

**Television Programming For Older People
The Older Community's Perspective
Summary Qualitative Research Report**

Prepared for:
NZ On Air

25 July 2001

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1.0 Television Programming For Older People

1.1 Introduction

NZ On Air was established pursuant to the Broadcasting Act 1989 to 'reflect and develop New Zealand culture and identity'. One purpose of NZ On Air is to support local content on radio and television.

NZ On Air's role includes helping to fund a range of locally made programmes, and ensuring that there is diversity on television and radio. In particular, NZ On Air television funding is allocated to the production of 'at risk' categories such as drama and documentaries, and to programmes catering to the interests of women, children, persons with disabilities and minorities in the community, including ethnic minorities.

As part of NZ On Air's 2000/2001 research and consultation plan, the organisation undertook audience research on special interest programming for ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and for other minorities, for example, the queer community.

The research and consultation plan also included a component to identify significant special interest groups that could be considered for broadcast programming. Secondary research and contact with community organisations and government and private sector social analysts, identified a number of potential audiences. The main ones identified were older people (i.e. those age 50 years or over), rural people, and people with mental health problems.

Given New Zealand's ageing population and fact that the older segment is projected to grow significantly in coming years, it was decided to explore television programming with this group.

Older people

The number of New Zealanders aged over 65 continues to grow. As at June 2000 they numbered 451,080 or 11.8 percent of the population. The total population aged 65 plus years is expected to more than double to 25.5 percent in 2051. The increase will be greatest after 2011 as the baby boom generation enters the elderly age group. The age group 85 plus years is also predicted to grow during this period due to increasing life expectancy.

A number of existing agencies and support organisations service this group including Age Concern New Zealand Inc, Diabetes Projects Trust Auckland, Grey Power New Zealand Federation, Link with Carers Inc, The Diabetes Society Christchurch Inc, Supergrans Christchurch Inc, SeniorNet and the Office of the Retirement Commissioner.

Issues relating to the older segment of the population include work and career matters, skills training for the younger elderly, health and related issues (illness, depression, chronic medical conditions such as Alzheimers Disease) and ageism.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of the research were to:

- To study the current television offering for the older community in terms of:
 - How older people are reflected on television
 - What programmes involving older people appeal/do not appeal

- To determine what topics would appeal if a television programme was developed for the older community.

1.3 Approach

The same approach and methodology as used for the research with existing special interest audiences, was used with the older community, i.e. a qualitative approach and mini focus group methodology.

Two mini focus groups were conducted in NFO CM Research's Wellington offices, with people aged 65 years and over.

In each group there were two males and two females. The respondents in each group represented a mix of high, medium and low socio-economic status (based on total household income).

The groups were audio and video taped with respondent consent. The audio tapes were used to aid analysis.

Each respondent received a cash incentive to express thanks for their time and input and to defray travel costs.

1.4 Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the research conducted with older people.

- The older community feels a marginalised part of society, largely because of the lack of acceptance and tolerance by younger generations. Mainstream television programming plays a role in perpetuating stereotypes held by younger generations, through portraying older people in a less positive light, e.g. as talkative, difficult and out of date.
- By portraying older people in a more positive light and giving them more than secondary roles, mainstream programming could make a significant contribution to bridging the generation gap and giving New Zealand a more harmonious society.
- The positive response to having a television programme that caters specifically to the older community, suggests that such a programme would be well supported if it went to air.
- To have appeal to older people, a television programme would air at a convenient time (e.g. weekdays late afternoon/early evening or on Sunday mornings), have a magazine format (supplemented by panel discussions), be fronted by a versatile, enthusiastic and knowledgeable woman aged 45 years or over. The primary audience for the programme would be the older community and this would be reflected in the content. There would need to be a range of content that includes advice on how older people can enhance their lives (e.g. hobbies, activities and financial planning). It would also need to include human interest stories, general educational content (travel, other cultures and wildlife/nature) and reviews (books, films and music).

1.5 Setting The Context

This section of the report provides an overview of the older community. It considers the broad types of older people and discusses their television viewing behaviour.

An understanding of older people's context is useful for appreciating some of the research findings.

Respondent Overview

The older people we spoke to can be divided into three groups according to their lifestyle. We have called these groups Socialites, Nurturers and The Isolated.

A summary of the characteristics for each group appears below.

Socialites

- Socialites are extrovert, enthusiastic, high energy people who enjoy meeting new people and having social interactions with people beyond their family network.
- On moving from employment to retirement, Socialites worked to maintain and regularly activate their social networks. This was driven by the desire to avoid social isolation and mental stagnation, both of which are perceived as potential risks in retirement.
- Socialites keep themselves busy with a wide range of activities including participating in craft groups, community groups (e.g. charitable organisations and their church), games (especially bridge and mah jong), playing sport (e.g. bowls) or walking to keep themselves physically fit.
- Socialites are particularly avid newspaper readers, regarding it as an important means of keeping up with what is going on in New Zealand and overseas.

“I read every word in the newspaper from front to back. It is a routine and I would miss it dreadfully if I don’t [read it]”.

Nurturers

Nurturers are less gregarious people who are content to potter round home. They enjoy functioning in a nurturing role which means they still like to help their family and are always on the look out for how they can help their friends. Helping others gives them a real sense of purpose and fulfilment in their lives.

While Nurturers do not shun interactions with the wider community, they do not seek it either. Social interactions beyond the home are typically confined to a small group of close friends.

The Isolated

The Isolated are people who have limited social interactions for reasons that tend to be beyond their control, in particular, less robust health and lack of mobility (e.g. do not drive and not near transport).

In this study, The Isolated had limited family networks because their children had moved to other geographic locations. A consequence of this is that The Isolated can feel emotionally unsupported in times of needs, resulting in feelings of despair and helplessness.

Media assumes considerable importance for The Isolated, acting as a means of contact with the outside world.

Older People’s Issues And Concerns

To better understand older people, we asked respondents what issues and concerns they perceived faced this age group. In this study, the key issues were as follows:

- **Older people are perceived in a negative light** - a common theme was that the majority of people in younger generations see older people as less attractive and less worthy members of society. Respondents felt that older people could make a valuable contribution to society, particularly at the local community level, e.g. imparting pearls of wisdom to children as part of their schooling. Having the media give a higher profile to positive activities involving older people would assist with breaking down stereotypes and making younger generations more accepting and tolerant of older people.
- **Concern about health and welfare** - concern was expressed as to what direction the health and welfare systems in New Zealand may take in the future and the implications that this could have for older people generally, and themselves in particular.
- **Fear of loneliness and isolation** - several respondents expressed a fear of being lonely or isolated in the future, e.g. having to fend alone if their family is not in close proximity. While financial worries are an issue, they are considered less significant overall than the lack of emotional support.
- **Declining societal standards** - concern was expressed about the accelerated rate of changing values in society, e.g. the breakdown of the family unit, increased violence and people becoming even more self focused and losing sight of working for the collective good.

1.6 The General Television Viewing Context

This section considers the role of television in older people's lives and discusses their preferred genre and programme. It also considers how older people are reflected on television and what an ideal programme aimed at older people would be like.

The Role Of Television

Television viewing per se appeared to play four broad roles in older people's lives. It helps them to relax, keep informed, be entertained, become more 'educated' and acts as a substitute for social contact for The Isolated.

- **Relaxation** - 'viewing' gives people permission to sit down and do nothing. It enables them to 'switch off' from their life for a time. In this frame of mind, what actually appears on the screen may be immaterial to the process of relaxing.

- **Keeping informed** - many people rely on the television for information, particularly in the form of national and international news. A daily news programme being a critical part of their viewing day, without which they feel uninformed and cut off.
- **Entertainment** - television provides an important source of entertainment for many older people. Being in-house, it is easy to access and, if viewers are not fussy about what they watch, it can provide continuous entertainment.
- **Education** - television educates viewers by bringing them images and information about events, activities and things that are happening in the world around them. In this way, television adds another dimension to viewers' lives through increasing, stimulating and challenging their thinking and taking them to places they may never visit. Wildlife, nature and travel documentaries are seen as valuable educational tools.
- **A substitute for social contact** – the lack of social contact that The Isolated have means that television viewing assumes the role of social contact with the wider world. This reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness because it directs viewers' attention away from themselves.

Preferred Genre and Programmes

Television viewing was typically a daily event in most respondents' lives. Most people spent at least "two or three hours" daily watching television.

To gain insight into older people's preferred programmes or type of programmes, we asked them to name their *favourite* programmes. A summary of their preferences follows.

Genre

- News
- Current affairs
- Documentaries (especially wildlife and travel)
- British dramas and comedies

Programmes

- Coronation Street
- The Last Of The Summer Wine
- Providence
- To The Manor Born
- Sunday Theatre
- 5 pm With Jude

1.7 Television Programming Reflecting Older People

How Are Older People Currently Reflected On Television?

- Older people perceive that their age group has an overall low representation in mainstream television programming. The programmes that respondents were aware that featured older people included Coronation Street, Emmdale, Estee Sanders and The Last Of The Summer Wine.
- Some mainstream programmes feature a higher number of older characters (e.g. Coronation Street and The Last Of The Summer Wine) and portray some of the characters in a positive light (e.g. older people as able individuals making a valuable contribution to their community). However, older people's inclusion in most mainstream programming is secondary and often portrays this age group in a negative light, e.g. as a chatter box, a nagging mother in law or an old fashioned and unaware parent. This negative imagery reinforces stereotypes that younger generations have of this age group.

The Importance Of Programming For The Older Community

- The respondents felt it was important for the older community to be represented in a more accurate way than occurs with current mainstream programming. However, to be of value mainstream programming needs to include more older people and importantly, portray them in a more positive light than currently. This would help to break down stereotypes and lead to greater acceptance and tolerance of older people by younger generations.

1.8 The Ideal Programme For Older People

- No respondents were aware of any programme ever having catered specifically for older people and they reacted positively to the idea of having such a television programme. Apart from giving people a sense of connection with other older people in the wider community, it could alert people on ways for enhancing their life, e.g. through learning about new hobbies and interests and expanding their knowledge.
- To determine the best way of providing programming that catered specifically for the older community, we asked respondents to design a programme that would appeal to them. They were heavily prompted to help them think beyond mainstream programming that featured older people.

Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Topics that would be of interest to older people include:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The experiences of other older people and their lifestyle, activities and interest, e.g. people that have made positive changes to their life. Such material could be inspiring and alert others in similar circumstances to ways of improving their own life.- Advice on planning for and dealing with retirement, e.g. what the issues are and how these can be worked through. Content could cover social, emotional and financial matters.- Human interest stories (these could be given a regional focus)- General educational content, in particular, on travel, other cultures and wildlife/nature- Demonstrations of craft, art or hobbies (gardening has considerable appeal)- Reviews – books, films and music- Welfare and health could be featured. Care would need to be taken that information is informative but without complaining.
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1.9 General Media

- Most of the older people that we spoke with make considerable use of newspapers (to be informed and radio (to be informed and entertained).
- Overall the general media does not serve the older community because coverage rarely focus directly on older people. Issues that are covered tend to be controversial and this does little to bridge the gap between older people and younger generations.
“ Occasionally I read about an old lady who was murdered in her flat. It is usually only the controversial issues that come up. On a daily basis one doesn’t get to hear about the elders in society. We are a neglected lot.”
- The “Grey Power” newsletter that comes occasionally is the only medium that focuses on the older community. However, the political focus of this organisation means that the newsletter does not cover the spectrum of issues and interests that are relevant to older people.
- At present the primary source used by older people for finding out more information about their community is word of mouth.

Appendix

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