

## Will H'wood act its age?

Pic, TV exex confront cultural shift as younger auds drift away

By BRIAN LOWRY

After a wearying pursuit of capricious youth, does Hollywood need to grow up?

For years, CBS pleaded the case that TV audiences should be measured using the 25-54 demographic, rather than the prevailing yardstick of adults aged 18-49. Yet now that CBS has shed its image as the *alter kocher* network via younger-skewing hits, all of the Big Four broadcasters are performing markedly better using the 25-54 measure.

That bracket gives them an aggregate rating that is 17% higher than their 18-49 tally -- a pretty remarkable gap, given the enormous overlap between the two segments.

TV is discovering the same thing that the movie biz is: While younger audiences are eroding or being pulled in a dozen different directions, the older auds are holding fast -- or growing.

**"We're truly going through a paradigm shift unlike any we've ever seen before ... from an emphasis on youth to a middle-aged population," says Maddy Dychtwald, who is partnered with her husband Ken in Age Wave, a San Francisco consulting firm focused on the marketing implications of the aging Baby Boomer contingent.**

Although rival networks have yet to join CBS in pressing the case regarding shifting demographics, the impact of boomers rippling through the population could be hard to ignore. And since key demos are the measure by which networks charge advertisers, billions of dollars are at stake.

Transforming changing demographic trends into ad dollars, however, is another matter for the major nets because of the marked difference between the role of demographics in films and TV.

In pics, studios are selling the audience on a film, so a 55-year-old's money for a movie ticket is worth exactly as much as a teenager's. In TV, the networks are selling the advertisers on the audience. And a 55-year-old's enthusiasm for a TV show isn't worth a fig.

Perhaps for that reason, the graying of America has yet to seriously affect network development and programming, or the way they pitch shows to Madison Avenue. Yet with older adults having been disenfranchised for so long -- treated as "gravey" by media buyers -- even a small tilt would restore a degree of sanity to the demo derby.

Similarly, in the film biz, studios are still gearing tentpoles and CGI films to young audiences. But the majors' heightened emphasis on their classics divisions is a sign movie audiences are changing. And the fact films like "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" and "March of the Penguins" became major hits in slow, steady releases are object lessons that a socko opening weekend --

when older auds don't always rush out to see a film its first week -- isn't the only measure of success at the box office.

Even with our longer-living and healthier society, ageism won't be dispatched in a day. But for the networks and studios, a modest swing toward older viewers could prove extremely profitable in the long run. Here's why:

- Younger audiences not only watch less TV but are generally faster to embrace film-broadcast TV competition such as videogames, computers and, soon enough, two-by-two cellphone or iPod screens.
- CBS chairman Leslie Moonves has joked that the only "upscale" 18-to-24 year-olds he knows are his children, and dad is the final arbiter on big-ticket buying decisions.
- According to CBS exec veepee of research David Poltrack, a substantial portion of 18-24 year olds are "dependent adults," still living with, or sponging off, their parents. And in terms of viewing tastes and patterns, they often have more in common with teens than adults over 30.

**"They're very proud of the fact that they're taking longer to grow up," Dychtwald says, citing the increasing number of twentysomethings who return home after college.**

- The fastest growing segment of the U.S. population is the over-50 crowd.

Asked about the eventual necessity of a new barometer, Poltrack -- long a lonely voice on the issue -- says, "There's no question about it. This is definitely where the population is going. ... All media are recognizing that they really have to own an audience, and the audience broadcasters are more likely to own is 25-54."

As it stands, adults aged 18-49 remain the principal currency in dealings between ad-supported TV and Madison Ave. Yet with Baby Boomers reshaping census data and lifestyle expectations as they march, jog and yogacize their way into middle age, it appears inevitable that the Big Four must adopt the secondary 25-54 age bracket as their main yardstick.

As *Variety* recently noted, NBC's median viewing age has risen to a record high of 49.4, joining CBS above the "49 as end of the media map" benchmark. ABC is up, too, into the mid-40s.

At the same time, network viewing among teens has plummeted.

The arguments for sticking with 18-49 are well known. Young adults' buying habits are more fungible (and thus responsive to advertising); and because they don't suffer "empty nest" syndrome as much as the 50-plus group, they have more kids per household and buy more stuff.

The problem is many of those assertions don't really hold anymore.

Besides, it's not like the aging population is a secret. Just after New Year's Eve, the first Baby Boomers will turn 60. ABC News closed October with a weeklong, multi-program series titled "Living Longer, Living Better," which noted that the average U.S. life span is up to 78.

Admittedly, teens and younger adults command a premium precisely because they are difficult to reach, like any scarce commodity. Still, it's hardly as if the conglomerates that own the broadcast nets would be shedding ties to that audience, which they attract on sister channels, from ABC Family to NBC Universal's Sci Fi Channel to UPN and Nickelodeon (until Viacom and CBS go their separate ways, anyway).

Perhaps the most outdated reasoning against an older target is that networks need to plan for the future by establishing a relationship with young viewers now. That's tantamount to saying that newspapers can entice teens to read the real-estate section long before they leave their parents' house, much less have any interest in buying one.

Tinkering with demo priorities is hardly without precedent. The major nets have already abandoned children under 12, who once comprised a serious part of their primetime programming. Not only has the notion of being "family friendly" at 8 o'clock been jettisoned, but Saturday morning lineups have become an afterthought, with both Fox and NBC leasing the time to outside suppliers of kids' fare.

Broadcast news has also recognized its older profile, regularly issuing adults 25-54 data as its primary demographic criterion.

Not surprisingly, media buyers like getting viewers for free, so the fact that CBS' "Survivor" pulled a 6.2 rating in 18-49 on Oct. 27 and a 7.6 in 25-54 -- a 23% differential -- won't send them. That said, some marketing categories, such as financial services, have started directing messages and marketing plans at reaching an older crowd.

"It depends on the advertisers. There's not a cookie-cutter demographic target for everyone," says Shari Anne Brill, VP and director of programming at Carat USA, who adds that big-spending, younger-skewing products -- movie studios, fast food, soft drinks -- still wield a powerful and immensely lucrative pull toward the 18-24 age range.

Granted, newspapers have only recently begun referencing demos and 18-49 results in their TV coverage, but given the problems assailing that industry with a graying consumer base, rest assured, they'll get over it.

Nor should anyone confuse 50-54 with easygoing retirement. After all, the CEOs of these media companies -- the folks ultimately responsible for saying "Yea" or "Nay" -- are all over 50.

Until now, the broadcasters have tended to offer excuses about why their audiences are getting older, rather than taking action to soften the stigma surrounding it.

Catching the age wave needn't require tossing out the rulebook. But in baseball parlance, it's time for the networks to redefine their strike zone.