

'OLDER PEOPLE AND THE MEDIA'
The Rt Hon the Lord Heseltine
Counsel and Care Annual Graham Lecture
Thursday 10th September 2009

[Initial thank you].

INTRODUCTION

It isn't hard to see why I was asked to give this lecture.

More than a decade beyond what used to be considered the retirement age for men, and after more than fifty years of publishing, I have by now some experience of looking down both ends of this particular barrel.

And how the world of the elderly and the world of the media have changed over those years.

When I started the Haymarket Publishing Group, it was still essentially a post-war world where the broadcasting media was dominated by a handful of press barons and the BBC, and where cinema and radio were assumed to be giving way to television. Personal media amounted to letters and cards.

Telephone calls from a bright red booth on the corner of the street. 'Digital technology' meant bookies waving their arms around at racecourses or stock-market traders holding various combinations of fingers up in the air.

The world has also changed for people who have been fortunate enough to join the growing ranks of 'older people'. Indeed, society's understanding of what is meant by 'old' has changed. It used to mean over sixty. Now, it probably means over eighty.

PEOPLE ARE MORE THAN THEIR AGE

I confess that, generally speaking, I don't think or talk in terms of young or old when it comes to people. This is partly because of the risks a speaker runs when categorising or generalising about large groups of people in any way, but especially by reference to their age.

Even as a publisher, though I pay tribute to the success of others in the field, I have never been tempted to produce a consumer magazine or website dedicated to an audience defined principally by age.

Of course, 'the grey pound', the 'silver surfer' and the 'empty nesters' are all subjects of fascination to media companies ever anxious to grow their audiences and revenue streams.

However, given how little ground is shared between, on the one hand, an affluent pre-retirement couple looking forward to possible decades of leisure-centred years together and, on the other hand, a genuinely old, less well-off, dependent person who may well be lonely and in declining health, I hesitate to generalise about older people. I also doubt the desire of older people to be unduly defined by their age.

You will, of course, point out to me my error, telling me how well others, notably Saga, have done commercially but, at Haymarket, we have always chosen to publish to an individual's interest, passion, or professional discipline rather than to their demography. It may be, as its name implies, that our classical music magazine, Gramophone is read mainly by older people and our gadgets magazine Stuff by young men, but that is incidental not design.

To the extent that I, personally, think about 'old', as becomes my age, I tend to think, 'vintage', 'antique' or 'classic'. To my mind, 'old' is first and foremost something mature, ripened and proven, something that has survived time's test.

FROM DEFERENCE TO DISRESPECT

But I appreciate that society as a whole, and the media especially, does not see it that way. Ask any female news presenter over the age of fifty whether she feels age has become a career issue for her, and you will see what I mean.

So, instead of venerating age, as some Eastern societies are said to do, Post war British Society like many other western societies, noticeably America has worshipped at the altar of the young.

As their disposable incomes rose, and their voices grew louder, their influence extended. This was perhaps inevitable and quite probably desirable for a society in need of greater dynamism.

Better educated, more confident, less constrained than previous generations, the young increasingly have set society's agenda. In my view, the release across society of their energy and enthusiasm has been and continues to be an immense force for good.

But that is not at all how they are portrayed. Pick up any popular paper any day of the week and you will find abundant references to drugs, alcohol, knives and ASBO's – a whole litany of condemnation – and next to nothing about accomplishment in their schools, communities and families.

That is why our magazine for professionals working with the young, 'Children and Young People Now' launched the positive images awards in 2005.

The magazine campaigns for balanced reporting of young peoples issue. Every year it gives rewards to young people who have produced work that gives a positive image of young people, and highlights media that have been fair to them.

While it has been a difficult and uphill struggle, and the majority of news stories are still negative about young people, we have noticed that more newspapers and radio and television stations will at least include a young person's voice in their coverage.

Many have increased their coverage of issues important to young people.

My first point then is this, if older people are being misrepresented by the media in general and in news coverage in particular, they are not alone in this. Indeed, it becomes ever harder to find a section of UK society of which the media speaks well.

Indeed it is difficult to find any issue, including the extension of human well-being and lifespan, that is presented as an achievement rather than as a problem!

As a society, within a couple of generations, media- assisted, we seem to have moved from excessive deference and respect for each other and for our institutions to excessive cynicism and disrespect. If the elderly have fallen prey to such a trend, again, I believe they are not alone in being subject to such changes.

There are probably many reasons for this, but let me dwell on just three:

- First** - an erosion of our collective sense of identity, interest and community at the family, local and national levels;
- Second** - an over-pre-occupation with oneself, with one's own wants and expectations at the expense of concern for the needs of others;
- Third** - the erosion of news quality following from the breakdown of news providers' business models, and from the demand for news on a 24/7, multi-media basis.

PRESSURE ON NEWS QUALITY

Let me work backwards through my list starting with the growing and, in my view, justified concern about the quality of the news media.

A comparison of the newsrooms of today with what went before illustrates the intensity of the pressure bearing down upon news providers to the detriment of the objectivity, accuracy and insightfulness of news.

In recent years, the economics of news provision have markedly deteriorated.

With more and more TV channels, radio stations and websites giving the appearance of burgeoning choice, it is easy but mistaken to assume that more necessarily means better.

In fact, the information being fed into these channels by news wires, PR agencies, corporate and governmental communications departments has never been more in need of intelligent questioning.

But time and cost pressures, leading to shrinking news-staffs, despite an apparently insatiable appetite for news, have made even the checking of facts a luxury some news teams struggle to afford.

Against this background, you might expect news providers to emerge who differentiate themselves by offering only top quality content.

I expect that will prove to be so in the case of deeply specialised news for professional audiences. But for news in its more general forms it is not axiomatic.

In the press, a 'scoop' lasts for a day; online it lasts for as long as it takes rivals to copy or aggregate into their newsfeeds.

News International's experiment with paid online content may give a clue to the viability of paid-for news, but the survival of a diverse supply of reliable local, regional and national news is no longer a 'given'.

You may say that there is always the BBC with its comprehensive range of national, regional and local services. But for all its many virtues, the BBC cannot be the entire solution.

News diversity is vital to any healthy democracy and the BBC alone cannot provide that.

Indeed, so long as the UK media landscape is at risk of becoming dominated, and I use that word intentionally, by an organisation whose privileges stand it apart, the BBC finds itself as much part of the problem as the solution.

How, for example, does one expect the BBC to report wholly objectively on the criticisms to which it is being subjected. The quality of reporting of the future of the news, by the news providers, will be one to watch in the months and years ahead.

Meanwhile, the pressures on the rest of a struggling news media sector discourage deep research, investigation and balance, while encouraging the partisan, sensational and salacious.

We have never been so continuously tied to news. Night and day, those umbilicals, like mobile phones and networking sites, connect us to each and every personal and global matter of the moment.

Time once reserved for detached reflection is now besieged by a world seeking our attention and demanding immediate response.

And what could be more demanding than constant calls for concern about some latest health warning, repossession statistic, job loss or mugging - every one of them nudging an inch further forward some growing anxiety? And it is of course the elderly who feel most vulnerable to those calls. They are their principal victim.

PRESSURE FROM UNREALISABLE EXPECTATIONS

Let me turn to the question of rising expectations. Of course, they have their place; without them we would be a less dynamic society. But, if taken too far, we risk becoming a society out of step with what is politically, economically or environmentally sustainable.

In a world where an abiding philosophy for many people appears to be: 'I SHOP, THEREFORE I AM', consumerism is going too far.

At a time when the economy is brittle, when business leaders and politicians are being held in ultra-low esteem, and when mankind's very success as a species is placing the well-being of the planet in doubt, the need to manage expectations has never been greater.

The truth is that we know we are into a period of markedly slower economic growth. As a society, I think we recognise that spending our way out of it is not an option. If, during such a demanding time, we are to come closer together rather than drift further apart, we are going to have to give greater prominence to each other's needs and less to our own. Words like: 'save', 'share', 'community', 'unity', 'patience', and 'public service' are going to have to become more central to the lexicon.

Certainly, with older people being a large and rising proportion of the population, the risk is that the young may feel unduly burdened as they support the elderly.

After all, young people struggling to find work, to afford homes of their own and to do other things that were once more straightforward to achieve may well become frustrated.

This is not a pretty picture, and it will require great maturity for us as a society to respond to its challenge and for the news media to report upon our progress in a thoughtful and balanced way.

FISSION?

Finally, let me say why I think this reporting, this outward manifestation of dialogue between young and old, matters so much.

In tough times, a society can come together or it can come apart. Whenever historically the people of this country have had to face a challenge from outside of their borders, they have come together to extraordinary and magnificent effect.

What makes today different is that the challenges we face going forward are largely generated within our society. To that extent they are essentially divisive. The need for a sense of community is harder to achieve when we are told daily that every public service is in crisis even while taxes, work pressures and customer demands are rising all around.

Nevertheless, despite all the media portrayal of dissent and disharmony, and despite all of the 'me' pressures of modernity, I believe, we remain at root a tolerant, caring and generous people, healthily sceptical of those who would divide us by attempting to turn poor against rich, white against black or young against old.

And older people themselves, by virtue of their numbers, by virtue of their experience and by virtue of their perspective have a key role to play in ensuring the maturity of the debate we are embarking upon.

Of course, the fact that so many are politically active represent a growing proportion of the electorate, and do canvas and vote, may well turn out to be their best form of security!

Interesting and valuable though informed and balanced comment on the elderly will be as part of the national debate going forward, I suspect it will be outweighed by what they themselves - politically engaged, informed and influential as many of them are - have to say.

We are here today recognise and celebrate the best of what is said about the old, and I am delighted to have been invited here to share in paying tribute to those who are showing the way to the rest of the media industry.

Thank you.