An Older Person and New Media in Public Discourses: Impossible Encounters?

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to consider the use and role of new media in the lives of older people. To this end, I focus on the social images of encounters between older people and new media. My focus is two-fold; on the one hand, I aim at opening the academic discussion on new media and older people to societal and structural considerations; on the other, I make an argument about the use of discourse, critical discourse analysis in particular, approaches to understand the main discourses that frame the experience of older people with new media. Thus, in this paper I question taken for granted assumptions regarding the inherent characteristics of older people that prevent them from entering the social media space. I draw on the concept of ageism to discuss the implications of this for an individual, older social media user.

Keywords: New media · Older person · Discourse · Social imaginaries

1 Introduction

The main argument of this paper is that the use of social media by older people needs to be understood in the context of societal discourses about the encounters between an older person and new media. The societal discourse of old age is understood to have overarching implications on both the personal and social experience of ageing [1–3]. The social dimension of ageing determines roles assigned to older people in a given society. Thus, age is regarded as one part of a social stratification system; it encompasses suppositions related to the appropriateness of certain social positions, which affect the behavior of a person or a group [4].

The socially constructed processes of ageing and old age are however materialized in the everyday choices and decisions made by, for, and on behalf of older people. In this, many activities and forms of behavior are coded [5] as either more or less appropriate for people who have entered the socially defined period of old age. The problem with these coding practices is that they often become naturalized and accepted as the expression of what is called 'the norm'. This is particularly visible at the level of language use. For example, a saying 'mutton dressed a lamb' is rarely questioned as inappropriate and derogatory to a person who is described in this way. Ageism is the main reason for this.

1.1 Ageism

The term 'ageism' refers to discrimination based on chronological age [6]. The term was coined in 1969 by Robert Butler, who stressed that this type of prejudice and discrimination refers to any age group, though old people are at the highest risk of being affected [7]. This "last form of discrimination" [7, p. 3], preceded by sexism and racism comprises the variety of negative attitudes towards old people. The ageing process is viewed as something that renders people unattractive, unintelligent, asexual, unemployable and mentally incompetent [4]. However, the phenomenon of ageism needs to be understood as much more than a set of attitudes because ageism "is also a complex tendency woven into the social fabric" [8, 9] that is built on age relations [10] and intersecting relationships of inequality [11].

Ageism operates at different levels, including the personal, interpersonal and structural domains of human life [12]. Its prevalence is so profound that some question even the possibility of thinking about non-ageist societies (see [13]). Ageism is a form of social oppression that produces a fear of the ageing process and uses age as a signifier of classes of people [6]. Ageism is manifested through a number of processes, including systematic stereotyping, discrimination and the reinforcement of divisions between 'us' (the young) and 'them' (the old) that are founded on the assumption of homogeneity among old people [6, 14].

Ageism is enacted in social relationships and attitudes, and it always has negative connotations, unlike age discrimination, which may have both positive and negative characteristics [7, 15, 16]. Ageism, as a form of social practice, always refers to the aged body, and there are many arenas in which ageism operates [17]. These include relationships in the labour market, welfare policies and culture [17]. Culture remains one of the major sites of ageist practices that sustain "decline ideologies" [18], which tend to reduce the experience of ageing and old age to the sense of loss, despair due to being 'defeated' by passing time.

A wide range of empirical investigations of ageism discusses its various enactments in popular culture. From birthday cards [19] to TV programs [20], newspapers and magazines [21, 22], marketing strategies [23–25], and the food and cosmetics industries [26, 27], we learn about various prejudices against ageing and old people. These studies tend to focus on linguistics practices in either talk or text to emphasize the extent to which ageist assumptions and practices find their way into everyday lives. Language remains one of the key mediators of ageism.

1.2 New Media and Ageing

According to the report published by Pew Internet Project (2013), the use of social networking sites (SNS) among 65+ Internet users increased from 13 % in 2005 to 43 % in 2013. These changes go hand in hand with increasing number of studies that examine the use of social networking sites among older people. Studies investigating older people's engagement with this type of media tend to look at reasons and experiences of using it (e.g. [28–30] as well as non-users views on why they prefer not to engage with social media (e.g. [31, 32] to recommend changes: (a) in design of social

networking sites to make it more age friendly, and (b) in the perceptions of older people regarding SNS.

Those studies point at experiences of uneasiness, fear, and embarrassment about the use of SNS as common among older people. In an overview of literature that examines the interaction of older people with SNS [33] conclude that concerns regarding privacy and unsuitability of current SNS designs are found to be the key factors that prevent older people from engaging with this type of media. These findings need to be however seen in context.

This paper draws attention to the fact that how older people engage with SNS is not only related to their personal characteristics and technical features of SNS design. To understand these encounters and their lack, we need to understand how societal discourses envision such meetings and how the use of SNS is coded in relation to age. Further to that, debates regarding the use of new media in general and SNS in particular tend to be based on representations of older people as a specific group of users/non-users who require a special attention. Although the main reason for that is a genuine concern, the reality is that such representation may lead to static and essentialist understandings of old age that not only reduce old age to a disadvantageous condition but also propagate the image of older people as a homogenous group [14], preventing us in this way from seeing an individual with her/his unique life history.

2 Discourse

Discourse is understood as a symbolic system and social order [34] that is composed of "meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects" [35, pp. 3–4]. Everything we do has some meaning that is relevant for our way of living. In other words, "discourses have implications for what we can do and what we should do" [36, p. 75], and whom we can become. For example, the discourse of ageism is created at the axes of many different practices, such as the use of discriminatory language, the production of anti-ageing face creams, and the building of age-segregated housing, to mention just a few examples. These are ready-to-go practices that show what to do to fit in and to be included. In addition, institutions and social relations take part in (re) producing certain discourses and are shaped by them. The discourse of ageism produces a divide between old-bad and young-good, which affects the ways in which old people and young people interact.

Discourses embody rules, principles, and values that, at a particular point in time and in a particular place, are crucial for the construction of social reality. These aspects of discourses are considered as normal, natural and standard. The concept of discourse allows us to understand, for example, not only why people spend money on anti-ageing treatments but also why elder abuse tends to be seen as less dangerous than other forms of abuse. The discourse of ageism constructs ageing as worthless and hazardous to people. It also explains the attempts to build segregated living areas for old people, and it sheds new light on active and positive ageing policies. These examples also highlight that discourses have *real*-life and material consequences.

2.1   Critical Discourse Analysis

The origin of critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be traced back to early 70s, when a group of British researchers initiated studies of relations existing between language, power and ideologies [37]. The concept of power and ideology lies at the core of CDA and their embodiment in discourse is used to explain life of societies, their members and cultures [38, 39]. Thus, CDA warrants the process of consciousness-raising, revealing, reflecting and transforming persistent in the societies inequalities and discriminations induced by the above [40]. Media discourse occupies the prime position within this tradition by the dint of its role in expressing, constructing and reconstructing power relations that are accustomed in the society. Its overarching scope encompasses assertions concerning representations, identities and relations among discussed groups of people and phenomena [41].

CDA emerges as a valuable framework when investigating the relationships between language, power and inequalities. Language is an indispensable part of society, in the sense that linguistic phenomena are social and vice versa [42]. The use of language is, hence, considered to be constitutive of social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge. CDA focuses on revealing how language-in-use constitutes unequal power relationships, contributes to injustice and perpetrates discrimination; at the same time, it offers insight into particularities of social change through language use. Importantly, CDA attends to the ways in which some people are given the vice while others are either silenced or neglected to discuss issues of social change.

3   An Older Person(s) and Social Networking Sites

In this section, I will consider several examples of cultural texts that touch upon the use of SNS by older people. Using the perspective of critical discourses analysis, I will discuss those examples within the context of ageist assumptions that pervade our societies. Ultimately, this section will demonstrate that even positively sounding messages, such as: "Social networking sites for older people are wonderful ways to meet and share information with like-minded people. Social networking isn't just for youngsters; there are many sites suitable for older people on a wide range of subjects" (http://socialnetworking.lovetoknow.com/Social_Networking_Site_for_Older_People) perpetuate ageism and contribute to the creation of an imaginary divide between different age groups.

3.1   'Groupism'

"Nearly two-thirds of people aged 50–64 are on Facebook, which could explain why many younger people are switching to Twitter. But many older people haven't grasped the lingo, misusing terms like LOL, believing it to mean 'lots of love' rather than 'laugh out loud.'"(Daily News, August 6, 2013).

"Although it [increasing number of older people using social media] may be bad news for younger people who don't want their parents snooping or uploading embarrassing baby photos, it's great news for marketers. (…) The key is to treat older

media users just like any other consumer – though it might be worth teaching your mum what "lol" really means." (http://www.candidsky.com/blog/social-media-and-the-older-generation/).

Articles like the above are exemplary in demonstrating the way older people and their encounters with social media are presented in public sphere. The key appears to be the imaginary war between 'the young' and 'the old' that is presented as a natural feature of intergenerational relations. The ageist assumption that underlines such images leads the authors of the first quote to conclude that as older people increase their use of Facebook, younger people lost interest in it as the site becomes associated with old age. In this way, we are indirectly presented with an image of virtual space as 'naturally' age-segregated, which does not encourage relations across generations, but is rather bound by strictly defined rules regarding who is 'in' and who is 'out'. Once the outsiders manage to enter a given space, those who are 'naturally' found are quickly promoted to look for and to create a different space that will again stave off the presence of outsiders for some time.

In the second quote, the same assumption regarding the intergenerational war is expressed in the envisioned embarrassment of younger people over, what is considered, a typical behavior of older people. According to this image, older people are apparently motived to use social media for two reasons: either monitoring their children or extending their family life onto online spheres. Older people are therefore constructed as unusual users of social media, who are above all else, different than the 'natural' social media users-younger people. This quote goes however further than this; it uses a familiar family frame to strengthen the divide between different generations. By juxtaposing parents to their children who in our culture are always presented as two binary groups, the second quote applies a family frame to present relations between SNS users of different ages. Indirectly, the link between children and the future versus parents and the past is brought to the forefront. Therefore, older people using SNS are constructed as being out of space and having little if any understanding of the rules of the game. Interestingly, both quotes use the same phrase "lol" to illustrate the incompatibility of older people and new media. Language is used to both describe this unfit and to give evidence. In this, both examples reproduce the academic discourse on 'digital immigrants and natives' [43] who speak different languages.

The difference between two quotes is that although both are based on ageist assumptions, the second one finishes on a lightly more positive note. Clearly speaking from the perspective of adult children, the authors encourage their peers to teach older people (read: older parents) how to use and understand the language of SNS. This may appear as an anti-ageist gesture. However, as Hendricks [8, p. 5]warns, this form of "benign or compassionate ageism, sometimes labeled the "poor dear" syndrome, is no less dehumanizing than its negative counterpart - either way people are viewed through a stereotypic lens". In a similar vein, slogans, such as "Older adults warm up to social networking" (http://www.techhive.com/article/2045964/older-adults-warm-up-to-social-networking.html) and "Old School, Meet New School: Seniors Tackle Social Networks" (http://www.cnbc.com/id/100537483#) may at first appear as rather positive. However, they too are based on an image of older people as distinctive 'they' who are different from the regular, if not 'normal' users. Thus, the encounter between SNS and old age seem to result in a form of 'groupism' that characterizes all older people as the same,

and portrays them as lacking knowledge and skills that are needed to effectively engage with this new type of media.

3.2   It is All in the Family

Mentioned above the family frame used to explain differences and relationships between various age groups of SNS users is commonly used to emphasize not only the specific characteristics of older people as SNS users but also to explain what motives older people to use SNS. The below quote from a blog post entitled: "Why Your Grandmother Should Use Social Media" is an example:

"Your grandkids will think you are the coolest grandma or grandpa around because you are Internet savvy!" (http://blogs.wsj.com/experts/2014/12/03/why-your-grand mother-should-use-social-media/).

Building on family relationships, this quote introduces older SNS users as grandparents. This has far reaching consequences for creating images of how and why older people should use SNS. Contrary to earlier mentioned examples, the one discussed here implies even a bigger distance between two groups of users that are separated by one generation. The image of grandchildren and grandparents is often used to idealise the family relationships and intergenerational solidarity. Particularly, 'the perfect grandma' stereotype is effectively used to create an image of older women as entirely focused on family lives and devoted to their grandchildren [44]. This is a stereotype that combines ageist and sexist assumptions about the role of older women in societies to imply which activities and spheres of life are more natural to them and which are not [45]. Seen through the family lenses, older people as grandparents are thus imagined to live for their grandchildren and use their appreciation to build self-confidences and positive images of themselves. In this way, social media is presented as a natural habitat of younger people-grandchildren, and older people-grandparents are encouraged to enter that sphere to get closer to their family members. Importantly, the whole image is often built on the ideas of inherent incompatibility between older people and social media-this is further emphasized by pointing out that those who use it are exceptional and therefore, named as "coolest" by their grandchildren.

3.3   Social Problem

In October 2013, the British Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt in one of his speeches defined the problem of loneliness among older people as "national shame" [46]. This speech triggered many discussions in the UK particularly that families were to bear greater responsibility for ensuring that their older family members will not be lonely. In May 2014, a think-tank Policy Exchange announced a report which stated that increase in the use of internet among older people could reduce loneliness in old age [47].

Independent Age, a charity organization that offers advice and support to older people in the UK and Ireland aims to combat three forms of poverty among older people: financial, social and information. Within this context, defining its problem areas, it points to the figure of 5.3. mln people aged 65+ as those who "have never been

online" (http://www.independentage.org/about-us/). In this, the use of online resources or rather lack of it appears to be as alarming as living below the poverty rate or suffering from fuel poverty.

The above helps to explain messages, such as "Get the Silver Surfers on Facebook: Experts say using social media can help prevent decline in elderly's health (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2873604/Older-people-use-Facebook-social-media-prevent-decline-health-study-finds.html#ixzz3LxmkiAPN). Increasingly, the use of SNS among older people is presented as a health issue and a social problem. In her constructionist account of social problems, Loseke [46] discusses two concepts that aid our understanding of how social problems are constructed: (a) social problem work - an activity of categorizing something and/or someone as a problem; (b) social problems game – an activity focused on convincing everyone about the seriousness, severity of a given condition or groups of people. The rhetoric that begins to unfold in policy and media discourse is indicative of the process of constructing the problem of older people not using social media. In this, many actors are involved in categorizing the lack of use of social media by older people as something that we need to be concerned with. Consequently, we are convinced that poor use of social media among older people is directly linked to loneliness and ill-health. As with any other social problem, one of its key characteristics is the assumption that things can be changed [46]. In this case, it is older people who are to change to solve their problems. There is an underlying assumption that moving online will automatically make older people happy, healthy and it will enable them to live to their full potential.

4   Concluding Remarks

The main tenet of this paper is that to understand an older person and his/her ways of engagement with social media, we need to attend to societal discourses that frame and define these types of activities. Only upon understanding social and cultural context in which an older person may or may not interact with social media, can we discuss the role of social media in everyday lives of older people.

Drawing on the concept of discourse and critical discourse analysis, this paper identified several ageist practices that pervade our thinking about encounters between an older person and social media. Continually, older people are referred to as a homogenous group, they are often presented in their family roles and in general, and their low level of engagement with social media is represented as a social problem to deal with. Against this picture, the SNS activity in itself is coded as one most appropriate for young people; older people are seen as unusual if not say 'unnatural' users.

This study is neither disputing the usefulness of social media nor claiming that access to social media is easy and straightforward. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the way in which SNS and older people became appropriated as representing and belonging to opposing poles. This, as Loos [47] demonstrates, leads to a number of misconceptions and myths surrounding the use of social media by older people. In line with this, the paper at hand posits that discourses that remove an individual replacing him/her with a group identity tend to be inaccurate, discriminatory, and decontextualized. Thus, it becomes essential to question the images of older people

(not) using SNS and invest in contextualizing the discussion. This however, as Loos [47] argues, requires not only shifting our thinking from 'digital gap' metaphors to those of 'digital landscapes', but recognizing that how and when we access new media is dependent on a variety of factors among which age is only one.

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