

Introduction

Being Old in the Age of Mediatization

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Older people of today grew up with radio, television and print media, such as newspapers and magazines, and in their later years they are faced with the challenges of new digital media, such as computers and mobile phones. Like people in other age groups, many older people own a computer, a tablet or a smart phone, and they use them for many purposes – not least for maintaining their social network of family and friends, for entertainment, cultural experiences and for having contact with, for example, health authorities, their bank or the library. For this group of older people, such media are a completely natural development. On the other hand, most old people still own traditional media such as a television set or a radio, and for some older people, the new digital media do not in fact contribute to making their lives any easier. Either way, both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ media play an important role in the lives of older people. They are important prerequisites for maintaining social contacts and building links to culture and society.

This special issue of *Nordicom Review* examines media dynamics in the lives of older people and how these dynamics influence the perceptions of old age, ageing and older people. From a number of different perspectives, the articles in the issue present studies of the specific consequences media have on the later part of the life cycle and how old age and ageing is affected and shaped by processes of mediatization. Mediatization research has thus far focused on various aspects of work life and public life, such as politics (Strömbäck 2008, Hjarvard 2013), religion (Hjarvard & Lövheim 2012), and conflict (Cottle 2006), while other studies have looked at parenthood (Clark 2013, Damkjær 2016), how children play (Hjarvard 2004, Johansen 2016), health (Kamin 2007, Christensen 2016) and sport (Frandsen 2014).

This issue concentrates on the question of how media influence our older generations and thus discusses how a mediatized society may contribute to confirming or altering conceptions of what it means to be old. In a predominantly Western context, older generations respond to a mediatized culture through various processes – including appropriation, adoption and resistance – and the articles in this issue illustrate how these processes take place.

Mediatization theory provides a theoretical framework that highlights the importance of the media in shaping, maintaining and changing cultural practices and ideas, and it therefore serves as an inspiration for the articles in this special issue. Both at a macro- and a microsocial level, media structure and shape social interactions between older people, as they do for people of all ages. Media are present both ‘outside’ as part of society at large, in the form of institutions that influence the public agenda, including notions of ageing and older people, and in the more domestic contexts of everyday life, where they function as tools for communication and interaction in the family, with the doctor, in the nursing home, etc. The media

have gained a presence *out-there* in the public and wider society at the same time as they are *in-here*, integrated into the structure and workings of everyday life in the narrower social settings of family, workplace, classroom, and so on. The dual process of media being simultaneously embedded *out-there* in wider society and *in-here* in the lifeworld of individuals represents a new, mediatized condition of culture and society (Hjarvard 2017).

Thus the argument in this context is that, on the one hand, media influence how older people are represented and co-structure how older people in general are perceived in culture and society. On the other hand, media also play an important role in the everyday life of older individuals as they co-structure everyday practices and routines and influence how older people relate to other people and interact in communicative and other social activities. Media ensure *that* communication and social interaction take place, and influence *how* they take place. In particular, the proliferation of personal and mobile media technologies has played a crucial role in bringing about changes at both the level of society and at the level of the individual older media user.

The significant changes effected by media developments in communication and interaction have posed a challenge for many older people, who have grown up and lived most of their lives with mass media; only relatively late in their lives have they been confronted with digital media technologies. Generally, studies of older people’s media usage have shown that they are late adopters of digital media technologies. Having lived most of their lives with mass media, they often still prefer to use these media. At the same time, new studies show that the proportion of older people who use computers, tablets and smart phones is increasing rapidly. It is therefore likely that within the next few years, older people will be able to cope with digital media just as easily as young people do today. By then, virtually all older people will have been confronted with digital media at some point at their workplaces, and so will not feel as alienated as many do at present. On the other hand, it is also probable that, over the same period of time, new media technologies will be developed. This may in turn result in older people having problems accommodating to these new technologies, and we might still in the future be talking about early and late adopters.

This issue of *Nordicom Review* presents a collection of articles focusing on many of the areas in which media may shape the lives of older people. Not only does this issue reveal that older people are in fact active media users; it also shows in depth how and for what purposes older people use different media and, thus, how media becomes a resource even in old age.

In her contribution ‘Healthy ageing and mediated health expertise’, Christa Lykke Christensen examines older people’s experiences and use of media in acquiring knowledge about health issues relating to their own lives. Media constitute for many older people one of the most important sources of information about health. The question is, however, how media influence older people’s perceptions of health and to what extent they trust the media in relation to health issues. Based on a qualitative interview study with men and women aged between 65 and 86 years, the study demonstrates that media do not influence older people uniformly. For some people, media function as a guide to maintaining and experimenting with an active lifestyle in later life; for others, media are met with scepticism as they are not trusted as a source of reliable information on health issues.

In Line Nybro Petersen’s article ‘“Generation conviviality”: The role of media logic in television production for elderly audiences’, she reports on a study of television programming on the Danish niche channel TV2 Charlie, which is aimed at a mature and elderly audience. The study analyses processes involved in the production of two talk show programmes and argues that a media logic of conviviality contributes to shaping the way in which ageing and old age are represented in the programmes. The study considers the issue at the channel level, production level and programme level in order to see how rules and resources at all levels contribute to the promotion of conviviality, and how this ‘feel-good’ notion is integrated into the idea of positive and active ageing.

Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol, Kim Sawchuk and Line Grenier’s article ‘Maintaining connections: octo- and nonagenarians on digital “use and non-use”’ analyses the concepts of user and non-user through twenty-two interviews with octogenarians and nonagenarians in a retirement home setting. The article offers a set of ‘techno-biographies’ which chart how participants have changed media use across their life course, registering their encounters with different media ranging from newspapers, radio and landline phones to computers and mobile phones. These ‘techno-biographies’ challenge the binary distinction between use and non-use, and the notion of media adoption as linear. Instead, the authors argue for the importance of recognising the heterogeneous nature of media use and non-use that shapes the fourth age. The individual user’s relationship with digital media is dynamic and shaped by circumstances, situational contexts and personal interests.

The use of personal media technologies is also the focus of Cecilie Givskov’s ‘Growing old with mediatization – reflexivity and sense of agency’. She interviews a group of single Danish women in order to gain an understanding of their reflexive practices as a generation that have become familiar with personal media technologies (computers, smartphones and mobile phones) in later life. Givskov argues that the media expand the everyday reflexivity of the respondents and thus play a role in trans-situational agency. For example, Givskov identifies an urgency to adapt to and appropriate digital media technologies, but points out how this urgency finds diverse and individualised expressions and results in very different practical experiences. Control of media is connected to both empowerment and disempowerment, and the study suggests that adapting to media is an intrinsic component in contemporary digital mediatization and linked to various aspects of people’s feelings of agency.

Noah Lenstra’s article ‘The community-based information infrastructure of older adult digital learning: A study of public libraries and senior centers in a medium-sized city in the USA’ considers the information infrastructure in American senior centers and public libraries and its role in promoting digital learning in older adults. He argues

that learning practices are shaped through negotiations between the institutions and the older adults using the facilities. The study clearly shows how older adults are actively shaping learning practices and the institutional contexts they are a part of; however, Lenstra also points out that these negotiations are often shaped by an inherent societal ageism. In particular, the article illustrates how older adult users both support each other and organise themselves to create the learning practices, even when these practices may not be encouraged by the institutional infrastructure. The article invites these, often underfunded, public institutions to take seriously the agency of older adults in order to better reconfigure the infrastructure serving an ageing information society and thereby contribute to a more inclusive culture.

Annika Bergström's article 'Digital equality and the uptake of digital applications among seniors of different age' considers how ageing societies are facing challenges from the perspective of the use of information and communication technologies. It is a problem for society that the increase in online services, which are crucial for economic, political, cultural and private purposes, does not apply to everyone. Those who participate more fully in a digitally mediated social life enjoy advantages over their digitally disadvantaged counterparts. Bergström claims, however, that today's digital divide is not first and foremost between pensioners and the under-65s, but between younger and older pensioners. Based on longitudinal, representative surveys, her study concludes that there is a clear gap between younger and older seniors, and that it is closing only very slowly. She also identifies age and level of education as key factors, whereas generational belonging and social capital make only a limited contribution to the understanding of Internet uptake among older adults.

In their contribution 'Why ageing is more important than being old. Understanding the elderly in a mediatized world', Thorsten Naab and Christian Schwarzenegger also consider the challenges of living in both an ageing and a mediatized society. Western populations are growing older and media have permeated almost all areas of social life. By looking at how different generations specifically use electronic media, the authors try to understand what impact digital media have had on older people. They suggest recourse to the more comprehensive perspective of Mannheim's concept of generations in order to understand being old as the effect of ageing. Naab and Schwarzenegger conclude that research on media generations needs to bear in mind the processuality that is significant for mediatization and ageing, and they use Siibak and Vittadini's concept of 'generationing' (2012) to describe the dynamic of continuities and changes after the formative years in individuals' media biographies. This, they point out, may make it necessary to recalibrate the lens of (historical) audience research.

The concept of media generation is also the key element under discussion in the article written by Andreas Hepp, Matthias Berg and Cindy Roitsch – 'A processual concept of media generation: The media-generational positioning of elderly people'. In the context of older people's media use, they understand generation as a process rather than a static phenomenon of homogeneous use. Focusing on older people, the authors put forward the concept of media generation as a thickening of one or more age groups of people who, in their media appropriation, share specific experiences of mediatization and, based on their personal media biographies, develop a shared self-image as a media generation. Such a conceptualisation regards media generation as a process. It operates with aspects of media relatedness, media-generational specifics of appropriation, and

self-positioning. This offers an understanding of older people as members of a mass-media generation whose members, the authors conclude, define themselves in contrast to younger media generations.

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