

Representing Old Age and Aging in Serbian Press¹

Jovana Trajković^{2,3}, Research Assistant, Faculty of Philosophy,
University of Niš, Serbia

Abstract

Demographic data clearly indicate that the global population of older individuals is reaching unprecedented levels in human history. Nevertheless, negative attitudes and stereotypes toward the elderly remain persistent. Old age is a socio-historical and cultural construct, imbued with meanings attributed to it by society. Consequently, the role of the media in shaping and reproducing representations of older people is of considerable importance. This paper examines the manner in which the topics of aging and old age are represented, as well as the portrayal of older individuals in the Serbian press on October 1st, the International Day of Older Persons. Furthermore, the aim is to determine the extent of media coverage devoted to these topics in the Serbian daily press. The analysis encompasses four daily newspapers published in Serbia: the serious informative press (*Politika* and *Danas*) and the semi-tabloids (*Večernje novosti* and *Blic*). The study includes regular issues and special supplements published on October 1st from 2019 to 2024. The findings reveal that the topics of aging and old age are marginalized; while the coverage in serious newspapers is generally professional, a sensationalist approach is evident in the semi-tabloids.

Keywords: media, representation, ageism, stereotypes, International Day of Older Persons

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Introduction

Demographic data clearly show that there will be more elderly people in the world than ever before in human history, and the beginning of this trend is the time we live in. Despite this, negative attitudes, judgment, and stereotypes towards older people remain present (Gendron et al., 2016: 997). According to estimates by the United Nations, by 2050, 1 in 6 people in the world will be over 65 years old, compared to statistics from 2019, when 1 in 11 people belonged to this category (World Population Aging 2019). When it comes to Serbia, according to the most

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² Corresponding author: jovana.trajkovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

³ ORCID: 0000-0002-4371-2716

recent population census by the Republic Institute for Statistics from 2022, the share of people aged 65 and older in the total population was slightly more than 22 percent (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2023). The observed increase in the number of elderly people in the world, as well as in Serbia⁴ (Republički zavod za statistiku, 2011), is primarily a result of advancements in science, particularly medicine and pharmacy, along with technological development that has raised standards and quality of life, leading to increased life expectancy. In addition, almost all countries are experiencing a decline in birth rates, which also contributes to the rise in the number of elderlies in the overall population (Simić, Simić, 2008: 54).

Age is a social, historical and cultural category, as it is not valued in the same way everywhere. In this sense, the question of social construction involves not only who is considered old but also what is implied by that term (Iversen, Wilinska, 2020: 124). Demography, however, views age on a global level and has very precise criteria for defining an elderly population—demographically, “old population” conventionally refers to all individuals over 65 years of age (Devedžić, Stojilković, 2015: 12). On the other hand, the social status of the elderly, which is often unfavourable, is defined by culture and social circumstances themselves. For this reason, Simone de Beauvoir states: “Society determines an old person’s place and role, taking into account their personal temperament, their sexual impotence, their experience” (de Beauvoir, 1987: 13).

What is characteristic of all discriminated groups is also characteristic for older individuals—they are spoken about in a simplified manner, through stereotypes and prejudices. Although the social group of those aged 65 and older is heterogeneous, it is often viewed as very homogeneous, with their needs, characteristics, and behaviours being attributed to every member. Since the category “elderly” encompasses individuals who can be of varying ages, whether 65 or 85, it is clear that attributing the same qualities to individuals between whom there is a generational gap can be entirely misleading. The low social awareness of the problems that ageism causes for older individuals is a consequence of discrimination that exists in many cultures of contemporary society. For this reason, Thornton emphasizes that updating our image of aging and rejecting myths about old age requires a political and philosophical commitment equivalent to that needed to overcome racism and sexism. The language, concepts, and stereotypes that support ageist myths deserve academic attention (Thornton, 2022: 311), but it is also extremely important that this issue is addressed outside the academic community, through influence on social policy and education. The media play a significant role in constructing and reproducing meanings. Therefore, it is essential to pay special attention to how older individuals are reported on, and this can be achieved by reshaping the language used when writing about this social category. This would influence the change of adopted value systems and eliminate negative feelings, such as fear, that aging and older people

⁴ According to the 2011 census by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, the proportion of people aged 65 and over was 17.4%. See more: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2012/Pdf/G201218003.pdf>.

evoke. Unlike discrimination based on immutable categories of individuals, such as gender and race, ageism is based on discrimination according to age, which is a category applicable to every living being. This fact underscores the necessity of changing existing attitudes, as “we do not all become black or white, but we all become older” (Butler, 1969: 246).

This study explores how aging and old age are represented in the Serbian press on October 1st, the International Day of Older Persons, and examines the extent of media coverage dedicated to these topics.

Theoretical Framework

Defining Ageism and Age-Based Discrimination

Robert Butler was the first to define age discrimination or ageism, describing it as the prejudice of one age group against other age groups. In his view, ageism reflects the subjective experience that accompanies the concept of the generational gap. It reflects a deep discomfort among younger individuals and middle-aged people—a personal aversion to aging, illness, and disability, as well as a fear of helplessness, “uselessness,” and death (Butler, 1969: 243). For over half a century, medical workers, social workers, and psychologists have pointed out the existence of a negative attitude towards the elderly at the individual, institutional, and socio-political levels (Simić, Simić, 2008: 54). The causes of this discriminatory perception arise from several sources, such as a lack of knowledge about the real status of older people, a lack of close interactions with the elderly, or a fear of aging that manifests as a desire to distance oneself from “old age” (Ory et al., 2003: 165).

Ageism is considered, alongside sexism and racism, one of the largest prejudices present in contemporary society. Equating these categories highlights the significance of ageism, and when these three “isms” are imposed on women and men in certain communities, their impact can be devastating (Thornton, 2022: 310). In most cases, ageism is a product and consequence of socialization. Đorđević and his collaborators state that adopting certain attitudes and behaviour models that are considered desirable in a given society can, and often does, lead to the adoption of prejudices towards aging and older individuals. They further emphasize that “the modern value system promotes ideals such as speed, change, strength, success, competition, power, beauty, and health, values that are exclusively associated with youth” (Đorđević et al., 2007: 3). In this sense, although old age is not explicitly mentioned, all of the aforementioned characteristics are the direct opposite of what aging represents, and therefore it necessarily acquires a negative connotation.

Ageism is an extremely complex phenomenon that is often insidious (Gendron et al., 2016: 997). Age-based discrimination is often very difficult to recognize because it is accepted as normal. Many forms of ageism can be easily overlooked because such forms of discrimination are very subtle and ingrained in society; they are not recognized as behaviours and thoughts based on stereotypes and prejudices

about one age group, but rather as a normal relationship between different age groups that do not think well of each other (Milojević, 2021: 120). Ageism, manifested in the form of pervasive negative attitudes towards older individuals, is widely accepted and normative in most cultures (Gendron et al., 2016: 997). In this way, prejudices against older people can be easily spread, reproduced, and transmitted to future generations. Butler notes that cultural attitudes in society only amplify the negative feelings of other age groups toward older individuals. He points out that mandatory retirement removes older individuals from the mainstream of life, and ageism also manifests itself in derogatory remarks about “old fools.” Age discrimination is evident in hiring practices, regardless of individual competencies, and is also presumed in inequalities in the allocation of research funding (Butler, 1969: 244).

Age discrimination is also contributed to by the fact that older individuals are perceived as dependent on other social groups, specifically those in middle age. Throughout history, older people have held different statuses depending on social circumstances. In the past, they were respected by younger relatives who, unlike their contemporaries, lived in community with older individuals, sharing living space and resources. The change in this pattern and the early independence of the young have led to older adults often being seen as a “burden.” The dependency ratio in economic analyses is based on fixed categories concerning individuals under 15 years old and those over 65. These two categories drive social policy and planning, and adults aged 65 and older are deemed dependent solely because social and economic analysis labels them as such, regardless of their economic productivity or social circumstances (Thornton, 2002: 308). This assertion somewhat demonstrates the view that ageism is a consequence of social constructions and socialization. In this way, changing social and public policy and education to eliminate prejudices can help remove existing stereotypes.

Discrimination against older individuals is also reflected in the area of healthcare. This is discussed by the authors (Đorđević et al., 2007), who note that medications used in the treatment of geriatric patients are not actually recommended for people in that age group. The reason for this is that most pharmaceutical companies do not consider the population over 60 when testing new drugs. The aforementioned authors conclude that the likely reason for this selection of participants is that the inclusion of individuals over 65 would show a higher number of adverse drug effects, and thus the study results would be significantly less favourable. “This is particularly important because these are medications for hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, that is, for diseases that are largely present in older age” (Đorđević et al., 2007: 3).

When discussing ageism and any other form of discrimination, the role of language is undeniable. The starting point for this specific area is provided by Norman Fairclough in his book **Language and Power**. It discusses the connections between language use and unequal power relations—social interactions are analysed in a manner that focuses on their linguistic elements and aims to reveal their generally hidden determinants within the system of social relations as well as the hidden effects they may have on that system (Fairclough, 1988: 1,5). Gendron and others (2016) discuss the language of ageism, emphasizing that language carries

and conveys meanings that perpetuate prejudices that can lead to the development of stereotypes and discrimination. They give the example of how a comment can appear as a compliment (such as addressing an older woman as “young lady”) while subtly maintaining the idea that “old” is negative. In this sense, language has power and is essential in understanding discrimination. The language of ageism is complex and can manifest through attitudes that may be perceived as positive (like the aforementioned compliment) to verbal deprecation. Moreover, the person expressing a discriminatory attitude may not be aware that they are causing offense, and simultaneously, the person receiving the message may not be aware of the underlying prejudice (Gendron et al., 2016: 997, 998).

The expression of stereotypes in communication with individuals of a different age can be seen through changes in the way younger individuals address older adults during conversations. This form of communication often originates from individuals who may hold positive attitudes towards aging but still communicate in accordance with negative stereotypes. According to the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), people adjust their communicative behaviour during social interactions (Dragojevic, Gasiorek & Giles, 2015). When addressing older individuals, Nelson identifies two main types of negative communication: over-accommodation and baby talk. In both instances, younger individuals become excessively polite, speak more slowly, and use simple sentences; however, baby talk is deemed more negative and condescending. These forms of communication are based on the stereotype that older individuals have hearing issues and diminished intellect (Nelson, 2005: 209). Such communication implies that older adults are incapable of caring for themselves and are dependent on others, which can negatively affect their social status and self-esteem. This situation further leads older individuals to withdraw into themselves and exclude themselves from social activities, accepting their new role and believing that the assumptions of younger people are correct.

Stereotypes about Older Adults

Existing stereotypes about aging marginalize the lives of older individuals and are inaccurate for the vast majority of them. Many of these prejudices are degrading and based on false images and lies, which are believed to increase the isolation, dependency, and abuse of some older adults (Thornton, 2022: 311). The stereotypes that have persisted through the years can be either positive or negative, but it is a fact that the negative ones are more numerous. Stereotyping is a product of categorizing others, and Nelson states that categories of race, gender, and age are so automatic that they are referred to as “primitive categories.” However, he observes that researchers have uncovered a great deal about racism and sexism, but relatively little about age-based prejudices and stereotypes. Age-related prejudices are among the most socially accepted and institutionalized forms of prejudice (Nelson, 2005: 207, 208).

Hummert (1990) identifies the ten most common stereotypes about older people and classifies them into the following categories: Severely Impaired, Shrew/Curmudgeon, Despondent, Self-centred, Vulnerable, Inflexible Senior Citizen, Recluse,

John Wayne Conservative, Liberal Matriarch/Patriarch, and Perfect Grandparent. Among these stereotypes, the last three are positive (John Wayne Conservative, Liberal Matriarch/Patriarch, and Perfect Grandparent), while the others are negative. This list has been supplemented in subsequent research, which highlights a positive stereotype that describes older individuals as active, healthy, sociable, sexual, and well-informed – individuals in their Golden Age (Golden Agers) (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, Strahm, 1994).

The first group of negative stereotypes is based on certain features attributed to this social group. A large number of features assigned to older adults are in complete contrast to the desirable features associated with dominant social values, and categorizing older individuals in such ways significantly hinders their functioning in society. In this context, the category of the inflexible senior citizen implies a traditional person who is difficult to change, while the egocentric stereotype refers to a greedy, demanding individual full of prejudice. A recluse is seen as quiet, living in the past, having fixed incomes, and being grateful for any help. Traits attributed to the category of the severely impaired include forgetfulness, slowness in speech and thought; this implies illness and the need for hospital care, as well as dependency on others. Similar traits are ascribed to the vulnerable, which are viewed as hypochondriacs, suspicious of strangers, and fearful of crime. Older individuals are also viewed as despondent. In this sense, they are seen as neglected and useless, lonely and impoverished. The last category classified under negative stereotypes relates to grumpy old individuals who are perceived as bitter and emotionless, those who constantly complain and are easily disturbed.

On the other hand, positive stereotypes are explained through traits that are highly valued on the scale of social values. Thus, the perfect grandparent is a generous person who loves life. They are active, healthy, full of understanding, and supportive of others. The stereotypically portrayed older person as affluent, cautious, and liberal, distinguished by their physical appearance, is characterized as a liberal matriarch/patriarch. The last stereotype known as the John Wayne Conservative describes a vital individual of mild temperament, wise and conservative, who tells stories about the past (Hummert, 1990).

Categorizing older individuals into these ten categories, although rich in various attributed features, is misguided as it overlooks the individual as a person and defines them through specific frames. Although aging has its characteristics conditioned by the natural course of life—just as various biological factors characterize different life stages—such depictions of aging affect all age groups. Likewise, all traits accompanying these stereotypes can be attributed to individuals of any age; they are universal and not bound to a specific social category. Due to such stereotypical views, older individuals can be discriminated against, but they simultaneously create aversion and disdain for aging among younger generations. Nelson (2005), in his exploration of the origins and consequences of stereotypes and prejudices against older individuals, titles his research *Ageism: Prejudice Against Our Feared Future Self*. In this sense, if the period of life that lies ahead for all members of society is viewed as exceptionally negative, and if aging is attributed with the traits previously

highlighted through stereotypes in this chapter, the influence of these stereotypes does not only affect older adults but also impacts all social layers.

Stereotypical Viewing of Older Adults

Stereotypical perceptions of older individuals lead to the emergence of myths about aging, and authors Rowe and Kahn (Rowe & Kahn, 1998; according to Ory et al., 2003) describe six of the most common myths while simultaneously presenting evidence that disproves them:

- a) *Being old means being sick* – Although the prevalence of chronic illnesses and disabilities increases with age, a large number of older adults are capable of independently performing the functions necessary for daily life well into old age.
- b) *You can't teach an old dog new tricks* – Older individuals are capable of learning new things when it comes to cognitive vitality as well as behavioural changes.
- c) *The horse has left the barn* – Adopting recommended lifestyle changes can occur even in later years, such as increasing physical activity.
- d) *The secret to successful aging is in wisely choosing one's parents* – The role of genetic factors in longevity and quality of life is relatively small; social factors and lifestyle have a much greater impact.
- e) *The light may be on, but the voltage is low* – Although interest in sexual activity declines with age, most older individuals with partners and no significant health problems remain sexually active, although the nature and frequency of such activities may change over time.
- f) *The elderlies do not pull their own weight* – Most older adults who are not employed have productive roles within their families or in society (Rowe & Kahn, 1998; according to Ory et al., 2003).

However, the fact that stereotypes are not fixed categories but can change over time is extremely significant in the context of altering discriminatory social practices that marginalize older individuals. Society's effort to improve the status of this social group is necessary to enhance their quality of life. Stereotypes and prejudices result in insufficient contact between different generations and older adults. They base their attitudes and beliefs about aging without direct communication, which could help them understand the real needs of this group. Moreover, the media play a significant role in this process; by choosing topics and methods of reporting, they influence how society perceives reality, producing new and reproducing existing social patterns.

Representing the Elderlies in the Media

Previous research on the representation of older individuals in the media has examined various types of media—traditional and online. In recent years, authors have also explored how this social group is represented on social media, which is becoming increasingly significant in the realms of information and communication. Results show that news, television, film, and advertisements typically contain stereotypes that emphasize the “burden” of aging and frame aging through the lens of

decline and diminished value. The usage of these stereotypes shapes and reinforces societal attitudes and responses to aging, resulting in low expectations for aging that affect all areas of life (UNFPA, 2012). Furthermore, when it comes to the portrayal of older adults in the media, authors emphasize that they are underrepresented relative to their share of the population (Kessler, Rakoczy, Staudinger, 2004; Ylänné, 2015; Prieler, Kohlbacher, Hagiwara, Arima, 2015).

The degree of representation of older adults in the media differs by gender. Women are particularly affected, as they can be seen as a more discriminated group on this basis. Additionally, the degree of representation is directly associated with age—older individuals are less represented in the media (Kessler et al., 2004: 354). This media practice significantly influences how the marginalized group is perceived by society, and the choice of actors in the media plays a role in determining who has the right to participate in public debate. Thus, insufficient representation hinders discussions about the needs of marginalized groups (Jürgens, Meltzer, Scharkow, 2022).

In representing any social group, the roles in which its members are depicted are equally important. When older adults appear in the media, especially in advertisements, they are not represented as “human beings” but rather appear for a specific purpose. This purpose is usually to support the qualities, roles, or products associated with age (Ylänné, 2015). Furthermore, the visual representation of marginalized groups is extremely important, considering that visual news has unique properties compared to other reporting methods, making it a more effective and influential bearer of meaning (Joffe, 2008). Images of older adults are particularly important in providing visibility to this historically marginalized topic, and a study by Thompson and his collaborators focused on the visual representations of elderly care showed that this subject is often represented in a decontextualized, trivial, and unrepresentative manner (Thompson et al., 2022).

However, certain contemporary authors in their research come to conclusions indicating a change in media practices regarding the portrayal of aging. Although older adults are still underrepresented in the media relative to their demographic percentage, they appear more frequently and are depicted in more acceptable ways compared to data from previous decades (Prieler et al., 2015). The exclusively negative portrayal of older individuals is changing (Uotila, Lumme-Sandt, Saarenheimo, 2010). Investigating how the Finnish press represents older adults, Uotila and his colleagues conclude that, in addition to traditional images of aging—viewed either as a time of weakness and loss or as a time of wisdom and experience—there exists a third, new stream. This new image represents successful aging, attributing qualities such as continuous activity and timelessness. Despite the changes in exclusively negative depictions of older adults in the media, patterns still exist in which they are represented negatively—where aging is associated with attributes of loneliness and illness, completely excluding the possibility that frail and sick older individuals can be socially active (Uotila et al., 2010: 121).

Xu (2020) examines the content on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, about older people, which has become important for understanding media representations of older individuals. The study explores how Swedish authorities visually depict older adults on Facebook compared to other age groups, showing that

the representation is not diverse: older individuals, including those in nursing homes, are predominantly portrayed as socially engaged and moderately physically active, which does not align with the prevailing negative stereotypes about older people. Additionally, this study argues that older individuals are depicted as inferior to younger people in terms of physical and technological competence (Xu, 2020: 719).

Nevertheless, the majority of authors in our region primarily report a negative representation of older people, as well as their inadequate presence in the media. Authors Perišin and Kufin, in their research, focus on ageism in the informative programs of Croatian television. They conclude that older individuals are relatively rarely depicted, and particularly rarely as active or socially recognized (Perišin & Kufin, 2009: 30). In the context of the media and public sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina, research shows that older individuals are marginalized in two ways: through the exclusion of this population from reporting and the public sphere in general, and by minimizing their significance in society by reducing reports about older individuals to trivial and socially unimportant topics (Baraković & Mahmutović, 2018: 31). Regarding research in Serbia, authors Simeunović Bajić and Manić (2015) conclude that Serbian media do not sufficiently address the issues of older adults, aging, and age. Older individuals remain almost invisible, and when they are visible, they are often portrayed stereotypically alongside numerous prejudices about their inferiority, passivity, and undesirability (Simeunović Bajić & Manić, 2015: 101).

The common conclusion of most studies is that older individuals are underrepresented in the media and are most often depicted through negative imagery. Such media practices marginalize and isolate individuals who belong to this social group, who are already excluded from many social activities due to their age. Therefore, changes are necessary in the realm of information; more media space is required to promote aging and to adopt a culture of aging through media literacy for the public (Zovko & Vukobratović, 2017: 121).

Methodological Framework

The subject of this work is to examine how the theme of aging and age is represented, as well as how older individuals are depicted in the Serbian press on October 1st, when the International Day of Older Persons is observed. The goal of the research is to determine how much media space these media outlets dedicate to reporting on older people, aging, and age. Additionally, the aim is to ascertain whether these topics are reported in a stereotypical manner and which stereotypes are most prevalent. Through quantitative and qualitative content analysis, we have attempted to establish in which sections the mentioned topics most commonly appear, whether the articles are accompanied by photographs, and what significance is attributed to these articles considering the page number on which they appear. We also examined the typical length of articles and the genres journalists use when writing about these topics, as well as the authors' value judgments.

The analysis includes four daily newspapers circulating in Serbia—*Politika*, *Danas*, *Večernje novosti*, and *Blic*. This selection was made because these newspapers

have different editorial policies: *Politika* and *Danas* are categorized as serious news publications, while *Večernje novosti* and *Blic* are considered semi-tabloids. The issues of these newspapers, along with their special supplements, published on October 1st in the years 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024, were analysed. The choice of years is based on the aim to cover a recent period, with an emphasis on possible changes in media reporting on issues related to older adults over the past few years. The choice of October 1st as the focal point for analysis is directed towards the observance of the International Day of Older Persons, which represents a key opportunity for media coverage on aging issues, the social challenges faced by older adults, and the institutional responsibilities of society towards this population.

The International Day of Older Persons is celebrated every year on October 1. It was first celebrated in 1991, following the United Nations General Assembly's proclamation on September 14, 1990, to declare this day as the International Day of Older Persons, as stated in Resolution 46/106 (Zungu, 2022). International days provide opportunities for the broader public to be educated about significant issues, to mobilize political will and resources to tackle global problems (UN⁵). In this sense, the International Day of Older Persons aims to focus public attention on the status and problems faced by older adults, ensuring that development for all age groups and dignified aging are facilitated.

To improve the lives of older people, their families, and the communities in which they live, last year saw the launch of the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030). This involves global cooperation that brings together governments, civil society, international agencies, professionals, the academic community, media, and the private sector—all with the understanding that older adults often lack access to even basic resources necessary for a dignified life and face multiple barriers that prevent their full participation in society (World Health Organization).

The unit of analysis in this research consists of newspaper articles that explicitly mention age, the years of individuals, or in which the context clearly indicates that the journalist is writing about an older person. Texts in which age is not mentioned (e.g., articles about famous personalities who are older but without mentioning their age) are not included in the analysis, as they are not directly related to the topic of aging. The research corpus includes all articles published in the newspapers during the specified period that pertain to aging, the lives and problems of older individuals, and the International Day of Older Persons.

Results and Discussion

During the analysed period, a total of 1,639 articles were published in *Danas*, *Politika*, *Blic*, and *Večernje novosti*. Out of these, 66 articles relate to the themes of aging, older individuals, and the International Day of Older Persons, which constitutes 4.03% of the total content. Additionally, the largest number of articles (40) appeared

⁵ For more information, see: <https://www.un.org/en/UN-system/ageing> (Accessed March 3, 2025)

in special supplements bearing the same title—*Treće doba* (Third Age), published by *Danas* (27, 6.64% of *Danas*' total) and *Večernje novosti* (13, 2.49% of *Večernje novosti*'s total). Considering that October 1st was specifically chosen to mark the International Day of Older Persons with the aim of directing public attention to the problems faced by older individuals, we conclude that this topic is not sufficiently represented in either serious print media or semi-tabloids, and that the issues of older individuals are marginalized.

Out of the total number of articles, *Politika* published 437 articles, *Danas* 407, *Blic* 272, and *Večernje novosti* 523. The largest number of articles pertaining to the themes covered in this research was published in *Danas* (31 articles, 7.62%) and *Večernje novosti* (21 articles, 4.01% of total), while significantly fewer articles were noted in *Politika* (10 articles, 2.29% of total) and *Blic* (4 articles, 1.47% of total) (Table 1).

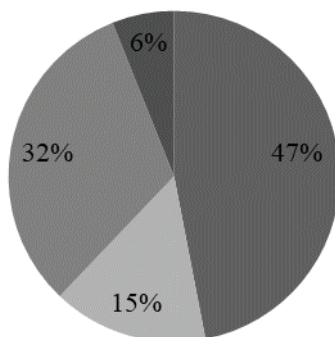
Table 1: Newspaper Coverage of Aging Topics

| Newspaper | Total Articles | Articles on Aging |
|------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Danas | 407 | 31 (7.62% of total) |
| Politika | 437 | 10 (2.29% of total) |
| Blic | 272 | 4 (1.47% of total) |
| Večernje novosti | 523 | 21 (4.01% of total) |

The Graph 1 illustrates the distribution of articles on aging and old age across four daily newspapers. *Danas* accounts for the largest share with 47% of all identified articles, followed by *Večernje novosti* with 32%. *Politika* contributed 15% of the articles on this topic, while *Blic* had the smallest share, with only 6%. These percentages reflect the extent to which each newspaper engaged with the themes of aging and old age within the analyzed sample.

Graph 1: Distribution of Articles on Aging and Old Age by Newspaper

■ Danas ■ Politika ■ Večernje novosti ■ Blic



Thus, 62% of the articles were published in serious informative media, while in the semi-tabloids, this percentage was almost half, amounting to 38%. Based on the statistics, we can conclude that serious informative media pay more attention to the problems of older individuals; however, the semi-tabloid *Večernje novosti* published a significantly higher number of articles on these topics compared to the serious informative newspaper *Politika*. In this regard, the newspapers *Danas* and *Večernje novosti* published the largest number of articles. The fact that these editorial teams are attentive to these issues is illustrated by the fact that both newspapers published the supplement *Treće doba* on October 1st, with *Danas* publishing it in 2019, 2020, and 2021, while *Večernje novosti* featured it only in 2019. It is important to note that the articles published in *Večernje novosti* (outside of the supplement) are exclusively very short or of medium length, whereas *Politika* has a larger number of long articles.

The analysis of media reporting on the topics of old age and aging shows a tendency to decrease the number of published texts during the observed period. The largest number of texts on this topic was recorded in 2019 (43.94%). During 2020, the number of published texts almost doubled - a total of 21.21% were published. The same values were recorded in 2021, while in 2022 the number of published texts dropped to 7.58%. This downward trend continued in the following years, and only 2 texts (3.03%) were published in 2023, while a slight increase to 4 texts (6.06%) was recorded in 2024. These data indicate a declining media interest in issues of age and aging during the analysed period. In addition, in the analysed period, a gradual abolition of special allowances on the occasion of the International Day of Older Persons was observed. One of the possible reasons for the decrease in media attention to the topics of age and aging may be the increased focus of the media on reporting on the epidemiological situation caused by the Covid-19 virus. Although the elderly were among the most vulnerable groups during the pandemic, the number of published texts on this topic did not increase even in the post-pandemic period, which may indicate a long-term decline in media interest in this population.

Given that the texts published in the special supplements differ from the texts on the pages of the regular edition, they will first be analysed separately. When it comes to texts that were published outside of special supplements (25), the largest number belongs to the section *Društvo (Society)* (44%), followed by *Hronika (Crime section)* (16%), while four texts (16%) were published in the section *Belgrade*. One text each was recorded in the sections *Politika*, *Ljudi*, *Aktuelno*, *Beogradska hronika*, *Ekonomija and Globus (Politics, People, Latest, Belgrade Chronicle, Economy and Globe)*.

Texts published in the *Society* column predominantly deal with the International Day of the Elderly, where they most often rely on statistical data and official statements about the need to adapt society to demographic changes and the growing number of elderly people. However, they lack a deeper analysis of the problems faced by the elderly population. In the dailies *Blic* and *Večernje novosti*, a sensationalist way of reporting on the elderly is noticeable, with these articles predominantly placed in the Crime section. The newspaper *Blic* only publishes information about the

celebration of the International Day of the Elderly in the 2023 issue, while the other articles published in the analysed period place the elderly in the context of victims. Also, the authors of the texts refer to elderly female members as “grandmothers”, thus approaching the aforementioned negative types of communication (excessive kindness) and implying the dependence of elderly persons (Nelson, 2005).

The distribution of texts about elderly people in the analysed daily newspapers indicates their limited importance within the editorial policy. Most of the texts were published in the central part of the newspaper (pages 8–17), while they were absent from the cover and front pages, which suggests that this topic is not given a high priority. This distribution may indicate that age and aging are primarily treated as social issues, rather than as political or economic topics of wider public interest. Given that readers pay the most attention to the cover and front pages, this positioning may contribute to a lower visibility and impact of topics related to the elderly.

Short texts dominated the analysed sample, considering that there were the most of them (56%), while the number of medium-length texts was 5 (20%), and long texts 6 (24%). Almost all texts are signed, and the value attitude of the author is mostly neutral. Media content related to the elderly and the topic of aging was mostly packaged as news (48%) or reports (40%), while only 3 articles (12%) were observed. Long texts of analytical genres are not present in media practice when it comes to reporting on this topic, while a more complex approach is necessary for topics that require raising social awareness and adjusting living conditions for all citizens. These facts lead to the conclusion that the elderly receive limited media space and are marginalized. This is supported by the fact that, in the majority of cases, elderly people are the subject of reports, often appearing in sensationalist texts in which they are portrayed as victims of violence. For example, headlines such as *They were hitting and throwing me for 3000 dinars* (*Večernje novosti*, October 1, 2019) and *The Prosecution is investigating who beat the grandmother* (*Blic*, October 1, 2019) illustrate this tendency. On the other hand, content in which the elderly person appears as a subject was observed in *Politika*, where the approach to the topic is professional and responsible, giving a voice to older individuals. For example, headlines such as *The pandemic changed the view of old age* (*Politika*, October 1, 2020) and *Cheerful spirit and dedicated work – the secret of longevity* by Jovanka Videnović (*Politika*, October 1, 2024) illustrate this approach. Despite the fact that the analysed press was published on October 1st, there are still texts that portray elderly people stereotypically and place them in the context of victims (through stereotypes of *severely damaged, depressed, vulnerable*), which is why this practice indicates an insufficiently professional approach to such topics.



Photo 1: Elderly men in public space, almost turned away, portrayed without active roles - *Večernje novosti*, October 1, 2023, Page 7



Photo 2: Older men depicted passively, reinforcing invisibility - *Večernje novosti*, October 1, 2024, Page 7

The visual representation of aging and the elderly is equally important, and most of the texts (68%) are accompanied by a photo. However, the way this group is visually depicted can be characterized as stereotypical. The pattern of photos depicting the elderly does not differ in the semi-tabloids and the serious news press, with the fact that in 2019 both semi-tabloids featured a photo of an injured elderly woman with facial bruising. The dominant images of the elderly are photos in which individuals are not active, and photos in which their backs are turned stand out in particular (Photo 1, Photo 2). They refer to the loneliness and isolation of the elderly, and their faces are not visible, which suggests their invisibility in society and reproduces existing stereotypes. Despite the fact that the number of years implies certain risks, it is necessary for the elderly to be represented in other aspects of life in which they have active roles.

On the other hand, the eponymous special supplement of the *Third Age*, published by *Danas* and *Večernje novosti*, represents a more significant example of journalistic practice in reporting on aging and the elderly, although there are differences in their approaches. The daily newspaper *Danas* printed this supplement in 2019, with 10 published texts, in 2020 with 11 texts, and in 2021 with 6 texts. Various topics are covered, and the tone of the texts can be interpreted as critically directed towards society, which has the responsibility to react and improve living conditions so that all its members have the opportunity for a dignified life. This is reflected in articles such as *Through intergenerational appreciation, we must show how mature we are as a society* (*Danas*, October 1, 2019), *Employees in social care are forgotten, the system is neglected* (*Danas*, October 1, 2020), and *The media sporadically follows topics about older people, there are no critical texts* (*Danas*, October 1, 2020). With this way of reporting, the responsibility for the maladjustment of the elderly and their isolation is justifiably attributed to society, thereby empowering the elderly. In addition, the elderly individuals are not stereotypically represented as inactive,

depressed and sick, but are shown in roles in which they contribute to society and are physically active within certain limits. This is illustrated by articles such as *Half a century of volunteering by Danica Šmić* (Danas, October 1, 2020), *Nordic walking increasingly popular, age is no obstacle* (Danas, October 1, 2020), and *How old crafts and craftsmen survive in the modern world* (Danas, October 1, 2021). In the Third Age, unlike the texts published in the same issues and outside the supplement, the interview appears as a genre (Danas, October 1, 2020: *Branka Petrić: I found great freedom in the third age*; Danas, October 1, 2021: *CORAX: The characters are getting worse and worse, there is still a lot of work for me*). This fact is highly positive because older people appear as subjects who talk about themselves and their age. The direct visibility of members of marginalized groups is extremely important in the context of improving the position of the entire group.

The supplement of the same name was printed in *Večernje novosti* only in 2019. The texts (70%) published in the supplement are long and the authors are well-known, which is common to the supplements of both newspapers that publish them. However, what is noticeable is the use of positive and negative stereotypes in reporting. This fact is illustrated by the title *Grandparents Love, Parents Care* (*Večernje novosti*, 2019) which supports the stereotype of *the perfect grandparent*. The texts with the titles *Work comes before father and mother* (*Večernje novosti*, 2019) and *How to make two dinars out of one* (*Večernje novosti*, 2019) indicate the isolation and loneliness of the elderly, which illustrates the following stereotypes - *solitary, vulnerable, depressed*. In addition, sensationalism is also noticeable in the headline *150 people in Serbia older than 100* (*Večernje novosti*, 2019). Although *Večernje novosti* dedicated a lot of its space to the topics of aging and old age compared to other analysed newspapers, its approach can be characterized as stereotypical. Given that stereotypical attitudes can cause discrimination, it is necessary for the media image of the elderly to be non-stereotypical.

Conclusion

The media are the basic tool for disseminating information and their task is to provide their users with information necessary for orientation and decision-making in everyday life. Media images shape the social, political, economic and cultural environment and these images influence citizens to determine which topics are relevant. In this sense, the media create a context within which age and aging are understood.

In the analysed media, the elderly individuals are marginalized. In this way, this social group is excluded from the public space, and the stereotypes that cause isolation are maintained and reproduced. Having in mind that one of the roles of the media is to point the citizens' attention to problems and suggest a democratic society, it is necessary that they approach these topics professionally. The results of the research showed that the serious informative press gave more space to the topics that are the subject of the work, while in the case of semi-tabloids, in addition to insufficient representation, sensationalist and unethical reporting is also present. The

most prevalent were the negative stereotypes that Hummert (1994) categorizes as *severely damaged, vulnerable, lonely and depressed*, and the positive stereotype of the *perfect grandfather/grandmother* was also noted. Especially significant are the special supplements that indicate that the importance of a professional approach has been recognized in the editing.

It is important to emphasize that the corpus of research included numbers published on the first of October, when the International Day of the Older Persons is celebrated, and it is necessary to examine to what extent these topics are represented and how they are approached under normal conditions.

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Predstavljanje starosti i starenja u srpskoj štampi

Jovana Trajković, Istraživač saradnik, Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Nišu, Srbija

Apstrakt

Demografski podaci jasno pokazuju da će na svetu starijih ljudi biti više nego ikada u ljudskoj istoriji. Uprkos tome, negativni stavovi i stereotipi prema njima su i dalje prisutni. Starost je društveno-istorijska i kulturološka kategorija i nosi ona značenja koje joj društvo pripisuje. Zbog toga je uloga medija u stvaranju i reprodukciji slike starijih veoma značajna. Predmet ovog rada je ispitati na koji je način predstavljena tema starosti i starenja, kao i to kako su prikazane starije osobe u srpskoj štampi prvog oktobra kada se obeležava Međunarodni dan starijih osoba. Pored toga, cilj rada je utvrditi koliko medijskog prostora srpska štampa koristi kako bi izveštavala o starijim osobama, starosti i starenju. Analiza obuhvata četiri dnevna lista koja izlaze na teritoriji Srbije – ozbiljnu informativnu štampu *Politiku* i *Danas*, kao i polutabloide *Večerenje novosti* i *Blic*. Analizirani su brojevi i njihovi specijani dodaci koji su izašli prvog oktobra od 2019. do 2024. godine. Rezultati pokazuju da su teme starenja i starosti marginalizovane i dok je izveštavanje ozbiljne informativne štampe uglavnom profesionalno, u polutabloidima je prisutan senzacionalistički pristup.

Ključne reči: mediji, reprezentacija, ejdžizam, stereotipi, Međunarodni dan starijih osoba

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