

“Oldies come bottom of Grim Reaper hierarchy”¹: A framing analysis of UK newspaper coverage of old age and risk of dying during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This article examines UK newspaper coverage during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic March–August 2020. A qualitative framing analysis of public messaging on age in five high circulation newspapers provides a detailed account of who is deemed to be at risk of dying from COVID-19. Newspapers represent older people as most at risk, with disability as a secondary factor. Reports on who is responsible, who is at risk, and who is to blame for deaths from COVID-19 are framed as issues of public health and generational fairness, with individual responsibility occupying a prominent role. We also find two counter-frames. First, in letters to the editor, older people’s pleas for freedom are framed as a fight for their civil liberties. Second, newspapers praise 99-year-old Captain Tom Moore and frame his behaviour as a source of national pride. We identify this as positive ageism. We conclude that reporting across progressive and conservative newspapers reflects age-based stereotypes and paternalism towards older people. Public figures are represented as scapegoats or heroes, offering distraction from the less newsworthy fact that long-term under-investment in social care increased the risk of dying amongst the old and disabled during the pandemic.

Keywords: old age; media analysis; risk; COVID-19; ageism; framing analysis

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the role of the press in informing citizens about government policy. While social media is often blamed for the circulation of ‘fake news’ (Hartley and Vu, 2020), we know from the Leveson Enquiry that

misrepresentation of facts occurs within mainstream UK media too (Burgess, 2010; Dean, 2012; Petley, 2012). There is a growing consensus that the central role of the media in communicating between state and citizens in democratic societies deserves more careful attention (Goovaerts and Marien, 2020). This became apparent during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the rapid spread of the novel virus required governments to make major impositions on individual freedoms and communicate these ‘social distancing’ requirements – to avoid social contact outside one’s household – to the public at breakneck speed. The COVID-19 virus was more deadly for those with compromised immune systems or ‘underlying conditions’ and the higher likelihood of older people having either or both of these meant that age quickly emerged as a key indicator of mortality. This trend led to public health advice being framed in terms of chronological age, with blunt age cut-offs being used to categorise members of the public as high or low risk of dying if they contracted the disease (Previtali et al., 2020). In March 2020, the UK was one of many countries to order everyone over 70 to ‘shield’ from the virus by avoiding all social contact (Hancock, March 16, 2020). From then on, people aged 70 or over, officially classed as ‘vulnerable’ by government policy, were subjected to a constant barrage of dire warnings in the press, causing some to claim that an ‘infodemic’ ran concurrently with the pandemic (Rahman and Jahan, 2020).

In this article we track how age was represented as a key factor in determining who dies and who survives in the COVID-19 pandemic. We find that age became a central frame of the coronavirus news story, from the first two weeks of March 2020. Drawing on recent critical analysis on the framing of people living in poverty in ‘sharp, dichotomous and simplistic’ terms (Patrick, 2020: 252), we chart a line of ageist stereotyping which places the ‘over 70s’ in the category of ‘other’ (Patrick, 2020). Our focus on representations of risk in the mainstream media follows on from Warner’s (2013a, 2013b) investigation of newspaper campaigns against individual social workers in the case of Baby Peter Connolly, a toddler who was killed by his mother, her boyfriend and lodger while on the ‘at risk’ register at Haringey council in 2007. Recent research into the deepening of poverty in the UK (Edmiston, 2021) resonates with Warner’s analysis of anti-welfare narratives in the right-wing press (MacGregor, 2011). This work deserves attention from those of us in social policy who seek to analyse how some groups are held personally responsible for their own poverty, disadvantage or ill-health. In particular, press reporting on age-related illness or disease is often framed within an individualized medical model (Clark, 2006) where individuals are blamed for lifestyle choices. We also draw on previous work by Pickard (2019), in this journal, which demonstrated a predilection amongst both progressive and conservative UK media to use age as a justification for representing older people as an undeserving and affluent minority who are ‘stealing’ from younger generations. This ageist narrative

appears to be resistant to the evidence of large-scale national research projects. For instance, the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme (2005-2015) demonstrated how collective social policy measures such as publicly funded social care could improve health for older people in the UK more effectively than medical intervention (Walker, 2018).

In this article, we use the pandemic as an opportunity to bring together these strands of the literature; the ‘poverty porn’ and anti-welfare commentary (De Benedictis et al., 2017) with that on media abuse of power (Petley, 2012) and the rising recognition of ageism in media discussions of population ageing (Walker, 2012). Our analysis adds credence to Macnicol’s contention that high levels of inequality in the UK’s neo-liberal regime mean that older people have been placed on ‘a kind of misery index’ (Macnicol, 2015: 230) along with people with disabilities, children and people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. As such, the article addresses a key gap in exploring how age shapes public discussions of who is deserving or entitled in a policy crisis.

Methodology

Our research set out to ask: ‘*how has chronological age been used by mainstream UK newspapers to establish a hierarchy of vulnerability during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic?*’ We present the results of a framing analysis of newspaper coverage of old age between March 1 and August 31, 2020. The early weeks and months of the pandemic offer a significant opportunity to examine how the media framed the government’s public health message. The public had no prior knowledge of COVID and so was particularly susceptible to framing by media and political elites at that time (Entman, 1993: 56). We draw on Foley et al.’s (2019) framing guide for media analysis of public health issues which is built on Entman’s (1993: 52) classic conception of framing – ‘to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment/outcome’ (see Table 4).

The purpose of frames is to allow researchers to pick out how narratives are constructed and certain aspects of a story are employed to help readers understand the world around them (Entman, 1993). This method provided a coherent and logical scheme for sorting and analyzing the overabundance of repetitive media reports that emerged in response to the crisis in March 2020. Our approach was inductive, drawing out frames which show how journalists have consciously or unconsciously used stereotypes to make old age synonymous with risk of dying from COVID (Van Gorp and Vercruyssen, 2012; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2019: 3). This approach allows us to link together narratives that are shared across diverse ‘communicating texts’ in five major UK newspapers.

We situate what we find in the context of existing research about societal attitudes towards older and younger people (Graham et al., 2017; North and Fiske, 2013a); how the British press use stereotypes to communicate about old age (Bailey et al., 2021; Harvey and Brooks, 2018) and how old age is associated with diminished social status and power in UK society (Walker, 2012; Goffman in Lecheler and de Vreese, 2019: 7). We do not deal with social media, which has been analysed elsewhere (Fraser et al., 2020). Rather, we focus on influential and widely read newspapers given their vital role in informing the public during the pandemic (Thomas et al., 2020).

Methods

The research began in July 2020 with searches of the NEXIS database using search terms ‘vulnerable AND coronavirus AND age’ to identify patterns in how UK newspapers approached reporting on the pandemic (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Adopting an ‘interpretative, qualitative’ approach (Linström and Marais, 2012: 25), initial thematic analysis revealed a large number of results, with a developing narrative that age is *the* primary risk factor for dying of COVID-19. After the initial searches and some independent coding by Carney and Maguire, we decided to focus on representations of age – as they appeared to occupy the most prominent position on the hierarchy of at-risk groups in press reports, thereby constituting the over-arching frame around which journalists constructed the story of COVID for readers (Entman, 1993). Next, we agreed to apply a number of limiting criteria, which led us to three more focused searches of the initial database. We agreed that concentrating on the first two weeks of March 2020 would help us to capture initial responses to age and the risk of dying of COVID-19 and so reveal what shortcuts, stereotypes and accepted wisdom journalists fell back on when framing the pandemic in their work (Entman, 1993). We also analyzed data where people who identified themselves as ‘over 70’ had written letters to the editor about how public health advice was affecting them. Finally, we searched for counter-frames of older people as anything other than ‘vulnerable’ and found the example of ‘Captain Tom’ who began to emerge as a national hero in April 2020. These three key searches, which were linked to specific time periods in the unfolding of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic were:

Search 1 – Use of age to explain the risk of dying of COVID-19 in press reports in the earliest days of the pandemic, before lockdown was introduced (March 1, 2020 to March 16, 2020);

Search 2 – Letters from older people to editors of newspapers during lockdown (March 16, 2020 to August 31, 2020);

Search 3 – The search for ‘corona heroes’, notably Captain Tom Moore (March 16, 2020 to August 31, 2020).

TABLE 1. National Newspaper circulations in September 2020 (ABC)

| <i>Publication</i> | <i>ABC circulation for August 2020</i> | <i>Method of access</i> |
|--------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Daily Mail | 1,007,181 | Free on-line |
| Daily Express | 241, 439 | Free on-line |
| The Guardian | 113, 261 | Free on-line (voluntary subscription) |
| Telegraph | 54,412 | Paywall |
| The Times | Choose to keep circulation private | Paywall |

Source: PressGazette, 16 October 2020

A limitation of our research is that it did not include receiver response in the study, so we cannot draw conclusions on the salience of frames in terms of impact on the reader (Entman, 1993; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2019). However, counter-frames (searches 2 & 3) including letters to the editor from older people do offer some readers' views.

Our first search of all English language newspaper coverage of old age and coronavirus from March 1 to 16 2020 yielded more results than we could analyze. We included both on-line and in print versions of each paper as the contents of newspapers can vary across platforms (Blatchford, 2020). Early results showed repetitious coverage as journalists struggled to fill columns in circumstances where business, policy and public life in general was either cancelled or completely over-shadowed by COVID-19. This made it more challenging to pick out a coherent narrative, so we narrowed our search to five of the most culturally relevant and influential newspapers in the UK: The Times, the Daily Express, The Telegraph, The Guardian and the Daily Mail. We included 'middle market' newspapers such as the Daily Express and Daily Mail that are read by a broad cross-section of the population, and 'quality/broadsheets' such as the Guardian and the Telegraph whose readership is lower but who are known to influence political and business leaders (Thurman, 2014). Much of the data produced by newspapers to measure their audience is not in the public domain (Thurman, 2014). Table 1 outlines the circulation figures of each newspaper.

Results from all three searches are reported in Table 2. Coverage was broadly consistent across the three highest circulation newspapers publishing an average of 226 articles on old age and coronavirus between March 1 and August 31, 2020.

Through thematic analysis of searches focusing on the five newspapers, Carney worked through the data, allocating stories, headlines, and segments of stories for each newspaper to common categories which became frames in the next stage of the analysis (see Tables 4 – 6). Articles were excluded if their content only made passing reference to COVID-19. Included articles were

TABLE 2. Search Terms by Number of Articles Returned March 1, 2020 to August 31, 2020

| | Daily Mail | Guardian | Express | Telegraph | Times | |
|--|------------|----------|---------|-----------|-------|-----|
| “older people” OR “over 70” and “coronavirus” OR “COVID 19” | 166 | 122 | 117 | 86 | 45 | 536 |
| “over 70” OR “age” AND “lockdown” AND “letters” AND “Restrictions” | 17 | 60 | 3 | 26 | 30 | 136 |
| “Captain Tom” and “COVID 19” and “heroes” | 24 | 10 | 159 | 13 | 8 | 214 |
| Total | 207 | 192 | 279 | 125 | 83 | 886 |

TABLE 3. Breakdown of articles included in the thematic and framing analysis

| | | | | | |
|--|--|---------------|--------------|----------------|-----------|
| Articles returned from Thematic Analysis (886) | Daily Mail: 207 | Guardian: 192 | Express: 279 | Telegraph: 125 | Times: 83 |
| | Total Articles after duplicates removed: 442 | | | | |
| Articles included in Framing Analysis (442) | Daily Mail: 98 | Guardian: 112 | Express: 103 | Telegraph: 75 | Times: 54 |

copied from NEXIS to Microsoft Word, arranged by date and named according to their newspaper. Once all duplicates were removed the number of articles in each newspaper was reduced (Table 3). As a result, we were able to identify common themes that in turn enabled decision-making for the framing analysis.

Next, the database of results was reviewed by Maguire for completeness and decision rationale. It was at this point that we undertook further independent coding to draw out frames from within each search.

The Frames

The thematic analysis established the prominence of age as an indicator of mortality and so a significant factor in deciding policy interventions by government. Next, we searched for frames that showed how old age was operationalized as a risk factor, and how moral arguments were made in public discussions about personal responsibility during the early months of the pandemic (Entman, 1993). Foley et al.'s 'framing analysis for purposes of media analysis within public health inquiry' (Foley et al., 2019:1810) is applicable to the case of coronavirus, which, in the early days of the pandemic, was poorly understood and so

TABLE 4. Framing Analysis Adapted from Foley et al. (2019)

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|---|
| Name of component | How operates in Foley et al. (2019) | Diabetes and Obesity Epidemic | Example from our study Old Age and COVID-19 Pandemic (2020) |
| Problem Definition | Media links outcome to behaviour/characteristic (e.g. greedy, fat people over-eat. This causes diabetes.) | | Older people are more likely to die from COVID than any other section of the population (i.e. older people <i>are</i> the problem). |
| Causal attribution | 'the fat body acts as a cultural signifier for diabetes' (Foley et al., 2019: 1811). | | Wear and tear means that the older body is vulnerable to death from COVID. |
| Moral evaluation | Greedy people are fat and so are getting diabetes which costs the health service. | | Old people are getting sick/dying from COVID which costs the health service. They should take responsibility for their own risk by shielding. |
| Treatment/Policy Intervention | Shame fat people into getting thinner to stop diabetes costing healthcare system. | | Apply extra 'shielding' restrictions to everyone over 70 in order to 'Protect the NHS (National Health Service)'. |

TABLE 5A: Summary of News Frames during COVID-19 pandemic in UK newspapers

| Dates | Questions editors ask . . . | Journalists' answers . . . | Framed as an issue of . . . |
|------------|---|---|--|
| March 2020 | 1. Who is most at risk of dying of 'coronavirus'? | Frame 1: Older people are more likely to die of coronavirus than any other section of the population. | Public health (in the context of older people as a burden on the NHS) |
| | 2. Who is responsible for responding to the crisis? | Frame 2: Compassionate experts and heartless bureaucrats are ultimately responsible for the UK's reaction to the pandemic. | Individual responsibility for decision-making (in neo-liberal policy 'market') |
| | 3. Who should we save if resources are scarce? Who should we allow out of isolation sooner? | Frame 3: Age can be used to decide everything from who is allowed out of isolation to who gets an Intensive Care Unit bed. | Fair allocation of resources between generations based on probability of survival. |
| | 4. Who is protecting those at risk of dying from the virus? | Frame 4: Old Age defines risk of dying so generations must be kept apart as young people are 'super spreaders'. | Inter-generational blaming ('selfish youth' versus 'vulnerable elderly'). |

TABLE 5B: Summary of Counter-frames during COVID-19 pandemic in UK newspapers

| Dates | Questions editors ask . . . | Journalists' answers . . . | Framed as an issue of . . . |
|---------------|---|---|---|
| April 2020 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do older people think about lockdown? 2. Who is the national hero who will show us how to survive this pandemic? | <p>Frame 5: Letter to the Editor from Older People –</p> <p>Frame 6: Captain Tom Moore – war veteran and national hero.</p> | <p>Civil liberties</p> <p>National pride and positive ageism (Palmore, 1990).</p> |

TABLE 6. Newspaper Headlines – Frame 1

| Daily Mail | Guardian | Express | Telegraph | Times |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| “Health chiefs urge over-60s to avoid crowds and stay away from shops, public transport and GP surgeries as coronavirus panic spreads” (Adams, 1.3.2020) | “Coronavirus hits ill and disabled people hardest, so why is society writing us off? no wonder immuno-compromised people are heading online to share strategies as to how to stay safe” (Ryan, 11.3.2020) | “BBC Coronavirus UK warning: Pensioners face ‘rapid increase’ in risk of death from illness” (Nanan-Sen, 6.3.2020) | “Virus is more deadly for men than women while mortality soars among over 70s” (Knapton, 6.3.2020) | “Oldies come bottom of Grim Reaper hierarchy” (Turner, 12.3.2020) |

open to misinterpretation. Foley et al. (2019) analyzed newspaper coverage where journalists causally attributed the incidence of diabetes to obesity. We applied a similar method to analyze the pandemic where correlations between 'being over 70' and 'risk of death from COVID-19' might rapidly become synonymous in the mindset of the public. We employed independent, two-person coding (Carney and Maguire) to ensure consistency (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020).

Following Foley et al. (2019) we employ four interactive components of a frame outlined in Table 4:

We undertook an identical framing analysis of the results for search 1 for the Daily Mail, The Guardian, The Telegraph, the Daily Express and The Times. This resulted in a number of core frames that were shared by all newspapers, together with some key differences in tone and emphasis related to the target audience of the newspaper, its circulation and how it is funded. We began with the Daily Mail as it had the most articles and the highest circulation. Next, we updated those findings with articles from the remaining newspapers until we reached saturation. We found that frames that emerged in search 1 were later reflected in the letters from older people about lockdown, which we identify as a counter-frame. Finally, we undertook an identical analysis for search 3. The frames and counter-frames are summarised in Tables 5a and 5b.

Results

Our analysis reveals how the press established old age as *the* defining cause of death from COVID-19 and used it as a lens through which the impact of the pandemic could be outlined. We do this by offering headlines from each of the five papers that underpin each frame. Appendix 1 provides a full list of newspaper articles cited. We begin by focusing on frames 1-4 that emerged from search 1, then report on frames 5 and 6, which emerged from searches 2 and 3.

Analysis of Search 1

Frame 1: Older people are more likely to die of coronavirus than any other section of the population.

All of the newspapers included in our analysis led with the story that the virus was more likely to kill older people than any other section of the population. This was reported in various ways, as outlined in Table 6, which presents newspaper headlines on this topic. The use of homogenizing stereotypes such as 'oldies,' 'pensioners,' 'over 60s' or 'over 70s' by most of the newspapers was common during the pandemic.

From March 1 to 6 articles in the Daily Mail, Guardian and Express draw on statistics from early studies in China which explain that most of those who die from COVID-19 are aged 80 or over, whereas the mortality rate for children is

‘essentially zero’ (Express, 6.3.2020). The Telegraph seems especially concerned with the fact that the virus appears to be more deadly for older men than women (Telegraph, 10.3.2020). The overwhelmingly negative early coverage of old age as a risk factor was countered when on March 5, 2020, England’s Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty is quoted in the Daily Mail as saying that ‘catching coronavirus in your 80s does not mean you are a goner’ (MailOnline, 5.3.2020).

There is an implicit moral evaluation in the Daily Express coverage that implies that older people must brace themselves for the onslaught of disease by trying to protect themselves. Emphasis is placed on individual responsibility for protecting one’s own health. For instance, on March 13 the newspaper appeals directly to older people by asking, ‘What should the elderly be doing?’ The Daily Express later runs a poll asking readers to tell them whether they think four months’ isolation is a ‘fair and reasonable’ order?

The Guardian publishes a contribution by disabled writer, Frances Ryan, on March 11, 2020. Ryan makes the point that what is reassuring for the 98% who do not belong to a ‘high risk’ group leaves disabled people alone and terrified. This article is unique. None of the papers seem to be mindful of the possibility that their constant reporting of the risks for older and/or disabled or ill people, while reassuring for the majority who do not fit these categories, must be terrifying for those that *are* classed as ‘vulnerable.’ Stories make causal connections between age, disability and death rates. Older people’s chance of dying is reported as being ‘ten times higher’; or the virus is described as ‘deadly for the over 80s.’ Then on March 6, The Mail Online reports ‘the UK today confirmed its first coronavirus death in a woman in her 70s with underlying health conditions’ (MailOnline, 6.3.2020). This merging of old age and disability as necessary pre-conditions for dying of COVID-19 is consistent across newspaper coverage.

Next, we identify Frame 2, which emerged in response to Frame 1 – the newspapers began to search for someone or something to hold responsible for COVID deaths.

Frame 2: Compassionate experts and heartless bureaucrats are ultimately responsible for the UK’s response to the pandemic.

One side effect of the pandemic is a renewed interest amongst the press in listening to experts, particularly in critiquing the UK government’s response to the pandemic. Whether questioning the evidence the government is using, drawing contrasts between the UK and other European countries, or arguing that older people should not be patronised, the Guardian is set against every aspect of the government’s response to the pandemic. Many column inches are dedicated to seeking out and publishing the views of experts on everything

from how to self-isolate, to the prospects for a vaccine. The central message is that the situation is complex, but that experts have the answers and so their advice must be followed. While the Guardian clearly leads this focus on expertise, this enthusiasm for experts is shared across all five papers as illustrated by the headlines in Table 7.

Not all coverage of experts is positive. All five publications offered negative coverage of Professor June Andrews, the NHS official, whose address to a Public Accounts Committee in the Scottish parliament led to her becoming a hate figure in the first week of March 2020. Professor Andrews had been asked to put forward a plan on how to respond to the pandemic to the committee during which she made the following comments: ‘Curiously, ripping off the sticking plaster, in a hospital that has 92 delayed discharges, a pandemic would be quite useful because your hospital would work because these people would be taken out of the system . . .’ Andrews’ comments appeared to imply that deaths of older ‘bed blockers’ were ‘useful’, and was subsequently vilified in national papers. The Daily Express responded with an ‘attack’ from Professor Sloan of Age Scotland who is reported as saying: ‘Her comments are barbaric and frankly abhorrent. No one should believe this, let alone say it’ (Express, 7.3.2020). Media reports offer no deeper discussion of the structural issues of decades of underfunding in social care, which Andrews had referred to, even after her attempts to clarify herself.

Frame 3: Age decides everything from who is allowed out of isolation to who gets an Intensive Care Unit bed.

In the first two weeks of March 2020 leading up to the national lockdown, newspapers report on old age as if it is the only variable worth taking into account when assessing the health impact of COVID-19. The Mail covers the story of overwhelmed Intensive Care Unit (ICU) wards in Italy with accompanying photographs of Coronavirus patients lying prone, almost naked, in an ICU ward with the caption: ‘Intensive care wards may need to stop treating older patients and instead focus on those who have longer to live and better chances of survival. Pictured: An Italian ICU ward in Cremona’ (MailOnline, 12.3.2020). That article is followed on March 14, 2020 by Dr. Max, the Mail’s regular columnist who argues that ‘it’s not just coronavirus, ageism is a killer too’ (MailOnline, 14.3.2020). This article is the only one we found to question the ‘natural’ deaths of older people who have ‘had a good life’ with the practice of ageism in healthcare, something that has been widely documented in research in pre-pandemic times (Centre for Policy on Ageing, 2010), and which is intimately connected to disability (see Burke and Byrne, 2020).

TABLE 7. Newspaper Headlines – Frame 2

| Daily Mail | Guardian | Express | Telegraph | Times |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| <p>“Coronavirus explained: What are the chances I will die? How do I avoid it? Is it all a big fuss over nothing? World experts answer your questions” (Boyd, Murphy-bates, Matthews and Blanchard, 2.3.2020)</p> | <p>“How to give your elderly relatives coronavirus advice: a doctor’s view” (Clarke, 13.3.2020)</p> | <p>“From self-isolating to how best to avoid catching coronavirus, Cyril Dixon reveals the facts and dispels the myths surrounding the pandemic currently sweeping across Britain and the world” (Dixon, 13.3.2020)</p> | <p>“Elderly will have to self-isolate as infection peaks, says health chief; Vulnerable people and those with health problems will be urged to stay home and avoid crowded areas as epidemic takes hold” (Donnelly, 6.3.2020)</p> | <p>“Coronavirus: what UK can learn from Italy and the global scientific battle; Everything you need to know about Covid-19 and the worldwide effort to defeat it” (Allen-Mills and Gregory, 15.3.2020)</p> |

Frame 4: Generations must be kept apart as young people are ‘super spreaders.’

From the early weeks of March, COVID-19 is drawn into existing narratives of inter-generational warfare (Daily Mail, 11.3.2020). Just as age is used as shorthand for risk of dying of coronavirus, it is used as a means to homogenise and stereotype ‘the young’ as an amorphous group who are often cast as ‘selfish millennials.’ A counter argument was offered in the Guardian, which claimed that ‘only in online cesspits do the young want the elderly to sicken and die’ (Guardian, 15.3.2020). Nevertheless, the narrative that the young are putting the old at risk seeps into public debate. Older people are advised to self-isolate, particularly from younger family members such as grandchildren, who are identified as super-spreaders (Telegraph, 10.03.2020). Some newspapers try to offer counter-balance. The Daily Mail published an opinion piece by high profile journalist and former TV presenter Esther Rantzen in support of older people’s freedom. In another piece, Labour peer David Blunkett argued against government policy of asking older people to shield in order to protect the NHS (Hancock, 2020): ‘... Former Home Secretary David Blunkett, 72, says ordering the elderly to quarantine themselves is unfair’ (MailOnline, 15.3.2020).

Next, we present a counter-frame, giving space to the voices of older people living through the pandemic. We do this by gathering the letters they wrote to newspapers during the first lockdown (March 16 to July 4 2020) and letters published in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown, up to August 31 2020. We found twenty-six letters to the editor where writers self-identified as belonging to the ‘over 70s’ category across our five selected publications. The letters challenged the dominant narrative which framed age as *the* problem in tackling the pandemic.

Analysis of Search 2

Frame 5: Letters to the editor from older people

Letter writers express fear of social isolation and frustration while living with restrictions. One writer outlined the difficulties he encountered trying to secure a delivery slot from supermarkets for weeks: “My wife and I... have only been able to get two ‘click and collect’ slots since mid-March” (Telegraph, 25.5.2020). As the lockdown progressed, letters from healthy older people expressed an unwillingness to stay isolated for the rest of the year, as was suggested by some public health experts in April 2020. Sandra Handley wrote to the Telegraph expressing preparedness to engage in political protest: ‘If I stay in lockdown for much longer, I will become depressed, overweight, and lonely. I would certainly join a protest march if it became necessary’ (Telegraph, 26.4.2020). Ian Fuller wrote to the Daily Express promising to resist further lockdown restrictions on the over-70s: ‘I, for one, will refuse further lockdown

restrictions if it's aimed at our age group and will happily pay any fine imposed' (Express, 1.5.2020).

Across the political spectrum, both right and left leaning publications such as the Telegraph and the Guardian published submissions from older people and their advocates making pleas for liberty. Letters, from sometime Guardian contributor Salley Vickers, co-founder of Intergenerational Foundation Ashley Seager, and a Bob Wolfson, were featured in the Guardian (26.4.2020) under the joint headline "Don't let older people's liberty be stolen by the crisis". A letter written by Lord Hope of Craighead, Deputy president of the Supreme Court 2009-2013, to The Times draws a distinction between health and age: "This is age discrimination. What about the thousands of people in their early 70s who are active, fit and healthy? Their GPs should decide whether they have to be in lockdown, not the government, which has plucked a number out of the sky without taking into account the fact that the 70-year-olds of today are not the 70-year-olds of the past' (The Times, 21.4.2020).

Letters from the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners in the first week of May 2020 both insisted that, 'a person's age should not determine whether they are at high risk or not.' (Express, 3.5.2020). Baroness Altmann, described as an 'advocate for older workers', was scathing of the government's plans to confine the over 70s to their homes. Both interventions earned supportive letters from older people. In the Daily Express, these were generationally divisive: "Funny how the older person is doing what they are asked and staying in yet get the blame . . . And what about the selfish, arrogant, 'I can do what I want, you can't stop me' millennials" (Express, 3.5.2020). This contrasts with a Telegraph reader who is more concerned with younger and future generations: 'I am over 70 and will gladly accept more isolation if the majority of the workforce can return to something like normality . . . Otherwise the younger generation will have to pay off that debt for many years after we're gone' (Telegraph, 6.5.2020).

Next, we focus in on another counter-frame: this one is an example of 'positive ageism' (Palmore, 1990). Positive ageism is where praise is heaped on an older person who is defying their assumed descent into decline. This is often paternalistic, giving primacy to age as an identifying characteristic of the person. An example is the national obsession with Captain Tom Moore, veteran, who pledged to complete 100 laps of his garden before his 100th birthday in order to raise money for the NHS. The media and government place him on a pedestal as a national hero from the mid-point of the national lockdown in April 2020 (McCormick, 2020).

Analysis of Search 3

Frame 6: Captain Tom Moore war veteran and national hero

Newspaper editors' search for a hero was evident from the earliest days of the pandemic as the Daily Mail referred to Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty as '007 who should be put in charge of Brexit' (Daily Mail, 6.3.2020). Likewise, the Daily Mail identifies corona heroes exclaiming, 'Woman, 99, who survived coronavirus is hailed as 'amazing' by GMB [Good Morning Britain] viewers' (Daily Mail, 13.4.2020). The search for a national hero was called off once the media discovered Captain Tom Moore (see above). His efforts to fundraise for the NHS made him a national hero who had been granted a knighthood before the end of the first wave of the pandemic (MailOnline, 19.4.2020). Captain Tom's fundraising raised a total of £32,794,701 from more than 1.5m supporters (BBC, 1.5.2020).

Captain Tom is consistently praised across all newspapers for his heroic efforts. Most newspapers provide daily updates highlighting the amount of money Captain Tom raises as he continues to walk laps of his garden, with the Daily Express starting a petition for Captain Tom to be knighted (Express, 17.4.2020). Captain Tom Moore is no longer regarded as a 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' but rather a celebrity as he 'marches into the record books' (Times, 17.4.2020). Sharp contrast is drawn between Captain Tom and regular celebrities who played no significant role in the national response to the pandemic (MailOnline, 18.4.2020).

Discussion

Our analysis suggests that there are two main public messages made by newspapers in the early months of the pandemic. These are: that older people *are* the problem for the NHS; that public figures can be held in hate or esteem in apportioning blame at a time of crisis. Reports on who is responsible, who is at risk, and who is to blame for deaths from COVID-19 are framed as issues of public health and generational fairness, with individual responsibility occupying a prominent role.

Our framing analysis has shown that ageist societal norms and the belief that all older people are pretty much the same (Carney and Nash, 2020: 22) pervade mainstream media reports in the early months of the pandemic. Homogenizing language such as 'pensioners,' 'oldies' and 'over-60s/70s' succeed in framing the impact of restrictions on older people as reasonable in light of the health risk. Their assigned role in the national response to the pandemic is to do everything they can to avoid becoming a burden on the NHS. This is in sharp contrast to the UN's call for older people to be protected equally during the pandemic (HelpAge International, 2020). Complex intersections between age and other risk factors such as disability, inequality and housing status are ignored

in favour of the blunt use of chronological age to decide policy (Goodley, 2021). Paternalistic use of chronological age to define risk is resisted by older letter writers, who make pleas for their personal freedoms and civil liberties to be returned. The othering of older people is superficially counter-balanced by inserting occasional comments or stories from older journalists or TV personalities such as Esther Rantzen (MailOnline, 16.3.20). The decisive example of this kind of inspirational and exceptional older person – at odds with the mass of ‘pensioners’, and so the victim of ‘positive ageism’ (Palmore, 1990) – is Captain Tom Moore. Newspaper reporting on the patriotism and heroism of Captain Tom also offer shallow counter-balance against the hundreds of articles published which write off the majority of older people as at best victims, and at worst burdens, on an over-stretched health system. The central frame is that older people *are* the problem in this pandemic and must take responsibility for their own survival. Older people are placed in separate conceptual categories from ‘families’ and ‘younger people’ in many press reports. This distancing of younger people from their future, older selves, is an increasingly recognised problem in light of the need to make policies that benefit all generations equally and at the same time (Lloyd, Devine and Carney, 2018).

Another familiar trope from past analysis of British newspapers is apparent in our research. Warner (2013a) and Jones (2014) provided substantive evidence of a culture of blaming public servants amongst the right-wing press in the case of Baby P, a toddler who died while on the at-risk register of Haringey Council in 2007. The pandemic offers up another scapegoat in the form of Professor June Andrews whose claim that ‘the pandemic could be quite useful’ in killing off bed-blockers allows the media to take the moral high ground, while continuing to perpetuate the idea that older people are, by their very existence, the main problem for the NHS during this pandemic. Professor Andrews is held up as personally to blame for what are, arguably, systemic problems. By focusing on individual public servants as hate figures the media divert attention away from the underlying social policy failures such as the fact that successive governments have not provided basic, adequate social care as an integrated part of the NHS (Glasby et al., 2020).

We conclude that the newspaper coverage has, thus, either consciously or unconsciously, used public health advice around age and risk to segregate older people from the rest of the population. For instance, while the majority of those who died from COVID-19 in the first wave were aged 70 or over (Daly, 2020), the fact that most older people *do* survive was lost in the media coverage (Rahman and Jahan, 2020). This status of older people as an out-group, observable from our news framing analysis, is both real and metaphorical. As of 2021, social care is still provided privately, outside the ‘protective ring’ of the NHS – which contributed to the high death rates in care homes during the first wave of the pandemic (Daly, 2020). Hodgson et al. (2020: 7) found that 12,800 of the

30,500 excess deaths in care homes at the time of our study were not linked to COVID-19. They surmise that increased social isolation and lack of hospital care may have contributed to indirect deaths of the very oldest people. Isolating, segregating and removing those in need from the protection of the NHS must raise questions for UK society about how we use age to make policy decisions in a crisis.

Conclusion

In this article, we have traced the trajectory of UK newspaper coverage of the pandemic; from the establishment of age as *the frame* around which the public health response was shaped, through letters to the editor from older people themselves, which provided a 'lived experience' counter-frame. Finally, we reported on how journalists fell back on the positive ageism trope of age hero in the guise of Captain Tom Moore.

By drawing attention to the representation of older people in newspaper coverage, we hope that our study contributes to an emergent social policy literature which is critical of the treatment of out-groups in media discussion (Patrick, 2020; Pickard, 2019). It also suggests critical re-evaluation of how we, as social policy scholars frame population ageing as a 'long-term structural problem' rather than a matter of human need (Taylor-Gooby, 2017: 418). Undertaking combined analysis of cultural and systemic issues can help us to reveal the roots of long-term policy problems like the absence of social care (Daly, 2020). Specifically, our research suggests that news framing analysis provides a means of assessing how society constructs certain groups as deserving and entitled while others are seen as a problem for the welfare state (Carney, 2010). The status of the poorest or frailest members of our society is reflected in our media (Clark, 2006). So, in seeking to reveal the absences and silences that often surround them we must challenge media elites as well as politicians and policy-makers who have been found to 'work together to present a moral story together for their mutual benefit' (Warner, 2013b: 1651). The examples of June Andrews and Captain Tom Moore suggest that editors are willing to use scapegoats and heroes that offer effective distraction from the less newsworthy notion that the rights of our oldest cohorts to health and social care have been ignored for decades. Arguably, the 2021 Health and Care Bill is a response to the recent political salience of social care in light of the pandemic. The jury is very much out on whether this is the policy game-changer the government claims it will be.

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Competing Interests

We, the listed authors of the above referenced article, declare no competing interests.

Supplementary material

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Note

1 Turner (2020).

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