Audience Segmentation and Age Stratification Among Television Writers

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In this research, we analyze quantitative longitudinal data on the careers of 8,990 television and film writers to assess whether barriers to career success for older writers have increased in recent years. We detect a substantial shift in age-earnings profiles in favor of younger television writers during an era when programming strategies increasingly targeted younger audiences. We argue that marketing strategies in television that emphasize audience demographics and distinctive features of the business context encourage "typecasting" that creates barriers to career success for older writers.

Nineteen year-old Riley Weston was a Hollywood phenomenon. In the summer of 1998, she had a six-figure development deal to write for Disney's Touchstone Television, and *Entertainment Weekly* had just named her one of the 100 most creative people in the industry. Weston's claim to fame was that as a teenager she was both writing for and portraying a high school senior in an episode of the WB's youth-oriented series, *Felicity*. "In many ways I am Felicity," Weston told *Entertainment Weekly*, "so I hope to portray this generation in a realistic light" (Pope, 1998).

The idea that one has to be young in order to write scripts that appeal to a youthful audience is widespread in Hollywood, a lesson that Ms. Weston learned all too well just a few months later, in the fall of 1998. Shortly before *Entertainment Tonight* was to do a feature on her, an investigative reporter broke the news that Ms. Weston was in fact 32 years old. Weston was embarrassed but unapologetic. She noted that those seeking work as actors and actresses routinely misrepresent their ages and said that "in a business fraught with age bias, I did what I thought I had to do to succeed." Executives at Imagine Television, the production company that hired Weston for *Felicity*, were less sympathetic. The company's statement read: "The recent accusations concerning Riley's background are a complete surprise to all of us. If proven to be true, we will be disappointed and shocked" (Pope, 1998). The story was picked up by the major wire services, prominently featured in the entertainment press and

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television news magazines, and in the end Touchstone decided not to pick up the option on Ms. Weston's contract.

Coincidentally, shortly after the Riley Weston story broke, the Writers Guild of America issued the *1998 Hollywood Writers' Report* (Bielby & Bielby, 1998), which documented disparities by gender, minority status, and age in the career trajectories of television and film writers. With the Weston story as backdrop, media coverage of the WGA report focused almost exclusively on the findings about older writers. Receiving most media attention were statistics showing that: (1) very few writers over 40 are employed on many popular prime-time television series; (2) the unemployment rate for writers over 30 had increased since the early 1980s; (3) the unemployment rate for writers 30 and younger declined over the same period; and (4) the growth in earnings among younger writers greatly outpaced earnings growth among older writers.

The media attention peaked when *60 Minutes* used the Riley Weston story and the WGA report to frame a segment on age bias against television writers. In that segment, experienced television writers, such as *M*A*S*H* executive producer Larry Gelbart, pointed to the Riley Weston story as an extreme example of the age bias that, in their view, had become commonplace in the industry. Around the same time, the entertainment writer for *The New York Times* wrote about the plight of older writers by proclaiming, "in Hollywood, a new kind of blacklist targets older writers" (Weinraub, 1998). Given the reality of Hollywood blacklists a half century ago, this imagery, which resonates so strongly with many older writers, is indeed provocative. But is it in fact the case that the television writers over 40 are less valued in the marketplace today compared to ten or fifteen years ago? And if so, what accounts for this trend? Can it be explained by age differences in the skills and qualifications of writers and shifts in the qualities being sought by those who hire television writers? Is there evidence of age bias against older television writers?

In this research, we analyze quantitative panel data on the careers of both television and film writers to assess whether barriers to career success for older writers have increased in the television sector in recent years. Based on an analysis of shifts in programming strategies, we develop hypotheses about the effects of age, years of experience, and prior career success on the earnings of television writers compared to film writers during the period from 1982 to 1997. These hypotheses are tested with a formal statistical model of writers' earnings, and in a concluding section we discuss whether our findings are consistent with the notion that television writers are being "typecast" by age as a result of programmers' pursuit of younger audiences.

While there is a substantial body of scholarship that addresses portrayals of elderly on television (Bell, 1992; Greenberg & Heeter, 1982; Harwood, 2000; Vasil & Wass, 1993) and viewing patterns by age (Harwood, 1997; Kubey, 1980), virtually no research exists on age stratification among those who work on the production side of the television industry. The research reported here relies upon and contributes to three distinct lines of scholarship in order to understand how age affects the careers of those who write for television. First, relying on recent research on culture industry

systems (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Caves, 2000; DiMaggio, 1977), we start from the assumption that decision-making contexts are highly institutionalized and are char-acterized by high degrees of risk, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Second, recent scholarship has documented the ascendancy of demographically-targeted marketing since the 1970s (Turow, 1997), and we describe the impact of this trend on how television audiences are understood and valued by industry executives. Finally, we draw upon research on how age stereotypes influence decisions in employment contexts (Finkelstein, Burke & Raju, 1995; Perry & Finkelstein, 1999) to explain the circumstances that are likely to lead to a "typecasting" of television writers by age. The major contribution of our study is to demonstrate how changes in marketing strategies in a business context characterized by ambiguity, risk, and uncertainty create the conditions which allow stereotypes to influence the careers of creative workers in a commercialized culture industry system.

How the Television Marketplace was Transformed in the 1990s: "People Meters," Emerging Networks, and "Key Demos"

Advertisers whose products appeal to specific demographic groups have always attended to the age, gender, and (to a lesser extent) ethnic composition of network television audiences. Since the earliest days of commercial television, products appealing to housewives have been advertised on daytime serials, those appealing to children have been advertised on Saturday mornings, and televised sporting events have always been a vehicle for advertising aimed at adult males. Nevertheless, from the 1950s through the early 1980s, network television's main appeal to advertisers was the ability of programming on ABC, CBS, and NBC to reach a mass audience, and each network's revenues derived primarily from the overall number of house-holds its programs reached. However, that began to change in the 1980s with the emergence of cable as an effective means of delivering audiences with distinctive demographic profiles. In *Breaking Up America* (1997), Joseph Turow describes how HBO's early success in attracting a young, upscale audience and Ted Turner's introduction of the "superstation" concept demonstrated to advertising agencies the potential of cable to efficiently reach the audience segments that were most valued by their clients.

The traditional broadcast networks were slow to respond to the threat cable's "narrowcasting" posed to their sources of advertising revenue. However, by 1984 the networks began developing strategies to improve audience targeting, and as one advertising industry analyst observed, "a logical next step would be designing specific programs to reach certain audiences" (Barrett, 1984, p. 106). The viability of such an approach was greatly increased in 1987, when each of the major ratings services introduced versions of the "people meter" technology for measuring broad-cast network viewership (Honomichl, 1987; Paskowski, 1987). People meters trans-mitted overnight ratings tabulated by detailed demographic categories, and by the beginning of the 1988–89 season, the technology had been expanded to measure

VCR use and cable audiences as well as viewership of the traditional broadcast networks (Huff, 1988; Walley, 1988).

The fledgling Fox network, which launched two nights of primetime programming in Spring of 1987, seized upon the strategy of delivering to advertisers guaranteed audiences in specific demographic categories at significantly lower cost per thousand viewers (Walley, 1987). At the time, few industry analysts expected the high-risk venture to succeed. By 1990–91, Fox Broadcasting had refined its formula of programming series and television movies targeting an 18 to 49 year old audience, had expanded to five nights per week of original programming, and was considered by many to pose a significant threat to the profitability of the traditional broadcast networks (Mandese, 1991). By 1992, the median age of Fox Broadcasting's viewers was 28.5 compared to 37, 42, and 45 for ABC, NBC, and CBS respectively, and it had become clear that the traditional broadcast networks were moving to emulate Fox's successful age-targeted programming strategy (Coe, 1992; Mandese, 1992). The Fox strategy was also imitated by the UPN and WB networks which debuted in 1994, with former Fox executives in key positions at the WB (Coe, 1994).

The term "key demographics" (or "key demos") to describe the networks' target audiences (usually adults aged 18–49) first began to appear in industry trade papers in late 1989, and by 1997 it had become commonplace.[1] Today, a typical report in the industry trade press on the network ratings race includes age-specific references like this from the *Hollywood Reporter* of July 12, 2000 (Littleton, 2000, p. 2) titled "CBS Wins 'Big' in Key Demos":

> CBS' experiment in summertime voyeur-vision series "Survivor" and "Big Brother" has given the eye network its first weekly win in key adult demographics since March 1994, outside of Olympics programming periods.

> With the influx of younger viewers delivered by "Survivor" and the first four installments of "Big Brother," CBS led the primetime demopack during the week ending July 9 with 9.7 million total viewers and a 3.4 share in adults 18–49. . . .

Indeed, the language of "key demos" in television ratings can now be found beyond the industry press, in daily newspaper reports, in business publications such as the *Wall Street Journal,* and in entertainment magazines for lay readers such as *People* and *Entertainment Weekly.* In short, it is common knowledge among anyone who knows anything about television that demographics are the key to evaluating audiences and that younger audiences are the "best" audiences.

There can be no question that the trend in television since the late 1980s has been towards a single-minded pursuit of younger audiences. But how does that translate into changes in the labor market value of older writers? Have the individuals at the networks and production companies who make decisions about who gets hired to write for television come to place a greater value on younger writers? Our analytic strategy for exploring this issue is to look at how the relationship between age and earnings for television writers changed from 1982 through 1997 to see whether the

growth in earnings of older writers during this period substantially exceeds that for younger writers.

As a point of comparison, we contrast the pattern of earnings growth of television writers with that for writers of feature films. Because feature film revenues do not derive from advertising, the shifts in marketing strategies in television programming described above do not directly influence the market for feature film writers. Thus, we can hypothesize that compared to television writers, the relationship between age and earnings has changed much less for writers working in film. Film writers make for an especially appropriate comparison because the skills required for writing in the two industry sectors are quite similar. Film and television writers practice the same craft and belong to the same union. In fact, it is not unusual for writers to work in both television and feature film over the course of their careers, and in any given year, about 15% to 20% of writers working for television are also working in film (Bielby & Bielby, 1998). Below, we describe in detail the data we rely upon, the hypotheses we test about the relationships among age, earnings, and experience among film and television writers, and the statistical models we use to test those hypotheses.

Data and Models

The data for our study describe the earnings trajectories of 8,990 film and television writers who were employed at least once during the period from 1982 through 1997. These data are from the employment and membership records of the Writers Guild of America, West (WGAW). Each quarter, Guild members report their earnings from all employment covered by the WGAW's major collective bargaining agreement with producers. Because the overwhelming majority of producers are signatory to the agreement, these data pertain to almost all those writing for television and feature films produced in Hollywood.[2] From these data, we have extracted information on writers' annual earnings, years of membership in the WGA, gender, minority status, age, and sector of employment (i.e., feature film or television).

Our statistical model is a pooled cross-section time series specification. That is, in any given year, t, we observe cross-sectional variation in earnings across writers, and for any individual writer, i, we observe variation over time in earnings. Accordingly, our model takes the form:

$$\ln Y_{it} = a + b_1 X_i + b_2 W_{it} + d_t + e_{it} \tag{1}$$

where $\ln Y_{it}$ is the natural logarithm of earnings for the i'th individual in year t. Attributes of individuals that do not vary over time (minority status, gender) are included in X_i and individual traits that vary over time (age, years of experience, whether the writer is working primarily in television or in film, prior years' employment and earnings) are included in W_{it}. The term d_t captures year-specific effects on earnings. The disturbance e_{it} is assumed to have a mean of zero and constant variance and to be uncorrelated with the other independent variables. The model

includes a series of interaction terms for age, year, and sector (film versus television), which are described below.

A particular focus of the analyses reported here is disentangling the relative impact of age, years of industry experience, and prior success as a television or film writer. Years of experience is measured by number of years of membership in the WGAW. Human capital models assume that the impact of experience on earnings is nonlinear (increasing at a decreasing rate), so our statistical models include both linear and quadratic terms. We measure prior career success in two ways. Since over half of the WGA membership finds no employment writing for film and television in any given year, employment itself is a measure of career success. Accordingly, in one set of models we index recent career success with three binary variables indicating whether a writer reports any employment in each of the three previous years, $t-1$, $t-2$, and $t-3$. In other models, prior career success in a given year is measured by the writer's cumulative earnings from work in film and television over the previous three years, captured by eight binary variables for the following nine categories: no earnings (reference category); $1–$5,000; $5,001–$10,000; $10,001–$25,000; $25,001–$50,000; $50,001–$100,000, $100,001–$200,000, $200,001–$500,000; and more than $500,000. We use this specification of lagged earnings instead of a dollar or log-dollar metric to allow for the possibility of nonlinear effects.

Age is measured by five binary variables for the following six categories: younger than 30 (reference category); 30–39; 40–49; 50–59; and 60–64; and older than 64. The dummy variable specification allows for nonlinearities in the effects of age and also allows us to specify differential rates of earnings growth by age categories (see below). Our models also include a binary variable that differentiates between cohorts of writers who first joined the WGAW prior to 1971 and those who joined in 1971 or later. We use 1971 to approximate the date by which the industry had fully made the transition from the studio system to one of decentralized flexible specialization (Caves, 2000). In television, that year also marks the beginning of the era when FCC regulations required the television networks to rely almost exclusively on independent producers for entertainment programming (Bielby, Bielby, & Altarac, 1999).

Simultaneously estimating effects of age, years of experience, and cohort often raises concern about unstable estimates due to extreme multicollinearity. It is of less concern in the analyses reported here for several reasons. First, the median age at which writers join the WGAW has ranged between 33 and 34 years since the early 1980s, and there is substantial variation in age among writers with the same years of experience. Second, our longitudinal design allows us to take advantage of both cross-sectional and over-time variation in age and experience, and with a relatively large sample size (over 40,000 person-year observations) we can obtain stable and reliable estimates of the independent effects of each. Nevertheless, as a precaution, we examined collinearity diagnostics for estimates of all models reported here, and we have conducted supplementary analyses that re-estimate all of our models with the experience and cohort variables omitted.

Year effects (d_t in Equation 1) are captured by fifteen binary variables, with 1982 as the reference category. We differentiate film writers from television writers on the basis of source of earnings. A writer who earns more from film than from television is considered a film writer, and one who earns as much or more from television as from film is considered a television writer. In any given year, the overwhelming majority of writers (85% or more) work exclusively in feature film or in television. Because some writers work in both sectors, our models include a binary variable coded one if a writer has earnings for both sectors in addition to a binary variable coded one if a writer works in film (working exclusively in television is the reference category). Minority status and gender are represented by binary (0–1) variables, coded one for minority and female, respectively.

Our analysis focuses on the effects of age on writers' earnings, controlling for measures of prior career success, how those effects change over time, and how they differ for writers working in television and feature film. Capturing these differences in the effects of age on earnings requires including a series of interaction terms in our models. *Age by time* interactions are captured by multiplicative terms for the product of each binary variable multiplied by a linear measure of time since 1982.[3] By including these terms, we allow for earnings differentials between writers under 30 and older writers to increase (or decrease) linearly over time, but at a different rate within each of the over-30 age categories. Three-way interaction terms, *age by time by film*, allow the rate of earnings growth for each category to be different for compensation from the film versus television sectors.[4]

Hypotheses

Based on our analysis of industry trends, we expect to find:

H1: Among those working in television, earnings have grown more slowly for older writers than for younger writers.

Hypothesis H1 is supported if we detect a significant *age by time* interaction, with a pattern of negative two-way interaction terms for older age categories.[5]

Because of different marketing dynamics in the film and television sectors, we also expect:

H2: The differential earnings growth by age category is less pronounced for compensation earned from writing for film compared to writing for television.

Hypothesis H2 is supported if we detect a significant *age by time by film* interaction, with a pattern of positive three-way interaction terms for older age categories.[6]

Finally, in an industry where "you're only as good as your most recent hit," we expect:

H3: The effect of experience on writers' earnings is negative, controlling for measures of recent career success;

and:

H4: Among writers with comparable track records, older writers earn less than younger writers.

Hypothesis H3 is supported if we detect significant and negative effects of experience in models controlling for prior career success. Hypothesis H4 is supported if we detect significant effects of the binary age variables with a pattern of coefficients that decrease monotonically with age.[7]

Results

Descriptive statistics for employed writers are reported in Table 1. Somewhat surprisingly, the average age of employed writers remains nearly constant, between 42 and 43, for the entire period from 1982 to 1997. However, the more detailed age statistics show changes in the shape — if not the central tendency — of the age distribution. As the baby-boom generation of writers aged, the proportion of writers who are in their forties expanded continuously from 1982 to 1995 and the proportion in their fifties expanded from 1991 to 1997.

Mean years of experience for working writers increased from just under nine years in the early 1980s to just over ten years in 1997. Typical earnings (measured at both the mean and median) more than tripled from 1982 through 1997, a period when the consumer price index increased by less than 70%.

Figure 1 reports age-earnings profiles for selected years from 1982 through 1997, separately for writers' compensation from feature film and from television. As can be seen from the figure, earnings increased substantially more for writers under 40 than for older writers, especially in television. In 1982, the best paid television writers were in their fifties, but by 1985 writers in their thirties had the highest median earnings, a pattern that persisted through 1997.

Our multivariate models allow us to examine whether the pattern apparent in Figure 1 persists after controlling for demographic characteristics (gender, minority status) and, especially, prior career success. We estimate three versions of our model. The first, reported in Table 2, includes no controls for prior career success. The second, reported in Table 3, includes controls for whether or not a writer was employed in years t-1, t-2, and t-3. The final version, reported in Table 4, includes controls for writers' cumulative earnings in the three years prior to year t. Three variations of the model are reported in each table. The first (Model I) includes no interactions, the second (Model II) includes the two-way *age by time* interaction, and the third (Model III) includes the two-way interaction and the three-way *age by time by film* interaction. The results reported in Table 2 pertain to the years 1982 through

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics, Employed Film and Television Writers, 1982-1997

	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988*	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Total Empl	2657	2654	2746	2953	3164	3374	3199	3489	3714	3628	3604	3552	3548	3623	3750	3838
Mean $	$55,452	$59,733	$67,746	$74,246	$76,835	$79,908	$74,588	$95,893	$110,767	$112,761	$116,000	$121,622	$129,457	$148,056	$162,088	$156,339
Median $	$26,250	$27,854	$33,304	$39,660	$42,226	$44,012	$38,343	$50,012	$57,500	$57,603	$60,000	$62,730	$64,586	$78,976	$92,884	$83,735
Pre-'71 Admit	27.5%	25.2%	22.5%	20.1%	17.9%	16.1%	14.6%	12.6%	11.1%	9.4%	8.4%	8.2%	7.1%	5.9%	5.3%	4.2%
Age																
l.t. 30	8.5%	7.8%	7.4%	7.2%	7.7%	7.6%	7.4%	7.3%	6.9%	6.9%	6.2%	5.6%	5.3%	5.7%	6.4%	7.3%
30-39	40.6%	41.9%	41.8%	42.1%	41.0%	39.3%	38.4%	37.3%	37.7%	37.2%	36.0%	35.8%	34.4%	34.1%	34.2%	33.5%
40-49	23.4%	24.3%	25.1%	27.0%	28.4%	30.6%	33.1%	34.8%	35.5%	37.3%	38.8%	39.4%	40.8%	40.9%	38.6%	37.8%
50-59	16.8%	16.2%	17.0%	14.9%	14.1%	13.8%	12.9%	12.5%	12.4%	11.6%	12.6%	12.9%	13.0%	14.0%	15.5%	16.6%
60-64	5.9%	5.5%	4.4%	4.7%	4.5%	4.2%	3.9%	4.2%	3.7%	3.4%	3.3%	2.8%	3.2%	2.6%	2.8%	2.4%
65+	4.7%	4.3%	4.4%	4.2%	4.3%	4.5%	4.4%	3.9%	3.7%	3.5%	3.0%	3.5%	3.2%	2.7%	2.3%	2.2%
30+	91.5%	92.2%	92.6%	92.8%	92.3%	92.4%	92.6%	92.7%	93.1%	93.1%	93.8%	94.4%	94.7%	94.3%	93.6%	92.7%
40+	50.8%	50.3%	50.8%	50.8%	51.3%	53.1%	54.2%	55.3%	55.4%	55.9%	57.7%	58.6%	60.2%	60.2%	59.3%	59.1%
50+	27.5%	26.0%	25.7%	23.8%	22.9%	22.5%	21.1%	20.5%	19.8%	18.5%	18.9%	19.2%	19.5%	19.3%	20.7%	21.3%
Mean Age	42.6	42.5	42.5	42.4	42.3	42.4	42.3	42.3	42.2	42.0	42.3	42.5	42.8	42.7	42.6	42.4
Yrs. Exper	8.8	8.9	9.1	9.2	9.1	9.2	9.4	9.4	9.4	9.4	9.7	10.1	10.3	10.4	10.3	10.1
% Female	18.7%	19.3%	19.8%	19.8%	20.9%	20.9%	21.4%	21.6%	21.6%	22.4%	22.1%	21.6%	22.5%	23.2%	22.9%	22.9%
% Minority	2.5%	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%	2.7%	2.6%	2.8%	3.1%	3.3%	3.7%	4.5%	4.8%	5.5%	5.5%	5.9%	5.8%
% Film	28.0%	30.5%	31.5%	33.0%	31.3%	32.0%	32.0%	33.3%	33.3%	35.4%	34.7%	36.5%	36.8%	36.5%	36.6%	36.1%
Empl Film & TV	11.4%	11.8%	15.0%	14.1%	13.7%	13.6%	12.8%	13.4%	14.8%	12.6%	12.8%	13.0%	12.5%	13.1%	14.2%	13.5%

*Strike year

Figure 1
Age-Earnings Profiles of Film and Television Writers
for Selected Years, 1982–1997
Median Earnings by Age Category

Film

Median Earnings in Thousands

$120 · $100 · $80 · $60 · $40 · $20 · $0

1997
1993
1989
1985
1982

Age Category

TV

Median Earnings in Thousands

$120 · $100 · $80 · $60 · $40 · $20 · $0

1997
1993
1989
1985
1982

Age Category
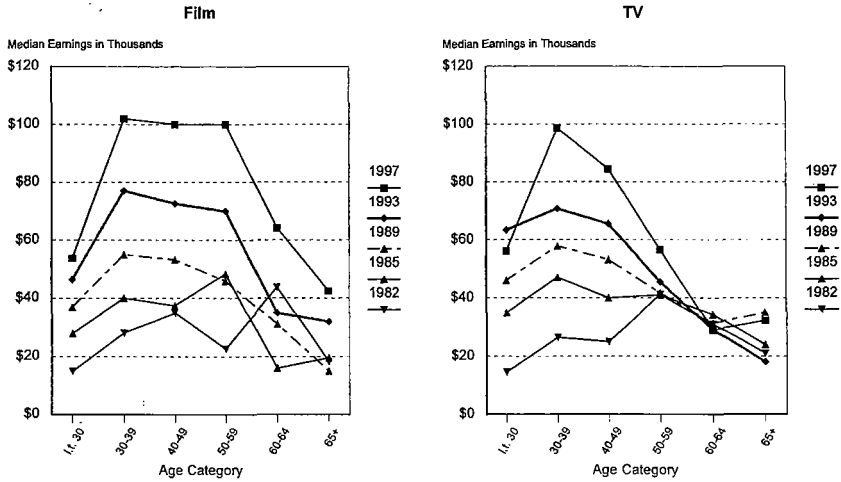
1997. Three-year lagged variables are included in the models reported in Tables 3 and 4, so these results pertain to the years 1985 to 1997 (because 1985 is the first year for which we have measures of earnings and employment in year t-3).

In a semi-logarithmic regression model such as ours, substantive interpretation can be facilitated by converting the effect X on ln Y into a percentage effect on (non-logged) Y. The slope coefficient for a scaled (non-binary) independent variable multiplied by 100 can be interpreted as the percentage change in Y for a one unit change in X (i.e., a coefficient of $b = .02$ implies that a one unit change in X results in a 2% change in Y). For a binary variable independent variable, the percentage change in Y for change in X from 0 to 1 can be computed as $(e^b - 1)*100$ (Halvorsen and Palmquist, 1980).

In the models that do not control prior career success, there is no significant difference in net earnings between writers under thirty and writers in their thirties, but earnings decrease monotonically with age in the older categories (Table 2, Models I, II, and III). The linear and quadratic coefficients for experience imply that earnings increase with experience at a decreasing rate, with a return of about 9% per year at career entry, and a positive return up to approximately 24 years (i.e., the relationship between experience and earnings peaks at 24 years). In short, before taking prior success into account, it appears that advanced age is a disadvantage in the marketplace, but among writers of the same age, those with more industry experience command greater compensation.

The two-way *age by time* interaction is significant in Model II of Table 2, with the coefficient estimates implying that the disparity in earnings between writers under 30 and writers in their forties was growing at a rate of about 2% per year (coefficient of $-.024$), and the disparity between writers under 30 and writers over 40 was growing at a rate of 4% per year (coefficients ranging from $-.039$ to $-.043$). In Model III, both the two-way and three-way interactions are significant, and the individual coefficient

Table 2
Log Earnings Regressions, No Controls for Lagged Employment or Earnings, 1982-1997 (N = 8,990 Writers)

Independent Variable	Model I	Model II	Model III
Intercept	9.702***	9.564***	9.623***
Pre '71 Cohort	0.144***	0.045	0.041
Age 30-39	−0.019	0.031	0.027
Age 40-49	−0.311***	−0.132**	−0.141**
Age 50-59	−0.610***	−0.302***	−0.317***
Age 60-64	−0.897***	−0.595***	−0.622***
Age 65+	−1.129***	−0.869***	−0.889***
Experience	0.09089***	0.09132***	0.09166***
Experience Squared	−0.00201***	−0.00190***	−0.00191***
Female	−0.200***	−0.197***	−0.197***
Minority	−0.063*	−0.076*	−0.079*
Film Writer	0.176***	0.179***	−0.009
Earnings Film & TV	0.720***	0.721***	0.719***
T*Age 30-39		−0.007	−0.014*
T*Age 40-49		−0.024***	−0.034***
T*Age 50-59		−0.041***	−0.053***
T*Age 60-64		−0.043***	−0.049***
T*Age 65+		−0.039***	−0.050***
F*T*Age 30-39			0.017***
F*T*Age 40-49			0.028***
F*T*Age 50-59			0.036***
F*T*Age 60-64			0.021*
F*T*Age 65+			0.034***
Root Mean Square Error	1.374	1.373	1.372
R-Square	0.137	0.139	0.141
Observations (person-years)	53492	53492	53492
Tests (F-ratios)			
Age × Time interaction	NA	19.814***	25.655***
Age × Time × Film interaction	NA	NA	24.022***

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. All models include binary variables for year.

estimates are in the hypothesized direction. The *age by time* coefficients in Model III suggest that for television writers, the earnings gap between writers under 30 and those over 40 grows at about 3% to 5% per year (coefficients ranging from $-.034$ to $-.053$). The *age by time by film* coefficients suggest that among film writers, the disparity is growing at less than half that rate (e.g., for film writers in their forties the rate is $-.034 + .028 = -.006$, and for film writers in their fifties the rate is $-.053 + .036 = -.017$).

Controlling for recent prior career success with measures of lagged employment (Table 3) changes the pattern of results somewhat. First, being recently employed in film or television has a strong effect on earnings, with large net effects for each of the three measures.[8] Second, the effect of years of industry experience is no longer positive after controlling for employment in the previous three years, indicating that longevity in the industry *per se* is no advantage in the labor market for film and television writers. Third, the pattern of age coefficients is monotonically decreasing with age: among writers with similar patterns of recent employment, the most highly compensated are writers under thirty, and it is "down hill" from there (e.g., age coefficients of $-.210$, $-.312$, $-.456$, $-.618$, and $-.912$ in Model III of Table 3). The pattern of interaction effects is similar to that reported in Table 2: the earnings disparity between television writers under 30 and writers over 40 grew at a rate of about 2% to 5% per year, whereas among film writers the disparities are growing at a much lower rate, about 1% to 2% per year.

The results controlling for lagged earnings, reported in Table 4, comprise our strongest tests of the hypotheses posed above. These results compare earnings disparities by age among writers who have earned the same amount over the prior three years. Not surprisingly, lagged earnings has a huge effect on earnings in year t.[9] More of a surprise is the pattern of coefficients implying that it is better not to have worked at all than to have worked for modest pay during the previous three years. Because zero earnings is the reference category, the negative coefficients imply that writers who were employed within the past three years but who earned less than $25,000 during that period fared less well than writers who weren't working at all during the same three year period.[10] In other words, a successful "A list" writer is typically able to sustain his or her career momentum, but a working "B list" (or "C list") writer is valued less than someone who is new to the industry.[11]

According to Model III in Table 4, the earnings disparity between television writers under 30 and those between 30 and 64 grew by about 2% per year from 1985 to 1997 (coefficients ranging from $-.017$ to $-.026$). In contrast, for film writers, there was very little change in age disparities between writers under 30 and those between 30 and 64 over the same period. The sum of corresponding two-way and three-way interaction terms imply disparities growing at the rate of 0.3% to 0.6% per year for compensation from feature film writing during the 13-year period. The most rapid growth in age disparities was between the youngest (under 30) and oldest (65 and older) writers. For compensation from television writing, the disparity grew at a rate of about 5% per year, and for film earnings, it grew at a rate of about 2% per year.

Table 3
Log Earnings Regressions, Controlling for Lagged Employment, 1985-1997
(N = 8,399 Writers)

Independent Variable	Model I	Model II	Model III
Intercept	9.517***	9.465***	9.556***
Pre '71 Cohort	0.110**	0.065	0.062
Age 30-39	−0.208***	−0.189*	−0.210**
Age 40-49	−0.398***	−0.289***	−0.312***
Age 50-59	−0.590***	−0.432***	−0.456***
Age 60-64	−0.831***	−0.577***	−0.618***
Age 65+	−1.187***	−0.876***	−0.912***
Experience	−0.00492	−0.00529	−0.00509
Experience Squared	0.00029**	0.00035***	0.00036***
Female	−0.191***	−0.189***	−0.191***
Minority	−0.008	−0.014	−0.019
Film Writer	0.250***	0.251***	0.036
Earnings Film & TV	0.547***	0.548***	0.546***
LAGJOB	0.700***	0.700***	0.701***
LAGJOB2	0.460***	0.460***	0.459***
LAGJOB3	0.409***	0.408***	0.407***
T*Age 30-39		−0.002	−0.007
T*Age 40-49		−0.012	−0.021**
T*Age 50-59		−0.017*	−0.030***
T*Age 60-64		−0.030	−0.037**
T*Age 65+		−0.038***	−0.047***
F*T*Age 30-39			0.016***
F*T*Age 40-49			0.027***
F*T*Age 50-59			0.038***
F*T*Age 60-64			0.030***
F*T*Age 65+			0.032***
Root Mean Square Error	1.279	1.279	1.277
R-Square	0.229	0.229	0.231
Observations (person-years)	45435	45435	45435
Tests (F-ratios)			
Age × Time interaction	NA	5.572***	8.507***
Age × Time × Film interaction	NA	NA	21.775***

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. All models include binary variables for year.

Table 4
Log Earnings Regressions, Controlling for Lagged Earnings, 1985-1997
### ($N = 8,399$ Writers)

Independent Variable	Model I	Model II	Model III
Intercept	10.021***	9.929***	9.988***
Pre '71 Cohort	0.083**	0.061*	0.059*
Age 30-39	−0.198***	−0.075	−0.089
Age 40-49	−0.311***	−0.148**	−0.163**
Age 50-59	−0.366***	−0.217***	−0.237***
Age 60-64	−0.510***	−0.335***	−0.358***
Age 65+	−0.748***	−0.378***	−0.396***
Experience	−0.03844***	−0.03891***	−0.03868***
Experience Squared	0.00083***	0.00088***	0.00087***
Female	−0.095***	−0.094***	−0.095***
Minority	0.020	0.016	0.012
Film Writer	0.182***	0.182***	0.043
Earnings Film & TV	0.415***	0.416***	0.415***
L1-5K	−0.726***	−0.727***	−0.726***
L5-10K	−0.386***	−0.384***	−0.383***
L10-25K	−0.048*	−0.047*	−0.048*
L25-50K	0.270***	0.271***	0.270***
L50-100K	0.661***	0.661***	0.662***
L100-200K	1.143***	1.143***	1.143***
L200-500K	1.823***	1.823***	1.823***
L500K+	2.619***	2.620***	2.616***
T*Age 30-39		−0.014*	−0.017**
T*Age 40-49		−0.018**	−0.024***
T*Age 50-59		−0.017***	−0.022***
T*Age 60-64		−0.020*	−0.026**
T*Age 65+		−0.044***	−0.053***
F*T*Age 30-39			0.011***
F*T*Age 40-49			0.018***
F*T*Age 50-59			0.019***
F*T*Age 60-64			0.023***
F*T*Age 65+			0.030***
Root Mean Square Error	1.069	1.069	1.068
R-Square	0.461	0.462	0.462
Observations (person-years)	45435	45435	45435
Tests (F-ratios)			
Age × Time interaction	NA	5.030***	7.402***
Age × Time × Film interaction	NA	NA	12.150***

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. All models include binary variables for year.

Older and more experienced writers are at a disadvantage in the labor market compared to equally successful younger writers who are new to the industry. Net of recent prior career success (as measured by lagged earnings), increasing years of experience has a negative effect on earnings; the linear and quadratic terms imply an effect that remains negative up to 22 years of experience. The coefficients for the binary age variables in Model III of Table 4 imply no significant difference in earnings between writers in their thirties and those under thirty, and growing disparities with age above age 40. The coefficients reported in Model III of Table 4 imply that compared to writers under thirty with identical recent track records (as measured by three-year lagged earnings), writers in their forties earn 15% less, those in their fifties earn 21% less, and those 60 and older earn over 30% less. These "main effects" of age do not tell the complete story, because of the three-way interaction between age, time, and film versus television employment (i.e., the net differentials by age category are contingent upon both year and film versus television sector). The overall pattern is portrayed in Figure 2, which uses the coefficients in Model III of Table 4 to impute net age-earnings profiles, controlling for lagged earnings and the other independent variables in our models.[12] The negative effect of age is immediately apparent, as is the substantial differential growth in earnings for younger versus older writers in the television sector.[13]

In sum, each of our four hypotheses receives strong support. Relying upon longitudinal career history data for the years 1982 through 1997, we have shown a

Figure 2
Net Age-Earnings Profiles of Film and Television Writers
for Selected Years, 1985–1997
Predicted Dollar Earnings by Age Category
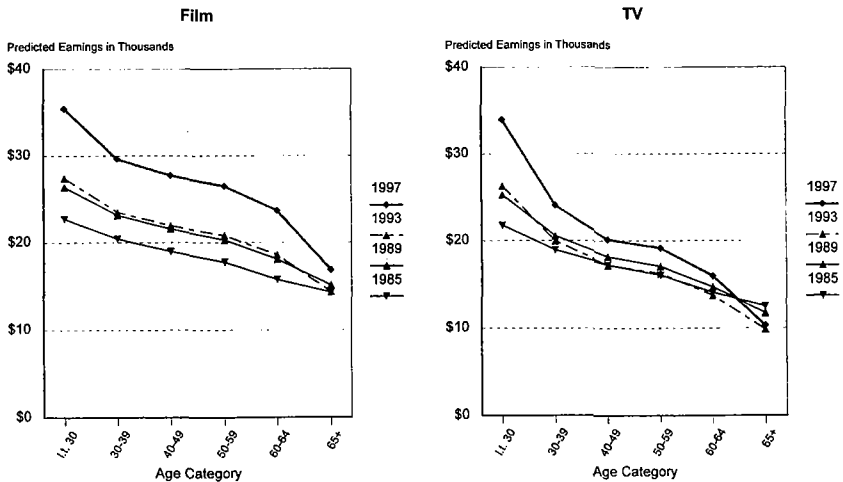
shift in age-earnings profiles in favor of younger writers. That shift is substantially more pronounced for television writers than for film writers. Moreover, older writers earn substantially less than younger writers with comparable track records of recent success in the industry, and years of industry experience *per se* appear to be a penalty rather than an advantage in the labor market. Below, we rely upon descriptive statistics on television writers' employment to gain insights into the factors responsible for the shifting age dynamics of the labor market.

Evidence of Age Segmentation in the Labor Market for Television Writers

The results reported above document the shifting dynamics of the labor market for television writers, but they provide no direct evidence of why it is increasingly the case that writers in their forties, fifties, and sixties earn less than younger writers with comparable records of recent success in the industry. Unfortunately, the longitudinal data available to us on annual earnings and employment for members of the WGAW are not linked to compensation received for specific projects, roles, and writing assignments.

However, data compiled from WGAW files on members who receive on-screen credit for writing on prime-time series offer some insights to factors that sustain age stratification among television writers. The report issued by the WGAW in 1998 (Bielby & Bielby, 1998) tabulates age distributions (percent over 50 and percent 50 and younger) in writing credits by genre (sitcom, drama, TV movie), network (broadcast networks, syndication, basic cable, pay cable), and production role (freelance writer, staff writer, writer-producer) for all series broadcast during the 1997–98 season. Those data show the lowest representation of writers over 50 employed on networks that target younger audiences. For series broadcast on CBS, which had the oldest-skewing audience demographic, 19% of credited writers were over 50, compared to just 3% of writers in series on the WB, 6% of the writers on Fox, and 7% of the writers on NBC (which was highly successful that year with its youth-oriented "Must See TV" schedule). According to WGAW records, no writers over 50 received on-screen credit on nearly half of the series broadcast during the 1997–98 season. There is a similar age stratification by genre, with older writers most highly represented on genres with older-skewing audiences. Writers over 50 are 5% of those credited on network sitcoms, 13% of those credited on network dramas, and 33% of those credited on network made-for-TV movies.

Overall, older writers are more likely than younger writers to be working in peripheral areas of the industry. Writers over 50 represent 17% of those working for television overall, but just 10% of those writing on network series, where pay is the highest. On network series, writers over 50 were less likely than younger writers to hold positions as staff writers or writer-producers and more likely to be hired to write on one or two scripts per season as freelance writers. Writers over 50 have higher representation — 27% of credited writers — on series made for basic cable networks

(e.g., Lifetime, USA, Family Network, AMC), where the pay is lower and viewership is skewed towards older audiences. The probability of a writer over 50 holding a staff or writer-producer position is also higher in the cable and syndication sectors then on network series, where such positions are most lucrative (Bielby & Bielby, 1998, Table 26).

Conclusion: Is it Typecasting by Age or Changes in Skill Requirements?

Our statistical findings demonstrate conclusively that compared to writers in their twenties and thirties, the earnings of older television writers eroded substantially during an era when network executives increasingly embraced a strategy of scheduling programming that would appeal to younger audiences. Our statistical models show that longevity in the industry is not simply ignored — it is evaluated negatively. Among writers who have been equally successful over the short term, those who are younger and relatively new to the industry are much more likely to sustain career momentum than are older and more experienced writers. The perception among older writers themselves is that they are subject to typecasting by age. According to them, decision-makers in the industry subscribe to an age stereotype which assumes material must be written by a younger writer if it is to appeal to a younger audience.

A plausible alternative is that the skills required to be a successful writer have changed since the early 1980s, and more recent cohorts of writers are more likely than those from prior cohorts to have the skills valued by program suppliers and network executives. Recent research by labor economists David Galenson and Bruce Weinberg (1999) supports such an explanation for a rapid shift in the age-earnings profile of painters of contemporary art. Relying upon auction records and estimating regression models similar to those reported here, they show that for artists born before 1920, their most valuable works were produced late in their careers, with peak earnings around age 51. In contrast, for painters born after 1920, the age-earnings profile reached a peak at approximately age 29. They explain this substantial shift by a change in demand that began in the early 1950s. According to their account, a shift in the preferences of influential critics and the emergence and expansion of the gallery system as the locus of the art market resulted in a shift in demand that placed a premium on innovation rather than technique. The devaluing of technique eliminated the market value of years of experience as a painter, while the young artists of the 1950s quickly embraced and responded to the demand for painting that was perceived as innovative.

Might a similar explanation apply to the parallel shift we detect in the value of the work produced by television writers? Perhaps the tastes of younger television viewers call for a style of writing that is markedly different from that which prevailed from the 1960s through the early 1980s. The skills learned from experience by veteran writers simply may not be applicable to programming genres that appeal to younger

audiences, and writers under 40 may have a unique talent for developing narratives and dialogue that those audiences appreciate. Robert J. Dowling, publisher of the *Hollywood Reporter,* put it bluntly in the magazine's annual "Next Generation" issue: "the world is going young, and it takes youth to understand it." To succeed in this business, according to Dowling, "takes a level of stamina and enthusiasm that must match that of the ever-growing young audience it serves" (*Hollywood Reporter,* 2000, p. S-3). In short, this line of reasoning suggests that compared to an earlier era, older writers no longer have the requisite human capital (e.g., a youth-oriented sensibility), energy, and commitment that it takes to be among the best paid writers in the industry.

We find this argument unpersuasive. Episodic television relies heavily on conformity to the conventions of established genres, even in programming designed to appeal to youthful audiences. According to the 1998 WGAW report, among the series that relied almost exclusively on writers under 40 during the 1997–98 season were *Ellen* (ABC), *Friends* (NBC), *Men Behaving Badly* (NBC), *Veronica's Closet* (NBC), *Teen Angel* (ABC), *The Closer* (WB), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB). While each featured youthful characters, none of the series pushed the boundaries of established genre conventions in terms of narrative structure and dialogue. Among series for which a majority of writing was done by writers over 40 are some that have had considerable success attracting younger audiences (e.g., ABC's *The Practice* and the syndicated series *Baywatch Nights*), including series such as HBO's *Tracey Takes On* which critics lauded as especially innovative.

In our view, features of the industry encourage typecasting by age. As we have argued elsewhere, those who decide which series will be produced and appear on network schedules are operating in a context that exhibits two distinctive features: (1) there is no agreed upon formula for what guarantees a well-crafted and commercially successful production; and (2) actions are evaluated according to multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory criteria. An experienced programmer can probably distinguish well-crafted from mediocre scripts and make informed judgments about the quality of acting, editing, and direction of an episode. Nevertheless, the programmer has no reliable basis for predicting whether audiences, advertisers, and critics will accept the series. In effect, "all hits are flukes" (Bielby & Bielby, 1994). In such a highly ambiguous and uncertain context, decision-makers are under tremendous pressure to account for their choices and justify them as orderly, rational, and legitimate. Imitating what one's most successful competitors are doing and relying on established conventions and rules-of-thumb are proven techniques for establishing such accountability in the television industry. Thus, the unexpected quick success of the youth-oriented programming strategy at Fox in the late 1980s encouraged the other networks to imitate that success, and typecasting by age, which builds upon age stereotypes that were already quite prevalent in many areas of the entertainment industry, provided decision-makers with an adequate rationale for demonstrating that they had a viable plan for reproducing the success of Fox.

Research on stereotyping demonstrates that they are especially likely to affect decision-making in contexts: (1) where choices are based on informal, subjective, vague, and arbitrary criteria; (2) where objective, job-relevant information is unavailable; and (3) where decision-makers are not held accountable for the process used to make decisions or the impact on equal employment opportunity (see Bielby, 2000 and Finkelstein, Burke, & Raju, 1995 for reviews). The context in which decisions are made about hiring television writers has each of these features. Given this context, the typecasting of television writers by age is likely to persist as long as age remains a primary dimension by which programmers and advertisers segment audiences.

The ambiguous, risky, and uncertain decision-making context of the television industry has been well documented in previous research (e.g., Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Gitlin, 1983), and the demographic segmentation of audiences has been written about widely by scholars (e.g., Turow, 1997) and the popular media (e.g., Goodale, 1999). However, the research reported here is the first to show how the combination of these features of the industry create barriers to older writers' career advancement. Our findings suggest two important avenues for future research. One is to explore whether there is a relationship between the way age stereotypes affect who works in creative roles in television and the portrayals of older and younger adults that appear on screen. Another is to examine whether similar processes affect the careers of older individuals in other creative industries in which fashion cycles are closely linked to the preferences of younger consumers. Finally, a much more formidable challenge is to develop an overall theory of the linkages among the content of the work done by creative professionals, the business context in which it is accomplished, and who does (and does not) have the opportunity to pursue it as a career.

Notes

[1] Using the *Wall Street Journal* online publication library, we did a search of headlines and lead paragraphs from 1980 to the present for the phrases "key demo," "key demographic," and "key demographics" accompanied by "rating" or "ratings" and by "network or networks." These terms first appear together in the January 29, 1990 issue of *Broadcasting & Cable*, in an article titled "ABC is Giving NBC Run for Key Demos." Through 1994, they appeared together between one and six times per year. By 1997, 45 articles contained these terms in the headline or lead paragraph. In the *Hollywood Reporter* online archive, the term "key demographics" or "key demos" first appears in May, 1991, becoming relatively common beginning in 1995.

[2] A complete description of how these data were collected, and their validity and reliability, appears in *The 1998 Hollywood Writers' Report* (Bielby & Bielby, 1998, Appendix I). The analyses reported here exclude a small number of writers (less than 5% of employed writers) for which information on year of birth is not available.

[3] Specifically, the time variable is coded 0 for 1982, 1 for 1983, 2 for 1984, etc. Denoting the time variable as T and the age binary variables as A_1 through A_5, the relevant interaction terms are T^*A_1 through T^*A_5.

[4] Denoting the film binary variable as F, the relevant three-way interaction terms are $F^*T^*A_1$ through $F^*T^*A_5$.

[5] Given the way the model is specified, in the model including both the two-way and three-way interactions, the *age by time* terms represent the differential earnings growth for earnings from television.

[6] For compensation earned in writing for feature films, the rate of growth in the earnings differential between under-30 and older writers is the sum of the corresponding two-way (age category by time) and three-way (age category by time by film) interaction terms. Accordingly, our hypothesis is that negative two-way interaction terms are offset by positive three-way interaction terms.

[7] The coefficients for the binary age category variables reflect net age differentials in earnings in 1982 (i.e., time = 0). If the interaction terms have the pattern we have hypothesized, the net age disparities in earnings represented by these coefficients for 1982 grow over time for television writers but not for film writers.

[8] The coefficient of .70 for employment in year t-1 implies a 100% net earnings differential (i.e., $e^{.70} - 1 = 1.014$), the coefficient of .46 for employment in year t-2 implies a 58% net earnings differential (i.e., $e^{.46} - 1 = .584$), and the coefficient of .41 for employment in year t-3 implies a 51% net earnings differential (i.e., $e^{.41} - 1 = .507$).

[9] For example, the coefficient of 2.619 for the lagged earnings category of more than $500,000 implies a net earnings differential of 1,272%, relative to the reference category of no earnings for the prior three years (i.e., $e^{2.619} - 1 = 12.722$).

[10] Coefficients in Table 3 imply that writers who earned between $10,000 and $25,000 over the previous three years earn about 5% less than writers who have no earnings during that period. Those who earned between $5,000 and $10,000 lag behind writers with no prior earnings by over 30%. Evaluated at the mean for the dependent variable, writers who had earnings under $5000 over the previous three years earn about 52% less than writers with no earnings over that period.

[11] Caves (2000) describes how the strict ranking of talent into "A" list and "B" list categories is characteristic of nearly all labor markets for creative personnel in artistic realms, and these categories are widely understood in the world of television and film writers.

[12] In computing predicted dollar earnings for Figure 2, all other independent variables are set to zero (i.e., the pattern reflects a profile for a white male writer new to the industry, with lagged earnings of zero, and working exclusively in either television or film). However, the age-earnings pattern remains the same if the control variables are set at different values (in a log metric, changing the values of control variables would simply shift the entire age-earnings profile up or down by a fixed amount).

[13] Because we are estimating the independent effects of several time-related variables (age, experience, cohort, and year), we took several steps to evaluate whether the precision of our estimates has been compromised by multicollinearity. First, we examined collinearity diagnostics for each of our models, looking specifically for condition indices of 30 or larger (Belsey, 1991). Models II and III of Tables 3 and 4 (models with lagged employment or lagged earnings and age interactions) each generate one condition index of about 45, with the remaining condition indices substantially smaller than 30. For the most part, coefficients most affected by collinearity are the intercept and binary variables for year, which are control variables and not of interest substantively. Furthermore, each of the age and interaction terms that were potentially influenced by multicollinearity had relatively small standard errors, indicating that the very large number of observations (over 45,000 for each model) more than compensated for any imprecision introduced into the estimates due to correlated independent variables (Goldberger, 1991). Finally, we also estimated versions of Models II and III without the experience and cohort variables, and for those models the main and interaction effects of age, controlling for prior career success, are almost identical to the results reported in Tables 3 and 4.

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