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The vulnerable old-old *versus* the dynamic young-old: recurring types in the representation of older people on television

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Abstract

Research shows that older people tend to not only be underrepresented on television (TV), but also to be represented within a number of fixed types. These correspond to cultural myths about ageing, which emphasise vulnerability and decline but also increasingly stress the individual's responsibility for successful ageing. This paper analyses the representation of older people on Flemish public TV, using qualitative content analysis to identify patterns of representation in a sample of 44 programmes broadcast in 2019 and 2020, including the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. To complement our own analysis, we also interviewed eight experts on ageing. Our research shows that representations of older people on Flemish public TV tend to gravitate towards two types related to different age groups: vulnerable and passive old-old people (over 80 years old), particularly those in nursing homes who feature prominently in reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic; and dynamic and active young-old people (65–80 years old), connected to the ideals of successful ageing. The two predominant types correspond to cultural myths about ageing and are also connected to recurrent themes: sexual intimacy, loneliness and death. Our research highlights the need for a more diverse representation, reflecting the variety of individual life conditions and the functional age of older people.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, from its start in early 2020, hit the older population very hard. In Belgium, the country this paper focuses on, 54 per cent of the casualties up to 2 June 2020 were 85 or older (Sciensano, 2020), and 56.9 per cent of the COVID-19 casualties up to 14 February 2021 were residents of residential and nursing homes (Sciensano, 2021). This led to an unprecedented media focus on older people, also on television (TV), but in a limited set of roles: often frail or ill people over 80, in hospitals and residential and nursing homes. This raises

questions about the representation of older people: Is this how they are typically represented in the media? And do these representations reflect the broad range and diversity of older people and their experiences?

In this paper, we discuss the results of a research project on TV representations of older people. While our prime focus was not on the pandemic, the period we studied, from 1 July 2019 to 30 April 2020, partly overlapped with the pandemic. As a result, we could observe how patterns and problems of representation before the pandemic evolved during the pandemic. The main focus of our research is on the issue of representation in 'normal' times, but we do reflect on the particularities of representations during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper starts by discussing the international literature on the media representation of older people, as a framework for our qualitative analysis of TV representations of older people on public TV in Flanders, the northern, Dutch-language region in Belgium. To complement our own analysis, we also conducted eight interviews with Flemish experts on ageing. Based on these two sources, we identified a number of patterns and recurring types in the representation of older people, as well as themes which were often connected to them.

Older people in society

The term 'older people' refers to an extensive and heterogeneous group of adults. 'Age' itself can be defined in different ways (de Medeiros, 2017). In official statistics, 'older people' in Belgium are defined as people aged 65 or older. This definition of older people can either refer to the number of years lived from birth (biologically speaking) or, more dynamically, to a societal age bracket to determine the rights, responsibilities and social status of people of a certain age. For instance, the legal retirement age in Belgium will be raised from 65 to 67 years in 2030 (Federale Pensioendienst, nd). However, neither interpretation acts as a clear indicator of how (in)dependent, (in)active or (un)healthy an individual is (Lodge *et al.*, 2016). A functional definition of age allows for such individual diversification, by recognising that the process of ageing is an individual experience, related to physical, mental and social changes.

While this paper acknowledges the importance of highlighting the individual and varying experiences of ageing, for practical reasons the age group discussed is limited to people of 65 or older, *i.e.* people over the current retirement age in Belgium. Similarly, while we recognise the limitations of grouping older people into fixed social categories with concomitant biological characteristics, research does show that on average people need more help and care the older they get (Baltes and Smith, 2003). Hence, where useful we will further distinguish between 'young-old people' (aged 65–80) and 'old-old people' (over 80), following similar age categorisations from gerontological and geriatric research (*e.g.* Neugarten, 1974; Cohen-Mansfield *et al.*, 2013).

Societal discourses mostly focus on the assumed limitations and risks of the ageing process. In Belgium, as in many other European countries, demographic evolutions lead to the 'greying' of the population. Discourses focus on an increasing proportion of older people who are not active on the job market (De Baere *et al.*, 2017), challenging the current socio-economic system (Lodge *et al.*, 2016) and leading to an increasing pressure on the health system. Consequently, societal

discourses about ageing and the 'greying' population appear to be shaped by *cultural myths*, understood here as a consistent set of presuppositions about older people (de Medeiros, 2017), perpetuating a narrative that emphasises processes of decline and/or potentially concealing alternative perspectives on ageing (*e.g.* Rowe and Kahn, 1998; Thornton, 2002; Hilt and Lipschultz, 2005).

Based on existing literature, at least six such myths can be distinguished. A first myth considers ageing as a kind of disease, equalling old age with decay, illness and death. A second myth identifies genetic predisposition as the secret to successful ageing, implying that everyone has a genetic 'expiry date' which is hard to change. A third myth suggests that older people are unable or unwilling to change bad health-related habits (*e.g.* smoking) and that it is too late anyway to see positive effects. A fourth, related myth is that older people are stuck in their social attitudes and opinions, and that it is not possible or valuable to let them try something new. A fifth myth equals ageing with decline on all aspects of physical, mental and social life: older people are predetermined to become asexual, senile, depressed and lonely. A final myth emphasises the supposed economic cost of older people, who are considered to be poor, incapable and an economic burden.

Taken together, these myths reduce older people and ageing to a narrow set of negative characteristics and experiences, presenting them as a burden on society. At the same time, by framing older people as unwilling or unable to maintain their physical, mental, economic and social capacities, these myths also imply that it is a matter of choice and responsibility of older individuals to actively slow down these negative consequences of ageing. Despite the overwhelming focus on the challenges of an ageing population, there is also an alternative discourse, focusing on the opportunities created by older age (Lodge *et al.*, 2016), for instance in terms of expertise and experience.

From the 1990s, the cultural understanding of ageing has partly shifted with the emergence of discourses on 'successful ageing' (Rowe and Kahn, 1997) and World Health Organization (WHO) policies on 'active ageing' (WHO, 2002). These discourses emphasise the possibility of older people working on their physical and mental health and pursuing an active and independent lifestyle (Rowe and Kahn, 1997; de Medeiros, 2017). Nonetheless, a sweepingly positive account of ageing is not without risks. While the notion of active ageing emphasises the importance of supporting policies, discourses on successful ageing stress the responsibility of older individuals. This not only highlights their agency, but also risks marginalising those who do not conform to the new ideal of active older people (Loos and Ivan, 2018). This dual discourse, of ageing as a threat and limitation, on the one hand, and as an opportunity, on the other hand, also recurs in TV representations of older people, as will be developed in the next section.

Older people on TV

To start, it is important to note the underrepresentation of older people on TV. Content analyses in Europe, the United States of America and Asia found that older people are less present on screen than in society, both on prime-time TV (Signorielli, 2001, 2004; Kessler *et al.*, 2004; Daalmans and ter Horst, 2017) and in TV advertising (Roy and Harwood, 1997; Simcock and Sudbury, 2006; van

Selm *et al.*, 2007; Prieler, 2012; Ylänne, 2015). This 'symbolic annihilation' (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Rodan and Ellis, 2016) on TV seems to suggest that older people matter less to society in general. It also puts a 'burden of representation' (Cruikshank, 2018) on the few older people on TV, who are expected to represent their whole age group.

The underrepresentation of older people on TV is exacerbated by recurrent patterns of representation. TV representations of older people often verge on stereotyping, as they are often represented with a fixed set of characteristics (Dyer, 1993). Stereotyping involves the reduction of a group to a few dominant characteristics, while those not corresponding to the social norm are excluded (Hall, 1997). This is related to processes of age-related discrimination or 'ageism' (Mason *et al.*, 2010; Luther *et al.*, 2018; WHO, nd). On TV this takes on the form of 'visual ageism', when media represent older people in an unrealistic, caricatural or homogeneous way (Loos and Ivan, 2018).

Media representations of older people tend to confirm the mostly negative cultural myths about older people and ageing. For instance, research shows that older people are often associated with negative themes on TV, such as health issues (*e.g.* Van Gorp, 2013; Luther *et al.*, 2018). Three themes in particular are often connected to older people. The first is the issue of *intimacy and sexual intimacy*, which connects to the cultural myth of older people as asexual beings and reflects a social taboo on expressions of intimacy and sexual intimacy among older people (Gott, 2005). Research on media representations of sexual intimacy discloses a presupposition about ageing: sexual decline is seen as a symptom of ageing, while sexual activity is considered a sign of successful ageing (Wada *et al.*, 2015; Montemurro and Chewning, 2018). This simplified presupposition disregards the diverse situations, preferences and capacities in the experience of intimacy and sexual intimacy among older people. A second theme often connected to ageing is the changing social network of older people, leading to *loneliness and social isolation*. This is also identified as a social presupposition in the gerontological literature, the tendency to consider the social relations of older people to be deteriorating, which leads to isolation and loneliness (Rowe and Kahn, 1998). A third recurring theme connected to ageing is the *end of life* and the taboo of death. In the media, representations of death were long situated in the private sphere, but the matter seems to be gaining visibility (Hanusch, 2010).

Despite recurrent negative portrayals of older people and their connection to particular themes and taboos, research also observed positive evolutions. For instance, Dutch research by Lepianka (2015), while confirming the connection of older people to particular negative themes, did find that people over 55 were represented more positively than young adults (15–35) and were often portrayed as warm and honest. Similarly, a German study (Kessler *et al.*, 2004) found that people over 60 were represented positively in prime-time TV drama. Indeed, since the 2000s researchers have observed a shift in Western media discourses, which attribute more positive characteristics to (mostly younger) older people and represent them as active, lively and healthy (Loos and Ivan, 2018).

This positive representation corresponds to a 'counter-frame' identified by Van Gorp (2013), who studied representations of older people across different Belgian media types. He found that media often rely on four problematising frames to

represent older people, connecting them to decline, helplessness, loss of autonomy and intergenerational conflict. However, he also found alternative counter-frames which highlight the opportunities offered by a higher age, the social role of older people, exceptional realisations by older people, intergenerational relations and ageing as self-development. These counter-frames can verge on positive stereotyping, in particular by idealising the older age as 'golden years'.

Methodology

This paper reports on a research project investigating the representation of older people and ageing on Flemish public service TV. This project was funded by public service broadcaster VRT (Vlaamse Radio-en Televisieomroeporganisatie), as part of their endeavours to better represent social diversity and to train production staff. The research was done independently by the authors who are all academic researchers specialised in media and diversity. The project was guided by two research questions:

RQ1: How are older people and ageing represented in VRT TV programmes?
RQ2: How do experts on ageing perceive the representation of older people and ageing in VRT TV programmes?

The first question was answered using qualitative content analysis, investigating which (kinds of) older people were represented and how they were represented. As mentioned above, we defined 'older people' as people of 65 years and older, adopting the age category also used by VRT itself. To avoid slipping into stereotypical preconceptions about ageing, we opted to only include programmes where the age of the older people that were represented was either mentioned, or where the subject matter was a reasonably certain indicator of their age group. For analytical purposes, we also opted to exclude programmes with only non-speaking older actors. We studied only new programmes produced by or for VRT and broadcast between 1 July 2019 and 30 April 2020. To ascertain a sample reflecting the diversity of contexts in which older people are represented, we deliberately selected programmes on VRT's three channels (Eén, Canvas and children's channel Ketnet) and across different genres. This resulted in a sample of 44 analysed episodes or segments (such as news items or reports) belonging to different genres: 11 news and current affairs, 29 infotainment (including talk shows, reality TV, human-interest programmes and game shows) and four fiction. As our focus was not on the quantity but on the quality of representations, we deliberately aimed to include a number of programmes portraying underrepresented groups such as old-old people, along with ethnic and sexual minorities. We also deliberately included seven episodes or segments dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in order to explore how these did (not) fit wider patterns of representation.

The programmes were analysed using a qualitative coding grid with four sections. First, we noted information about the programme such as the channel and genre. Second, we took notes on the themes of the programme, in particular the aspects of ageing it focused on (*e.g.* physical and mental health, economic or social issues). Third, we analysed the older actors in the programme, in terms of socio-

demographic characteristics and role in the programme. To avoid overreliance on – potentially stereotypical – contextual cues, we opted to rely only on explicit statements made in the programme. For instance, to further determine age brackets, we relied on either explicit references made to their age or age-related statements (such as mentions of historical events older actors were present at, mentions of the time since retirement, *etc.*). Fourth, we studied the way other actors interacted with older people, for instance the way they talked to or about them. In all of this, we both described what was happening on screen, and the way it was represented in terms of image, sounds and language use. This first round of qualitative coding, jointly done by the first and second authors, led to extensive analytical notes on each individual programme, which were then further analysed in more depth and contextualised (for instance within a particular genre), looking for patterns and connections with existing research on the topic. As our sample was not random nor representative in quantitative terms, we will refrain from quantifying the patterns found, instead focusing on their characteristics.

To answer the second question, which asks how experts on ageing perceive the representation of older people and ageing in VRT programmes, we conducted eight expert interviews. In recruiting people for the interview, we aimed for a mix of people working in organisations for older people, gerontologists and hands-on experts. Four experts worked for associations for older people (two of whom were specialised in communication), three were gerontologists or researchers on ageing, and one was a retired TV journalist. Three of these experts were aged over 65.

The online interviews were conducted by the first author in June and July 2020. In preparation for the interview, the participants were asked to watch four segments of the programmes we analysed, from different genres and presenting older people from different age groups in a variety of roles. During the interview, which was semi-structured, the researcher first asked general questions about the representation of older people, particularly in VRT programmes. Next, the four segments were discussed, focusing on good practices and problems of representation. Finally, some specific issues were raised in relation to the diversity of representations and the representation of older people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were used as an additional source for the interpretation of the representations we analysed. To safeguard their anonymity, we will refer to the experts by number (1–8).

Public service media in Flanders

Before discussing the results, it is important to provide some context on the specific broadcaster analysed here. The research is set in Flanders, the northern, Dutch-language region of Belgium with about 6.5 million inhabitants. Belgium has two public broadcasters, based on the country's main languages (Dutch and French). The Flemish public service broadcaster VRT is regulated by five-year contracts with Flemish government, which stipulate its obligations in return for government funding. The relevant 2016–2020 management contract did not contain quantitative targets for the representation of older people, but it did refer to age and other forms of diversity in several ways. One strategic goal for the public broadcaster was to be attentive to diversity, to address everyone and to give a

Table 1. Older people on VRT television in prime time

	Age 65–80	Age 80+
	Percentages	
2017	3.4	0.3
2018	3.3	0.6
2019	5.2	0.7
2020	5.7	1.4

Source: De Swert *et al.* (2020).

'representative, non-stereotypical, gender neutral and nuanced representation of all segments of society' (Vlaamse Gemeenschap and VRT, 2016: 15). The contract also stipulated that first channel Eén had to address a 'broad mix of ages', 'from young to old' (Vlaamse Gemeenschap and VRT, 2016: 58).

Diversity in the VRT offerings is tracked through an annual Diversity Monitor, a quantitative content analysis executed by researchers at the University of Antwerp. Although there are no formal targets for the representation of older people, age is monitored as one aspect of diversity, beside gender, ethnicity and socio-economic class. In line with international research, the 2019 Diversity Monitor found that people over 65 are underrepresented in VRT TV programmes. Across the three TV channels, 5.2 per cent of the actors on screen in prime time were young-old people (65–80) as opposed to 13.9 per cent in the Flemish population, and only 0.7 per cent were old-old (over 80), as opposed to 6.1 per cent in the population (De Swert *et al.*, 2020). It is important to note that these numbers predate the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a larger on-screen presence of older people in 2020, as indicated in Table 1.

VRT also has several internal diversity policies, most centrally the Diversity Charter which stipulates general guidelines in relation to audience address, representation and employment. Older people are not explicitly mentioned but are implied in a number of statements. For instance, the Diversity Charter states: 'We show society as it is and are accessible to all', which implies both the representation of and accessibility to older people (VRT, nd). VRT also drew up internal guidelines in relation to inclusivity, to guide and sensitise production personnel on issues of diversity (VRT, 2018). Again, the focus is not explicitly on older people, but the general principles mentioned in the guidelines are relevant to their representation too. For instance, these guidelines advise TV producers to ascertain diversity within the representation of certain groups, in relation to other social characteristics; to talk *with* people from certain groups instead of (only) talking *about* them, particularly when the theme is relevant to the specific group; and to avoid clichés and break out of one's own perspective as a TV producer (VRT, 2018: 8).

Results

The analysis of the 44 segments or episodes of programmes, in combination with the eight expert interviews, allowed us to identify several patterns. First, we give an overview of the kinds of actor representations we witnessed, identifying types

connected to different age groups. Second, we take a closer look at the cultural myths about ageing underlying these representations. Third, we explore some themes which are often connected to ageing.

Two age groups: the vulnerable old-old and the dynamic young-old

The programmes we analysed show a clear difference between the two age groups mentioned above, the young-old (65–80) and old-old (over 80). Old-old people are mostly represented as helpless, passive and vulnerable, also in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic where a lot of media attention went to residential and nursing homes. The old-old people we could observe all had speaking parts; however, this is partly due to a data selection criterion whereby we excluded programmes with only non-speaking older actors. Young-old people are often represented as dynamic and active. This also came up when talking to the experts, who criticised the tendency to reduce older people to several types. One expert said:

> Older people are not only vulnerable people locked up in nursing homes … There is also a whole range of older people who are very active in society … So, it's much too one-sided: either very vulnerable, or very lively, but the group in between, of whom there are many more, is too seldomly portrayed. (Expert 6)

The representation of *vulnerable old-old people* is often featured in programmes about specific problems such as loneliness, illness, loss of autonomy or euthanasia. The overarching presupposition is that from a certain age, decline cannot be stopped. Confirming this observation, one expert stated that when a programme deals with old-old people, the idea seems to be: 'Oh, that's the old people who can't do very much anymore', adding 'The focus is too much on the problematic part' (Expert 1). Ageing, here, is connected to unavoidable decline, disregarding the large group of healthy, active and self-dependent old-old people and their daily lives. This negative type is most strongly connected to the cultural myths about ageing discussed in the literature review and will be more elaborately analysed in the next section.

The other recurrent type, that of *dynamic young-old people*, is equally one-sided. It portrays the young-old as active and 'young at heart'. This is most clearly illustrated in a news item we analysed about the search for an alternative term to designate people who prefer not to be called 'elderly' or 'retired' (*Het journaal/ The journal*, 8 November 2019). It reports on a radio call for alternative names, which led to the euphemism 'jaggers'. The new term serves as an abbreviation of Young Active Retirees (in Dutch) and refers to Mick Jagger, the seemingly eternally young Rolling Stone (VRT Taal, 2019). The news item is light-hearted, but it does confirm the socially desirable ideal of successful ageing discussed in the literature review (Rowe and Kahn, 1997). Tellingly, the people interviewed in the news item are playing golf or cycling, presenting a one-sided picture of young-old people as always physically active. This positive countertype, too, will be more elaborately analysed in the next section.

Beside these two predominant types, we observed another actor type that was more unexpected: that of *exceptional old-old people*. This offers an explicit counter-

image to representations of vulnerable old-old people connected to problems and negativity by showing old-old people in a positive context. Emphasis is on how people of 80 years and up can do much more than what society expects from them. These representations are akin to the counter-frame of exceptional realisations by older people identified by Van Gorp (2013). This type of frame is intended positively but may not represent a recognisable or attainable image to most older people. Similarly, we identified several older people who were complimented on the things they could 'still' do and were presented as 'heroic' exceptions to the image of the vulnerable old-old person.

One variation of this heroic exception is the 'older celebrity', for instance the 94-year-old former TV presenter Paula Sémer, who appears in three programmes and is always presented as exceptional. This is illustrated by a talk show that introduces her as 'the very, very, very best in her trade' and 'a living legend' (*De ideale wereld/The Ideal World*, 15 October 2019). Similarly, journalist Paula Marckx (also 94 at the time) is presented as a 'living legend', with an exceptional life which prompts the interviewer to state: 'But Paula, it's really a Hollywood movie, your life!' (*Meer vrouw op straat/More Women on the Street*, 3 March 2020). Like Paula Sémer, Marckx is represented as iconic, which is further reinforced by the exceptional things she continues to do. She was one of the first female Belgian airplane pilots, and in the programme we analysed she is taken to an airport, boards a small airplane and takes over its control during the flight. Both women are continuously complemented on the things they can still do. This is well-intentioned but does reconfirm the notion that most old-old people are expected to be helpless.

Another variation of the exceptional old-old person is the 'popular hero', who is not a public figure but is similarly represented as exceptionally vital and capable of extraordinary things. For instance, one show we analysed featured the 104-year-old Godelieve, who jumps out of an airplane with a parachute for the first time in her life (*Vandaag over een jaar/One Year from Now*, 12 December 2019). On the one hand, the programme allows Godelieve to shine in an unusual situation. On the other hand, the way she is addressed during interview segments of the show comes across as condescending, something the experts also commented on: 'That was rather patronising of course, as in: little old lady, you can still do a lot!' (Expert 1). The entire story relies on her being able to do this 'despite' her age, suggesting that we should not expect very much from people over 80. Although the experts did think such heroic representations were a useful antidote to negative representations, they should be used sparingly: 'Not every 104-year-old person will jump out of an airplane' (Expert 2). While bringing some more diversity to the representation of older people, heroic exceptions risk putting forward an unattainable ideal of vital old-old people.

This brings us to a final category of old people, which goes against the more extreme and exceptional types discussed so far: that of *ordinary older people*, who are not dynamic young-old people, vulnerable old-old people or exceptionally vital old-old people. These were relatively rare, but we identified some 'good practices' of older people who did not fit into any of the above-mentioned types. For instance, prominent storylines in the long-running soap *Thuis* feature characters who are not exceptionally vital nor vulnerable going about their everyday business (*e.g.* chatting about Christmas dinner) (*Thuis/Home*, 26 December 2019). Similarly,

cooking show *Dagelijkse zomerkost* (*Daily Summer Fare*, 3 July 2019) shows chef Jeroen Meus visiting Mariette and Urbain, both over 65. While Mariette mentions some medical problems in passing, the rest of the programme centres on everyday matters. Their chat includes mentions of ageing and retirement but avoids problematising old age or over-emphasising vitality.

We also found an instance of 'ordinary' older people in a report on anti-coronavirus measures for children's news programme *Karrewiet* (18 March 2020). The item shows how the live-in grandparents of two young children temporarily move out of the family home as a precaution measure. Instead of being presented as vulnerable older people, the grandparents are mentioned to have taken the decision themselves, displaying self-sufficiency and agency. While the above-mentioned examples of 'ordinary' older people are all young-old, we also found some instances of ordinary old-old people. For instance, in *Gentbrugge*, a programme about a popular neighbourhood (15 January 2020), the presenter talks to the 90-year-olds Simonne and Yvonne. The twin sisters are presented as two ordinary women living together. The images and conversation focus on their everyday activities (*e.g.* Simonne's volunteering) and their sisterly bond. In this programme, as in some others, the old-old are not approached or represented differently from younger people.

Cultural myths about ageing: decline versus vitality

The two predominant types in the representation of older people, the vulnerable old-old and the dynamic young-old, closely correspond to the cultural myths and expectations about ageing discussed in the literature review. Although we did not only witness these extremes, representations do gravitate towards one of two cultural views on ageing, connected either to decline or to vitality.

The predominant cultural myths connect ageing to *decline*, representing older people as a burden to society and highlighting what they cannot do anymore. In our analysis, we found three variations on the theme of decline. A first form of decline is related to health, and connected to (fear of) illness and death. This theme predictably takes centre stage in news reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic, but also occurs in other genres and on other occasions. It is again relevant to note here that the data selection process excluded programmes with solely non-speaking older people; based on the literature, we can assume that health themes would be even more common if we also included portrayals of non-speaking older people. For instance, in human-interest show *Het huis* (*The House*, 26 November 2019), the presenter interviews singer Willy Sommers (67) about his life and career. Fear of ageing and decline is a recurring theme in their conversation. For instance, the presenter asks: 'Are you afraid to age? To become less mobile? To become less active?' In his response, Willy Sommers talks about heart rhythm problems he recently experienced, which made him fear for his career and confronted him with his mortality.

In this programme, as well as others, declining functionality is a related theme. For instance, human-interest show *Iedereen beroemd* (*Everybody Famous*, 16 March 2020) has an item about people living on the same street, which shows older people struggling with digital TV. Among them is Greet (80+), whose granddaughter

wrote a manual, to no avail. The tone of the item is slightly mocking, capturing this statement from Greet: 'When it doesn't do it right, or when it doesn't do anything, I have already pushed the "help" button. But no help is coming then, you know.' While older people may struggle with technological developments, there is a fine line with the stereotypical image of the digitally illiterate older person incapable of learning new skills. However, the same human-interest programme *Iedereen beroemd* also provides alternative representations of older people dealing with new technologies. One of the recurring items during the COVID-19 pandemic was 'Woonvlogcentra' (a wordplay on 'elderly care centre' and 'vlog'). In the episodes we analysed (31 March and 14 April 2020), we see old-old people (mostly over 90) in retirement centres receiving filming equipment and learning to make video calls to family members. The items focus on the perspective of the older people themselves, who talk about their daily experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this group is generally talked about and presented as vulnerable and helpless, in these items we see a group of ordinary yet active old-old people who do manage to deal with new technology.

A third form of decline is related to (fears of) loss, for instance of autonomy. For instance, in *Op naar de 100!* (*Up to One Hundred!*, 3 July 2019), presenter Marcel Vanthilt (62) explores ways to age successfully. He visits an Italian nursing home for retired musicians. Walking up to the home, he talks about his fear of living in a Flemish nursing home, as he thinks they are 'very sad and sterile'. In contrast, the Italian home is filled with music and younger people who co-habit with the older residents, creating intergenerational dialogue. As such, the Italian home is presented as a unique case to aspire to, unlike the presumed state of affairs in Flemish residential and nursing homes. The overarching tone of the programme is one of fear of the presumed negative consequences of ageing.

Although illness, loss of functionality or loss of autonomy are undeniably part of the process of ageing, it is important for TV not to reduce ageing to representations of decline. One programme we analysed does portray the connection between ageing and decline in a more balanced way. In a human-interest show about insomnia, *De slapelozen* (*The Sleepless*, 9 October 2019), we meet the 82-year-old Lieve who lives in a nursing home and struggles to adapt to the early meal and bed times. Lieve is not shown as a vulnerable victim, but as an older person with a rebellious, independent streak, who exchanges torchlight signals at night with her new boyfriend who lives in another section of the nursing home. Her insomnia is not simply connected to her old age, as a sleep expert is invited to explain the shortcomings of nursing homes in creating suitable conditions for sleep.

An alternative perspective on ageing does not present it as decline, but emphasises *vitality*. This is connected to the notion of active ageing, emphasising the impact and agency of older people on their life quality (WHO, 2002). This notion underlies the human-interest show *Twee tinten grijs* (*Two Shades of Grey*, 28 April 2020) in which two ageing men, sound technician Pascal Braeckman (57) and guitar player Jan Van Eyken (65), explore useful ways to fill their lives after their imminent retirement. The programme refers to the fear of decline in the opening credits: 'What if this stops? If the stage, the travelling, the applause falls away? Can they retire after such a top life full of kicks? Or will they fall into a big, black hole?' However, the programme's premise is solution-oriented, focusing on looking for

useful and active ways to fill one's life. For instance, in the episode we analysed, both men volunteer during a trip to the pilgrimage site in Lourdes, accompanying older, ill and disabled people but also older volunteers. Interacting with these volunteers, who are represented as fun, active people, they are positively surprised by the pleasant atmosphere and ordinariness of the people involved. The experts were positive about this programme, because it showcases a diverse range of older people with different degrees of physical capabilities. This diversity corresponds to the functional definition of ageing, which highlights the varying and individual trajectories of ageing.

While lauding the emphasis on the possibility to fill one's life as an older person in a positive way, for instance by doing volunteer work, the experts did stress it is important not to present ageing as something to 'combat'. One expert was critical of the tendency to over-emphasise active and healthy ageing as the only good way to age (Expert 5). This is reminiscent of the discussion mentioned in the literature review about 'successful' ageing, which stresses the responsibility of older people to remain active and healthy (Rowe and Kahn, 1997). As discussed above, the programme *Op naar de 100!* (*Up to One Hundred!*, 3 July 2019) is completely premised on presenter Marcel Vanthilt's fear of physical and mental decline. In the opening credits, he says: 'I don't want to age! I also don't want to die at all! I want to live for tens of years! How can I – and you – get very old in a fit and healthy way?' Vanthilt is presented as the dynamic 60-year-old searching for 'good' ways to age. The aim is to try out different strategies (such as sports, meditation, a diet) to lower his physiological age, which is tested at the beginning and at the end of the programme. Ageing, here, is presented as one's individual responsibility to be successfully counteracted, which is more problematic than the search for useful ways to remain active explored in *Twee tinten grijs*.

In sum, the two predominant myths outlined here connect to the vulnerable old-old and dynamic young-old binary, in that they represent the process of ageing either as a generalised and inevitable decline, or as a matter of individual accountability. By contrast, examples like *Twee tinten grijs* succeed in showing a more nuanced representation that corresponds to the tenets of functional age.

Themes connected to ageing: intimacy, changing social network and end of life

As mentioned in the literature review, ageing is often connected to particular themes, in line with the cultural myths discussed in the previous section. The first is the issue of *intimacy and sexual intimacy*, which connects to the cultural myth of older people as asexual beings and reflects a social taboo on expressions of intimacy and sexual intimacy among older people (Gott, 2005). Intimacy and sexual intimacy are not often addressed in the programmes we analysed. Only occasionally do we see glimpses of intimacy among older people, for instance in *Dagelijkse zomerkost*, the cooking show discussed above, where Mariette affectionately caresses her husband Urbain's hair. Similarly, in *De slapelozen*, also discussed above, we see nursing home resident Lieve (82) communicating with her new love François at night using a torchlight. Only two programmes more explicitly deal with sexual intimacy. In human-interest programme *Iedereen beroemd* (*Everybody Famous*, 5 December 2019), we see an 'Upper at Home' sales

representative demonstrating sex toys in a residential and nursing home. The older people respond enthusiastically:

> Woman 1: It's not because we are getting older that we cannot know about these things. I think it's actually interesting, yes, to know all the things that exist (laughs).
>
> Woman 2: I became a widow at a very young age, I think it's fun that such things exist (raises her shoulders).

By asking the opinion of the older people themselves, we get their view on the issue, and they contradict the image of older people being asexual. Moreover, the sales representative does not patronise them nor does she focus on their age. Taken together, the programme normalises the possibility of sexual intimacy among older people.

A news report on the sexual needs of older people in residential and nursing homes (*Het journaal*/*The Journal*, 2 October 2019) similarly aims to break the taboo around sexual intimacy among older people, but with mixed results. On the one hand, it is positive that the item not only includes experts and nursing home staff talking about this issue, but also an older couple. On the other hand, the item problematically conflates two issues: the need for intimacy of this older couple, who got two separated beds in their nursing home flat which makes it hard to be intimate, and the risk of non-consensual forms of intimacy on behalf of older people, which a nursing home therapist comments on and which frames sexual intimacy among older people as a problem.

A second theme connected to ageing is the changing social network of older people, leading to *loneliness and social isolation*. Two experts we interviewed (Experts 1 and 3) commented on the complexity of the issue, distinguishing between the objective size of one's social network and the subjective experience of being lonely, the latter not necessarily following from the former. One drama production we analysed, *De twaalf* (*The Twelve*, 10 November 2019), confirms the stereotype about lonely older people by representing the only older character, Arnold, as an isolated man who has a hard time interacting with his fellow jury members during a criminal trial. While isolation can be a reality, it is unfortunate that the sole older character is represented in this way, thus reconfirming the link between ageing and loneliness.

The human-interest programme *Eenzaam* (*Lonely*, 11 December 2019) focuses entirely on loneliness, dedicating each episode to a different generation. One of the strengths of this programme is that it recognises the problem of loneliness among older people, which according to Expert 2 is underestimated, but also adds context and nuance. Thus, the interviewer lets the people tell their own stories and experiences, displaying an approach that Expert 5 describes as respectful. Another positive point is that the programme shows four older people in different situations, *i.e.* a young-old widower living at home, a nonagenarian residential and nursing home resident who also lost his wife, a former care-giver struggling with family loss and a former teacher who finds retirement isolating. These choices highlight the individual circumstances of loneliness in line with the functional definition of ageing. Finally, by focusing on loneliness among different generations, the programme as a whole contradicts the unique connection of loneliness to old age. However, the episode on older people does reconfirm some clichés about

older people, for instance in the opening credits which state: 'Older people can quickly feel superfluous. They sometimes have a hard time to participate in our society that is evolving ever more quickly.' Moreover, the programme's tone is rather dark, which to Expert 1 created the impression that the older people were 'pathetic little people'. The programme ends with a montage of sad imagery, among other things of a ticking clock, a weeping willow, and an image of a man sitting silent and alone in the barber shop, with a sad song about loss on the soundtrack. Once again, old people seem to be destined to end up irreversibly lonely.

Some programmes offer an alternative perspective, focusing on the possibility of actively building or maintaining a social network. For instance, in *Op naar de 100!* (3 July 2019), one expert coaching the presenter in his quest for successful ageing emphasises the importance of social contacts. In his analysis of frames in reporting on ageing, Van Gorp (2013) lauds representations of self-development and people actively seeking to establish new social connections. Again, *Twee tinten grijs* (28 April 2020) provides a better example in this respect, showing a number of social activities older people can engage in, such as group hikes and taking dancing lessons. Similarly, the older people vlogging in *Iedereen beroemd* (31 March and 14 April 2020) illustrate the possibility of social connection in times of COVID-19, recognising the problem of isolation but also identifying strategies to stimulate social connections.

A third recurring theme connected to ageing is the *end of life* and the taboo of death. The end of life is explicitly addressed in a number of programmes we analysed. In *Twee tinten grijs*, two older volunteers spontaneously talk about the loss of their partner, which creates a strong emotional connection between the interviewers and interviewees. The experts laud this dialogue as a form of 'open communication' (Expert 4): loss and grief are discussed in an organic and intimate way, evoking empathy.

Three programmes we analysed also talk about older people planning their end-of-life care. In *Eenzaam* (11 December 2019), one of the lonely older people explains how she has already planned her funeral and registration for euthanasia, as she has no more relatives to handle this. The experts we interviewed approved of the serene way this topic was approached, emphasising the role of public service broadcasting in addressing such sensitive matters:

> People are preoccupied with that: 'What is going to happen with me when my partner dies? I'm in my eighties.' Things are discussed here [in *Eenzaam*] that are not sufficiently talked about. And I think that's the role of a TV programme on public service broadcasting: to make it possible to talk about things which people do not dare, want or cannot talk about. (Expert 4)

We also analysed an item in the current affairs programme *Terzake* (*To the Point*, 29 October 2019) about euthanasia, which is legal in Belgium under certain conditions. Besides two experts, three older women living in a residential and nursing home are interviewed. At the time of the interview they are amicably chatting while enjoying a drink together, but they also talk about their wish for euthanasia, referring to relatives and partners who died after a long process of suffering. As in *Eenzaam*, older people get to talk about their end-of-life choices themselves, and the topic is addressed in a serene way, breaking through the taboo of (talking about) death.

In short, various ubiquitous topics (intimacy, a changing social network and end of life) are discussed in the context of ageing, but recast as either a taboo or a particular (negative) aspect of the process. The most nuanced representations again show ordinary older people and their own perspectives.

Conclusion

In this paper, we addressed the stereotypical representation of older people on TV. Focusing on the case of Flemish public service broadcasting, we aimed to answer two questions: How are older people and ageing represented in VRT TV programmes? and How do experts on ageing perceive the representation of older people and ageing in VRT TV programmes? Our analysis confirmed many of the patterns identified in the existing literature on representations of older people in the media and, more broadly, in society. While we found a broad and diverse range of representations, they did gravitate towards two types: very vulnerable old-old people, and very dynamic and lively young-old people representing the 'golden age'. Exceptionally vital old-old people provided a counterweight to the predominant image of decline, but ordinary old-old as well as young-old people were relatively scarce although they constitute the majority of older people in society.

The two predominant types (dynamic or vulnerable) correspond to cultural myths about ageing, which mostly emphasise decline but also suggest a personal responsibility to stay 'young', echoing ideals of active and successful ageing. Recurrent themes – intimacy, changing social network and end of life – are also addressed within this binary. This further confirms the opposition between the vulnerable old-old and the dynamic young-old. Crucially, these binaries paint the ageing process as requiring either special care or prevention strategies, and older people as 'different' by definition, excluding them further from the 'normal' order of things. At the same time, we also found a number of good practices, representations deliberately contradicting myths about ageing, showing 'ordinary' older people, giving them a voice and agency, and showcasing the diversity of individual life conditions in line with the functional definition of ageing.

Reflecting on the broader implications of these findings, it is important to return to the particular context of this project. First, it focuses on a single public broadcaster in one country, so we must be cautious in generalising. Still, our findings do echo earlier international research, and seem to suggest that similar patterns of representation recur across multiple (Western) countries. The fact that even this public service broadcaster, with elaborate policies concerning diversity, tends to fall back on stereotypical images, makes one wonder how other (commercial) broadcasters perform. Second, our research took place mostly before and only partly during the COVID-19 pandemic, so again we must be careful not to extrapolate too easily. Still, we did witness some continuities (in particular the focus on the vulnerable old-old) as well as explicit attempts to counter stereotypes, for instance by showing old-old people vlogging in residential and nursing homes. Old-old people were most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their increased media visibility in 2020 both drew attention to their invisibility at other times, and highlighted the importance of a balanced representation. Particularly in this context where old-old people are disproportionally hit, it is important for broadcasters to be aware of patterns of

representation and stereotypical images, and to deliberately balance representations by showcasing the functional diversity of older people. Further research is needed to investigate how the representation of older people evolved throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, also considering the limitations and possibilities of different genres which were included in this project but not investigated in depth.

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