The image of aging needs a makeover. We’re still under the sway of outdated myths and stereotypes. But things are changing. Recently sporting goods manufacturers sponsored a conference on aging. They know that people want to stay fit as they age and that they buy more sneakers than rockers.

Have the media kept up with reality? How aware are they that according to U.S. management expert Peter Drucker, “the youth market is over”? How accurately is the demographic revolution depicted? AARP Communications staff investigated how media portrayed aging over the last five years in the United Kingdom and in the United States. We wanted to know what aging-related issues were covered, and at what frequency. Economics topped the list: national Social Security and pension plans received the most attention, followed by private pensions and retirement planning. Then housing, including nursing homes and long-term facilities, both here in the U.S. and in the U.K.

A further word about our research: although it was carefully conducted, it wasn’t peer reviewed. And we did not survey specially aging publications – including our own. In addition, we didn’t review medical articles or profiles.

We did, however, review leading U.S. and U.K. newspapers and news magazines appearing from January 1997 to the end of December 2001. We found that the image of aging was split right down the middle. In other words, older people were portrayed as powerful, wise, wealthy and generous as often as they were portrayed as helpless, naïve, poor and selfish. The media segmented people 50+ rather crudely in terms of being either baby boomers or elderly.

But recently, shades of gray seem to be emerging. We’re finding that newspapers are becoming more responsive to the interests of the 50+ population, with many creating an “age beat.” Such premier publications as the Wall Street Journal have created supplements for readers 50+; The Economist devotes at least one issue per year to pension and aging issues.

Today it is no mean feat for media to define “elderly.” Conventional wisdom defines elderly as 65, the traditional retirement age. But today, many retire before age 65, and others work well into their 70s. The presence of nearly 80 million baby boomers further clouds the issue because so many of today’s editors are in this age group.

One thing is clear: the news media can’t ignore the 50+ population. Here’s why: demographics and dollars. As for demographics:

- According to World Health Organization statistics, in 120 countries, there is a life expectancy of 60+ years, amounting to 5/6 of the world’s total.
- US statistics show that life expectancy for men is 77 years; for women, 84 years.
And in the US, a baby boomer turns 50 every 7.5 seconds, or 1,200 a day for the next 30 years.

The dollar-worth of the 50+ population is equally impressive:

- They control 70% of total net worth of American households
- They have $800+ billion in personal income
- They own $7 trillion in assets
- Some 79% own their own homes

Another reason to pay heed to people in this age group is that they vote:

- 62.3% of those 45-54 voted in the US 1996 presidential election
- 67.8% of those 50-64 voted
- 70.1% of those 65-74 voted, the highest rate of all people eligible

Overall media coverage on housing was good. There were strong editorials favoring affordable housing, exposing lending and mortgage scams, and reforming nursing home abuses. Articles focused on the widespread need for senior housing, especially since existing stock is substandard and threatened by developers. Last in terms of coverage were articles on new directions for senior housing.

When it came to retirement programs (Social Security, pensions), the media, while on the one hand stating that recipients need more benefits, on the other, promoted these messages:

- The system will collapse because of being bankrupted by the 50+ population
- Nothing will be left for younger workers, which will cause intergenerational warfare
- Beneficiaries are “greedy” and will fight for entitlement programs

Older people as “greedy” or as victim: media vacillates between these two views. When it comes to economic issues, more often than not, they’re greedy. When it comes to lifestyle issues, those 50+ are shown living in poverty; experiencing age discrimination in the workplace; being victims of predatory lenders and other criminals. Older people are portrayed as vulnerable: illness, poverty and loneliness seem to be all there is to look forward to. We see few older people in meaningful roles. Some notable exceptions are CEOs, university deans, researchers and artists.

Our conclusion is that the media – both print and TV – are not adequately serving the 50+ population. Although things may be changing, there is still a long way to go before the image of aging catches up to the reality of older people living longer, healthier and more productive and fulfilling lives than ever.