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Descriptive Analysis of News Magazines' Coverage of John Glenn's Return to Space

By Michael L. Hilt

Abstract: This study examined issues of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* for articles concerning John Glenn's return to space and described their content. A review of pertinent literature found that little attention has been paid to how older adults are portrayed in magazine articles. Although comments were made concerning Glenn's age and his role as a rookie payload specialist on the space shuttle *Discovery*, there were few comments considered ageist or demeaning to older adults.

Media images of older people contribute to society's perception of aging. The media have been charged with failing to capture the reality of being old in the United States and with creating and reinforcing negative stereotypes about old people (Bramlett-Soloman & Wilson, 1989; Gantz, Gartenberg, & Rainbow, 1980; Schramm, 1969). Some researchers have concluded that the media have helped to advance negative stereotypes and a homogenized view of old people (Markson, Pratt, & Taylor, 1989). Barrow (1996) suggested that one way to break the negative stereotypes of age was to "draw attention to people who have made significant contributors in their old age" (p. 39). The purpose of this research was to focus on one significant news event that featured an older adult (the return of John Glenn to space) and to describe how the three major news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*) covered that event.

Literature Review

Examining how the media reflect aging in the United States takes on increasing importance in light of the growing number of older people. By 2020 there will be an estimated 53.3 million people over age 65 in the United States, or roughly 1 in every 6 Americans (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1994). Furthermore, the over-85 age group represents the fastest-growing segment of the population (Dychtwald & Flower, 1989). Thanks to health care improvements, people in their 60s and older are living longer and they have more disposable income than ever before (Lieberman & McCray, 1994).

As the older population increases, media executives must consider this growing audience segment when making editorial decisions. It has been well established through past research that older people have very different preferences and media habits than younger people. Older adults follow the news in both print and broadcast forms, attend fewer movies, and select messages differently than younger people (DeFleur & Dennis, 1996). The elderly spend more than 40% of their leisure time watching television, reading, going to the movies, listening to the radio, and listening to music (Spring, 1993).

Although television and its relationship with older viewers continues to fall under increased scrutiny (Gerbner, 1993; Hilt, 1997), research into magazines and their portrayal of aging adults traditionally falls into two categories—the readership habits of older adults and their depiction in cartoons and advertising. The top-rated magazines for the elderly include *Reader's Digest*, *TV Guide*, *National Geographic*, and

Time, among others (Robinson & Skill, 1995). One study found that almost 20% of older adults read general-interest magazines (Durand, Klemmack, Roß, & Taylor, 1980). The affluent elderly read many more magazines than their less-affluent counterparts (Burnett, 1991). Burnett found that affluent elderly male readers were more likely to read *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, among others. Affluent elderly women also read these news magazines as well as others. Magazines tend to target the audience that falls under the “well-off, well-educated stratum of the population that the promotion departments of newspapers and magazines like to describe as the ‘opinion-makers’” (Grossman & Kumar, 1981, p. 62).

However, little research has been conducted into magazines’ content. Vasil and Wass (1993) examined nine studies that investigated the portrayal of the elderly in various print media—magazine cartoons, magazine advertisements, newspapers, and birthday cards. Their evaluation of the quality of the portrayals produced mixed results, and none of the studies under consideration by Vasil and Wass looked at the content of magazine articles. One study that did investigate the content of magazine articles was conducted by Kent and Shaw (1980). They examined age stereotyping in the news magazine *Time* by conducting a content analysis of named individuals appearing in 1978 issues and found little age stereotyping. On the whole, however, little attention has been paid to how older adults are portrayed in magazine articles.

Method

Qualitative research involves careful description of the subject under study. The goal of qualitative research is to preserve the form and content of what is under study and to analyze its qualities rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal codification (Lindlof, 1995). According to Lindlof, a qualitative method is useful for a study that seeks to describe the social reality created by messages. This is because the context of what is presented can be preserved. Marshall and Rossman (1995) stated that when providing a rationale for qualitative methodology, “the most compelling argument is to stress the unique strengths of this paradigm for research that is exploratory or descriptive” (p 39).

This study examined the January 26, October 26, November 9, and November 16, 1998, issues of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* for articles concerning the return of Glenn to space and described the content of those articles. Cartoons, letters to the editor, editorials, and commentaries were excluded from the study.

Findings

John Glenn became the first American to orbit the earth in 1962 at the age of 40. Since then he served as a U.S. senator from Ohio and was a presidential candidate in 1984, but never returned to space. In January 1998 the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced plans for Glenn’s return flight aboard the space shuttle *Discovery*. Glenn would be 77 years old when the shuttle launched in late October 1998.

The Announcement Issues

The January 26 1998, issue of *Time* featured a full-page article (p. 58) on the announced return of Glenn to space. Two photographs were included—Glenn in his space suit in 1962 and Glenn during the announcement ceremony. The article began with a look back at the 1962 flight, calling Glenn “a rookie pilot in the space agency’s Mercury program” and writing that the “40-year-old Marine” had to be able to physically control the spacecraft. The second paragraph moved to the present by giving his age at the time of the announcement (76) and referring to him as “a rookie payload specialist.” The paragraph concluded

with a listing of some of the things Glenn would have to learn “at an age when most Americans have long since retired.”

The story focused on the reasons why Glenn was selected to return to space. “Critics argued that the flight was merely a public relations stunt ; NASA insisted it was motivated by good, hard science.” Glenn had pushed for a return to space for many years and viewed his return as a “unique opportunity to study the science of aging.” Glenn had distinguished himself as “a champion of the elderly.” “It has not escaped his notice that some of the changes the body goes through as it ages—the breakdown of bones and the immune system, for example—are identical to the ones it goes through in zero-G.”

The article included criticism of Glenn’s selection, given the fact that other astronauts had been told they were too old to fly. Additionally, it noted that Glenn had been accustomed to being in charge. “This time he will be a passenger and scientific subject in a spacecraft piloted by astronauts young enough to be his sons—or daughters.”

The January 26 issue of *Newsweek* also featured an article (p. 32) on the announcement. The headline “The Ultimate Last Hurrah” was followed by the subheading “In the autumn of his life, John Glenn goes home—Back into outer space.” This article focused more on his life between the trips to space. At the announcement news conference, Glenn was described as “balder and more wrinkled” than he was in his 1962 spacesuit photograph. His return to space “is ostensibly about studying the common effects of aging and space travel : bone loss, muscle deterioration, sleeplessness, loss of balance.” However, the article acknowledged that the research was not critical and that the real significance of Glenn’s mission was to renew interest in the space program.

The January 26 issue of U.S. News & World Report did not feature a full article on the announcement. Instead, the information was included in the magazine’s “Outlook” column. The two paragraphs focused more on the naming of a teacher for a future shuttle flight than on Glenn’s return to space. “NASA acquiesced last week to Sen. John Glenn’s request to fly again in space, where as an astronaut he was the first American to orbit Earth in 1962. The 76-year-old’s imminent return to space was of special interest to Barbara Morgan, 46, a third-grade teacher in McCall, Idaho.” Nothing else was written about Glenn.

The Flight Issues

The space shuttle *Discovery* took off October 29, 1998, and landed November 7, 1998. Four issues of the magazines under study—the October 26 and November 9 issues of *Newsweek*, the November 9 issue of *Time*, and the November 16 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*— included information about the flight.

The October 26 issue of *Newsweek* was the only one of the four issues under study to feature Glenn on its cover. The photograph showed Glenn in his shuttle suit with the headline “A New Mission for John Glenn: Exploring the Science of Growing Old.” The cover article began on page 30 and was titled “The Time Traveler.” The author, Matt Bai, described Glenn’s mission as one designed “to find out what space can teach us about growing old on Earth.” The article described the Johnson Space Center in Houston and how items from past missions serve as monuments. “Last spring one of NASA’s most prized relics, 77-year-old John Glenn, took his friend Bill Clinton on a tour of the cavernous hangar known as Building Nine.” The article continued, pointing out differences between Glenn’s first flight in *Friendship 7* to this flight in *Discovery*, and concluded with the phrase “the old man had a lot to learn.” Glenn was described as exhausted by 12-hour days in the classroom and likened to “a grandfather trying to program his VCR.”

The article went on to describe the stated reasons behind the mission: how to live longer and better. Some of the experiments that Glenn would endure were detailed, such as the measuring of his sleep patterns and

the rate at which his body broke down proteins. From there, the article gave a history of Glenn's involvement with the space program and how he came to be a member of the shuttle flight crew. The article concluded with the following sentence: "Whatever Glenn's flight tells scientists about aging, he's already shown the rest of us how to grow old."

This issue contained two other articles concerning the *Discovery* flight. The first was a two-page look at Glenn's two space flights. It compared the two flights and described some of the experiments that Glenn would undergo. The second article was a two-page examination titled "Exploring the Secrets of Age." This article went into more detail about the experiments and the reasons why scientists needed the information: "Scientists hope that by sending people of different ages into space, they'll gain general insights into how the body works and why it fails." This article focused on the experiments and mentioned Glenn only in terms of his contribution to the tests.

The November 9 issue of *Newsweek* featured a two-page picture of the shuttle liftoff with the title "Zero-G and I Feel Fine," a quote from Glenn. The relatively short article that followed (three paragraphs) summarized the liftoff and some of the medical tests that Glenn would undergo. There were no references to age, and the article focused on the flight.

The November 9 issue of *Time* also focused on the flight and its possible meaning for NASA. Titled "Victory Lap," the article included a photo of the liftoff with an inset picture of Glenn waving as he walked to board the shuttle. A pull-out poster traced the space agency's progress, from the race to space with the Russians to the shuttle *Discovery* flight. The article recapped Glenn's habit of telling his wife Annie that he was just going down to the corner for chewing gum before a dangerous flight. References to age and aging appeared in this article only in the last few paragraphs, where some of the experiments that Glenn would conduct were detailed.

The November 16 issue of *U.S. News & World Report* included a one-page article titled "John Glenn's Mixed Message on Aging." This article openly challenged the reasons for sending Glenn back into space. It began with a description of how uncomfortable Glenn was with the title "world's oldest spaceman" but how he began to embrace the description as the launch date approached. From there, the article centered on how people who work with the elderly are now beginning to question the adulation of overachievers: "In reality, old age means to live with both vigor and limits" (p. 69).

Discussion

This research focused on one significant news event that featured an older adult (the return of John Glenn to space) and described how the three major news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*) covered that event. For the most part, news magazine coverage of Glenn's trip centered on his return to space and the aging experiments he would undergo. Although comments were made concerning his age and his role as a rookie payload specialist, there were few comments that could be considered ageist or demeaning to older adults. This finding is in agreement with the conclusions reached in 1980 by Kent and Shaw. In that research, Kent and Shaw reasoned that the lack of age stereotyping in *Time* was due to the journalistic goal of objectivity.

The same level of objectivity generally was found in the magazines in this study. However, the November 16 *U.S. News & World Report* article, "John Glenn's Mixed Message on Aging," challenged the reasons for sending Glenn back into space and suggested that the trip, although well intentioned, would "gloss over the fact that older hearts, lungs, ears, and eyes do start to wear out." This was the only article in that issue on Glenn's return to space. Barrow (1996) wrote that negative stereotypes must be countered with

accurate information. She found that “physical stereotypes are as common as mental ones and are just as false” (p. 40).

The news magazines examined for his study of Glenn’s return to space focused on the event itself. The reasons behind Glenn’s flight were presented and analyzed, not in an ageist or stereotypical fashion, but rather to explain why he had been selected. Objective reporting of a worthy news event is, to paraphrase Barrow, one way to break the negative stereotypes of age and to draw attention to people who make significant contributions in their old age.

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