

Growing old with and via media

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What we understand at any given time as “old age” may seem to have a very straightforward and factual base. Yet, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “as far as our own species is concerned old age is by no means easy to define” (de Beauvoir, 1996, p. 9). Even the most positivist sciences have to admit that old age is a “heterogeneous event that some individuals tolerate better than others” (Balcombe & Sinclair, 2001, p. 845). That is, “old age” as a biological and physiological phenomenon has many and variable causes that may become visible at differing points in individual lives. Moreover, the phenomenon of ageing cannot be explained by any one universal theory (Balcombe & Sinclair, 2001, pp. 845-846). What it means to be old in a particular society at any given time is, thus, a matter of social and cultural construction that may vary greatly from place to place and at different historical times (Hazan, 1994).

Media (texts, institutions and technologies) are, undoubtedly, some of the largest cultural arenas in which societal images and attitudes towards old age and older people are formed. The polemical title of an article by Norwegian media scholar Trine Syvertsen (2010) “Media researchers hate old people” points to the processes of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of old age and older people in media and research on media. We will not go so far as to suggest that, but we do, on the other hand, maintain that older men and women and their media-related practices as well as the mediated representations of old age deserve much more research interest from Media and Communication Studies than they have been getting. This is particularly relevant,

given the growing diversity of media uses and practices, on one hand, and on the other hand the intensification of public discourse regarding expected ways of ageing, if not non-ageing, in contemporary socio-economic, political and cultural domains. Therefore, it is crucial to examine these changes as processes that are intertwined.

This special issue of *MedieKultur* aims at facilitating a better understanding of the ways in which old age is approached in contemporary media and how media in various ways contribute to shaping, managing and negotiating old age as a representation, policy issue and everyday practice. The articles gathered under the theme “Growing old with and via media” illuminate relevant questions regarding the use of media in everyday life by older men and women and as well as about the mediated discourses on old age and older adults.

Growing old

The title of this special issue uses a term that is not exactly precise, but this imprecision is intended here. While chronological age is a central variable when governments tally, categorize and manage citizens (Blaakilde, 2004), this particular measure is just one of several when it comes to determining a person’s status as “old”. A widely acknowledged demarcation line, which for many marks the onset of old(er) age, is retirement from paid work. This is the case even though many people do not have a paid position to retire from. Notably, the point of retirement is by no means consistent or stable. Countries and professions abide by different age limits, and the age of (forced) retirement, likewise, changes with time. To the degree that “older age” is conceptually and practically separated from “normal” adulthood, there is a need for all lines of research to focus on it. The reason is not that the part of life categorized as “old age”, is in and of itself particularly problematic or fantastic. Rather, the aim should be to understand the basis for this demarcation and what it means for societal structures and individual lives.

Growing old with media

When it comes to media use in everyday life, older adults are often regarded as lacking media competences when they are presented in popular media discourse, at the policy level and in research (Schreurs & Quan-Haase, 2017; Sourbati, 2009; Wandke, Sengpiel, & Sönksen, 2012). While statistics show that older adults are the most prominent users of print newspapers, radio and television compared to other age groups (see for instance European Commission, 2015), the competences that they are seen as lacking are “new media” skills. Thus, although the majority of older adults are adept media users, from a technologically determinist point of view they are perceived as not keeping up. This understanding is typically coupled with a marked worry that lack of digital skills and access will isolate older adults and hinder their full participation in society (Siren & Knudsen, 2017).

Notably, much research assumes that the use of digital media will be highly beneficial for older adults but fails to examine the issue from the point of view of older adults themselves (Sourbati, 2009). On one hand, there may be many good reasons why the very old are often hesitant to adopt emerging and new technologies into their lives (Hagberg, 2012). For instance, they may not perceive any need for or regard these media platforms as useful. On the other hand, from a life course perspective, older people cannot be depicted as generally being hesitant to adopt, opposed to or incompetent with regard to the use of media technologies. They have, in fact, throughout their lives encountered many different (and, at the time, new) types of media technologies, platforms and institutions, which they have come to know and adapt into their everyday lives (Blaakilde, 2017). Similarly, the use of digital media technologies is growing among all age groups, including the oldest ones. Whether by choice or not, digital devices and infrastructures in various forms play a role in the everyday lives of older adults, facilitating social connectedness, monitoring, management and care (see for instance Pendergast & Garantini, 2015).

While much research establishes chronological age as a central factor in relation to digital media use (Siren & Knudsen, 2017), this is mainly due to the fact that digital media are relatively new phenomena. This means that not all age groups have had a chance to be incorporated into the practices related to the use of such media. It has been demonstrated that work experience with ICT along with level of education and income are the strongest predictors for the use of digital technologies (Olsson, Samuelsson, & Viscovi, 2016). Thus, chronological age seems to have less to do with any potential lack of ICT skills, while work experience, education and general affluence all are central – also in later life. It is nothing new that lack of literacy is directly related to lack of privilege. In terms of media as a channel for participation in public life or public services, the drive for total public digitalisation may, thus, cause more exclusion and marginalisation of those who have no experience interacting with such media.

This special issue contains two articles concerned with media use among older adults, one of them focusing on the use of printed newspapers and one on the use of Internet. The former authored by Karin Ljuslinder and Anna Sofia Lundgren is based on research interviews with a group of older adults from the northern parts of Sweden focusing on their daily newspaper reading practices. As a "growing with" article, this study demonstrates the ways in which interaction with a particular type of media becomes intertwined with everyday routines, emphasizing that familiarity is an important aspect of media use. This also relates to the institution of daily news, which is problematized by Ljuslinder and Lundgren. As they make clear, the institution of daily news consumption is closely linked to a much broader ideal of Swedish citizenship and, as such, can thrive alongside a general distrust of journalists as media producers.

The article by Malene Paulsen Lie problematizes the use of the Internet among older adults in Norway. Drawing on mediatization theory, she discusses the ways in which the

Internet and social network media are part of the everyday lives of older adults and the extent to which these platforms play a transformative role. Lie suggests that the research participants seem to adhere to two different types of rhythm in their consumption of media: a linear and a dynamic one, depending on whether they are using the Internet and social network media or not. Those who engage mainly with "traditional" media such as newspapers, radio and television are inclined to engage with them at particular times of the day, whereas the use of digital media is associated with a less fixed time rhythm. This directly affects the communication patterns of the participants involved in the study.

Growing old via media

There is a growing body of literature on the portrayal of older adults in a variety of media. In an interpretive review of research articles published between 2000 and 2015 (Iversen & Wilinska, 2016), we have found that the majority focus on either representation in advertising within a variety of media outlets or on film and television fiction. In line with this, the most prominent themes treated are 1) representation of roles, underrepresentation of older adults, and the use of positive or negative stereotypes and 2) the representation of gender and sexuality. The reviewed articles are also, to a lesser degree, concerned with notions of successful ageing, representations of dementia, of elder abuse as well as ageist media discourses in general. By comparison, empirical work on discourses of age and ageing in digital media is still very sparse.

This special issue includes an article that directly addresses the scarcity of research identified above on age and ageing in digital media. Gabrielle Lavenir and Nicolas Bourgeois have conducted a Topic Model Analysis of the depiction of older adults in relation to digital games in the European French language press between 2000 and 2016. Examining how the notions of digital games and older adults discursively affect each other, the authors analyse 333 newspaper articles. They conclude that, when digital games and older adults are presented in relation to each other, the moral panic that newspapers often express in relation to digital games is diminished. Likewise, the coupling of older adults with digital games tends to invoke notions of successful ageing in the newspaper articles. That is, ageing is seen as an individualistic, consumerist project that fends off the onset of the so-called fourth age.

Over a period of time, there has been a shift in the mediated representations of older adults – in particular, women – from depicting older adults mainly as old-fashioned, frail and helpless to representing them as confident, fit and powerful (Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007; Low & Dupuis-Blanchard, 2013; Mason, Darnell, & Prifti, 2010). Moreover, older adults are less underrepresented in the various media outlets than they used to be. Even though this can be construed as a positive change, it is a somewhat simplistic assessment of the development, which fails to take into account the problematic binary that is created instead. The images represent "good", consumption-driven and highly

disciplined ageing, on one hand, versus “bad”, dependent and unfit ageing, on the other hand (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010; McHugh, 2003). Positive depictions are more affirmative than those focusing only on the aspects of ageing that many people fear. However, it is still the case that nuanced depictions of all the different expressions of old age are missing in mainstream media. The same applies to more pluralistic portrayals of gender, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation. (Iversen & Wilinska, 2016; Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; Sciplino, Smith, Hurme, Rusek, & Bäckvik, 2010).

The special issue article by Anne Jerslev considers the representation of older women in three contemporary TV series. The old, female main characters are all CEOs, representing agency, power and sexuality. Jerslev discusses these portrayals through a postfeminist lens, arguing that they challenge the latent ageism in postfeminism. The representations of older women in the three series are also discussed in relation to notions of “agelessness” and “age appropriateness”. On one hand, the female CEOs transgress expectations of age appropriateness in their looks and behaviour. On the other hand, the independent and empowered role of the older women represents a kind of ageism inherent in the notion of agelessness. Hence, the analysis of the portrayals also reveals the deep complexities of ageing and the cultural implications of growing old.

Media and age orders

“Growing old” indicates a process that has neither a beginning nor an end. Media representations and the use of media alongside this process are two interrelated phenomena, which, when studied together, provide important insights into contemporary lives and the socio-cultural imaginaries guiding them. The four articles included in this special issue do just that. What emerges is a complex relationship between media and age orders that often escapes straightforward analysis. First, the concept of life course appears as an important perspective that helps to understand what and how media are used by people at various life and age stages. Second, a specific socio-cultural context shaped by various discourses creates the ground for a variety of media practices, which in turn may have potentially transformative effects on the social order. Finally, the role of the research community in mediating that relationship cannot be underestimated.

Open Section

Kjetil Sandvik

The Open Section in this issue contains three articles, one in English and two in Danish, concerned with the ethics and communication, the development of online fan communities and the role of media in portraying successful female students in academia.

In the article “Communication ethics and the receiver: Contribution to an ethic of strategic mass communication”, Jan Foght Mikkelsen contributes to the ethics of strategic communication by proposing a general ethical norm for all strategic communication. The article outlines the focal point of the norm, the ethical basis of the norm and a precise definition of the norm. The claim is that this norm focuses exclusively on the persuasive means used to get the sender’s message across. As such, the article asks whether the rhetorical means mislead the receiver. In order to answer this question, a norm of “fairness”, defined from the viewpoint of the receiver, is proposed, and the article demonstrates how “fairness” allows us to identify misleading means and to evaluate them on the basis of a common ethical ground.

In the article “20 år med Tolkien: Forandrede fællesskaber på nettet” [“20 years with Tolkien: Changed communities on the Net”], Stine Gotved sheds light on the development of communities on the Internet over the last 20 years by analyzing three specific entries into a particular newsgroup and its activities. The article points to the fact that we are moving away from well-defined communities to unlimited networks: access to the Internet has become a matter of course, and communication has transformed from geeky interaction to mainstream everyday practice. Social network media are playing an increasingly larger role in the mediascape; and, while the particular fan culture on the largest So-Me platform Facebook (which is being studied in this article) is primarily sender-dominated, while more focused communities with relatively anonymous participation have their own niches other places on the Net.

The article “12-talspigerne i medierne: Rammesætning af stereotypificering af højtpresterende piger og kvinder i det danske uddannelsessystem” [“A+ girls in the media: Framing and stereotyping high-performing girls and women in the Danish educational system”] by Kenneth Reinecke Hansen and Jonas Nygaard Blom critically studies the way in which Danish newspapers construct the concept of A+ girls. They argue that these particularly ambitious and high-performing students are subject to negative stereotyping and generalizations as products as well as victims of a society characterized by performance pressure and zero defect demands. The article points to the fact that this does not only impact the girls themselves but also the way society at large understands and deals with ambitious and high-performing female students in the educational system.

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