



Submission to the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media on Older Persons' Access and Inclusion in the Media.

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Introduction

Age Action is Ireland’s leading advocacy organisation on ageing and older people. Age Action works for a society that enables all older to people to participate and to live full, independent lives. To achieve this, Age Action supports and advocates for equality and human rights for all older people.

Eliminating ageism in Ireland is core to our mission, as is ensuring older persons can engage in and contribute to culture and society. As part of our work in this area, we commissioned polling on ageism that confirmed it was a serious problem in Ireland, reinforcing previous research in which older persons reported experiencing significant levels of age-based discrimination. Age Action encourages media organisations to recognise their role in influencing ageist attitudes and their responsibility in reframing how we think, feel and act towards ageing and older people. The Future of Media Commission’s report is a welcome and much-needed contribution to the vision of an inclusive society.

Representation of Older Persons in the Media

The World Health Organization’s Global Report on Ageism demonstrated that ageism is a pressing and under-acknowledged societal issue that can have grave consequences. It worsens older person’s psychological well-being and health outcomes. It can create blind spots that allow harmful policies and practices to go unchecked. Age Action’s own research confirms that the Global Report’s international findings hold true in Ireland. For example, our recent polling found that over a third of Irish adults agreed with two or more of the seven ageist opinions presented to them.

The Global Report on Ageism found strong evidence of ageism in the media. People learn and internalize ageist values and stereotypes through the media, and the media can continuously reinforce ageism. Narratives that pit generations against in each other in relation to housing, health, pensions or climate are divisive and often ill-informed and ageist. Ageism in the media can result from the so-called “cult of youth” in our culture and the fact that much media is targeted at the under 30 cohort, which leads to a side-lining of the perspectives and circumstances of older persons. The media can depict older persons in stereotypical ways, for example through the use of language like “elderly” or “vulnerable.” They can do so through the employment of ‘visual ageism’, e.g. pictures accompanying stories about older persons that portray mobility aids or disembodied body parts like wrinkled hands. However, the media can also powerfully counteract ageism by providing evidence and developing narratives that reflect the diversity of older persons including unequal experiences of older age. This should be characteristic of public service media, which the Commission’s Report defines as involving informing and educating the public regarding Irish identity and culture. The development of editorial guidelines on ageism is one of the recommendations Age Action made in our 2022 *State of Ageing* report.

Recommendations:

- Include measures to prohibit ageism in editorial guidelines.

Access to the Media by Older Persons – Digital Exclusion and Income Inadequacy

The Commission ‘recognised the intrinsic value of Public Service Content as a “merit good” that delivers valued benefits to society and democracy, and as such represents critical public infrastructure’. In this context Age Action wishes to draw attention to the need to mitigate two potential barriers older people face accessing public service content – digital exclusion and cost.

Digitalization is a force for monumental change in all areas of our society and culture. While it brings with it many benefits, it is important to ensure no cohort is left behind in the shift. Age Action estimates that 65% of persons aged 65 or older are digitally excluded. This means they either do not use the internet or lack the basic skills required to use it safely. While many older persons embrace technological developments, for many others radically changing their way of life is undesirable, if not impossible. Research demonstrates that persons aged 55+ rely more on traditional media than new media, compared to younger cohorts. The delivery of high-quality public service content through traditional media forms such as radio, television, and newspapers should be safeguarded and maintained. This includes ensuring their affordability. Age Action is concerned that high quality independent and impartial public service content could be beyond the reach of people who depend on social welfare, such as many older people, if steps are not taken to ensure that content is accessible to them. In this context, the free TV licence to people over 70 remains important and due consideration to protecting people’s access will need to be given in any policy decisions about funding public service content.

Community and regional media must also be available, accessible and affordable. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, often due to a loss of advertising revenue, some local media newspapers reduced their output or closed down. This cut off many older persons from their favoured source of information and their means of learning about local opportunities for engagement. Community and regional media also help ensure that diverse viewpoints are present in the media landscape. The Commission’s report further recognizes the importance of community and regional media in covering local politics and democracy. Ensuring the continued funding and the protection of the integrity of community and regional media is key to adequately serving older persons.

For media to be accessible, it is also important to ensure media literacy among the audience. This includes the ability to identify misinformation and accurately interpret facts. Evidence demonstrates that people with lower levels of formal education tend to report higher levels of trust in information found on social media platforms. While older persons may use social media to a lesser extent than other age cohorts, they also have significantly lower levels of formal education, and in combination with many older persons having below basic digital skills, this may make them especially susceptible to misinformation disseminated online. We know that persons aged 65+ have higher levels of trust in the national media, and lower levels of mistrust, than people aged 18-64. Media literacy is rightly prioritized in the Commission’s report. Often, efforts to promote it are targeted at younger cohorts. While there is value in this, older persons should not be left behind. Age Action is represented on the Steering Group of Media Literacy Ireland, which is an initiative set up by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland that looks at creating awareness of media, how the media is created and how it does what it does on a daily basis. Age Action recognises that more concerted and tailored efforts need to be made to engage with older persons to promote their media literacy, including in their engagement with social media platforms. This

will strengthen their ability to recognize and benefit from objective and independent public service content.

Recommendations:

- Ensure the maintenance of high-quality content on non-digital platforms.
- Ensure accessing public service content is affordable for older persons.
- Provide adequate funding to community and regional media.
- Tailor initiatives that promote media literacy to older persons.

Support of Older Persons Working in the Media

It is important that media companies are attractive employers for older persons. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, if we want media content to adequately reflect our population it is vital that older persons are involved in its production. Secondly, there are by now well-established benefits to ensuring workplaces are diverse. This includes in terms of age. Thirdly, as more older persons remain in work for longer, it is increasingly necessary for workplaces to be cognisant of their needs.

Many elements of an age-positive workplace are simply desirable and advisable conditions for any workplace employing any age cohort. These include supporting flexible work arrangements, particularly for workers with care responsibilities; ensuring occupational health and safety and an ergonomic work environment; and supporting continued training and development for workers. Indeed, in 2019 Ofcom recommended flexible working to accommodate caring responsibilities as an approach for retaining older media workers. Sometimes the policies that set out to achieve these general aims need to be responsive to the particular situations of older workers. This is especially true when it comes to training and development. High quality training opportunities for workers is a government priority, as demonstrated in the White Paper on Enterprise and the National Skills Strategy, and its importance equally applies to older workers. In the media context, the industry is undergoing significant technological changes. Older workers must be supported to adapt to the changing market, through the delivery of training in line with adult learning principles. This will require managers to confront any stereotypical assumptions about older workers and training, for example that less benefits are associated with training older workers than younger workers. This assumption is flawed, as benefits from training manifest in the short-term as well as long-term, and while older persons may be closer to retirement than younger workers, changes in employment conventions mean younger workers cannot be guaranteed to any greater degree than older workers to be working for the same employer in three years' time.

The media sector is also undergoing significant changes as a result of the growth of the gig economy. While many older persons working in the media sector are likely to have secured permanent contracts, Age Action is still concerned about current and future workers being guaranteed an adequate income in older age, and ensuring that they can exercise choice and control over their employment.

Age-positive workplaces also require explicit efforts to identify and root out ageist attitudes and practices. It is important that older workers, including in audience facing roles, are not discriminated against on the grounds of age. Our polling on ageism found that those working in the arts and entertainment sector were disproportionately likely to report having experienced discrimination on the basis of their age in the last couple of years. One particularly harmful manifestation of ageism in the

workplace, including in the media sector, is mandatory retirement. Abolishing mandatory retirement is a central ask in Age Action's 2022 *State of Ageing* report and is a cause for which we have long been campaigning. In 2019, Ofcom recommended the removal of age restrictions on particular jobs and schemes in the context of retaining older media workers. The case for mandatory retirement rests on flawed assumptions about the labour market that are not borne out in empirical research. For example, allowing older persons to keep their jobs in no way disadvantages younger workers in the workforce.

Where there may exist marginal benefits to employers in enforcing mandatory retirement, these are greatly outweighed by the significant cost endured by the worker (as well as the wider economy through the loss of skills and experience, and the public finances through loss of tax receipts). Whether retirement was the result of the worker's own choice or not is one of the key determinants of their quality of life post-retirement. Forcing older workers to retire often does long-lasting damage to their health and well-being and is further linked to income inadequacy in older age. It also promotes dangerous stereotypes about older persons and denies their worth, individuality, and ability to contribute. Rather than being respectful of workers or rendering any wider social benefits, the practice of mandatory retirement has been categorized as a means of shirking managerial responsibilities, in which a crude metric is used to force workers to retire. This is instead of employers being responsible for managing the performance of workers on the individual level, and, if necessary, instigating normal dismissal procedures. For a workplace to be age-positive, and for older workers to feel valued, they cannot be facing the looming threat of losing their job simply because they reached an arbitrarily set age.

Recommendations:

- Age should be strengthened as a pillar of Diversity, Equality and Inclusion in the workplace.
- Mandatory retirement clauses should be removed from employment contracts.