



## Pre-course activity one: Anti-age culture and Apocalyptic demography

**Task set by Jayne Raisborough, Professor of Media at Leeds Beckett University.**

In this exercise we are thinking about social inequalities and social injustice. More specifically we will be taking a look at ageism. At the end of this exercise you will know about 'anti-ageing culture' and 'apocalyptic demography' and have an appreciation about the seriousness of ageism for all of us - no matter our age.

Let's start by imagining how old you, your parents/carers, and grandparents may be in 2050 and then in 2070. I ask this because you and your family are part of a global change in populations: there will be more people over 60 than ever before and the number of young people is falling. 2050 and 2070 are key years in these changes. I explain this in my TEDx talk '*Our Changing World Grey Planet*' you can find it [here on the Leeds Beckett TEDx site](#).

My fascination with ageing started when I was researching cosmetic surgery - if surgery is risky and unpredictable why do people have it? What emerged was people as young as 20 were having 'tweakments' and pre-emptive procedures into order to look young. My research into make-over television found that that shows were also telling us not to get old – never mind the countless ads for potions and lotions that declare themselves to be anti-ageing! I have argued that we live in an **anti-ageing culture**.

Anti-ageing culture is a problem: it increases bodily anxiety and it also makes us more vulnerable to the pressures of pharma-medical promises. It prevents us from learning to be old: it encourages us to deny our future older selves while encouraging us to be anxious consumers of hair dye and implants. My main concern is that it affects our ability to care - care for ourselves (because we are encouraged to see ourselves as invulnerable) and to care for others (because they are vulnerable). Furthermore, it encourages ageism - prejudice and discrimination on perceptions of age (and this starts a lot earlier than you think!)

More specifically it starts an ambivalence and in some cases a fear about getting old and of older people too. We can see this in the ways demographic changes I speak about in the video are referred to. Metaphors such as 'grey tsunami', 'demographic cliff' and 'grey timebomb' present older people as a burden or a threat on the young. Scholars describe this as an '**apocalyptic demography**'. In my research, I argue that apocalyptic demography forms a content for recent aggressive stereotyping of older people. Remember Brexit? Older people were represented as an out of touch, self-interested group who *stole the future* from younger people. What's called an 'intergenerational warfare discourse' characterises UK media, whereby the older population are represented as *ruining* the financial future of the young, through their costly pensions and 'excessive' use of health-care services. We media scholars always need to ask a few questions here: what purpose does this scapegoating serve? What are we being distracted from? Immediately we can

start to reflect on how years of austerity policies have shaped health-care – is it right that older people are framed in such ways?

This can only be but a brief introduction so now it's over to you.

### **Study questions/activities:**

The Conversation is a newsfeed written by academics for the wider public. Please read [How coronavirus exposes the way we regard ageing and old people](#) and consider the following questions:

1. How can media scholars help us understand our response to Covid 19?
2. What can we learn by studying media representations?
3. How does apocalyptic demography feed into government and public responses to Covid 19?

Take some time to reflect on the ways Covid 19 has been communicated. Do you think that earlier messages to stay at home to protect *vulnerable* people has been successful in helping the lock down? What do you think has helped people understand the need to socially distance and stay home?

There are other *Conversation* articles which may be of interest, such as [this article on allocating ICU beds and ventilators based on age](#). Please feel free to search this accessible resource.

### **Final Comments**

If you would like to discuss your ideas / work, or if any other questions related to the degree programme or studying at Leeds Beckett University, please contact Dr Daniel Kilvington, Course Director of BA (Hons) Media, Communication, Cultures, at: [D.J.Kilvington@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:D.J.Kilvington@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) or contact him on Twitter: @dan\_kilvington. Also, feel free to give the degree page on Twitter a follow too: @LeedsBeckettMCC.