

Media reporting on ageing in rural and regional northern Queensland

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Abstract

Aim: To determine views about older Australians as portrayed in rural and regional print media in north Queensland and whether these views differ from those in metropolitan papers.

Methods: A descriptive discourse analysis of newspaper articles published in north Queensland between 2011 and 2014.

Relevance: Negative stereotyping of older people in the media has been identified as a significant social issue. These stereotypes can be self-fulfilling and limit expectations of ageing from an individual and societal perspective, promoting discriminatory practices and impacting health and social policy.

Results: Negative ageing stereotypes are evident in regional papers and promote similar misconceptions as their metropolitan counterparts.

Conclusions of the work undertaken: This study identifies the need to challenge the negative stereotypes of older people within the media to foster healthy ageing in place. This is especially important in rural areas with a greater proportion of older Australians ageing within the community than urban areas.

Introduction

Over the last three decades media interest on the increasing ageing population has grown, with the majority of studies originating from Europe and the USA (1-3). Media reporting has a tendency to catastrophise the situation and problematise older people. Robert Skeffington, writing for the Wall Street Journal, compared older Australians to zombies; *“granted we will face an army of the not-yet-dead as opposed to the formerly-dead-but-now-undead, but it’s still a scary prospect”* (4). In Australia, a recent report from The Human Rights Commission suggested that across all ages negative attitudes towards older people were mainly attributed to personal experience and media reports (5).

Negative stereotyping of older people in the media has been identified as a significant social issue (6). These stereotypes can be self-fulfilling and limit expectations of ageing from an individual and societal perspective, promoting discriminatory practices and impacting health and social policy (7)

Newspapers are a common form of social media with 61-77% of Australians aged 25 years and older accessing this media both in paper and online formats, importantly, readership of newspapers increases with the age of the reader (5). High distribution not only allows newspapers to be used as a reflection of social and cultural beliefs but also to influence and shape social practice. In 2013 The Australian Human Rights Commission authorized a survey on the editorial content of three city newspapers: The Herald Sun (Melbourne), The Daily Telegraph (Sydney) and the Courier-Mail (Brisbane). Survey participants were asked to report the perceived portrayals of older people in the media with the following themes reported; slow, burden, poor, frail, lonely and vulnerable.

Previous studies have concentrated only on national and metropolitan newspapers (5, 8) , yet 36% of older Australians live in regional and a rural areas with these areas having a disproportionate amount of the population over 65 years old, compared to cities (8).

A report into the social positioning of newspapers showed that readers differentiated between urban, national and regional newspapers with the former bringing the outside world to them and the latter informing and advising them(9). This puts regional newspapers in an ideal position to have a major impact on how regional and rural society view older community members. This study aims to explore and characterize the portrayals of older people in regional newspapers and compare content to national and metropolitan newspapers.

Method

Design

As critical theory attempts to confront the injustice in society this study employed critical theory to identify if older people were being unjustly portrayed in rural newspapers (10). Discourse analysis which seeks to link language and its use to power and social difference in society was used in this study to look at how newspaper reports use language to socially shape discourses on older Australians.

Sample selection

Newspapers from the local area of north Queensland archived in www.newsbank.com were selected; ten in total*. A search of all newspaper articles published between January 2011 and October 2014 excluding advertisements and reader's comments was undertaken. The sample was restricted to rural and regional areas as previous studies (9) have assessed metropolitan newspapers and this review was undertaken as part of a study on rural ageing.

Data collection and analysis

Articles were selected where the following search terms were present in the headlines: elder, elderly, pension(s), pensioner(s), older workers, older drivers, elderly drivers. Search terms were validated by review of the literature and discussion with the research team.

The term old/older was excluded due to the large number of unrelated articles identified.

A total of 214 articles were initially screened resulting in 179 for analysis. Articles were then grouped according to the subject matter in descending frequency; crime, finances, health, driving and older workers.

Articles were then read (EA) and content assessed both textually and contextually for any negative aged bias in the report (11). Bias was classified as articles that made note of age along with an underlying undesirable assumption regardless of the article topic. Themes arising from the articles were discussed and agreed by the research team.

Results

Analysis showed that regardless of whether articles subjects were positive or negative, words and phrases portrayed older Australians as being less capable members of society. Newspapers were

* Ayr Advocate, Bowen Independent, Cairns Post, Cairns Sun, Cairns Weekend Post, Herbert River Express, Home Hill Observer, Innisfail Advocate, Townsville Bulletin, Townsville Sun

found to socially construct older people as in four main ways; vulnerable victims, burden on society and deserving or undeserving. These results closely reflect the stereotypes portrayed in metro and national newspapers (8).

Vulnerable

Older Australians were categorised as more vulnerable when reporting crime propagating a public perception that they are more likely to be victims of crime (12).

“he targets vulnerable victims and that’s clear from their ages”—*Townsville Bulletin*
12 September 2013

“this would have been a terrifying experience for anyone, let alone someone elderly”— *Cairns Post*
15 September 2014

A paternalistic tone depicted older Australians as defenceless or helpless and unable to cope with the demands of modern life.

“so little old ladies can sleep better at night knowing that you are not out and about to rob them”—*Townsville Bulletin* 4 January September 2012

“Elderly people haven’t grown up with the cynicism needed to survive in this day and age”—*Cairns Post* 19 February 2014

Vulnerability was also apparent in finance reporting. Reports contained an underlying tone of protectiveness towards the older Australians, suggesting that this group need help to manage their finances so that they are not disadvantaged or taken advantage of by charlatans. This promotes the assumption that by age alone, they are intentional targets for financial fraud.

“The elderly and frail are being duped by funeral insurance policies that can cost up to 20 times the average price of a funeral, or up to \$140,000 in premiums if the holder lives to 90”—*Townsville Bulletin* 21 March 2013

“banks have been accused of routinely ripping off vulnerable older Australians”—*Townsville Bulletin* 17 September 2011

“senior Australians can be too trusting and confused by technology, so remind them to never pass on banks details, passwords over the web or email”—*The Cairns Post* 5 August 2013

Deserving and undeserving

The context of reporting on pensions was mixed with the dominant view suggesting that older people were deserving of the Age Pension, but this was juxtaposed by concerns about increasing associated costs. A positive ideology suggested that older Australians are deserving of the pension having earned this right by working (and paying tax) for most of their adult life—in effect they have paid their dues to society. However, concerns were raised that older Australians although deserving of the pension were living on the edge of poverty which while sympathetic, positions older Australians as a group to be pitied:

“difficult to decide between eating and household bills” heart breaking to see pensioners struggling to survive”—*Townsville Bulletin* 15 September 2012

“increases in levy would be burden to our most vulnerable citizens”—*Bowen Independent*
12 April 2013

Concerns about the sustainability of Age pensions were couched in terms of need for government restraint:

“The National Audit Commission has urged Tony Abbott to target the age pension as one of his “clearest opportunities” to restrain out of control government spending and linking the pension to average weekly earnings, not average male earnings, meaning pensioners would receive about \$200 less a fortnight than they would otherwise have pocketed”—*Townsville Bulletin* 2 May 2014

Connotations of words such as “pocketed” challenged the legitimacy of deserving pensioners giving the impression that this money is not needed or indeed deserved with pensions an unnecessary economic encumbrance. A report of a speech by Australian Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss clearly suggests that this undeserving view is held by policy makers

“Mr. Truss said that 1100 people a week in their mid-60s were moving onto the old age pension, with many accessing their super from age 60 and squandering it. Increasingly, the lifestyle and the savings for superannuation are being seen as an opportunity to enjoy a few cruises and the luxuries of life for a few years until it runs out and then people wish to fall back on the old age pension” and “The Government has been forced to act because the pension will become unaffordable as the population ages”—*Townsville Bulletin* 15 May 2014

This quote positions older Australians as undeserving, playing the age pension system for their own gain, with the implication that there will be no pension when today’s workers retire. Furthermore, by clearly positioning older Australians as undeserving he is then “forced” to take action to stop this undesirable behaviour.

However, positive support and sympathy underwrote articles about older workers. The problems older job seekers face as the pensionable age increases was widely reported reflecting age discrimination in the workforce, the longer periods of unemployment experienced by older workers and the need for more government incentives to employ older workers. The fact that older workers needed to work to accrue sufficient superannuation to support their retirement was nuanced as being unfair

“a quarter of Australia’s greying boomers expect to work into their 80s because they are too poor to retire”—*Townsville Bulletin* 27 November 2013

“too broke and too bored to retire, Australia’s grannies are flocking back to work, with nearly half the nation’s 60-something women in the workforce”.—*Cairns Post* 10 August 2013

These reports implied that as long as older Australians are contributing to society or wanting to contribute, they are positively viewed as in the overall community rather than as a non-contributing financial drain.

Burden

Older Australians were portrayed as a burden in the area of health, requiring extra healthcare resources and needing assistance. Articles promoting “healthy ageing” used dependent and paternalistic narratives directed towards younger readers.

“looking after the elderly at home”—*Bowen Independent* 11 May 2012

“care for the elderly during summer sizzlers”—*Cairns Sun* 30 June 2013

Reporting about residential aged care was emotive and negative with the lack of beds, staff and aged care services, being the main topics.

“bed crisis in elderly care, elderly turned away at aged-care facility”—*The Cairns Post* 9 November 2013

“aged care providers in Townsville say they cannot maintain their existing level of service for elderly people unless there is a serious increase in federal funding for the sector”—*Townsville Bulletin* 31 July 2013

These articles promote negative stereotypes regarding the ageing population and the burden of caring for them, raising concerns for the future financial stability of the healthcare system.

The term “bed blocking” in common use in hospitals, media and public arenas has a negative impact when used in this quote to suggest that older patients are intentionally staying longer and purposely impacting on the care of others.

“elderly patients occupying beds at Townsville Hospital because they have nowhere suitable to go, has been a major component of bed blockage at the facility, contributing to longer patient waiting times”—*Townsville Bulletin* January 23 2013

The use of negative emotive phrases within reports, whilst not overtly blaming older Australians, raises anxiety in the reader. The report would not have the same effect if older patients were “receiving care” compared to “occupying”, and “bed shortages” was used instead of “bed blockage”.

The public perception of older drivers as a burden to other road users was fuelled by statements like

“forget young hoons, older drivers are the new road menace”—*The Cairns Post* 2013

as less than able drivers due to their age alone, in some cases described as dangerous.

“A Townsville mum is calling for ‘s’ plates to be introduced for senior drivers after a near miss on a roundabout”—*Townsville Bulletin* 12 August 2011

Discussion

Rural communities are often represented as being idyllic, with a less pressured way of life, along with strong communities and traditional values promoting them as a good place to grow old (13). With the larger proportion of older residents in rural areas it is important that they feel included and part of their local community. This study demonstrates that regional newspaper reports concerning older Australians are often negatively nuanced portraying them as vulnerable, dependent and in need of support. These descriptors concur with those reported in Australian urban and national newspapers(9) have the potential completely remove any sense of agency from older people themselves.

Age stratification was evidenced in north Queensland’s press through the use of collective naming terms such as “grannies” and “little old ladies”. This stratification, positions older Australians as being ‘other’ and setting them apart from the rest of the community (2) and challenging the widely held belief that rural communities are typified by shared sense of values and social closeness (13).

Contextual analysis of crime reporting also portrayed age stratification indicating that criminal acts against older Australians break an inherent societal moral code, with perpetrators seen as cowardly and committing a worse offense than a similar offense against a younger person. This stratification can be viewed as both positive and negative, showing that although society wants to protect older people at the same time it views them as vulnerable victims. The New South Wales report, *Older People Crime: Incidence, Fear and Prevention* discussed media reporting on crime stating that whilst the media are a valuable source of information for communities, crime reports “are skewed in favour of unusual and horrifying events, such as violent crimes against older people” (14).

There was evidence of marked paternalism suggesting that older people need to be looked after and told what to do with regards to making financial and health decisions. These reports may promote a self-fulfilling prophecy among older Australians. They may feel they cannot manage adopting a fatalistic attitude to health and ignoring symptoms simply as ageing. This is of particular importance in rural areas where older residents may be already be struggling with increased costs for goods and services, inadequate transport and access to health services and lack of economical parity with their community.

Articles about older people who were living well, engaging with the community for example through volunteering and those making a success of life in their older years were underreported. Instead, discourses mainly focused on the promotion of extremes with greedy “baby boomers” and frail old people “living in poverty”; one designed to create conflict and the other pity or indeed blame for not accruing enough resources when young, “too poor to retire”. Living in rural areas carries a life-course disadvantage when it comes to salaries and job opportunities leading to reduced opportunities to build assets (15). Thus, the pre-existing socio-economic situation of an older person is likely to be a reflection of their life to date rather than a characteristic to be pitied or blamed on old age.

Reporting around pensions and welfare suggests that the Age Pension is unsustainable in its current form and will bankrupt future generations. This style of reporting places younger and older Australians in direct conflict, presuming will be no pension for the younger generation, again reinforcing a negative divide between generations influencing intergenerational relationships and potentially, creating age related prejudice (2).

Older workers were positively portrayed; however the term older worker was not clearly defined in the articles. Employees and employers classify an older worker as aged from 55 to 57 years (16), with 10% of employers admitting to having policies avoiding recruitment of workers usually over age 50 . Older workers experience longer periods of unemployment which increase with age, with workers 55 years and above unemployed for an average of 75 weeks. Growing older has a negative impact on employment prospects and increasing the retirement age may further penalize older workers.

Older drivers were negatively portrayed with calls for increased regulation. However older drivers also tend to self-regulate their driving, adopting strategies such as not driving at night, during busy times or in bad weather, to keep their driving independence for longer. This demonstrates when older Australians feel that their driving is impaired they take pro-active steps (17). Previous studies of portrayals of older drivers have found that the media are complicit in stereotyping older drivers as being incapable and a menace (18).

Increasing health care requirements of older Australians and the ability of society to pay was the main concern identified in health reporting. While results and projections vary, what is clear is that an ageing population will increase demand on the healthcare system. Highlighting this burden may provoke anxiety in younger Australians who may perceive that limited care will be available for their own needs; promoting a competitive rather than a cooperative environment. Whilst there is clear evidence for increased spending in healthcare the main drivers are not the change in demographics and our older population but higher incomes, greater expectations, health sector salaries, changes in disease rates and new technologies. Data from the World Bank (2011) indicated little association between health expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product and the proportion of the 65 plus population (19). Given that rural populations already suffer from inequity in access to healthcare, anxiety about future healthcare is a valid concern but should be seen as a multigenerational issue for the community (20).

The ageing of the population is evidence of successes in healthcare, education and the increased standard of living. Policy makers should capitalize on media's ability to influence societal attitudes to promote and encourage positive representations of ageing.

Policy recommendation

Policy makers and the media should work together to promote positive recommendations of ageing.

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Presenter

Emma Anderson is a PhD student in the Anton Breinl Research Centre for Health Systems Strengthening at James Cook University. As a science graduate from Glasgow University, Emma undertook research at Kings College London, The Royal Free Hospital London and Astra Zeneca. After the birth of two children, Emma changed direction, working in research governance and management both in the UK and Australia to allow more time to be spent with the family. In recent years Emma has returned to research with a particular interest in the challenges of ageing at home and the social support that is provided by both family and community especially in rural areas. This interest has been fostered by her grandparents ageing in place and the strength and the support that they provided to the family.