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Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru
Older People's Commissioner for Wales

Portrayal of Older People in News Media

An independent voice and champion for older people

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales protects and promotes the rights of older people throughout Wales, scrutinising and influencing a wide range of policy and practice to improve their lives. She provides help and support directly to older people through her casework team and works to empower older people and ensure that their voices are heard and acted upon. The Commissioner's role is underpinned by a set of unique legal powers to support her in reviewing the work of public bodies and holding them to account when necessary.

The Commissioner is taking action to end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

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Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg // This document is available in Welsh

Contents

Introduction

The media plays an important role in raising awareness of a wide range of issues – including the issues faced by older people – and influencing opinion and public attitudes, such as attitudes towards older people.

Older people often share concerns with the Commissioner about the way they are represented in the media, and the ways that stories and articles often present a negative view of growing older, which can reinforce assumptions and stereotypes that lead to ageism and age discrimination. Many older people have told the Commissioner that the way that ageing is often presented does not reflect their experiences, or those of their peers, and that the media often does not reflect the diversity of older people in Wales today.

As part of her priority to end ageism and age discrimination, the Commissioner was keen to examine these concerns in more detail, in particular the language and content and tone of articles and how these may influence attitudes towards older people.

The research that forms the basis of this report was undertaken on the Commissioner's behalf by researchers from the University of Leicester[1], who examined 200 news stories across 13 Welsh and UK news outlets and publications published between August 2017 and October 2019.

They analysed the way that news media write and report stories about older people, examining tone and sentiment, the kind of language used, common themes, and whether articles represented older people in a positive, negative or neutral way.

Key findings and analysis are set out below, together with a number of recommendations for action and details of the next steps the Commissioner and her team will take to ensure that the issues identified can be tackled.

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

This report was due to be published in March 2020, but publication was postponed due to the pandemic and lockdown, which meant that the focus of the Commissioner's work shifted significantly. However, the way that issues relating to older people have been reported on and discussed in the media during the past 12 months has provided further insights into the issues identified by the research.

Throughout the pandemic, the media has played a crucial role in highlighting the impact of the pandemic on older people, questioning the action and decisions of governments and public bodies and holding them to account. During this time, the media has also shone a light on key issues, such as older people's rights, alongside providing critical public health information and details of government guidelines and regulations.

Alongside this, however, there were also examples where ageist language and attitudes portrayed older people in a negative light.

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1 The University of Leicester were commissioned to undertake the research following an open tender process

Older people feeling pressured into signing Do Not Resuscitate forms

WalesOnline, April 2020

Older Covid patients 'were DENIED intensive care during height of crisis'

Daily Mail (Mail online), October 2020

Coronavirus Q&A: How to help older people

The Telegraph, March 2020

Over-65s were the only age group to become MORE active during coronavirus pandemic, says study

Daily Mail (Mail online), October 2020

A consultant's beautiful letter to older people worried about getting coronavirus

Western Mail, March 2020

These kinds of examples reflect long-standing narratives about the 'burden' of older people and the 'challenges' presented by an ageing society, and reinforce the need for action, as set out below.

Elderly and overweight are the real Covid super-spreaders'

The Times, February 2021

DJ says elderly people should sacrifice themselves to coronavirus to save the economy

Metro, March 2020

The New Anti-Ageing: How the pandemic unlocked new ways to lower your biological age

The Telegraph, January 2021

Summary of findings

- Just over two-thirds (67%) of the articles and news stories reviewed portrayed older people in a negative way, painting a picture of older people as having ill-health and needing care, or being victims or a burden. These stories reinforced stereotypes of older people as dependents. Even positive stories often included reference to negative attitudes, usually to help frame a positive theme but none the less reinforcing negative stereotypes.

- The research suggests that portraying older people in a negative way is ingrained in the way that news media talks about and refers to older people and ageing, even when trying to be positive. There is also evidence of reliance on stereotypes/ stereotyping.

- There was limited representation from older people themselves, with a clear absence of older people's voices. Even where older people were included it was often the journalist themself who was an older person giving their view or opinion. This reinforces the image of older people as dependent and unable to represent themselves.

- Several common themes tended to dominate the news stories about older people. The most common themes included health and social care, economy and finance and society and social issues. Other themes included crime (victims of), lifestyle (anti-ageing/how to age well), politics (the cost of supporting an ageing society), work and occupation and technology.

- The research found evidence that those aged over 65 are often treated as a homogenous group, for example the 'elderly', 'pensioners', the 'over 65s'

- There was a clear correlation between the kind of language used and the tone of an article. For example, 85% of articles that focused on the 'elderly' had a negative tone and 79% of articles that referred to 'pensioners' had a negative tone.

- News articles often referred to older people as vulnerable (nearly half of all articles), or as being frail or a burden (nearly a quarter of all articles). Over three-quarters of all negative stories portrayed older people as being ill or in need of care, victims, a burden, or financially dependent.

- There was some evidence of positive news stories about ageing and some of those stories attempted to be supportive of older people with headlines such as 'The 25p per week bonus for turning 80? What an insult!' However, even stories that could be perceived as being positive about ageing talked about things like how to delay 'ageing' and slow down the 'ageing process'.

Background

Ageism and age discrimination

Ageism is prejudice or discrimination based on a person's age and is very prevalent within society. Ageism underpins many of the issues currently faced by older people and results in negative stereotypes, older people being treated unfairly, and their rights not being respected and upheld. Ageism can also negatively influence the decisions made by society, meaning that the services, facilities and opportunities that people need to help them to age well can be inadequate and discriminate against older people.

An ageing population is posing problems that will only get worse with time

The Times, August 2018

A growing body of research indicates that ageism has a wide range of negative impacts upon older people, affecting their physical and mental health, memory function, recovery from illness, levels of social exclusion and even life expectancy.

Tackling ageism and age discrimination is therefore essential to support older people's health and well-being and ensure that older people have equality, are treated with dignity and respect, and that the contribution older people make to society is both recognised and celebrated.

It is also essential that we challenge ageism if we are to make sustainable improvements in other aspects of older people's lives.

Our research has found that ageism is particularly evident in the way in which the media discuss and portray older people to their readers and audience, with the use of predominantly negative and pessimistic attitude and language very common when referring to older people. Action must be taken to change this narrative and ensure the parameters for reporting on older people is not ageist and does not use discriminatory language or portrayals.

Perceptions of older people and age identity

Ageist attitudes can be derived from how older people are perceived and identified. Part of the research included a literature review to look at the perceptions of older people and ageing. Although in recent years there has been a move towards more positive attributes to older people and ageing, perceptions about older people have overall remained negative.

Could drugs delay the disease of ageing?

BBC News, December 2017

While the literature review found some examples of positive perceptions of ageing – relating to things like wisdom and experience - negative perceptions about older people, which mean older people are often seen as lonely, of ill-health, mentally incompetent and less attractive[2] were far more common. Other negative stereotypes present older people as fragile, conservative and pessimistic.

Wider research has also highlighted how positive self-perception amongst older people resulted in better physical and mental health,[3] which highlights the crucial role that perceptions can play, and the importance of having a positive narrative of ageing and older people, with positive perceptions and representations bringing wider benefits.

Perceptions about ageing can influence our own age identity and how older people feel about their own ageing process. How older people are portrayed in the media can impact on how people feel about themselves, with articles about anti-ageing treatments, youthfulness and looking young all having an impact on our perception of ageing and why it is something to resist rather than embrace.

The role of the media

A report published in June 2018 by the Royal Society for Public Health (in partnership with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation)[4] revealed the extent of ageist attitudes across the UK, and how they harm the health and well-being of everyone in society as we grow older. The research, which included analysis of how the public's attitudes to ageing are formed and reinforced, found that print and broadcast media help to drive national discourse and therefore have a significant role in both setting and changing attitudes to ageing.

The research focused on news from UK newspaper titles (print and newspaper websites/apps). Research by Ofcom into news consumption in the UK shows that up to 47% of adults use print newspapers and newspaper websites/apps to access news stories, which increases to 63% for those aged 65 and over. This highlights that while newspapers and online articles might not be the most popular source of news, they still have a significant reach. The table below provides a breakdown of the ways that different news platforms are used by different groups in the UK.

	Total	Male	Female	16-24	65+	ABC1	C2DE	BAME Groups	White
Television	75%	74%	76%	49%	92%	75%	75%	65%	77%
Internet (any device)	65%	64%	65%	79%	44%	68%	60%	74%	63%
Radio	42%	42%	43%	24%	48%	45%	40%	31%	45%
Newspapers (print only)	35%	37%	32%	32%	56%	37%	32%	34%	35%
Newspapers (print & website / app)	47%	49%	46%	46%	63%	52%	42%	50%	47%

(Data taken from Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2020)

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2 Hurd, 1999; Kite and Wagner, 2002; North and Fiske, 2012
3 Levy et al., 2002: Biggs, 2005.
4 That Age Old Question: How Attitudes to Ageing Affect Our Health and Wellbeing, The Royal Society for Public Health & The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch, June 2018

Findings

To understand how older people are portrayed in the media, the contents of 200 articles were analysed to identify common themes or sub-themes. Alongside this, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to facilitate further in-depth analysis and understanding of the narratives that news stories are creating or reinforcing through the use of language. Discourse analysis helps us to better understand how meanings around older people are constructed and reflected in the news media and can also highlight inequalities across society that lead to discriminatory behaviour towards older people.[5] See a summary of the methodology on page 18 for more information on how this research was undertaken.

The main findings from the Content Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis are outlined in the sections below:

- **How are older people referred to in news stories?**
- **The tone and sentiment of news stories about older people**
- **The language used to portray older people**
- **The common topics and themes**
- **Narratives and representation of older people**

How are older people referred to in news stories?

The first stage of the research looked at how older people were referred to in news stories. This provided context for how the stories were then framed. The research found that older people were most often referred to as 'elderly' followed closely by 'old(er) people' and 'pensioner/s' and then 'retired/retiree'. Other ways of describing older people included terms such as 'silver strivers', but these were used to a much lesser extent and, in the majority of cases, were used alongside one of the other terms outlined above.

News stories and articles that referred to the 'elderly' and 'pensioners' are most likely to have negative tones expressed in the article and in the framing of the story. The research found that 85% of the articles that focused on the 'elderly' and 79% of articles that referred to 'pensioners' had a negative tone. However, the articles that mainly use the term 'old(er) people' and 'retired/retiree' are more likely to be framed in a positive way, with 60% of articles referring to 'old(er) people' being positively framed, and just over 80% referring to 'retired/retiree' having a positive sentiment overall. These examples highlight the importance of the ways that older people are described and the need to ensure older people are referred to using appropriate and responsible language.

One in five pensioners pop 7 pills every day

Daily Mail, August 2017

The research also found that 4% of articles used the term 'OAP'. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) guidelines on reporting age[6] suggest that this term should not be used, even if a story is framed positively, to avoid reinforcing perceptions of stereotyped groups of

5 Van Dijk, 1998
6 National Union of Journalists Guidelines on Reporting Age https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/nuj-guidelines-on-reporting-age/

older people. Even though the number of articles that carried the term 'OAP' was low, it is very disappointing that this term is still being used and highlights the importance of the research in addressing ageist attitudes.

Tone and sentiment

The tone and sentiment of news stories is essential to bring them to life, and presenting a positive, negative or neutral tone to the reader helps them to form and shape opinions on the individuals or issues featured in a story.

The research found that around two-thirds of the articles reviewed had an overall negative tone. Only 30% were framed positively and a very small minority were neutral in tone.

Ancient Britons: Britain's population is getting bigger... And older

Daily Mirror, November 2018

Of the stories that had a positive tone or sentiment, 96% acknowledge and explicitly reference commonly perceived negative framing. Examples of this include acknowledging the stereotypes of older people as vulnerable before focusing on combatting those stereotypes with positive attributes. In contrast, it was rare for articles that have a negative tone to discuss any positive attributes of ageing as part of the framing of the story; this was only found in 5% of cases.

The research also highlighted that it was more common to see negatively framed news stories during the winter months compared to the rest of the year. There is some evidence that this could be linked to the notion of older people being seen as more vulnerable and needy during the winter and therefore news stories tending to focus on this and reinforce stereotypes of older people as vulnerable. Some of the examples led on the pressures on health services during the winter.

'Ageing Britain: two-fifths of NHS budget is spent on over 65s'

The Guardian, February 2016

Overall, the research shows that, regardless of time of year, the general tone, sentiment, and way in which stories were shaped and brought to life portrayed older people in a negative light.

What language is used to portray older people?

The language used in news articles can reinforce the overall negative tone and sentiment reflected in stories. Articles frequently refer to older people using negative terms such as 'vulnerable' (nearly half of all articles), 'frail' and 'a burden' (nearly a quarter of articles). Over three-quarters of all negative stories portrayed older people as being ill or in need of care, victims, a burden, or financially dependent. The table below provides a more detailed breakdown.

Portrayal	% of articles	Type of language used
Ill and/or in need of care	23%	Negative
Golden-ager	19%	Positive
Victim	18%	Negative
Burden	11%	Negative
A coper	10%	Negative
Deserving of respect	9%	Negative / Positive
Financially dependent	6%	Negative
Other	4%	

(Percentages have been rounded)

The research did find some examples that used more positive language. Of the positively framed articles, over half portrayed an older person as a 'golden-ager', creating a picture of older people as enjoying and living a fulfilled life in older age. However, stereotyping was still often present in these articles.

Be super over 70...

Daily Mirror, October 2017

Some of the news stories included attributes and framing that were both positive and negative, using terms such as 'a coper' and 'deserving of respect'. Again, there was stereotyping and overall negative tones in the articles that had positive and negative language.

Our old folk are an asset not a burden

The Sun, April 2019

Overall, the analysis showed that negative language was more common than positive language which is consistent with the use of negative tone and sentiment.

Common topics and themes

For each article reviewed as part of the research a core theme was identified as the main overarching topic, and within this key subthemes that contextualise the different angles and discussions that take place within each theme. The table below gives an overview of the top 3 themes and the main subthemes. The most common core themes related to each other were found to be 'Health and Care' (35%), 'Economy and Finance' (25%) and 'Society and Social Issues' (16%).

Considering the words most used when referring to older people (elderly, pensioner, old(er) person, retire/retiree) it was possible to identify some interesting patterns.

For example, nearly three-quarters of the articles in the health and care theme referred predominantly to the 'elderly', articles about economy and finance referred to older people as 'pensioners' and the articles on work and occupation most often referred to older people as

'retired/retiree'.

Articles referring to 'older people' had less frequency in any one theme and were most likely to occur in stories about work and occupation or those about society and social issues.

Just as the words most used to describe older people demonstrated tendencies for journalists to use certain language to construct more positively or negatively framed stories, the themes are also indicators of the tone of a story. The portrayal and framing of older people in stories relating to health and care and economy and finance themes are more likely to be negative than positive in news coverage: around three quarters of all articles in those themes expressed negative sentiments.

The more positively framed articles were around the lifestyle theme, where 100% of articles were framed in a positive light. However, although lifestyle stories were portrayed in a positive way, they are far less frequent in the news media than stories about health and care or those about the economy and finance, with lifestyle stories accounting for less that 6% of all the articles reviewed. Due to the lack of frequency of lifestyle stories, they have much less impact on the perceptions and stereotyping of older people.

A clear shift in the narrative is needed to move away from negative and ageist reporting across almost all issues but in particular health and care, economy and social issues; news stories should reflect the diversity of older people and their lives.

Narratives and representations

By analysing the language used in news stories in more depth through Critical Discourse Analysis, the research was able to identify types of narratives that positioned older people into particular identities.

The research identified three main themes emerging from this analysis. These are consistent with earlier themes and include health and well-being (biological and psychological); social activity, family and friends (social); work and economy (economic and political).

In the first theme identified, discourse was focused on health and wellbeing, which painted a picture of older people as 'past it' or 'over the hill', with a focus on the bodily, physiological, cognitive and mental decline of ageing individuals that is socially constructed as problematic, inevitable and anomalous.

Examples of the language used in articles about older people

There were examples of news stories comparing younger healthier people that are 'fitter, stronger, more stylish' to older individuals being 'weaker', 'slower', with frailer memory, moving and/or vision capabilities, reinforcing messages and narratives that ageing is a negative process

and something to be 'feared'.

Some articles were identified that attempted to challenge the narrative of ageing as something to fear. These kinds of articles were more positive about growing older, focusing on celebrating the beauty and health of older people and praising initiatives, activities and practices that can help people to age well. The discourse in these news stories produced a 'reversed image' that presents older people as capable of being youthful, graceful and fit.

> ## Embracing the ageing process can be a positive experience – if you choose to see it that way – Thomas Moor talks to Liz Connor about the richness that can come with getting older
>
> **Daily Post, December 2017**

However, there were far fewer examples of these types of narratives and representations, and many of these articles still reflected stereotypes of older people and growing older.

> ## The challenges and opportunities of an ageing population
>
> **South Wales Argus, October 2018**

The second theme identified through the Critical Discourse Analysis concerned social activity, family and friends. Here, the dominant discourse was of 'ageing as passiveness'. This theme emerged from articles that talked about the social life of older people, their relationships with families and friends and everyday activities and hobbies.

The articles studied revealed two main discursive approaches to the subject of social activity, family and friends. The more pessimistic views presented older people as being left out of society and community life, isolated and lonely. Some articles talked about older people as being grumpy and bitter, with many references to the absence of friendship, companions and the joy that older people can experience. According to these news stories the realities of older people's lives are characterised as being socially excluded, alienated, distressed, depressed and having fears about running out of money and ending up alone. Overall, the picture framed ageing as isolated, resigned from social and family life, vulnerable and passive. Examples here had very negative narratives.

The second discursive approach had a more active and social focus, presenting a more positive and optimistic image of older people. In these examples, older people were described as being more socially active, energetic and happy, with more free time, decreased work obligations and reduced responsibilities. Once again, however, there were far fewer examples of these kinds of optimistic stories.

The final theme identified was work, economics and politics. This theme revealed discourses relating to the cost of healthcare, pensions and the impact of an ageing society on the economy, as well as discourses around the implications of working after retirement.

Some of the news stories linked issues around the economic crisis and Brexit to discourses around increasing retirement ages and people working for longer. Examining this line of discourse, the research concluded that two major binary oppositions were emerging– the deserving versus undeserving and contributor versus burdens.

The underserving and burden theme seemed to be more evident in stories that reported ageism in society and government practices, as well as the experience of ageism by older people. These stories were found to use pessimistic tones about the implications of an ageing population on and the demands and costs for social care and how such policies impact on the economy. This reinforces the portrayal of older people as a burden and vulnerable, which has been consistent throughout the different stages of the research. It also helps to reinforce negative views about ageing and the impact this, both directly on older people and on wider society.

Social Care needs for over 85s predicted to double in next 20 years: research suggests explosion in social care assistance for Britain's ageing population

The Guardian, August 2018

The opposing view portrayed in this theme highlighted older people as 'contributors and deserving', and the research found a limited number of stories that talked about the positive contribution older people make to society – the stories that portrayed older people as 'contributors and deserving' were mainly about older people who still worked after 'retirement-age' where people might be enjoying their job, like being active and spending time with their colleagues. Active older people are mostly pictured as contributors to society.

When describing older people through a contributor and deserving lens articles still tended to rely upon negative and ageist stereotypes, using these narratives to legitimise an article's anti-ageism discourse.

The overall narrative around the work, economic and political discourse is that ageing is unproductive, and even where news stories attempt to tackle ageism and unfair treatment towards older people, there is still a tendency for reporters and commentators to use a pessimistic tone. This discourse reinforces negative emotions about ageing which can be internalised by older people and society.

Conclusion

The findings in this report reflect long-standing concerns about the ways that older people are portrayed by the news media and the impact of negative narratives about older people and our ageing society.

The research and analysis highlighted above demonstrates that news reporting relating to older people and ageing is constructed largely through negative frames: news stories with negative and pessimistic tones are far more common compared to those with a more neutral, positive or optimistic focus. More needs to be done to ensure the portrayal of older people is more balanced and representative of older people in all of their diversity.

This is crucial as the way that older people are portrayed in the media can have a direct impact on people's attitudes to ageing, the way that older people are viewed by society, and the way that older people view themselves. Negative portrayals of older people that do not reflect the breadth of people's experiences of growing older can create or reinforce negative attitudes about ageing, which harm older people as they lead to direct age-based discrimination that can promote social exclusion, impact upon mental health, and affect wider determinants of health and well-being such as employment[7].

Given the media's power to shape and influence societal perceptions and attitudes, news media could play a considerable role in breaking down entrenched views of older people, as well as shifting ageist attitudes that lead to ageism and age discrimination, through greater acknowledgement of the diversity of older people and through greater recognition of the contribution older people make to society.

A key part of achieving this will be ensuring that older people's voices are heard and their stories are told, and that the diversity of older people and their experiences is reflected in the articles and features we see and read every day.

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7 That Age Old Question: How Attitudes to Ageing Affect Our Health and Wellbeing, The Royal Society for Public Health & The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch, June 2018

Recommendations and next steps

To improve the portrayal of older people in the media - by removing negative stereotyping and ageism - the Commissioner wants to see action in the following areas:

- The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) should update the Editors' Code of Practice which sets out the rules that newspapers and magazines regulated by IPSO have agreed to follow. The current code includes a clause (12) on discrimination, clause 12 says:

   > i) The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability.

   > ii) Details of an individual's race, colour, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story

   The code should be updated to include 'Age' in clause 12.

- The NUJ, whose code already includes age, should work to ensure the code is adhered to and promoted to members and that ageism is highlighted as part of their training, with poor practice identified and improved

As well as calling for the action above by IPSO and the NUJ, the Commissioner will:

- Work with Universities teaching journalism to highlight the issues around ageism and ageist attitudes in the media, including the findings of this report.

- Work in partnership with other organisations to develop and issue new guidelines for all journalists to use when reporting on issues for older people, including a call for new images to be used alongside stories.

- Work with Ofcom, as the regulator of TV and radio broadcasting, to ensure they understand the issues around ageism and ageist attitudes and ways in which they can work more effectively with regulated broadcasters to highlight the negative impact of ageism and ensure the Broadcasting Code properly protects older people from direct and indirect ageism.

Annex 1: Methodology

The research was carried out by the University of Leicester and was presented to the Older People's Commissioner for Wales in January 2020.

The research examined 200 new stories (online version) from 13 UK newspaper titles between August 2017 and October 2019. The research design involved a mixed method approach by conducting both content analysis and critical discourse analysis to explore the portrayal of older people UK online news stories.

The objectives of the research were to identify whether the representation of older people is positive, negative or neutral, to identify the kind of language and common themes used when reporting older people and the impact this may have.

The research considered the role the above may play in influencing attitudes about older people and/or reinforcing ageist stereotypes and assumptions about them that lead to discrimination. By using a sequential mixed method approach the research tried to identify, report, and demonstrate textual characteristics, key dimensions and common themes running across stories published about older people, but also evaluate media agendas, interests and motivations that possibly result in common issues, complaints and ageist stereotypes (Wooffitt, 2005).