and *active aging*. Although these terms are meant to address the stereotype of older adults as a largely frail and dependent group with little left to contribute to society, critics have worried that widespread use of these terms could prompt an attitude and, possibly, public policies that will tend to deny needed supports to those who do experience the vicissitudes of older age. The concern is emerging that older people who don’t seem to “age well”—that is, who aren’t civically engaged in volunteer work or other visibly “constructive” endeavors—will face an undercurrent of blame, such as for earlier lifestyle habits, rather than find themselves valued for the inherent wisdom and humanity elders may bring to their families and communities.

One gerontologist has suggested that discussants should think in terms of *valued aging*, which pivots the focus from those observed to the eyes of the beholders. This controversy has not surfaced much in reportage so far, but journalists should watch for this developing area of usage. ❖

OF A CERTAIN STEREOTYPE

An older person “looks much younger than her/his age” or “looks remarkably youthful” or “doesn’t look a day over. . . . Author Eleanor Dienstag offered, “These are supposed to be compliments. In fact, they reinforce stereotypes of age.”

Brad Edmondson, former editor of *American Demographics* and a frequent contributor to AARP publications among others, credited a comment made by Steve Slon at the 2004 meeting of JEOA writers in Philadelphia as what led to the development of this survey. After the more than 40 attending journalists debated the use of *senior*, *boomer*, *geezer* and other specific references to age, whether neutral or purposefully insulting Slon asked about more subtle turns of phrase that tend to paint older people into rocking-chair corners.

In his questionnaire, Edmondson cited AARP editor Slon’s example of the word *still* as applied to older people—as in *still driving* or *still running*. Edmondson added, “I think any slang term conveys connotations, but they can change over time—for example, *golden* was originally meant to convey the colors during a sunset but now draws attention to the fact that so many people in their 60s are well-to-do.”

The questionnaire asked, “Have you noted any words or phrases that indirectly convey positive or negative connotations or stereotypes related to aging, such as *feisty*? What are these words and usages?” This question yielded some of the more varied and insightful answers to this survey from almost half of the respondents (42), who replied with examples. (A dozen more said they had not, and 13 indicated that the question was not applicable to their work.) Here is a sampling of responses:

Author and essayist Cyra McFadden objected to the use of *elderly* “for anyone over 50, especially women.”

Author and freelancer Beth Witrogen McLeod noted *menopausal*, *senior moment* and other sly references to forgetfulness.

Editor Jim Brice of *Diagnostic Imaging* assured, “It’s a hanging offense. We’d issue an e-mail if anyone filed a story containing clichéd or stereotyping language,” such as *feisty golden-ager*.

Orange County Register columnist Jane Glenn Haas listed *frail*, *elderly*, *oldsters*, *active adults*.

Gerontologist Helen Dennis, columnist for the *Torrance Daily Breeze* in Southern California, said she had recently met with a group of elders, one of whom objected to a newspaper stating a person’s age when age seemed to be irrelevant, as in “A 70-year-old woman crossing the street was hit by an oncoming bus.” Dennis singled out words with negative connotations about older people: *rigid*, *slow* or *resistant to technology*, *resistant to change* and so on.

St. Petersburg Times reporter Stephen Nohlgren nominated *100-years-young* and its variations as the “all-

time worst” cliché about aging. On the positive side, he added, “I always liked *seasoned* when it is appropriate. *Mature* doesn’t cut it unless you are talking about bonds.”

The Gee-Whiz Syndrome: Other sprightly clichés mentioned by reporters included *spry*, *young for his/her age*, *perky*, *young in attitude*, *chipper*, *competent*, *on the ball*, *not easily fooled*, *bright*, *exceptional* and *late bloomers*. Columnist Phil Huggins advised journalists to avoid gee-whiz stories carrying the implication, for instance, “Gee whiz, she’s 80 years old and still keeps a nice garden.”

Glenn Ruffenach, “Encore” section editor and columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, also commented on what could be called the gee-whiz syndrome: “It’s not words as much as attitude: ‘Gee, isn’t it remarkable that that 76-year-old man is still (fill in the blank) working, or hang-gliding, or teaching, or running a marathon, or whatever.’”

On the crusty side, besides *geezer*, respondents listed *feeble*, *cantankerous*, *codger*, *grumpy* and *cranky*.

Must all adjectives be banned? Is this a case of political correctness gone bonkers? News desks often follow what John Lauerman said is the rule at *Bloomberg News*: “In general, we avoid using modifiers of any kind in any story.”

What’s more, said columnist and news writer Betty Booker of the *Richmond (Virginia) Times-Dispatch*, “If it matters to the story or to the public record, use it. If mentioning age is immaterial, leave it out.” As Kevin Lamb of Ohio’s *Dayton Daily News* put it, “Stay neutral . . . find something else to be colorful about.”

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette writer and editor Gary Rotstein echoed others in saying, “I’ve tried, in most of my age-related articles, to use the specific age category at least (‘people 65 and older’ or ‘people over 50’ or whatever the case may be) by the second or third paragraph. It’s hard to do that in the lead many times, so the usage there will be dictated by the context,” which will determine whether he can slip in a term such as *older adults*, *elderly*, *senior citizens* or *seniors*. Given the appropriate context, he said, “I’ve never had anyone complain about any of these.”

Among those surveyed, though, only five staff journalists and no freelancers indicated that their news organizations or editorial clients have “noted (or plan to note in the coming year) these connotative or stereotyping words in its style guide or acted in any way to avoid such usages in your copy or that of the news outlet.” Should they? Retirement reporter Bob Moos of the *Dallas Morning News* commented that in newsrooms, “I’m afraid some reporters are still flippant when referring to older adults. Some reporters are with age where they were with ethnicity and sexual ori-

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A Final Perspective

AGEISM: SEXLESS SENIORS TO DEMAND SERVICES

“What makes me mad,” Erdman Palmore told the Associated Press (Sept. 8, 2004), “is how aging, in our language and culture, is equated with deterioration and impairment. I don’t know how we’re going to root that out except by making people more aware.” Palmore, a professor emeritus of gerontology at Duke University, most recently coeditor of the *Encyclopedia of Ageism* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2005), has seen his viewpoint verified in numerous studies. For example, researchers at the Laboratory of Personality and Cognition, National Institutes on Aging (NIA), examined 49 cultures worldwide to discern the accuracy of stereotypes of national character. The study, published in the journal *Science* (Oct. 7, 2005), found in part that “stereotypes depicting older people as withdrawn and rigid are largely groundless and contribute to age discrimination,” according to an NIA summary.

In *Images of Aging in America*, AARP and social researchers at the University of Southern California reported on a 2004 telephone survey that found, “Many Americans still have misconceptions about aging and older people,” such as that they are asexual, miserable or “pretty much alike.” The study revealed that those with less knowledge about aging had higher levels of anxiety about the aging process. Also, the survey found that a majority of Americans “project many more problems onto older people” than elders say they experience. The report concluded, “There is room for politicians, jour-

nalists, educators, medical researchers and people in many other roles to help Americans to learn more and reduce anxiety about the aging process.” The authors added, “Americans with lower socioeconomic status and/or [who experience] serious problems in their lives stand to benefit the most from efforts to put the aging process and older people into proper perspective.”

Failing to Maximize Elders’ Potential

NIA’s founding director, Robert N. Butler, now president and CEO of the International Longevity Center, described the consequences of ageist attitudes in his introduction to the center’s 2006 report, *Ageism in America*. Butler, who coined the term *ageism* in 1969, wrote that beyond the damage to older individuals, “we fail to maximize the potential of older persons on either a paid or voluntary basis and deny them the opportunity to play a significant role in our cultural life.” The center’s report (online at www.ilcusa.org) documents the effects of ageist attitudes in a wide range of social institutions, such as the workplace, the media and, especially, in health and long-term care. For example, because healthcare professionals often assume that otherwise treatable or preventable conditions are a normal part of aging, they may treat older adults dismissively or even deny them care.

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STEREOTYPE

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entation 10-20 years ago. The boomer generation turning 60 may change that. At least that’s my hope.”

Precision and Dignity: Several writers expressed impatience with arguments over word choices when the coverage of issues in aging is so spotty around the United States. “I think we should focus on the issues and not worry about labels,” wrote gerontologist and *Arizona Republic* columnist Bill Arnold. He added, “Let’s talk about loss of pension plans and Social Security as it impacts people.” Author Beth Witrogen McLeod, a former editor for the *San Francisco Examiner*, agreed: “We spend too much time worrying about what might be offensive in terms of the language of aging and far too little time exploring the depth of what aging means.”

More generally, staff writer Warren Wolfe of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* joined others in observing, “I think that the precise word most often is less important than the context in which it is used. I would not use the word *feisty*, even though it might be proper, because it carries too much baggage for thinking older people. . . .

However, at times I do use *frail* to describe someone with physical handicaps, or people in general who live in nursing homes. But I think hard each time I use it.”

Wolfe went on, “I am on guard continually to avoid using condescending words or phrases that imply that older people are unusual simply because they do things other adults do—the implication being that old people, even centenarians, don’t do that, think that, or act that way. Right now, I’m about to write an article about an 88-year-old Minnesota woman who has been an energetic activist for years here, and who is in the process of ‘stepping back’ from full involvement. My challenge will be to describe her previous activism and her withdrawal in ways that honor both, show both to be a part of the common life cycle, and avoid stereotypes.”

The Christian Science Monitor’s Marilyn Gardner aptly advised, “The writer’s goal should be to convey a sense of dignity. That’s sometimes hard for people to come by as they grow old.” And Cynthia Woody, editor emeritus of the *Platinum Record*, the senior monthly covering the Baton Rouge, La., area, wisely counseled, “Place yourself in the position of the reader you are addressing.” ♦

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Furthermore, the mainstream media commonly smudge ink on *old folks*, not only the *silver generation*, but also the *budding over 50s*, terms used by *The Economist* (July 22, 2006) in “The Baby Boomers Retire: Of Gambling, Grannies and Good Sense.” The unsigned piece about Las Vegas “provides an example of how (and how not) to cope with the boomers surging past 60.” *The Economist* loaded this otherwise informative article about the impact of 77 million boomers moving toward retirement on the financial future of the United States with cutesy terms that not only reinforced the image of weak older people but also stated, “But as they age they will start, as a group, to demand more public services.”

Journalists should also be aware of the “ick” factor, named here after a remark made in January 2007 by a journalist, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, who judged that a novel’s depiction of “a preposterous amount” of sexual encounters in a nursing home “seems unlikely.” The reviewer then added, “And in any case, ick.” Few writers are apt to emulate this writer’s sophomoric disdain for the very thought of older people seeking intimacy, but the writer’s blatant judgmental attitude echoes the common assumptions behind the stock humor among late-night comedians, where age is presumed to be humorous or downright distasteful if coupled with vigorous activity or sexuality. This *New York Times* reviewer was so distracted by his own disgust that he deprived readers of a fair assessment of how well, poorly or appropriately the book depicted intimacy and tenderness among elders. Among the more serious sides of this issue, reporters should consider that researchers and advocates on HIV/AIDS in those 50 or older have noted that older patients are often not tested, diagnosed or treated for this disease. One reason: Many healthcare practitioners dismiss the idea that older people have sex. If Bette Davis was right that “old age is not for sissies,” then, likewise, reviewing books about it should not fall to those who feel squeamish about it.

Ageism: The Next Generation

What are legitimate journalists to make of efforts to frame this huge group for crimes against the rest of society? *Boomer* appends as a catchy prefix, yet, perhaps inevitably, applications have begun to raise their ugly salt-and-pepper heads, such as “Boomtastrophe,” a contraction of boomer and catastrophe used as the cover line for a desultory attack on the “gimme, gimme, gimme” generation in the Village Voice Media publication *SF Weekly* (May 2, 2007). In the story, the writer accuses the huge and diverse population cohort of fomenting “Boomerganda,” that is, propagandistic self-promotion by the presumably self-absorbed me generation in an

effort to “recast them as *The Greater Generation*.”

Several years ago, social critic Todd Gitlin posted a column on *Salon* predicting that boomers would be the next major group subject to prejudicial stereotyping. The temptation will be strong to call this boomerism, although it sounds a bit too much like *boosterism*. What it is, though, clearly falls under the rubric of ageism. Glib commentators in print, blog or Imus-style broadcast know they can flex audience reflexes by casting opprobrium on many an anonymous groups as long as it’s larger than a basketball team. This isn’t journalism but it won’t disappear from news columns, either. However, journalists who write about issues in midlife and aging, do need to follow the money and power, when these kinds of slurs surface.

In the case of the *SF Weekly* article, a 4,500 word spread, the writer embraced the conceit of Christopher Buckley’s satiric novel *Boomsday*, about a boomer-laden future when elderly of that generation are offered a tax incentive to commit suicide after turning age 65, in order to save the United States from the presumed burden of massive entitlement spending. Staff writer Martin Kuz goes on to cite questionable figures for the future economic strain of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid without question. Only economic and historical experts on one side of the issue are quoted.

A conservative public policy slant is common with cohort attacks. Twenty years ago, screeds against “greedy geezers” were directed at those we now call “the greatest generation.” The future victims at that time: their children’s generation—the boomers. But conservative or market-oriented values are not necessarily the only ones expressed. A widely distributed column by Ruben Navarrette, Jr., of the *San Diego Union Tribune* (“His Generation’s Moment,” May 9, 2007) praised Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., as “the first member of the post-boomer generation to seek the White House.” Never mind that most would place Obama, born Aug. 4, 1961, among the later boomers, Navarrette, cites the senator’s own attempts to distinguish himself as a fresh voice apart from his predecessors or his competition by criticizing the “psychodrama of the Baby Boomer generation” with what the columnist calls its “endless feuds, grudges and hard feelings.”

That boomers will be the verbal piñata of choice for some self-promoting writers will continue, at least until Generations X or Y mature as prime political and economic targets. The keys to any intelligent analysis of these baffling attributions of malicious volition to a whole generation are that of good sense and ethical journalistic practice. Such attacks simply defy logic. Furthermore, it wouldn’t hurt for concerned writers to review the one-page “Code of Ethics” of the Society of Professional Journalists (www.spj.org). It begins with this advice: “Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.” ♦