2 Mass media

Introduction

Can you imagine a day going by without watching a television programme or a DVD; listening to music on the radio, CD or the Internet; or reading a newspaper, magazine or book? If your answer is yes then you're a pretty unusual person! We live in a world where we are surrounded by print and electronic media and depend upon them for information and entertainment.

Media products are often produced by organisations. Does it matter who owns and controls these organisations?

We rely upon the media for much of our information and entertainment. Are the media giving us an accurate picture of the world?

We watch, listen to and read media messages. How do we respond to these messages? These are some of the questions examined in this chapter. What effect are the new media, such as the internet and satellite broadcasting, having on our lives?

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Unit 1 Media institutions

keyissues

1. What are the key characteristics of the media?
2. Who owns and controls media institutions?

1.1 Defining the media

What are the mass media? The term *media* describes different means of communication. Some media – such as the telephone – enable communication between two people. However, others allow communication with a *mass* audience. These include newspapers, television, radio, and the internet.

For much of human history, social relations have been face to face. People communicated by talking and through body language. Now technological developments have made it possible to communicate with large numbers of people at one time. It is these forms of communication that have come to be known as the *mass media*.

'The mass media are simply the means through which content, whether fact or fiction, is produced by organisations and transmitted to and received by an audience' (McCullagh, 2002).

This definition identifies three key aspects of the mass media.

- The production of messages by media institutions
- The content of media messages
- The reception of messages by audiences.

While these three dimensions are interrelated, it is important that each is examined separately. We cannot understand what factors shape media content without looking at the production process. We cannot understand the meanings of media messages without analysing their content. And we cannot reach an informed judgement about media effects without examining how audiences interpret media messages.

We shall examine each of these processes in turn, beginning with media organisations.

1.2 Media organisations

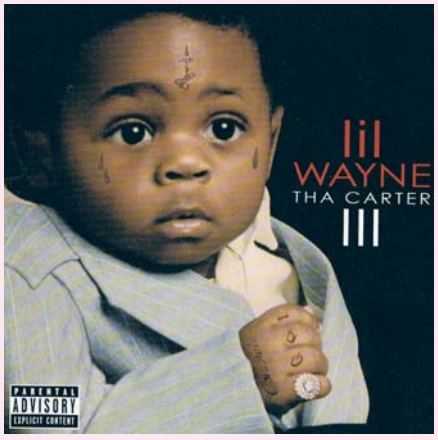
Types of media organisation There are three forms of media organisation.

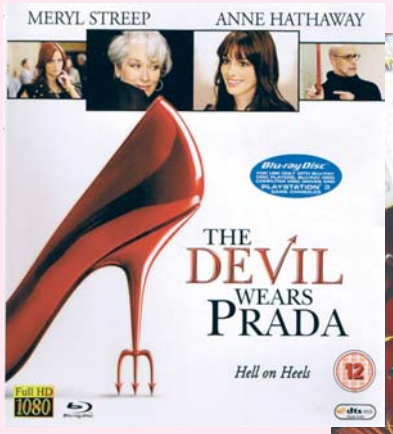
- Community-based media organisations, eg a radio station in a local hospital
- Public/state owned media organisations, eg the BBC
- Privately owned media organisations, eg News Corporation (Devereux, 2003).

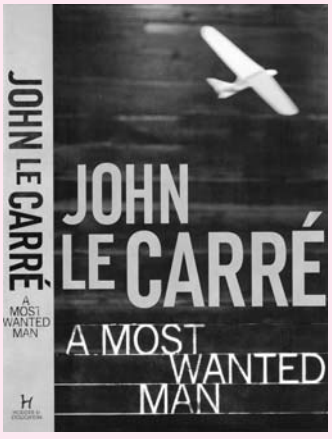
While all three forms still survive, privately-owned media organisations are by far the most significant. Community-based media continue to play a minor role, usually appealing to limited local audiences. Public/state owned media organisations, although in an earlier media age often

enjoying a national monopoly, have steadily lost their dominance. They have either been privatised or face significant competition from a limited number of privately-owned global media institutions.

activity 1 defining the mass media







question

Why is each picture an example of the mass media?

Trends in media ownership

Increasing media choice? In the last fifteen years there has been a rapid increase in the range of media outlets. 'In 1988 there were four TV channels in the UK; today over 250; there were sixty commercial radio stations, today over 350; 14 cinema multiplexes, today nearly 2000; zero web pages, today billions' (Peake, 2002, updated 2009). These changes suggest a much wider range of choice. However, the source of these 'choices' is a smaller and smaller number of extremely large and powerful media institutions. And, as the next unit indicates, some researchers see this development as reducing choice.

Increasing concentration of media organisations 'Fewer and fewer large companies increasingly own what we see, hear and read' (Williams, 2003). This process is known as the *concentration of media organisations*.

The increasing concentration of media organisations is the result of three major developments:

- Vertical integration
- Horizontal integration and multi-media ownership
- The expansion of transnational organisations.

Let's take each in turn.

Vertical integration This refers to 'the process by which one owner acquires all aspects of production and distribution of a single type of media product' (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997). Vertical integration is not new. Production and distribution of movies were concentrated in the hands of the big five Hollywood companies in the early part of the twentieth century. This enabled them to build a dominant position in world film production. Although film industries subsequently developed elsewhere, Hollywood still retains its dominance. 'The most comprehensive survey of cinema-going in Britain…by the Film Council reveals that although younger people are flocking to the cinema in ever increasing numbers, they are overwhelmingly watching films made by the big US studios' (Kennedy, 2003).

Horizontal integration This refers to 'the process by which one company buys different kinds of media, concentrating ownership across different kinds of media' (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997). Horizontal integration has developed rapidly in recent years. The largest media groups own a range of media. Take News Corporation owned by Rupert Murdoch. Although this company initially produced newspapers, it now has interests in a range of other media, including book publishing (eg, Harper Collins), television (eg, BSkyB), radio (eg, Sky), film (eg, 20th Century Fox), and the internet (eg MySpace).

Transnational ownership The major media organisations operate across national boundaries. Take News Corporation again. Although the company originated in Australia, it now operates on a global scale. It produces over 175 newspapers in Australia, Britain and the USA; it owns 37 television stations; and it is able to beam programmes into homes through its ownership and control of cable programming and satellite operations across Europe, Asia, Australia, Latin America and the USA.

Explaining increasing concentration

Media products such as newspapers and films are costly to produce. They require a large upfront investment. But while producing the first newspaper or film is expensive, the cost of reproducing copies is cheap. This encourages media organisations to maximise their audiences. Hence the three developments outlined above – all of which have led to increasing concentration.

Vertical integration has enabled Hollywood companies to sell their films more easily. Horizontal integration has allowed organisations to promote their products across a range of media. 'Batman was developed into a film by Time Warner, publicised through its magazines and promoted via its cable and television networks, the soundtrack of which was released on its record labels and whose merchandising included children's toys produced through its manufacturing interests' (Williams, 2003).

What is more, the development of multi-media organisations operating across the world enables them to search for markets on a global scale. 'The marketing of *The Lion King, Pocahontas*, and many other animated characters, by Walt Disney (the film, the dolls, the books, the jigsaw puzzles, lunchboxes and so on) is but one of many examples of this (worldwide) exploitation of one product in as many markets as possible' (Newbold et al., 2002).

key terms

Mass media Means of communication through which content – news, sport, music, drama, writing, advertising – are transmitted to large audiences.

Media concentration The concentration of mass media ownership into fewer and fewer organisations.

Vertical integration One company acquiring all aspects of the production and distribution of a single type of media product.

Horizontal integration One organisation buying up companies from different media, concentrating ownership across different kinds of media.

Transnational ownership The ownership by a single company of media organisations which operate in two or more countries.

summary

1. The mass media are the means of communication through which messages are produced by organisations and received by audiences.
2. Most people use the mass media extensively for information and entertainment.
3. Ownership and control of the mass media has become increasingly concentrated in recent years due to vertical integration, horizontal integration and transnational ownership.

activity2 media integration and concentration

Item A Time Warner

Time Warner, the world's largest media company, has grown through mergers and acquisitions.

- In 1990, Time merged with Warner Communications and became Time Warner.
- In 1996, Time Warner acquired Turner Broadcasting System.
- In 1996, Time Warner merged with AOL (America Online).

Time Inc. is the largest magazine publisher in the US and a leading publisher in the UK and Mexico. Its magazines include Time, Fortune, Ideal Home and Nuts.

Warner Bros. Entertainment produces feature films and TV series and distributes DVDs worldwide.

Turner Broadcasting System owns a number of television networks. It produces CNN, a 24-hour cable TV news service and CNNInternation which reaches more than 200 countries.

AOL is a leading global web services company with a worldwide audience.

HBO (Home Box Office) delivers two 24-hour pay television services offering movies on demand with over 40 million US subscribers. It has joint ventures in various countries, for example HBO Brasil, HBO Poland and HBO India.

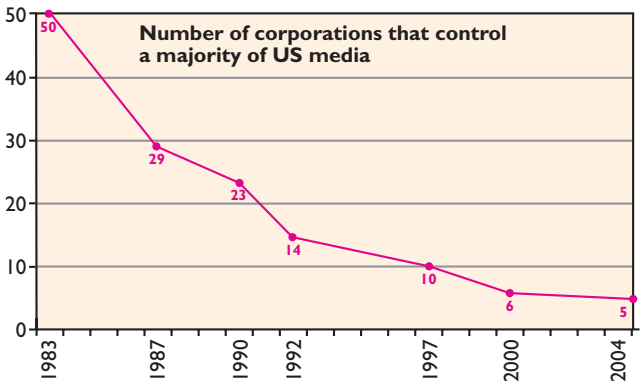
Time Warner Cable is the second largest cable operator in the US.

Joint operations There are joint operations between the divisions within Time Warner - for example, In2TV and TMZ.com from AOL and Warner Bros.

Source: timewarner.com, 2009

Time Warner Center, New York

Item B Media concentration in the USA



The 5 corporations which controlled most of the mass media in the USA in 2004 were Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corporation and Bertelsmann.

Source: Bagdikian, 2004

questions

1. How does Item A illustrate both vertical and horizontal integration?
2. How do Items A and B indicate media concentration?

Unit 2 Ownership and control of the media

keyissues

1. Does it matter who owns and controls the media?
2. Do the media provide the information required for an informed citizenship?

What is the relationship between ownership and control of the mass media? To what extent do the owners of media corporations control the content of the media they produce? Does media concentration matter? Are we well served by the mass media on offer? These are some of the questions addressed in this unit. These questions are examined in terms of two sociological theories – pluralism and Marxism.

2.1 Pluralism

Pluralism – the theory

Pluralism is a sociological theory which presents the following picture of Western societies. These societies are

seen as *representative democracies* – societies in which the concerns and interests of the population as a whole and of particular groups within the population are represented. The electorate – those entitled to vote – elect politicians whose job is to represent the nation as a whole. The electorate has the freedom to choose between competing political parties.

Pressure groups or interest groups represent sections of the population. For example, there are a range of interest groups representing various occupations – for instance, professional associations such as the British Medical Association representing doctors and trade unions such as the National Union of Teachers representing teachers. Pressure groups, as their name suggests, put pressure on the government to further the interests of their members. Some pressure groups represent more vulnerable groups in society – for example, the Child Poverty Action Group represents the interests of the poor. And, at the other end of the scale, the Confederation of British Industry represents the interests of the owners, managers and shareholders of private industry.

From a pluralist point of view, no one group is dominant in society – to some extent all groups have a say in the running of society, and all adults have the freedom to choose who governs society.

Pluralism and the media

Reflecting public demand The pluralist picture of a representative democracy is reflected in pluralist views of the media. It states that the content of the mass media mirrors what the public, or a section of the public, wants. The media cater to the public as a whole or to particular groups in society. Put another way, the media simply respond to the demands of the market.

Those who own and control the media usually take a pluralist view, arguing that they must satisfy public demand to stay in business. If they failed to do this, nobody would buy their newspapers or watch their TV programmes.

Diverse society, diverse media The media present a range of views which reflect the diversity of opinions in society. The pluralist theory of power states that no one group dominates the whole of society – power is shared among a range of groups. The mass media mirror this diversity. They present a wide range of views, which allows the audience freedom to choose between them. Minority views and tastes are catered for because of the choice of newspapers, magazines, films, radio and TV channels available in a free market.

The media may be biased in certain ways but this is simply because the views they broadcast are those that most people sympathise with and want to hear. If asylum seekers are represented as a 'problem', it is because this reflects the majority view; if women are portrayed in domestic roles, this reflects the reality of most women's lives.

Digital Technology All forms of communication, from statistical data to the human voice, can be coded, stored and relayed in a digital form. Increasingly, consumers can access this material - for example, they can select films and music from huge digital libraries. From a pluralist view, this can be seen as a transfer of power from owners to audiences. It puts audiences in the driving seat - they choose what and when to access (Murdock & Golding, 2005). According to Rupert Murdoch, owner and chief executive of News Corporation, 'This technology has liberated people from the once powerful media barons' (quoted in Greenslade, 1993:17).

Media concentration Does media concentration matter? Are we, the audience, well served by the concentration of ownership and control in the hands of a few, extremely powerful, media magnates?

Many pluralists argue that concentration of ownership is essential for survival in an increasingly global market. Only global companies such as Time Warner, Viacom and News International have the resources to provide audiences with a wider choice and a greater range of media products at affordable prices. Increasing media concentration should therefore be welcomed (Curran & Seaton, 1997).

Media deregulation In many countries there are laws which regulate the ownership and content of the media. For example, in the UK, television broadcasts were formerly limited to the BBC, a state-owned organisation controlled by a board of governors appointed by the Home Secretary. The content of broadcasts was regulated by the rules of public service broadcasting which stated that the BBC should 'inform, educate and entertain'. In practice, this meant a balance between entertainment on the one hand and news and documentaries on the other hand.

From 1954, with the introduction of commercial television, there has been steady reduction of the regulations governing the media. This process is known as *media deregulation*. In terms of television, this has resulted in a rapid expansion in the number of channels and increased competition between terrestrial, satellite and cable companies. The rules governing programme content have been reduced – for example, MTV is clearly not bound by the requirements of public service broadcasting.

In most countries, there are laws which limit the concentration of media ownership. They are designed to prevent organisations from dominating large sections of the media. In recent years, these laws have been relaxed. This is a further example of media deregulation.

In general, pluralists welcome media deregulation. They

key terms

Pluralism A theory which sees power widely dispersed in democratic societies.

Representative democracy A system of government in which the people are represented by elected officials.

Media deregulation The reduction or abolition of laws limiting media ownership and regulating media output.

argue that private ownership of the media is the most effective way to provide a wide range of choice. Privately-owned media organisations compete with each other to give audiences what they want. If audiences reject their products, they would go out of business. By contrast, publicly-owned media and state regulation can be seen as dangerous since they concentrate too much power in the hands of government, offer limited choice and are unresponsive to their audience.

activity3 catering for all tastes

Girls' and lads' magazines

question

What support do these items provide for the pluralist view that the media cater for a range of groups in society?

2.2 Pluralism – an evaluation

The previous section outlined pluralist views of the relationship between ownership and control of the media and presented evidence to support those views. This section looks at criticisms of pluralist views.

Media concentration and democracy

In *The New Media Monopoly*, Ben Bagdikian (2004) makes the following criticisms of pluralist views. His evidence is drawn mainly from America.

In 1983, most of the mass media in the USA was owned and controlled by 50 corporations. By 2004, the media were dominated by five giant corporations – Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation, Bertelsmann and Viacom. According to Bagdikian, this increasing media concentration has very serious consequences. It has moved politics in the USA towards the far right – the views broadcast are increasingly conservative and there is little room for liberal or radical voices. These views reflect those of the media owners – and the advertisers on whom the owners depend for their profits.

Media concentration has also resulted in less and less local news and local voices. For example, the largest radio chain has over 1,200 local radio stations but only 200 employees. The programmes are pre-recorded and the same programmes are broadcast by local stations throughout the USA.

Bagdikian argues that both local and national democracy are under threat. Despite more and more TV channels and radio stations, choice has been narrowed since they're all broadcasting more and more of the same thing – more 'reality' shows, more sitcoms and soaps, more movies. There is little diversity of opinion in the news and little access to local TV and radio.

In a democracy, citizens need to be informed – they need a range of views, a variety of opinions and information from which to make informed choices. Broadcast media are required by law to operate 'in the public interest'. According to Bagdikian, they are failing to do this and, in the process, failing to produce the informed voters essential for a democracy.

The drive for profits

In the UK, the BBC is funded by a licence fee. All other broadcasting media – commercial TV and radio – are funded by advertising (eg, ITV) or subscription (eg, BSkyB). As a public service broadcaster, the BBC is required to 'inform, educate and entertain'. The information it broadcasts should be 'accurate and impartial' and it should produce a variety of programmes to cater for all groups in society. Ofcom – the Office for Communications – regulates the output of both the BBC and commercial broadcasters. As with ownership, the rules governing the content of broadcasting have been relaxed. For example, TV channels can now specialise in popular music (eg, MTV), sport (eg, Sky Sports 1 and 2) or shopping (eg, the Shopping Channel).

Privately-owned commercial broadcasters are in business to make money. Their primary aim is profit rather than public service. And this is the main influence on media content. Evidence to support this view is given in the following examples.

Infotainment The need to make more money by increasing readership of newspapers has led to the growth of the 'human interest' story. This has largely replaced political coverage in the tabloid press (McCullagh, 2002). Now news has become 'infotainment' – part of the entertainment industry. Gossip about the 'instant stars' created by reality TV programmes such as *Big Brother* is regularly reported in tabloid newspapers. Investigative journalists have been replaced by celebrity columnists and presenters (Franklin, 1997).

Advertising revenue The importance of advertising as a major source of revenue has encouraged media organisations to focus on audiences with significant purchasing power. This means mass audiences – in general, the larger the audience the higher the advertising fees – or smaller audiences with spending power such as the young people who watch MTV and the readership of 'quality' newspapers such as the *Times* and *Telegraph*. This has led to a decline in the number of newspapers and minority interest programmes whose audiences are relatively poor (Curran & Seaton, 1997).

At the same time, the boundary between media content and advertising is being broken down (Murdock, 1992). For example, companies pay for products to be 'placed' in films.

Digital technology

Does digital technology increase audience choice and control as some pluralists argue? The first criticism of this view is that audiences often have to pay to access the vast libraries of digital products. This excludes some who cannot afford to pay.

Secondly, power lies with those who own and control cultural products such as films, books, newspapers, recorded music and images. Media corporations can decide what is made available and at what price (Murdock & Golding, 2005).

The influence of proprietors

The pluralist view argues that the power of media proprietors (owners) to influence media content is limited by their need to make profits. If proprietors printed or broadcast views which did not reflect those of their audience, then they may well go out of business.

How much do proprietors influence the content of the media they produce? Answers to this question fall into two main approaches – the *instrumental* and the *structural* approach.

The instrumental approach This approach argues that the proprietors of media organisations directly influence the content of the media they own. Between the two world

wars, press barons such as Lord Rothermere and Lord Beaverbrook used their newspapers to put across conservative political views. Some researchers argue that the growing concentration of the media has increased the power of proprietors who frequently mount propaganda campaigns 'to defend the economic, social and political agenda of privileged groups' (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

For example, Rupert Murdock, owner and chief executive of News Corporation admits that he exercises editorial control on major issues in many of the newspapers in his global empire. In newspapers like *The Sun* and *News of the World,* he decides policy on the European Union and which political party to support in a general election (House of Lords, 2008).

The structural approach This approach also recognises that top media executives exercise considerable power.

activity4 the influence of proprietors

Item A Rupert Murdoch

Rupert Murdoch is the owner and chief executive of News Corporation, a global media company. Murdoch owns 175 newspapers on three continents. They publish 40 million papers a week and dominate the newspaper markets in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. In an interview in his own *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, Murdoch backed President Bush's stance against Saddam Hussein and called for war against Iraq. And the editors of his 175 newspapers around the world mirrored his views, supporting military action against Saddam.

Source: *The Guardian*, 17.2.2003 and *The Independent*, 18.10.2004

Item B Conducting his campaign

This graphic by Steve Caplin gives one view of Murdoch's campaign for war against Iraq.

Item C What his papers say

The tyranny of Saddam and the danger to innocent lives demand the world responds.

Sydney Daily Telegraph

There comes a time when evil must be stopped, and it is better to do that sooner rather than later.

Brisbane Courier-Mail

The doubters must say how much more time they would give Saddam to play his delaying games.

Wellington Dominion-Post

Stick with the friend you can trust through and through – America.

The Sun

Item D Murdoch's leadership style

Richard Searby, one-time chairman of News Corporation, describes Rupert Murdoch's leadership style.

Most company boards meet to take decisions. Ours meets to ratify – confirm and rubber stamp – Rupert's decisions. For much of the time, you don't hear from Rupert. Then, all of a sudden, he descends like a thunderbolt from hell to slash and burn all before him. Since nobody is ever sure when the next autocratic intervention will take place (or on what subject), they live in fear of it and try to second guess what he would want, even in the most unimportant of matters.

Quoted in *Neill*, 1996

The Sun and the *News of the World*, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, used to support the Conservative Party. In the 1997 election, both papers changed their support to Tony Blair's Labour party. According to Andrew Neil who worked for Murdock as a newspaper editor for 11 years, the decision to back Labour 'was entirely Rupert's. Their editors played almost no part in the decision and many of the staff, especially on *The Sun*, were very unhappy about it. But they had no say in the matter and were never consulted.'

Source: House of Lords, 2008

IMAGE TO FOLLOW

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

question

How do Items A, B, C and D support the claim that proprietors sometimes influence the content of the news media?

However, those who favour this approach argue that it is impossible for one individual to control the day-to-day output of huge media organisations such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. They see Murdoch's power as *allocative control* – the power to set the goals of the organisation, to make key financial decisions and to set the tone and politics of his products (Williams, 2003). In Murdoch's case, key decisions relating to the press have involved:

- Relocating the production of his British newspapers in 1986 from Fleet Street to Wapping, where new technology could be employed to destroy the power of the print unions
- Appointing editors who share his views and firing those who do not toe the line
- Reducing the price of his newspapers to drive out competitors (Eldridge et al., 1997).

Despite the limitations of allocative control, it is still possible for proprietors to express their own views in the media they own. Evidence to support this claim is given in Activity 4.

2.3 Marxism

The theory

Karl Marx (1818-1883) argued that human society was made up of two parts – the *infrastructure* or economic base and the *superstructure* which, in capitalist industrial society, includes the political, legal and educational systems, the mass media and beliefs and values. The superstructure is largely shaped by the infrastructure – in other words, the economic base largely shapes the rest of society.

Social classes According to Marx, every society has two main social groups, a *ruling class* and a *subject class*. The power of the ruling class comes from its ownership of what Marx called the *means of production*. This includes the land, raw materials, machinery, tools and buildings used to produce goods. Thus in Western industrial society, *capitalists* – those who own private industry – form the ruling class. The subject class – the *proletariat* – is made up of workers who sell their labour in return for wages.

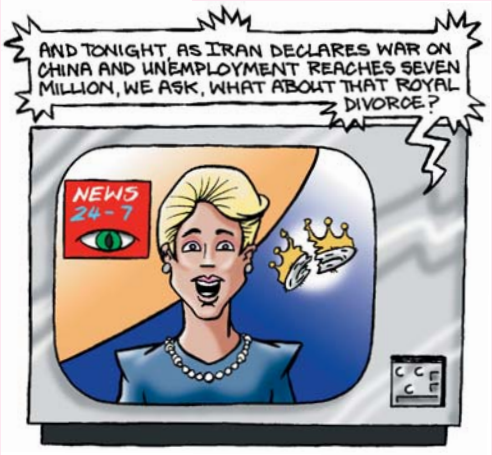
There is a basic conflict of interest between capitalists and workers. The workers produce wealth in the form of goods yet a large part of that wealth is taken in the form of profits by the capitalist class. Thus one group gains at the expense of the other.

Marx believed that this conflict could not be resolved within the framework of capitalist society. It would eventually result in the overthrow of the capitalist class. A workers' revolution would lead to a communist society in which the means of production would be owned by everyone, classes would disappear, and exploitation and oppression would end.

Ruling class ideology This, however, would only happen when workers became fully aware of their exploitation. But this awareness will not occur overnight because of the way society is structured. Since the infrastructure largely shapes the superstructure, the relationship of dominance and

activity5 the drive for profits

Item A Infotainment



Adapted from Glasgow Media Group, 1982

question

Use Items A,B and C to show how the drive for profits may affect media content.

Item B Concentration - local interests

In the 1990s, the US relaxed radio ownership rules. As a result, large transnational companies started buying up local radio stations. Clearchannel bought large numbers and ended up with three times more stations than its nearest rival. It was accused of ignoring local interests. For example, there was a train derailment of toxic chemicals in Minot, North Dakota in 2002. The *New York Times* claimed that the local Clearchannel station failed to report the incident. This was seen as a result of national programming and the centralisation of news production.

Source: House of Lords, 2008

Item C Concentration - cross promotion

A US study published in 2001 found that media outlets covered their parent company's products much more than those of their rivals. For example, CBS was then owned by Viacom (they are now a separate company) whose holdings included MTV, Simon & Schuster book publishers and Paramount film studios. CBS's morning magazine news programmes were nearly twice as likely to cover Viacom products as those of ABC and NBC combined. The coverage ranged from interviews with contestants on other CBS shows to interviews with the stars of Paramount movies.

Source: House of Lords, 2008

subordination between the ruling class and subject class will be reflected in the superstructure. Thus, the political and legal systems will support ruling class power – for example, laws will protect the rights of capitalists to own industry and take profits. In the same way, the beliefs and values of society will support ruling class domination. Thus, capitalism will be seen as reasonable and just, rather than exploitative and oppressive. In this way, beliefs and values will disguise and distort the true nature of society.

In Marxist terms, beliefs and values form a *ruling class ideology*. This produces a *false consciousness* which prevents people from seeing the reality of their situation.

Marxism and the media

In Marx's words, ' the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class'. As part of the superstructure, the mass media will reflect the economic base and present capitalism as normal, reasonable and acceptable. And, as part of the ruling class, those who own and control the media will have a vested interest in portraying capitalist society in a positive light. As a result, the media transmit a conservative, conformist view, promote established attitudes and values, and reinforce the position of the powerful.

Ideology Ralph Miliband's study *The State in Capitalist Society* (1973) provides an example of a Marxist approach to the media. The ruling class have to convince the rest of the population to accept the widespread inequalities which are inevitable in capitalist societies. Miliband points to the power of the dominant classes to control the way people think through *ideology* – a false view of reality. This control is exercised in part through the mass media.

Miliband rejects the idea of pluralist diversity. He sees the choice of alternative options and ideas presented by the media as very limited. The content of the media reflects the viewpoint of the dominant group in society – the White, male, ruling class. It is not just political reporting that supports the system, the content of entertainment programmes is also seen as supporting the way things are by portraying the capitalist system in a favourable light.

The new 'opium of the people' Miliband describes the media as the new 'opium of the people', adapting Marx's famous phrase, 'religion is the opium of the people'. He sees the media acting like opium, a hallucinatory drug which creates illusions and produces a feeling of well-being. This keeps the working class quiet and encourages them to accept a system which, in reality, exploits them.

In a similar vein, Herbert Marcuse (1964) suggests that programmes which simply entertain, plus the promise of consumer satisfaction that advertisements and game shows provide, help to remove any doubts people may have about the organisation of society. Programmes such as *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* divert attention from the unfair nature of society, give the impression that nothing is radically wrong with the world we live in, and provide enjoyment and a sense of well-being for millions.

Neo-Marxism and cultural hegemony

The picture presented so far is of a society brainwashed by a pervasive ruling class ideology. There appears to be little or no challenge to this ideology. In particular, the media

activity6 entertainment

Item A EastEnders

Item B The National Lottery

question

How might a Marxist interpret Items A and B?

fail to provide alternative views and critical voices.

Neo-Marxists ('new' Marxists) present a somewhat different picture. They draw in part on the work of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). Gramsci argues that beliefs and ideas are not simply shaped by the economic base. To some extent they have a life of their own.

Cultural hegemony Gramsci refers to the power of ruling class ideology as *cultural hegemony* – the dominance of one set of ideas and beliefs over others. He argues that there are always ideas and beliefs which challenge the dominant ideology and which threaten cultural hegemony. For example, as a result of their experience in capitalist society, workers will, at least partially, see through the dominant ideology and may develop views in opposition to it.

The British sociologist Stuart Hall (1995), has developed Gramsci's argument. He claims that the economic base places real limits on the development of alternative views but it cannot always prevent them. As a result, cultural hegemony is never complete, never totally dominant. To some extent, there are always competing viewpoints, there are always people who challenge dominant beliefs. And these challenges to cultural hegemony can change society.

The media and cultural hegemony To what extent does the media challenge cultural hegemony? Very little, according to researchers such as Ben Bagdikian – see page 10. However, as Activity 7 shows, it is possible to find examples which challenge dominant beliefs.

Marxism – an evaluation

From a Marxist viewpoint, it doesn't particularly matter who owns and controls the mass media – whether it is state owned like the BBC or privately owned like commercial TV. Because of the structure of capitalist society, the media will reflect the views of the capitalist class and broadcast the dominant ideology. Critics have argued that this is not always the case. To some extent, their criticisms have been taken on board by Neo-Marxists who accept that there are challenges to cultural hegemony.

Marxists make a judgement about what they see as the dominant ideology. They judge it to be a distorted view of reality which serves to disguise the oppression and exploitation of the capitalist system. As purveyors of the dominant ideology, the mass media are seen as instruments of oppression. Clearly, pluralists would reject this view and see it simply as a value judgement, with little or no basis in reality. From a pluralist viewpoint, the media reflect the concerns and interests of all the major groups in society.

key terms

Infrastructure The economic base of society.

Superstructure The rest of society, including the mass media.

Means of production The things used to produce goods – for example, machinery and raw materials.

Ruling class Those who own the means of production.

Subject class Those who actually produce the goods.

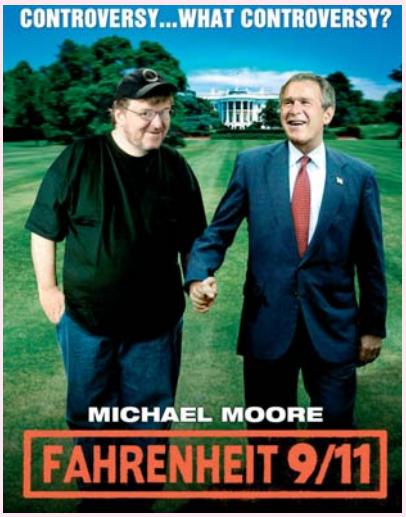
Ruling class ideology A false and distorted picture of society which supports the position of the ruling class.

False class consciousness A false picture of the class system which prevents people from seeing the reality of their situation.

Cultural hegemony The dominant ideas and beliefs in society. There are always alternative ideas and beliefs which threaten cultural hegemony.

activity7 challenging cultural hegemony

Item A Michael Moore



Produced, directed and written by Michael Moore, (holding Bush's hand on the DVD cover), *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a box-office success in cinemas across the USA. It was a scathing attack on the Bush administration. In a nutshell, Bush and those surrounding him were portrayed as liars, cheats and frauds, representing the interests of big business rather than those of the people.

A flavour of the film can be seen from the following example. In 2001, the Bush administration said that Iraq did not present a threat to America or the rest of the world. By 2003, all this changed. Iraq had weapons of mass destruction which threatened world peace and there was a close link between Iraq and al-Qaeda. We now know that neither of these claims was true. Despite this, President Bush stated that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was 'to save the world from great danger' and to bring democracy and freedom to the Iraqi people. However, *Fahrenheit 9/11* suggests another reason. In the words of one of the participants, 'If it wasn't for the oil, nobody would be there'.

Item B Reporting Hurricane Katrina

Thousands of desperate people outside the Superdome in New Orleans waiting to be rescued.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina smashed into the Gulf Coast of the USA. Over 1,000 people were killed and over a million made homeless. New Orleans was flooded when the hurricane broke through its sea defences. Over 60 fires blazed in the city and hundreds of people were trapped in bedrooms and on rooftops. The scenes were horrific. One woman tells how she couldn't get the images of dead babies, women and men floating along the streets out of her head.

Ray Nagin, the mayor of New Orleans, described the rescue operation as a 'national disgrace'. Over 50,000 people were trapped in the city for nearly a week with no electricity, sanitation or medical care and very little food and water. People shouted to the TV cameras: 'We're dying.' 'We haven't eaten for days.' 'Doesn't anybody care?' Many of those who got out were stranded for days on a motorway just outside New Orleans. Buses sent to rescue them did not arrive because there were no plans for housing them. The United States government was totally unprepared for a disaster on this scale, despite being warned for years that it was going to happen.

The American media, not known for their critical stance, became increasingly angry and hostile towards the government. The *New York Times* asked 'Who are we if we can't take care of our own?' The same newspaper stated, 'Thousands of Americans are dead or dying, not because they refused to evacuate New Orleans, but because they were too poor or too sick to get out without help – and help wasn't provided.' Jack Cafferty, a veteran newscaster on CNN TV News angrily stated, 'I have never seen anything as bungled and as poorly managed. Where the hell is the drinking water for these people? Why can't sandwiches be dropped? This is a disgrace.'

Media coverage shocked America. Those who suffered most were poor and Black. Nearly a third of the population of New Orleans lived below the poverty line and around 85% of them were Black. The comments of Jesse Jackson, a civil rights leader, were broadcast across America: 'Today, I saw 5,000 African Americans on Highway 10, desperate, perishing, dehydrated, babies crying – it looked like the hold of a slave ship.'

The results of years of racial discrimination and government indifference to the poor were clear for all to see. Questions were increasingly asked about the Bush administration's policy of cutting taxes for the rich and cutting welfare for the poor. George W. Bush, forced to cut short one of his many holidays to make a personal appearance in New Orleans, denied that race was an issue. Yet, even he, faced with TV pictures which said the opposite, was forced to admit that 'poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination which cut off generations from the opportunity of America.' What was out of sight, out of mind, ignored and brushed under the carpet, now stared mainstream America in the face.

Source: Various issues of *The Observer* and *Guardian*, September, 2005

question

How can Items A and B be seen as challenges to cultural hegemony in the USA?

Unit 3 Globalisation, the media and culture

keyissues

1 What is globalisation?
2 What part does the media play in the process of globalisation?

3.1 What is globalisation?

Globalisation is the process by which societies become increasingly interconnected. Many researchers believe that the pace of globalisation has speeded up over recent decades. Events in one part of the world increasingly affect other parts, activities in one nation have a growing impact on other nations. Global interactions become more and more frequent as goods, capital, people, knowledge, culture, fashions and beliefs flow across national boundaries. Here are some examples of globalisation.

Economic globalisation Financial transactions are increasingly global. The existence of stock exchanges in various countries means that the buying and selling of shares can continue round the clock. The financial market is now global. For example, the 'credit crunch' in 2008/09 began in the USA and rapidly spread to financial markets across the world.

The economies of nation-states are increasingly part of a global economic system. There has been a rapid growth in the size of transnational corporations (TNCs) - companies which operate in a number of countries, for example Ford, Sony, Nestle and Nike. They can move production from one country to another, wherever economic conditions are most favourable. And they sell their products to world markets.

activity24 a shrinking world

Item A 9-11

Attack on the World Trade Center, New York, September 11, 2001

Item B David Beckham

Playing dominoes in Egypt beneath a CocoCola advert

The pipeline through which Russian gas reaches Europe runs through Ukraine. A disagreement in 2008/09 between Russia and Ukraine about gas supplies led to the pipeline being turned off. This resulted in gas shortages in Europe and a rise in the price of gas.

question

How do Items A, B and C illustrate globalisation?

Political globalisation More and more nation-states are becoming members of international organisations. These organisations include the UN (United Nations), NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and the EU (European Union). International financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) have steadily grown. For example, the IMF, which among other things provides loans for its members, has grown from 25 members in 1945 to 185 in 2008 (imf.com, December 2008).

Cultural globalisation The world is increasingly exposed to Western tastes, styles and fashions, music and films, transmitted by international marketing corporations and transnational media corporations. According to some researchers, this is leading to the emergence of a global consumerist culture (Sklair, 2003).

Globalisation and risk According to the German sociologist Ulrick Beck (1992), we live in a *global risk society*. Global risks cross national boundaries. For example, the explosion at the nuclear power station at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union in 1986 resulted in radioactive material blown westward across Europe reaching 20 countries (see p 00). Global risks include global warming, pollution, deforestation, depletion of fish stocks in the world's oceans, devastating accidents such as major oil spills, diseases such as AIDS, and international terrorism.

3.2 Media imperialism and cultural imperialism

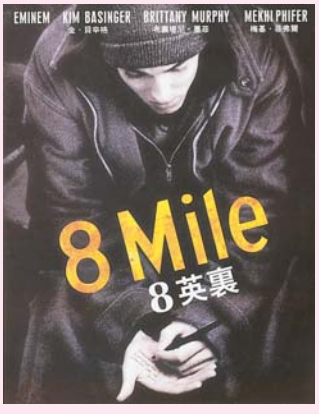
Media imperialism From the 1960s to the mid-1980s, the media's role in globalisation was often seen in a negative light. Many researchers saw the developing world as subordinate to Western interests - transnational corporations were seen to exploit developing countries.

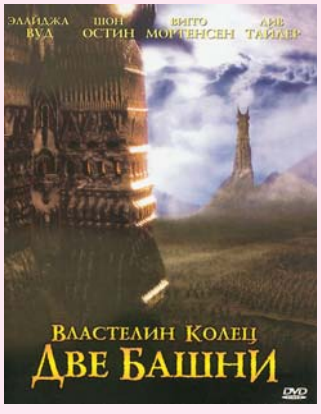
The part played by global media organisations in this process was known as media imperialism. The power and influence of transnational media corporations was seen as a new form of imperialism - similar, in certain respects, to the colonial rule of European powers in the 19th and first half of the 20th century.

Cultural imperialism Media imperialism was seen to result in cultural imperialism - the imposition of Western culture on developing countries. Transnational media organisations were said to transmit Western values and attributes across the developing world. Here is an example of this view. 'The global television music of MTV, the global news of

activity9 cultural imperialism

Buying pirated videos and DVDs in Shanghai, China. Titles include Gone With The Wind and Disney's Sleeping Beauty.





Vietnamese edition of 8 Mile and Russian edition of Lord of the Rings

MTV Asia Singles Chart

question

How can these items be used to support the idea of cultural imperialism?

CNN, the global box office hits of Hollywood films and the global soap operas shape the cultures of the developing world, ensuring their Westernisation' (Williams, 2003)

From this point of view, Western media corporations such as Time Warner, Disney and News Corporation dominate mass media news and entertainment in the developing world. As a result, local cultures will be battered into submission, swamped with Western media

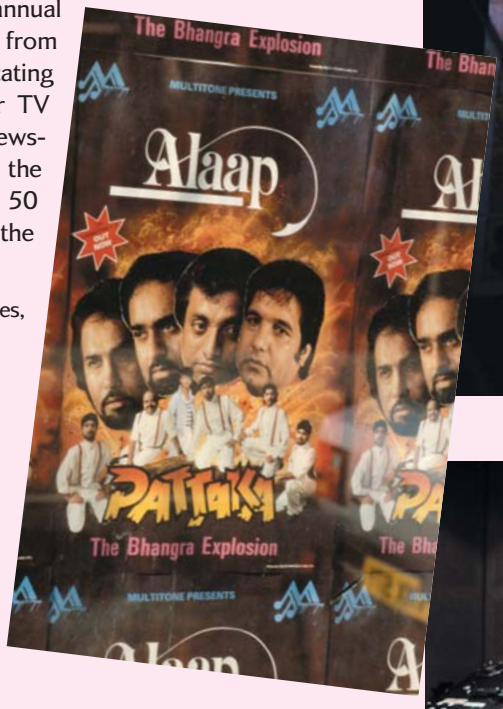
activity 10 questioning cultural imperialism

Item A Aljazeera

Aljazeera newsroom, Qatar

Aljazeera provides an alternative to Western produced global news channels such as CNN. It was set up in 1996 by Sheik Hamad, the emir of Qatar, a small state in the Middle East. Its income comes from an annual grant from the emir, from adverts, and from syndicating its programmes to other TV channels. It has 30 news-gathering offices around the world and an estimated 50 million viewers, mainly in the Arab Middle East.

Source: Haralambos & Jones, 2006



Indian film poster, Brick Lane. East London

Item B Minority ethnic media

Red Records, Brixton, South London, specialising in African-Caribbean music

Reading The Voice, an African-Caribbean newspaper

Radio presenter at Sunrise Radio, an Asian radio station

question

How can these items be used to question the idea of cultural imperialism?

output and will eventually disintegrate.

Evaluation

Many researchers now argue that theories of media and cultural imperialism either go too far or are no longer applicable. Here are some of their criticisms.

Cultural response Research indicates that different cultures interpret media output in different ways. Even when the same TV programmes are shown around the world, people don't necessarily respond to them in the same way. For example, Dutch viewers enjoyed the glossy US soap opera Dallas but rejected the programme's celebration of American capitalism (Ang, 1985). And when the rights to programmes such as *Who wants to be a millionaire?* and *Big Brother* are sold to TV companies across the globe, local versions reflecting local cultures are produced. Examples such as these can be used to question cultural imperialism.

National and regional broadcasting There has been a steady increase in local broadcasting specifically aimed at national or regional populations. For example, Aljazeera, a 24-hour satellite news station, was set up in 1996 by the emir of Qatar. Its main audience is in the Middle East (see Activity 10). There are a growing number of independent media production centres outside the USA and Europe. For example, TV Globo in Brazil produces many of its own programmes and is the dominant force in Brazilian television (Sparks, 2007).

In many countries home produced programmes are steadily replacing imports. They are more attractive to local audiences because they gel with local cultures. Research in Asia showed that in seven of nine countries studied more hours of locally produced television were broadcast than imported programmes (Gorman & Mclean, 2003). This suggests that local cultures are not being overwhelmed by Western media products.

Minority ethnic media In some cases, the flow of programmes may be reversed so that local programmes from developing countries are exported to Western societies. For example, British Asians 'maintain strong ties with their countries of origin through the consumption of popular film and television exported from the Indian sub-continent' (Gillespie, 1995). And, in many cases, minority ethnic groups produce their own media products reflecting the culture of their countries of origin. For example, in the US, Spanish speaking Latinos produce large quantities of recorded music, listen to their own radio stations and watch cable TV programmes specifically designed for their cultural requirements.

3.3 Globalisation and the media

By the 1990s, theories of media and cultural imperialism were partly replaced and partly re-labelled by the more fashionable term globalisation (Sparks, 2007). Here are some of the main views of globalisation theory and the media.

Changing reality Globalisation changes people's perception of reality. It compresses the world - the world seems to be shrinking. Time is also compressed - it appears to be speeding up as events in one part of the world can sometimes be seen thousands of miles away as they occur.

This new reality is known as *time-space compression*. The mass media play an important part in this process. Communication satellites can broadcast events across the globe as they happen. For example, people all over the world watched live transmissions of the destruction to the World Trade Center in New York.

Cultural products As noted earlier, global media corporations have not destroyed local cultures. The situation is complex and multi-layered with a)global, b)regional, c)national and d)local markets and products. From this point of view, Western media corporations do not dominate global markets. Nor are the products they broadcast necessarily Western in content. Often they are hybrid cultural products, combining aspects of several cultures (Sparks, 2007).

TNCs and state power Some globalisation theorists argue that the globalisation of the media has reduced the power of nation-states to control what their populations see and hear. Transnational media corporations transcend nation-states; satellite broadcasting systems and the internet bypass national boundaries.

Evaluation

Some researchers reject the view that the power of nation-states to control media output has been reduced. There is evidence to show that nation-states are not helpless in the face of global media corporations. For example, attempts to establish hard-core pornographic satellite TV subscription services for the UK have been prevented by domestic British law.

The power of the state to regulate satellite broadcasting can be seen from negotiations between China and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Murdoch's Star TV satellite service was designed to broadcast to China. In order to do so, it had to abide by Chinese law and adapt its

key terms

Globalisation The process by which societies become increasingly connected.

Transnational corporations Companies which operate in a number of countries.

Global risk society A global society in which human-made risks cross national boundaries.

Media imperialism A new form of imperialism in which Western media corporations dominate global media output.

Cultural imperialism The imposition of Western culture on developing countries.

Time-space compression The process by which time seems to be speeding up and space appears to be getting smaller.

programmes to fit government requirements. For example, the BBC world news was removed from Star TV because the authorities considered it too critical of China (Sparks, 2007).

The above examples show that nation-states have the power to regulate the output of transnational media corporations.

summary

1. There are a number of aspects to globalisation. They include:
   - Economic globalisation
   - Political globalisation
   - Cultural globalisation.
2. According to Beck, we live in a global risk society.
3. Some researchers accuse Western transnational media corporations of media imperialism and cultural imperialism.
4. Critics of media and cultural imperialism make the following points.
   - Different cultures interpret the same media output in different ways.
   - Local versions of Western programmes reflect local cultures.
   - There has been a steady increase in local media products specifically aimed at national or regional populations.
   - Minority ethnic groups often consume media products imported from their countries of origin.
   - Minority ethnic groups often produce their own media products which reflect the culture of their countries of origin.
5. To some extent media and cultural imperialism theory was replaced in the 1990's by globalisation theory.
6. According to globalisation theory:
   - Global media output plays an important part in time-space compression.
   - Western media corporations do not dominate global markets.
   - The increasing globalisation of the media has reduced the power of nation-states to regulate media output.
7. Critics argue that nation-states have the power to regulate the output of transnational media corporations.

activity 11 state regulation

Liu Chang Lee, Chairman of Phoenix TV, a Chinese television company, gives the following advice to foreign media companies seeking to broadcast to China.

'Foreign media companies need to develop a dialogue with bureaucratic agencies that regulate the media and entertainment market. The purpose of this dialogue is on the one hand to enable the foreign company to understand the Chinese environment more clearly, and at the same time convince the Chinese side that foreign media organisations are not seeing to destabilise China, sow the seeds of social or political trouble, or weaken China's sense of cultural identity.'

Source: quoted in Sparks, 2007

James Murdoch (Rupert's son) chairman and CEO of Star TV after signing an agreement in 2001 to broadcast a 24-hour Mandarin language entertainment channel in southern China.

question

Why does the Chinese government want to regulate the output of foreign media companies?

Unit 4 Selection and presentation of news

keyissues

1 How is news constructed?

2 What are moral panics and how do they arise?

4.1 The construction of news

This unit looks at the selection and presentation of news. Williams (2003) identifies three important influences on media content.

- The power of those who actually work in the media – people like journalists
- The day-to-day organisation and routine of media companies
- The culture of society – its wider norms and values.

We shall examine each of these factors in terms of the production of news.

The influence of media workers

An influential study conducted by White in 1950 argued that particular individuals play a significant role in determining which items make news. This study was based on the decisions made by one news editor on what should appear as national and international news in a small American newspaper. White's study suggested that the editor's individual prejudices played a significant role in the selection process. He acted as a *gatekeeper,* only allowing his preferred stories to pass through the 'gate' into the news.

Later research has challenged this view. An investigation of the selections made by a number of news editors did not find any significant variation in the news items they chose (Williams, 2003). This suggests that individual media workers are influenced in their decision-making by the organisations in which they work rather than their own preferences. Such a suggestion is reinforced when we realise that the selection of news involves many people – no one individual can be held responsible for the final product.

The influence of organisational structures

Watch the 10 o'clock news on ITV and BBC. While there is some variation in the events reported, there is also a noticeable similarity between the two news broadcasts on any day. This agreement over what counts as 'news' is the starting point for sociologists who highlight the importance of organisational structures in shaping the news. They believe that the routines of news organisations and the occupational socialisation of journalists are vital in explaining the content of the news.

Routines A daily newspaper works on a 24 hour cycle. To ensure that the news is fresh, one routine adopted is to focus on events that occur within that cycle. A train crash occurring since the previous day's newspaper is more likely to be reported as news than a famine that unfolds over time.

To make the reporting of events manageable, newspapers are divided up into sections (foreign news, crime news, sports news etc) and specialist correspondents are allocated to report on different kinds of news. Events happening in the real world are squeezed into these sections, with those occurring in locations where journalists are placed the most likely to be reported. So we know more about what is happening in North America and Europe than in South America and Africa.

News values Journalists learn the kind of events seen as newsworthy in the course of their professional socialisation. They pick up a set of informal rules or *news values* which enable them to identify what is newsworthy. A former editor of *The Guardian* identifies these news values as follows:

Significance: social, economic, political, human.
Drama: the excitement, action and entertainment in the event.
Surprise: the freshness, newness, unpredictability.
Personalities: royal, political, 'showbiz', others.
Sex, scandal, crime: popular ingredients.
Numbers: the scale of the event, numbers of people affected.
Proximity: on our doorsteps, or 10,000 miles away?
(Hetherington, 1985).

Events that correspond to these values are more likely to be identified as newsworthy than others. What's more, in reporting these events, journalists tend to present them in dramatic and personalised terms. 'Surprises' become 'shocks'; 'disagreements' become 'open conflicts'; and political debates are translated into choices between rival personalities (McCullagh, 2002).

News values have to be interpreted on a daily basis, with newspapers differing in the priority they give to some news values over others. However, there is often a remarkable similarity across the British news media when it comes to the main story of the day (Allan, 1999).

Objectivity Journalists often claim to be objective – to provide balanced and neutral accounts of events. Tuchman (1978) argues that the desire for objectivity means that the news media adopt a number of conventions in reporting the news. Facts are distinguished from opinions, with hard news, for example, being separated from editorial comment. The most important elements of the story are presented first, with the background outlined later. Different sides of the story are given; supporting evidence is produced for the claims

made; and reliable sources are quoted.

However, in practice, these conventions mean that the voices of powerful organisations such as the government are often given prominence as they tend to be seen by the media as credible and authoritative.

Frameworks To enable newsworthy events to be understood by audiences, the news media place them within familiar frameworks. Take the coverage of two seemingly similar tragedies, the shooting down of a Korean civilian airliner by the Soviet Union in 1983 and the shooting down of an Iranian airbus by the USA in 1986. Both events took place during the 'cold war' when communism was seen as a threat to Western societies. In this context, a common way of interpreting events involved a contrast between the civilised West and the uncivilised East. In both the American and British news media, this familiar framework was employed to interpret what happened in 1983 and 1986. The first event was presented as 'a barbaric, terrorist, heinous act', while the second was presented as 'an understandable accident' (McNair, 1996).

This framework was of course not the only one that could have been used. The Soviet (Russian communist) news media reversed the Western view and interpreted the first event as an unfortunate accident and the second as a terrorist act.

In Britain and America the same framework was used across the news media and reflected how both governments saw these incidents. Hall et al., (1978) argue that this is not uncommon and that powerful groups are able to act as *primary definers.* Less powerful voices may be heard, but these voices are often drowned out. And when they are not drowned out, they are often ridiculed.

Evaluation Sociologists agree that we need to take account of the influence of both media owners and organisational factors in order to understand the production of media messages. In many cases, these influences mean that media coverage reflects the interests of powerful groups. However, this is not always the case.

Powerful groups do not always speak with one voice. This means that there can be conflict over how events are to be interpreted. Powerful groups disagreed about war with Iraq in 2003. And they are bitterly divided over Britain's adoption of the euro as its currency. In these instances, it is not possible to identify one primary definition of the issues.

The media sometimes challenge powerful groups. Some investigative journalists can become the primary definers, with powerful groups being obliged to respond to the way the media define the issues. Two journalists on the

activity 12 news values

Item A Islanders consider exodus as sea levels rise

Tuvaluan children playing in the sea which threatens to swamp their island.

Faced with the prospect of being swamped by rising sea levels, the Pacific island nation of Tuvalu is considering evacuating its 9,300 residents.

With sea levels predicted to rise by more than 80 cms over the next century due to global warming, Tuvaluans are living on borrowed time. The most recent figures suggest that Tuvalu's sea levels have risen nearly three times as fast as the world average over the past decade, and are now 5cms higher than in 1993.

Source: *The Guardian*, 19.7.2003

Item B Harry is 'out of control'

Prince Harry's late-night drinking and wild behaviour have forced one of his royal protection officers to quit. Sergeant Ieuan Jones was transferred to other duties after telling colleagues he could not cope with the tearaway Prince.

One Buckingham Palace worker said: 'He won't do what he is told and when you are dealing with the safety of someone like him that is a dangerous situation. They get totally fed up sitting around in pub after pub while Harry knocks back drink after drink. They can only have tonic water or coke and it gets very boring indeed for them.'

Source: *Sunday Express*, 20.7.2003

Item C A balanced discussion

Source: Developed from an idea in *Glasgow Media Group*, 1982

Item D Reporting the intifada

The Glasgow Media Group analysed coverage of the Palestinian intifada (uprising) in 89 TV news bulletins broadcast by BBC1 and ITV in 2000. They found important differences in the language used to describe Israeli and Palestinian deaths. When Israelis were killed, words such as 'murder', 'atrocity', lynching' and 'savage cold-blooded killing' were used. But when Palestinians died at Israeli hands, the language used was considerably more moderate.

Adapted from Philo & Miller, 2002

questions

1 Assess the 'newsworthiness' of the news stories in Items A and B using the list of news values.

2 What point is being made by the cartoon in Item C? What does it suggest about the influence of the powerful?

3 What does Item D suggest about the claim that TV news is objective?

Washington Post, for example, uncovered a range of illegal activities by the US government that culminated in the resignation of the President in 1974 (Schlesinger,1991). And in 2005, the *Washington Post* revealed the existence of a network of detention centres in eastern Europe set up by the United States to interrogate suspected terrorists.

The influence of wider culture

What counts as news and the way it is reported will, to some extent, reflect the wider culture – the shared norms, values, concerns and beliefs of society. To take an obvious example, baseball, ice hockey, basketball and American football dominate sports reporting in newspapers in the USA. They are rarely found in British newspapers.

News often reflects strongly held values. For example, murder is regularly reported and condemned. This reflects the high value placed on human life.

News reporting often draws on widely held cultural stereotypes. For example, Schudson (2000) argues that news reports which represent young Black people as a problem and women as sex objects reflect shared cultural stereotypes.

We live in an age where organisations attempt to manage the news, to 'spin' information in order to present themselves in the best possible light. They try to ensure that their actions are seen to be in line with society's norms and values. For example, Tony Blair's Labour government has been accused of exaggerating the threat of weapons of mass destruction in order to justify the war against Iraq and the deaths of British soldiers and Iraqi civilians.

However, governments and powerful organisations are not always able to portray their actions as fitting the norms and values of society. For example, it is difficult for governments and business organisations to control media coverage when accidents such as oil spills and explosions at nuclear plants occur (McCullagh, 2002).

Conclusion

Most researchers see the construction of news in the following way. Here's how Graeme Burton (2005) summarises the process of news creation.

- News is socially constructed – it is created within a framework of social relationships and cultural beliefs.
- There is no 'truth out there' which is reported in the news.
- News consists of information that is selected and interpreted on the basis of national norms, values and concerns.
- Those who actually construct the news – editors and journalists – do so within organisational structures and in terms of news values. These structures and values define what counts as news.

key terms

Gatekeeping Making decisions about what will and will not become 'news'.

News values A set of informal rules used by journalists to identify what is newsworthy.

Primary definers Individuals and groups who are able to influence what events become news and how they are reported.

activity 13 news frameworks

The Gulf War (1990-91) was fought between Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, and the Allies (USA, Britain and a number of other countries) led by the American president George Bush Sr. The table below shows some of the words and phrases used by the British media to describe each side.

Mad dogs and Englishmen

We have	**They have**
Army, Navy and Air Force	A war machine
Reporting guidelines	Censorship
Press briefings	Propaganda
We	**They**
Take out	Destroy
Suppress	Destroy
Eliminate	Kill
Neutralise	Kill
Dig in	Cower in their foxholes
We Launch	**They Launch**
First strikes	Sneak missile attacks
Pre-emptively	Without provocation
Our boys are...	**Theirs are...**
Professional	Brainwashed
Lion-hearts	Paper tigers
Cautious	Cowardly
Confident	Desperate
Heroes	Cornered
Dare-devils	Cannon fodder
Young knights of the skies	Bastards of Baghdad
Loyal	Blindly obedient
Desert rats	Mad dogs
Resolute	Ruthless
Brave	Fanatical

Source: *The Guardian*, 23.1.1991

questions

1 What framework is the British news media using?

2 The Iraqi news media was tightly controlled by Saddam Hussein's regime.

a) What framework might they use?

b) Suggest two phrases they might use to describe the Allies.

4.2 The news and moral panics

Journalists often claim that the news represents a 'mirror on the world' (Allan, 1999). They believe that the news gives an accurate and impartial reflection of events. Research evidence gives a somewhat different picture. Section 3.1 showed that the news media not only select certain events as newsworthy, but also place a particular interpretation on those events. From this point of view, the media construct news rather than mirror the world.

Mods and rockers It is not unusual for the news media – especially the tabloid press – to sensationalise the events they report. This can be seen from the following research. In a groundbreaking study conducted in the 1960s, Stanley Cohen looked at media coverage of the activities of two youth subcultures – mods and rockers. On Easter bank holiday in 1964, large numbers of young people, including mods on their scooters and rockers on their motor cycles, went to Clacton for a day out at the seaside. Cohen was interested in how the media reported their behaviour and the consequences of that reporting.

The media presented a picture of two rival gangs 'hell bent on destruction'. Fighting, vandalism and anti-social behaviour were reported as widespread and those responsible were identified as mods and rockers.

On closer inspection, Cohen found little evidence of serious violence and vandalism. True, there were large crowds of often noisy young people. And there were mods and rockers baiting each other and sometimes getting into scuffles. But most young people did not identify with either group, and were not involved in any disturbances.

The mass media had presented a distorted and sensationalised picture of events. And this media picture created public fears and concerns about mods and rockers. The police responded to these concerns by increasing their presence at seaside resorts on future bank holidays and by making more and more arrests. Young people resented what they saw as heavy-handed and unjustified police behaviour and were more likely to identify with mods and rockers. There were further disturbances followed by yet more sensationalised reporting, and increased police activity in response to public demands to deal with the 'problem'.

Moral panics Cohen argued that the reaction of the media created what he called a *moral panic*. A moral panic exists when 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests' (Cohen, 1987). In this particular case, mods and rockers were singled out as *folk devils* whose behaviour was seen as a threat to social order.

Creating a moral panic Moral panics occur on a regular basis. Newspapers (especially tabloid newspapers) often play a key role in their creation. They sensationalise issues by using emotive headlines, language and pictures. They present groups as stereotypes. They associate those groups with stereotypical behaviour – for example, New Age Travellers with drugs; Black youth with street crime; English football supporters abroad with violence. Contrasts are

drawn between a rosy image of the past and a decline in modern-day morals. Finally, the media clamour for a clampdown on the group, and/or the behaviour identified as a threat.

Young people and moral panics Young people continue to be the focus of moral panics. Their behaviour has frequently been identified as a problem. Examples include youth subcultures such as hippies, skinheads and punks, and behaviour associated with young people such as street crime, football hooliganism and drug taking.

Young people are sometimes seen as the victims in moral panics. Critcher (2003) argues that moral panics increasingly focus on threats to children. Concern over child abuse, paedophilia and the influence of violent films on young viewers are examples of these kinds of moral panics.

Features of a moral panic The term moral panic has been taken up widely and is now regularly used by politicians and journalists. Often the term is used quite loosely. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) try to define moral panic precisely. They argue that moral panics have five distinguishing features.

- Increased public concern over the behaviour of a certain group
- Increased hostility towards the group
- A certain level of public agreement that there is a real threat and that it is caused by the group
- Public concern is out of proportion to the real harm caused by the group
- Moral panics appear and disappear very quickly. (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994)

activity 14 paedophilia: a moral panic?

Item A Tabloid headline

WE TRAP INTERNET CHILD SEX SICKO

Shocking Internet peril that all concerned parents should be aware of

Adapted from *The People*, 20.7.2003

Mothers of four murdered children lead a march through central London demanding more action to protect youngsters from paedophiles.

question

With reference to the items, explain how media concern over paedophilia can be described as a moral panic.

Item B Public reaction

Eight-year-old Sarah Payne was abducted while playing near her grandparents' house in West Sussex on July 1st 2000. Her half-buried body was found by a farm labourer on July 17th. On December 12th 2001, a 42-year-old local man and convicted sex offender, Roy Whiting, was found guilty of her 'sexually-motivated' murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.

When Sarah Payne's body was discovered, the *News of the World* launched a campaign: How do you know if there's a paedophile in your midst? The paper published the names and photographs of 50 people it claimed had committed child sex offences, and promised: 'We pledge we will pursue our campaign until we have publicly named and shamed every paedophile in Britain'.

The paper produced figures suggesting 88% of Britons believed parents should be told if a child sex offender was living in their area. It provided a website on which parents could use an interactive map to find their local paedophiles. It asked readers to report any convicted child abusers living in their area. And it published an endorsement of the campaign from Sarah's parents, Sarah and Michael Payne, who later spoke of their unease at being press-ganged into giving the campaign their support.

From Plymouth to Portsmouth, Manchester to London, wrongly identified men and known paedophiles found themselves being hounded by mobs up to 300 strong. The vigilante action was most severe on the Paulsgrove estate in Portsmouth, where protesters circulated a list of 20 alleged sex offenders in the community and proceeded to target them.

The crowds – 40 of whom were later charged with offences – smashed windows, torched cars and forced five families, wrongly identified as harbouring sex offenders, out of their homes. A suspected paedophile in nearby Southampton shot himself dead and a female registrar was hounded from her South Wales home because neighbours confused 'paediatrician' with 'paedophile.'

Source: *The Guardian*, 13.12.2001

Evaluation Critcher (2003) examined five case studies – Aids, ecstasy and raves, video 'nasties', child abuse in families, and paedophilia. In his view, only two of these cases were full moral panics – video 'nasties' and paedophilia. In these cases an issue was seen as a threat; the media defined the 'problem' in the same way; organised groups generally supported the panic; and the state eventually responded by bringing in new legislation to combat the apparent threat.

Critcher challenges the view that moral panics are always triggered by a concern over identifiable folk devils. What triggered concern in the cases he examined was the death of children or young people. These events were seen to reflect major social problems. In only one of the cases was there an indisputable folk devil – the paedophile.

Critcher argues that a consensus (agreement) is necessary for a moral panic to develop. Some newspapers

activity 15 video 'nasties'

Item A The Video Recording Bill

The Video Recording Bill was passed by the Conservative government in 1984. Its aim was to place strict controls on video 'nasties' – videos with high levels of violence and sex which were seen as harmful to children.

Adapted from Harris, 1984

Item B Child's Play

In November 1993, two 11-year-old boys from Merseyside were found guilty of murdering a two-year-old child. The 'horror' video *Child's Play 3* had been rented by the father of one of the boys shortly before the murder. There were certain similarities between scenes in the video and the killing of the child. But there was no evidence that either boy had seen the video. Despite this, the judge at the trial stated, 'I suspect that exposure to violent films may in part be an explanation'.

Adapted from *The Guardian*, 26.11.1993

Item C The police view

Merseyside police detectives who had interviewed the boys for several weeks before the trial rejected any suggestions that 'horror' videos had influenced the boys' behaviour. One detective said, 'I don't know where the judge got that idea from. I couldn't believe it when I heard him. We went through something like 200 titles rented by the family. There were some you or I wouldn't want to see, but nothing – no scene, or plot, or dialogue – where you could put your finger on the freeze button and say that influenced a boy to go out and commit murder.'

Quoted in *The Independent*, 26.11.1993

Item D Reaction in Parliament

In the Commons, the Conservative MP Sir Ivan Lawrence QC called for action to curb 'the constant diet of violence and depravity' fed to youngsters through television, videos and computer pornography. Sir Ivan, chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee, said it was becoming 'daily more obvious' that this was a major reason for the rise in juvenile crime.

Quoted in *The Independent*, 26.11.1993

Item E Burning videos

Azad Video, Scotland's largest video renting chain, burned its *Child's Play* videos including 300 copies of *Child's Play 3*. Xtra-Vision, the Irish Republic's biggest video chain, withdrew *Child's Play* from its shelves.

Adapted from *The Sun*, 26.11.93

Item F The Sun's reaction

The Sun, 26.11.1993

Item G Moral panics

At the turn of the century, there was great concern about violent images in Penny Dreadful comics. In the 1950s, panic that horror comics would lead to children copying the things they saw, led to the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act 1955. In the 1980s, there was the huge panic about films such as *Drillerkiller,* which also led to a new law. There's been a recurrent moral panic about violent images which looks to a mythical golden age of tranquil behaviour.

T. Newburn, Policy Studies Institute, quoted in *The Guardian*, 26.11.1993

Item H Press editorials, 26.11.1993

The uncanny resemblance between the film *Child's Play 3* and the murder must be of concern. A link between the film and the crime would not prove that the former caused the latter. Yet it seems quite possible that exposure to images of brutality could turn an already disturbed child towards violence.
(Independent)

More and more children are growing up in a moral vacuum, which for so many is being filled with fetid (stinking) junk from the lower depths of our popular culture – video nasties, crude comics and violent television.
(Daily Express)

Instead of urging legislation to ban violent films, it would surely be more to the point if we took it upon ourselves as adults to ensure their prohibition in our own homes.
(Daily Telegraph)

CAN WE GET AN IMAGE TO REPRESENT ITEM H.

questions

1 Read Items A, B, C and D. What justification is there for the views of the judge and Ivan Lawrence? Why do you think they reacted in this way?

2 Do you think the reactions in Items B, D, E, F and H can be described as a moral panic? With some reference to Item G, give reasons for your answer.

tried to create a moral panic over Aids by identifying it as 'a gay plague'. They were unsuccessful because experts challenged this view and Aids was eventually seen as a health risk to the population as a whole.

Critcher disagrees with the last feature of moral panics identified by Goode and Ben-Yehuda – that they appear and disappear very quickly. He gives examples of moral panics that last for years.

For instance, a moral panic over drugs has continued over the past 40 years. And even when a moral panic ends, it often comes back. For example, there was a moral panic over video nasties from 1982-1984. It re-appeared in 1993, as Activity 13 shows.

key terms

Moral panic Widespread public concern, usually fuelled by sensational media coverage, that an event or group is threatening society.

Folk devils Groups whose behaviour is seen as a threat to social order.

summary

1. The production of media content is influenced by professionals such as editors and journalists.
2. The work of professionals in the news media is influenced by organisational factors such as the routines of news reporting and by ideas about what is newsworthy (news values).
3. The wider cultural environment also influences media content. Powerful organisations usually have the ability to become primary definers of the news. And journalists are influenced by dominant cultural values and assumptions.
4. The mass media select certain events as newsworthy and place a particular interpretation on those events. In this way, the media construct news rather than mirror the world.
5. At times, the media sensationalise the events they report. This can lead to moral panics.
6. Certain groups of young people are seen as a threat to social order and a cause for public concern. Sensationalised reporting of their activities can result in a moral panic.
7. Moral panics sometimes view young people as victims – for example, as victims of paedophiles.

Unit 5 Media representations

keyissues

1 What are representations?

2 How do the media represent different social groups?

5.1 Representations and stereotypes

Representations We experience many events first hand. We meet other people, go to school or college, visit different areas and so on. The judgements we make about these people, events and places are based on our own direct impressions.

However, we directly experience only a tiny proportion of the world. We rely on the media for knowledge about unfamiliar places, people and events. The sort of information we gain from the media is indirect – the media actually re-present the world to us. In providing these *representations* of the world, the media will highlight some aspects and neglect others. The language they use and the pictures they choose will give particular impressions.

In general, the media do not have very long to provide background detail. For example, news broadcasts are made up of a number of short items. This means that 'shorthand' methods are often used to describe people and events. The media tend to rely on the images of particular groups that are already in the heads of their audience. In other words, they rely on *stereotypes*.

Stereotypes The term stereotype was introduced by the journalist Walter Lippman in his book *Public Opinion*, published in 1922. He described stereotypes as 'the little pictures we carry around in our heads'. Stereotypes are widely-held beliefs about the characteristics of members of social groups. Simply because they belong to a particular group, people are seen to have certain attitudes and behaviour.

Stereotypes are generalisations – they are applied to all members of a group. For example, Germans may be seen as efficient, Black people as good athletes and students as layabouts. Stereotypes can be positive or negative, they can offer a favourable or unfavourable image of a group. Nurses are usually pictured as kind and caring, whereas dealers in stocks and shares are often portrayed as money-grabbing and selfish.

Representations of social groups Representations are important because we depend on the media for much of our information about society. Even when we have direct experience of different social groups, media representations will still be in our heads. This will affect the way we think about and interact with others.

This unit looks at representations of gender, ethnicity, social class, age, sexuality and disability.

activity16 stereotyping

Item A Racial stereotypes

A number of experiments were conducted in the USA using the following procedure. After being shown this picture, one participant described it to a second participant, who then described it to a third, and so on. After six descriptions, over half the final participants reported that the Black person, not the White person, was holding the razor. Some even had the Black person waving the razor in a threatening manner.

Source: Allport & Postman, 1947

Item B *American stereotypes of Japanese*

1932	1950	1967
intelligent	treacherous	industrious
industrious	sly	ambitious
progressive	extremely nationalistic	efficient

Source: Katz & Braly, 1933; Gilbert, 1951; Karlins, Coffman & Walters, 1969

A response by an American cartoonist to the torture and execution of American airmen who had bailed out from damaged planes during a bombing raid over Japan. (Tojo was the Japanese Prime Minister during World War II.)

The cover of an American magazine published five days after the Japanese bombed the American fleet at Pearl Harbour in 1941.

questions

1 Explain the results of the experiment in Item A, using the idea of stereotypes.

2 Look at Item B.

a) Describe the changes in American stereotypes of Japanese.

b) Suggest reasons for these changes.

5.2 Representations of gender

Gender stereotypes: the 1950s to 1970s What is a woman? Judging from media representations of women from the 1950s to the 1970s, a woman is a:

- housewife and mother
- domestic servant
- domestic consumer
- sex object.

This stereotypical view of women was particularly apparent in advertising where the roles of housewife, domestic servant and domestic consumer were often combined. For example, women were regularly presented as cleaners, consuming particular brands of washing powder, washing-up liquid, furniture polish, toilet cleansers, air fresheners, disinfectants and the like. At other times, they were presented as sex objects selling products to women to make them appear more attractive to men, or using their sex-appeal to sell products to men.

When the media portrayed women outside this narrow stereotype, it was often in negative terms. A study of gender representations in the American media from the 1950s to the 1970s found that women shown in paid employment on TV programmes often had unstable or unsatisfactory relationships with male partners. Married women with jobs, particularly more demanding, higher-status jobs, were much more likely than full-time housewives to be portrayed as unhappily married in television drama and comedy (Tuchman, 1981).

The following quotation by Tunstall (1983) provides a summary of the main findings of research into gender representation in the media from the 1960s and 70s.

'The presentation of women in the media is biased because it emphasises women's domestic, sexual, consumer and marital activities to the exclusion of all else. Women are depicted as busy housewives, as contented mothers, as eager consumers and as sex objects. This does indeed indicate bias because, although similar numbers of

men are fathers and husbands, the media has much less to say about these male roles. Just as men's domestic and marital roles are ignored, the media also ignore that well over half of British adult women go out to paid employment, and that many of both their interests and problems are employment-related' (Tunstall, 1983).

Patriarchy From a feminist perspective, the gender representations outlined above are an aspect of patriarchy – a social system based on male domination. Women are portrayed either as domestic servants providing comfort and support for men, or as sex objects to service men's sexual needs. In both cases, women play subordinate and subservient roles.

Such media representations suggest that these roles are natural and normal. Feminists see this as an example of patriarchal ideology – a set of beliefs which distorts reality and supports male dominance.

Changes in media representations of gender

There is some evidence that the representation of gender roles has become more equal and less stereotyped. Drawing upon two content analysis studies of gender representations on prime-time TV shows, Gauntlett (2002) identifies the following changes.

- A significant increase in the proportion of main female characters, from 18% in 1992-93, to 43% in 1995-96.
- A massive decrease since the 1970s in the proportion of women whose main occupation was represented as housewife – now only 3%.
- A marked shift towards equality within the last two decades. 'Female and male characters are likely to be as intelligent, talented and resourceful – or stupid – as each other' (Gauntlett, 2002).

Films, soaps and sit-coms

Further evidence that gender representations are changing comes from analysis of films, soap operas and situation comedies. Gauntlett (2002) argues that women and men tend to have similar skills and abilities in films today. While a film like *Charlie's Angels* does focus on women as physically attractive, they are also presented as 'amazingly multi-skilled'.

Strong female characters are central to British soap operas and many actually drive the stories, for example Peggy Mitchell of *EastEnders* (Abercrombie, 1996).

In situation comedies, women are no longer portrayed in traditional 'feminine' roles. For example, both *Roseanne*

activity17 gender stereotypes

questions

1 What stereotypes are illustrated in these representations of women?

2 How can they be seen as examples of patriarchal ideology?

and *Absolutely Fabulous* show 'unruly women who refuse the straightjacket of femininity' (Newbold et al., 2002).

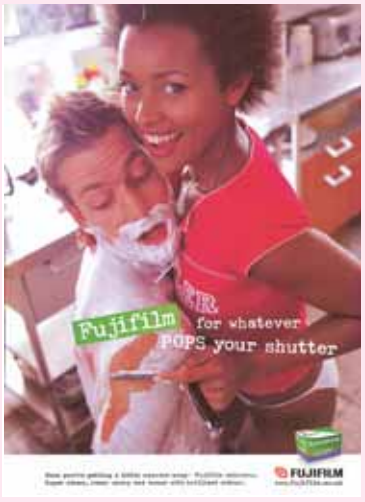
Women's magazines Evidence of changes in gender representations are also evident in magazines targeted at young women. Ferguson (1983) conducted a study of young women's magazines from 1949 to 1980 and found that they promoted a traditional idea of femininity. The dominant assumption was that girls should aspire to be beautiful in order to get a husband and once married should become home-makers and carers.

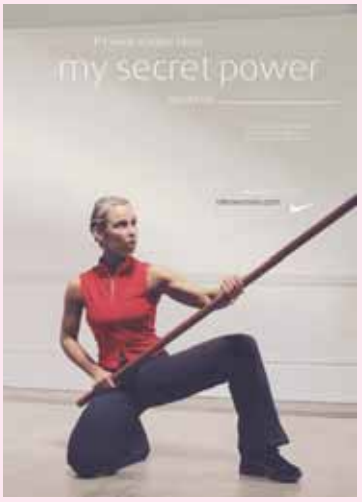
By contrast, the focus of magazines since the 1980s is on young women seeking to control their own lives rather than being dependent on men. There is now more emphasis on sexuality and less on romance. Articles such as 'The hottest sex you'll ever have' (*MORE!* May, 2003) illustrate this shift. The traditional idea of femininity is challenged, with women no longer portrayed as the weaker sex. Instead, young women are encouraged 'to be assertive, confident, and supportive of each other' (McRobbie, 1999). In some ways, these magazines turn the tables on men by encouraging women to be sexual aggressors rather than sexual objects (Gauntlett, 2002).

Evaluation Are the changes in media representations of women as significant as the above studies suggest? Think about the following evidence. A study of gender representations on American TV in 1995-96 found that men took 63% of the speaking roles compared to women's 37% (Gauntlett, 2002). Research on television sports coverage reveals that sportswomen continue to be under-represented. What little coverage there is 'tends to sexualise, trivialise and devalue women's sporting accomplishments' (Newbold et al., 2002).

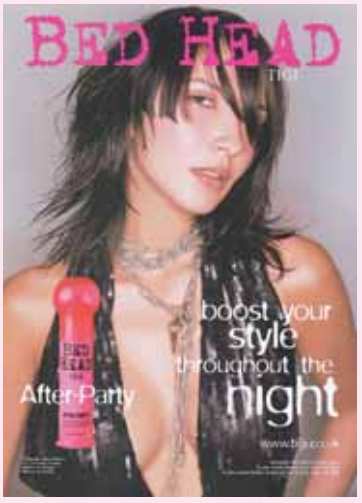
While accepting the above points, available evidence indicates that media representations of women are now less likely to rely on traditional stereotypes and less likely to portray women in a narrow range of subordinate roles.

activity18 changing representations of women





Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft in Tomb Raider.



questions

1 How do the items illustrate changes in media representations of women?

2 To what extent do you think the items accurately represent media representation of women today?

5.3 Representations of ethnicity

Research into the media treatment of ethnicity has emphasised the way in which minority ethnic groups are almost always represented as a 'problem'. They tend to be reported as the cause of social disorder (eg, riots) and crime (eg, 'mugging'). While Black youths *are* involved in these actions, so are large numbers of White youths. The negative representation of minority ethnic groups was particularly noticeable in earlier decades, as the following example from the 1980s illustrates.

Racism and the press In a detailed examination of racism and the press, Van Dijk (1991) focused on the reporting of ethnic relations in the 1980s. He studied a sample of British newspapers from 1985 and 1989. His main finding was a positive presentation of White British citizens and a negative presentation of non-White British citizens. Minority group members were quoted less often and less fully than majority group members – even when minority 'experts' were available for comment. White authorities – especially the police and politicians – were the major speakers.

Van Dijk showed that the voice of the British press was predominantly 'white' in both 1985 and 1989, although some improvement was noticeable in the later sample.

Racial stereotypes Most recent studies argue that minority ethnic groups continue to be represented in a stereotypical way. The research, almost without exception, has emphasised the large proportion of negative images in the portrayal of Black and Asian people (Cottle, 2000). Complex differences – for example, those between different minority ethnic groups – are ignored. The point of view is virtually always a White one: that 'of the dominant looking at the subordinate: how *they* are different from us rather than how *we* are different from them' (Ross, 1996).

Overt and inferential racism Both press and television news are often seen by these studies as racist. However, there is a difference between what Hall (1995) calls 'overt' and 'inferential' racism. Overt racism is apparent when racist arguments are presented favourably. Sometimes overt racism does occur but more often what is at issue is inferential racism.

Inferential racism occurs when coverage seems balanced but is based on racist assumptions. Television news and current affairs programmes make an effort to be balanced yet debates are often based on the assumption that Black people are the 'source of the problem' (Hall, 1995).

Changes in media representations of ethnicity

Much of the research on racism and the media relates to the 1970s and early 1980s. In recent years there has been a growth in both the number and range of representations of minority ethnic groups.

Film and television drama and comedy In Britain the ideal of public service broadcasting has allowed Black programming to develop on Channel 4 and BBC2 (Daniels, 1996). This has led to the emergence of Black British cinema through films such as *My Beautiful Launderette* (Higson, 1998).

In recent years, programmes and films developed primarily for minority audiences have become popular with White audiences, for example, the Black sit-com, *Desmond's* and the Asian comedy, *Goodness Gracious Me*. Although integrated casting is still exceptional, Black and Asian actors 'are now playing "ordinary" characters...and the new way of presenting Black (and Asian) people effectively says to the audience that Black [and Asian] people are just like White people' (Abercrombie, 1996). This is apparent in popular programmes such as *The Bill* and *EastEnders* in Britain and *The Cosby Show* in America.

It is still rare for Black or Asian actors to receive star billing but even this has become more common. In some cases this has resulted in the production of positive images of minority communities as in the representation of the Black middle-class family the Huxtables in *The Cosby Show*. The overall result has been an expansion in 'the *range* of racial representations and the *complexity* of what it means to be Black [or Asian]' (Hall, 1997).

Advertising Changing representations are also evident in advertising. 'Colonial images and crudely nationalistic emblems are relatively rare in the current period' (Solomos & Back, 1996) and the under-representation of non-Whites in advertising is no longer evident (Glasgow Media Group, 1997). Instead, some multinational corporations now acknowledge and celebrate difference. A classic example is the 'United Colours of Benetton' advertising series in which the message of human unity is based on an acceptance of ethnic and cultural differences (see Activity 17, Item A). While this campaign and others have been criticised for reinforcing ethnic stereotypes, shifts towards a positive valuation of difference 'can unsettle…racism within popular culture' (Solomos & Back, 1996).

Even more unsettling to racist beliefs are the attempts by some artists to challenge our traditional ways of looking through the development of new forms of representation. An example is the presentation by Toscani, the photographer responsible for the Benetton campaign, of a series of well known people with transformed racial characteristics. The picture of the 'Black Queen', for example, reveals and challenges our taken-for-granted assumptions about the necessary whiteness of British identity (see Activity 19, Item C).

The news A study from the 1990s of news reporting on TV, radio and in newspapers presents an optimistic picture. The content analysis, conducted over a six month period from November 1996 to May 1997, revealed that most news items that dealt with racial issues put across an anti-racist message.

No explicit racist messages in cartoons could be found. Extensive coverage was given to instances of racism.

Immigration was treated in a sympathetic way and press silence on racist attacks was no longer evident. Multiculturalism and Islam were more likely to be valued than attacked. And minority voices were more likely to be heard.

However, the extent of progress should not be exaggerated. While deliberate bias against minorities was found to be rare, about a quarter of news items still conveyed a negative message about minority groups. And the old framework depicting minority ethnic groups as a social problem was at times all too evident, especially in the tabloid newspapers (Law, 1997).

Evaluation Research indicates that media representations of ethnicity do change. They are not simply based on the same old negative stereotypes. While old stereotypes do persist, for example in coverage of Islam after September 11th, media representations of ethnicity are becoming more diverse and more positive.

key terms

Representations The way the mass media portray particular social groups, individuals or events.

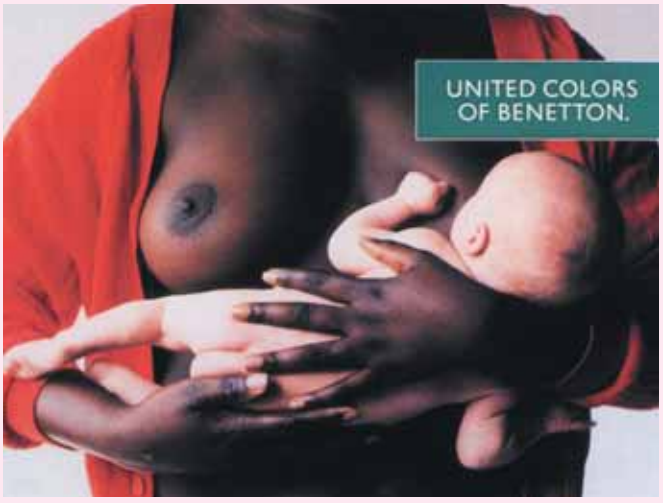
Stereotypes Widely held beliefs about the characteristics of members of social groups.

Content analysis A method of analysing the content of the mass media by counting the number of occurrences of particular words, phrases or images.

Patriarchal ideology The idea that traditional gender roles are natural and inevitable.

activity19 changing representations of ethnicity

Item A Benetton ads



Item B Obama/McCain colour switch

Item C Queen Elizabeth II

Item D Goodness, Gracious Me

The following dialogue is from the comedy programme *Goodness, Gracious Me.*

The setting is late on a Friday night at an English restaurant in downtown Bombay. Several drunken Indians stagger in. A White waiter helps them into their seats.

I'm totally off my face. How come every Friday night we end up in a Berni Inn?

Cos that's what you do innit? You go out, you get tanked up and you go for an English.

They peer bleary-eyed at the menu.

Could I just have a chicken curry?

Oh no, Nina, it's an English restaurant, you've got to have something English – no spices.

But I don't like it, it's too bland.

Jam-mess (*mispronouncing James – the waiter*) What've you got that's not totally tasteless?

Steak and kidney pie sir?

There you are, steak and kidney pee.

No, no. It blocks me up. I won't go to the toilet for a week.

That's the whole point of having an English.

Source: Gillespie, 2002

question

How does each of the items demonstrate that media representations of ethnicity are changing?

5.4 Representations of social class

Media representations of social class have received less attention recently than those of gender and ethnicity. Research has focused primarily on representations of the working class.

Under-representation of the working class Many researchers note how rarely the average working person is represented in the media. 'Studies of 50 years of comic strips, radio serials, television dramas, movies and popular fiction reveal a very persistent pattern, an under-representation of working-class occupations and an over-representation of professional and managerial occupations among characters' (Butsch, 1995). And when it comes to the news, 'working-class people are likely to cross the screen only as witnesses to crimes or sports events, never as commentators or – even when their own lives are under discussion – as "experts"' (Ehrenreich, 1995).

The few representations there have been of the working class have consistently tended to be negative, as the following examples from situation comedies and the news illustrate.

Situation comedies and social class An American study of situation comedies over four decades from 1946 to 1990 showed that working-class males were typically represented as buffoons. 'They are dumb, immature, irresponsible or lacking in common sense. This is the character of the husbands in almost every sitcom depicting a blue-collar (White) male head of house, *The Honeymooners*, *The Flintstones*, *All in the Family* and *The Simpsons* being the most famous examples. He is typically well-intentioned, even loveable, but no one to respect or emulate. These men are placed against more mature, sensible wives'. In contrast, situation comedies featuring the middle class typically do not represent either parent as a buffoon but, where they do, it is the 'dizzy wife' as in *I Love Lucy*, with the husband here being portrayed as sensible and mature (Butsch, 1995).

The news and social class In Britain, the Glasgow Media Group have carried out a series of detailed studies of television news (Eldridge, 1995). They argue that the news is not impartial but reflects the interests of powerful groups. The coverage of industrial disputes – involving, for example, strikes of the Glasgow refuse collectors in the 1970s and miners in the 1980s – illustrates this.

- In terms of access to the media, management and the 'experts' receive far more coverage than trade unionists – in the Glasgow refuse strike for example, not one of the twenty-one interviews broadcast nationally was with a striker.
- Management and trade unionists are treated very differently. The former were usually allowed to make their points quietly and at length; the latter often had to shout over the noises around them or were interrupted by reporters.

The Glasgow Media Group conclude that the overall impression given by the media was that workers caused strikes and that 'excessive' wage demands caused inflation. What is in fact just one interpretation of the cause and effects of industrial disputes is presented as the dominant and authoritative one. This dominant view represents the working class in a negative way.

Even more negative is the depiction of the poor, many of whom are pictured as an underclass. One study showed that welfare issues only become newsworthy when associated with crime and fraud. By focusing on cases of welfare abuse, the media have portrayed the underclass as the undeserving poor, sponging off the welfare state (Golding & Middleton, 1982).

Soap operas and social class So far research has indicated that:

- the working class has typically been underrepresented in the media:
- when it has appeared, it has often been depicted in a negative manner.

British soap operas are something of an exception. Series such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* feature the working class which continues to be represented as a close-knit community. While this community is portrayed as resilient, it is also increasingly depicted as multi-ethnic and threatened by outside criminal and racist forces (Dodd & Dodd, 1992).

Framing class

A recent American study based on a systematic content analysis of media representations of social class analysed the archives of major newspapers as well as 50 years of television entertainment programming (Kendall, 2005). It argues that the media selectively frame the world. 'A frame constitutes a storyline… about an issue' and this directs people's attention to some ideas rather than others. Surveying news stories and television entertainment across a range of media reveals a remarkable similarity in how events are framed. An example is the common coverage at Christmas of stories which feature charity towards the poor. 'These media representations suggest that Americans are benevolent people who do not forget the less fortunate' (Kendall, 2005).

Framing the rich and upper class In contemporary America, the upper class continues to be depicted generally in flattering terms. Kendall identifies four positive media frames.

- The consensus frame: the wealthy are like everyone else.
- The admiration frame: the wealthy are generous and caring people.
- The emulation frame: the wealthy personify the American Dream (anyone, whatever their origins, can be successful).
- The price-tag frame: the wealthy believe in the gospel of materialism.

While the above positive frames are dominant, two negative frames can also be distinguished.

- The sour grapes frame: the wealthy are unhappy and not well adjusted.
- The bad apple frame: some wealthy people are scoundrels.

Framing the poor and the working class In contrast to the generally sympathetic framing of the wealthy, 'much media coverage offers negative images of the poor, showing them as dependent on others (welfare issues) or as deviant in their behaviour and lifestyle'. Two common frames can be detected.

- The exceptionalism frame: if this person escaped poverty, why can't you?
- The charitable frame: the poor need a helping hand on special occasions like Christmas.

While the charitable frame exhibits some sympathy for the poor, it is very unusual to find any coverage that suggests the need to address the structural causes of poverty.

The working class is typically distinguished from the poor in America. This class also, is usually represented in a negative way.

- The shady frame: greedy workers, union disputes and organised crime.
- The caricature frame: rednecks, buffoons, bigots & slobs.
- The fading blue-collar frame: out of work or unhappy at work.

Occasionally a more positive frame can be detected.

- The heroic frame: working-class heroes and victims.

Framing the middle class Three key frames are evident.

- The middle-class values frame: middle class values are the core values of American society to which people should aspire.
- The squeeze frame: the middle class is finding it difficult to maintain its (costly) life style.
- The victimisation frame: middle-class problems are caused by the actions of people from other classes.

All tend to represent the middle class in a positive way, enabling most readers/viewers to identify with this class.

Conclusion Media representations of social classes typically mean that the upper and middle classes are depicted in a positive way and the working class and poor are depicted in a negative way. The result is that the media put forward an ideology which justifies class inequality and 'the ever-widening chasm between the haves and have-nots' (Kendall, 2005).

5.5 Representations of age

Nature and nurture

Over the course of the life cycle, children become teenagers; youths become adults; and middle-aged adults become old. This is normally thought of as a natural process since ageing entails inevitable biological changes. And these biological changes are often accompanied by changes in our attitudes and behaviour. Sociologists, however, argue that these social changes are not just a result of the biological clock ticking away. Indeed the stages themselves – childhood, youth, maturity, old age – have not always been distinguished in the ways we do now (Richardson, 2005).

Childhood Some historians argue that for most of human history children (at least after the age of 6 or 7) were seen as miniature adults. The idea of childhood as a period of innocence and dependence only began to emerge around the 15th century. And even then, the expectation that children should be engaged in education rather than employment took a long while to become the norm. Childhood is now seen as an extended stage of the life cycle and sharply distinguished from adulthood.

Youth For many historians, youth only became recognised as a separate stage of the life cycle after the discovery of childhood. Indeed, it was only in the post-war period that teenagers were affluent enough to become significant consumers of mass media products such as rock and roll, and develop youth cultures. Youth is now recognised to be a stage somewhere between childhood and adulthood.

Adulthood and old age For much of human history, adults were obliged to work for a living until they died. Old age, however, is now seen as a distinct stage in the life cycle when people are entitled to a pension and not expected to be employed.

Representations of age groups

The status of different age groups in Western societies is linked to their economic circumstances. Those in the middle – adults in work – have the most status. By contrast, those at either extremes – the young and the old – whom it is assumed (often incorrectly) do not work, have less status. The different status of age groups results in corresponding variations in mainstream representations. According to McQueen (1998), 'These, broadly, are that: children are helpless and innocent; teenagers irresponsible and rebellious; middle-aged people responsible and conformist; and old people vulnerable and a "burden" on society'. We shall now look at the portrayal of the groups with less status.

activity20 hooligans and yobs

Item A *Hooligans*

From the *Daily Graphic*, 5.12.1900

Item B *Yobs*

ONE MORE VICTIM OF OUR YOB CULTURE

A father of four was kicked to death by yobs after being asked for a light.

LOUTS DESTROY ANOTHER FAMILY

Britain's yob culture has claimed the life of yet another family man.

ATTACKED BY A TEEN GANG

A barrister was in a coma last night after becoming the latest victim of a teenage street gang. Yobs are intimidating entire neighbourhoods.

Headlines from the *Daily Mail*, June and July 2005

question

What impression of youth is provided by Items A and B?

Children A study of children's television has identified three main strands (McQueen, 1998). The first is a commercial strand and targets children as consumers of cartoons (eg *Tom and Jerry*) and action programmes. The second is a public service strand and seeks to be distinctly educational (eg *Blue Peter*). The third, and most recent, is an adult strand which recognises that children often prefer 'adult' programmes (eg *Neighbours*). In Britain, the second strand – though once dominant – has declined and the third strand has grown. While the former represents children as totally dependent and in need of protection and guidance from adults, the latter recognises diversity among children and their capacity to deal with complex issues.

Youth The most common depiction of young people in the news is the representation of youth as trouble. Hence a series of moral panics in the post-war period about 'depraved youth' who have no respect for authority (Muncie, 1999). Teddy boys were the first 'folk devils' to be identified in the post-war period but they were followed in successive decades by, among others, mods and rockers (see Section 3.2), muggers, punks and joy riders. In each of these cases, a group of young people was identified as trouble. The behaviour of this group in turn served to symbolise what was wrong with youth and, by extension, society generally.

Representing youth in this way – youth as trouble – is not new. An analysis of newspapers over a number of centuries reveals that, in every age, it is common to portray youth as a problem and to contrast contemporary youth with the situation of 20 years ago when young people respected authority and society was in a better state (Pearson, 1983).

Old age Older people are much less likely to be represented on television or in the mass media than younger people, 'with 11 per cent of the population who are aged over 65 years, reduced to only 2.3 per cent of the television population' (McQueen, 1998). When older people are represented, White middle-class men are much more commonly found than women, ethnic minorities or the poor. As for the nature of the images, these are according to one recent account 'overwhelmingly negative, comic or grotesque' (McQueen, 1998).

4.6 Representations of sexuality

The term sexual orientation refers to an individual's sexual preferences – for people of the same sex (homosexuality), persons of the opposite sex (heterosexuality) or persons of either sex (bisexuality). In all societies, there are rules governing what are deemed acceptable sexual relations. While these vary from society to society, in many societies heterosexuality is considered the norm and homosexuality/bisexuality as deviant. Indeed, as late as the 1960s, gay male sexual relations were completely illegal in Britain. And it is only since 2003, with the incorporation into law of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations, that it has been illegal to discriminate against people because of their sexual orientation. And it was not until 2005 that same-sex couples (lesbians and gays) have been given, through civil partnerships, similar rights as married heterosexual couples.

Representations of lesbians and gay men Analysis of media content has repeatedly produced the following findings.

- Sexual minorities 'mostly…are ignored or denied.
- When they do appear they do so in order to play a supportive role for the natural order and are thus narrowly and negatively stereotyped' (Gross, 1995).
- Common stereotypes include those of 'homosexual men' being 'identified by a mincing walk and camp voices' and 'lesbians…as butch dungaree-wearing feminists' (McQueen, 1998).

Changing representations of sexuality With more societal acceptance of diversity, including diverse sexual orientations, lesbians and gay men have become both more visible and less narrowly and negatively stereotyped. This is evident in a number of ways.

- The greater visibility of gays is evident in advertising, the news and fictional television programmes. Advertisers for example are now more likely to engage in gay-positive marketing campaigns. This is partly in order to attract a previously untapped market – gay consumers – and partly to draw on the perceived hipness of the gay lifestyle in order to sell products to a mass market (Media Awareness Network, 2005).
- In the period from 1981, when AIDS was first identified, to 1985 when a potential AIDS epidemic was recognised, some sections of the press identified gay men as folk devils responsible for what was presented as 'a gay plague'. Gay activists and medical authorities, however, successfully challenged this interpretation of AIDS and indeed persuaded governments after 1986 to develop campaigns in order to promote safe sex (Critcher, 2003).
- While gay men are often represented as camp in situation comedies, less stereotypical representations are evident in soap operas. In contrast to situation comedies and one-off dramas, it is not necessary in soap operas, which comprise an ongoing drama, to identify immediately whether a character is gay. There is room for some character development and it is possible therefore that it may emerge that certain individuals happen to be gay. Despite this, one analysis indicates that plots featuring gays typically 'dealt with the issue of heterosexuals coming to terms with gayness'. In other words, 'media representations are not representing in most cases a gay/lesbian perspective – they are constructed from a heterosexual point of view and aimed at a heterosexual audience' (Bernstein, 2002).
- Although the mainstream media often continue to represent gays and lesbians as the Other, they do present a wider range of images of gay people than was the case. Talk shows provide an opportunity for people outside the sexual mainstream to voice their concerns. And cutting-edge drama series have emerged such as Channel 4's *Queer as Folk* which focused on the lives of three gay men living in Manchester.

activity21 double standards

Item A Censorship?

Tesco has so far been unwilling to sell a new women's magazine, *Scarlet* because its raunchiness is thought to be tasteless and might offend customers. In contrast, equally raunchy lads' weeklies such as *Nuts* and *Zoo* are widely available. Referring to Tesco's decision and to the refusal of many outlets to stock gay and lesbian magazines, the chairperson of Object, an organisation against sexual stereotyping says 'This is social control of women's and gay men's sexual rights by the distributors. Why are male bodies being censored and protected but not women's bodies? Is it because they are afraid of female erotica and homosexuality?'

Source: *The Guardian*, 28.11.2005

Item B Steering clear

When the American version of *Queer as Folk* was in production, fashion houses such as Versace, Pravda, Polo, Ralph Lauren and Abercrombie & Fitch refused to allow their brands to appear in the series. And although the show is set in Pittsburgh, the marketing director of Pittsburgh Steelers wrote a letter to the producers demanding that all references to the team be removed.

Source: *Media Awareness Network*, 2005

questions

1 Look at Item A. What evidence is there of double standards in the treatment of *Scarlet* and *Zoo*?

2 Look at Item B. Why are some companies unwilling to be associated with the drama *Queer as Folk*?

5.7 Representations of disability

There are two main ways of understanding and representing disability:

- The medical model
- The social model.

The medical model This 'views disability as a product of impairment' (Bulsara, 2005). Here the focus is on physical difference such as blindness and being wheelchair bound. The disabled are defined as a group whose bodies do not function normally and who, as a result, are not capable of enjoying an ordinary lifestyle.

The social model By contrast, this model views disability as the outcome of social barriers. Here the focus is on the obstacles and discriminatory practices that people with disabilities face. It is recognised that some people experience impairments, but what is highlighted are the social barriers that prevent these people from enjoying an ordinary lifestyle.

Under-representation of disability

Content analysis of representations of disability on television conducted between 1993 and 2002 indicates that people with disabilities appear infrequently and that there has been little change over the years. In 2002, they made an appearance in 11% of the programmes surveyed but accounted for only 0.8% of all the people who spoke. What is more, the range of disabilities portrayed was very limited, being those highlighted in the medical model, notably blindness and being wheelchair bound (Agyeman, 2003).

Images of the disabled

According to Barnes (1992), there are a range of images of the disabled. Content analysis of both electronic and print media identified the following.

- The disabled person as pitiable and pathetic. Such an image was common on programmes such as *Children in Need* and telethons where the disabled were presented as objects of pity in order for the able-bodied to feel compassion and give money.
- The disabled person as an object of violence, a common scenario in television programmes where disabled people appeared.
- The disabled person as sinister and evil – for example, Shakespeare's *Richard III* or *Treasure Island's* Blind Pew.
- The disabled person as atmosphere or curio – for example, a character with a humped back such as Igor in the film *Frankenstein* being used as a metaphor for evil.

- The disabled person as 'super cripple'. This image of an individual heroically overcoming obstacles is evident in films such as *My Left Foot*, where the central character, Christy Brown is played in fact by an able-bodied actor, a common occurrence in Hollywood films.
- The disabled person as an object of ridicule – for example, Mr Magoo, a partially-sighted cartoon character.
- The disabled person as their own worst enemy able to overcome obstacles if he (or occasionally, she), put their minds to it and ceases to be self pitying.
- The disabled person as a burden who is dependent and needs to be looked after.
- The disabled person as sexually abnormal.
- The disabled person as incapable of participating in community life.
- The disabled person as normal.

While a range of media representations of the disabled can still be identified, the most prevalent ones 'commonly perpetuate negative stereotypes' (Roper, 2003). 'Three potent images are conjured up: pity, dependent and flawed' (Bulsara, 2005). For the most part, media representations thus 'represent disabled people as deviant outsiders in clear juxtaposition to the normal and "able bodied" majority' (Hughes, 1998). While most images of disabled people illustrate that the medical model of disability continues to be dominant, there is little doubt that – as disabled people have become more vocal in their demand for civil rights – more media representations draw upon the social model of disability. In 42% of those cases where people with disabilities appeared on television, for example, issues of prejudice, stereotyping or discrimination were highlighted. It still remains rare, however, for disability to be 'portrayed as an everyday, incidental phenomenon' (Agyeman, 2003) with 'disabled people nipping into the Queen Vic for a drink, and then leaving again' (Furner, 2005).

How important are representations?

The previous sections have demonstrated continuity and change in media representations of different social groups. But how important are these representations? Do they actually influence viewers, listeners and readers?

Their impact cannot be assessed without looking carefully at how audiences respond to the media. The problem here is that people do not respond in a simple and straightforward way to what they see, hear or read. The effects of the mass media on audiences are discussed at length in Unit 5.

summary

1. The mass media represent various social groups. These representations are often based on stereotypes.
2. Studies of gender representations from the 1950s to the 1970s showed that the media presented a stereotype of women as domestic servants and sex objects.
3. More recent evidence indicates that media representations of women are less likely to be based on traditional stereotypes.
4. Media representations of ethnicity have tended to rely on negative stereotypes. Black people were routinely presented as a 'threat' and a 'problem'. Ethnic issues were seen from a White point of view.
5. Recent research indicates more positive representations of minority ethnic groups and a growth in the number and range of representations. However, old stereotypes persist.
6. The working class are under-represented in the media and tend to be pictured in a negative way. The middle class are represented in a more positive light.
7. There has been a move from representing children as dependent and in need of protection to recognising their capacity to deal with complex issues.
8. The most common representation of youth in the news is 'youth as trouble'.
9. Older people are under-represented in the media and tend to be pictured in negative or comic ways.
10. Sexual minorities have tended to be ignored or represented in terms of negative stereotypes. There is some recent evidence of more diverse and positive representations.
11. The disabled are under-represented in the media. Although a range of media images can be identified, the most common continue to reflect negative stereotypes.
12. People do not respond in a straightforward way to what they see, hear and read. As a result, it is difficult to assess the effect of media representations.

Unit 6 Media effects

keyissues

1 What effects do the media have on audiences?

2 Do the media make us more violent?

6.1 Two views of media effects

How do the mass media affect their audiences? There are two main views. The first view sees the media as powerful and their audience as passive. The media are seen to shape the beliefs and behaviour of the audience who passively accept what they see, hear and read and act accordingly. In terms of this view, the audience is pictured as a mass of isolated individuals who are vulnerable to media manipulation and control.

The second view sees an active audience. They use the media to meet their own needs, selecting what they see, hear and read. Rather than simply accepting, they interpret media output, actively constructing their own meanings. And different individuals and groups interpret the media in different ways depending on their individual experiences and group membership.

Research on media effects has tended to swing between these two contrasting views of the audience. However, more recent research has shown a preference for the active audience view.

Hypodermic syringe theory

Early theories of media effects claimed that the mass media have a direct and immediate effect on behaviour. Hypodermic syringe theory likened the effect of the media to the injection of a drug into a vein. The media were seen to have an immediate effect on people's moods and actions. For example, violence in a movie produces feelings of aggression which can lead to violent behaviour.

Evaluation This view pictured a powerful media which could manipulate and control audiences. Much of the evidence used to support hypodermic syringe theory came from laboratory experiments. But the way people behave in laboratories is often very different from their behaviour in real life situations.

activity22 the Martians are coming

Orson Welles broadcasting War of the Worlds

New York Times

Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact

Many Flee Homes to Escape 'Gas Raid From Mars'—Phone Calls Swamp Police at Broadcast of Wells Fantasy

A wave of mass hysteria seized thousands of radio listeners throughout the nation between 8:15 and 9:30 o'clock last night when a broadcast of a dramatization of H. G. Wells's fantasy, "The War of the Worlds," led thousands to believe that an interplanetary conflict had started with invading Martians spreading wide death and destruction [illegible] Jersey [illegible] York

and radio stations here and in other cities of the United States and Canada seeking advice on protective measures against the raids.

The program was produced by Mr. Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air over station WABC and the Columbia Broadcasting System's coast-to-coast network, from 8 to 9 o'clock.

"The radio" as prepa[illegible]

'The girls huddled around their radios trembling and weeping in each other's arms. They separated themselves from their friends only to take their turn at the telephone to make long distance calls to their parents, saying goodbye for what they thought might be the last time. Terror-stricken girls, hoping to escape from the Mars invaders, rushed to the basement of the dormitory.'

With these words, an American college student recalls the reaction of herself and her friends to a radio broadcast in 1938. The broadcast was a radio play by Orson Welles based on H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, a novel about an invasion from Mars. It was so realistic that hundreds of thousands of people, who missed the announcement that it was only a play, were convinced the Martians had invaded. There was widespread panic at the news that millions had been killed by Martian death rays.

Many people just didn't know how to respond. They turned to family and friends to see whether they should believe what they'd heard. They interpreted what they saw in terms of the radio programme. One person looked out of his window and saw that Wyoming Avenue was 'black with cars. People were rushing away, I figured'. Another recounted, 'No cars came down my street. Traffic is jammed on account of the roads being destroyed, I thought.'

Thousands fled towns and cities and took to the hills.

Source: Cantril, 1940

question

To what extent does the behaviour of the radio audience support the hypodermic syringe theory?

Two-step flow theory

Hypodermic syringe theory largely ignores the fact that people are social beings, that they have families, friends and work colleagues. Katz and Lazarsfeld's influential *two-step flow theory* (1955) emphasised the importance of social relationships in shaping people's response to the media. They argued that opinions are formed in a social context.

Within this context certain people – *opinion leaders* – are influential in shaping the views of others. These individuals are more likely to be exposed to the media, for example to read more newspapers and magazines. As a result, they are more likely to be influenced by the media and, as opinion leaders, to transmit media messages to others. Hence the idea of a two-step flow – attitudes and ideas 'flow *from* radio and print to opinion leaders and *from them* to the less active sections of the population' (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Evaluation Two-step flow theory was largely based on research into short-term changes in attitudes and opinions. For example, media presentations of election campaigns were examined in order to discover to what extent they changed people's voting intentions. Often, such studies showed that the media had little effect on people's opinions.

Uses and gratifications theory

The uses and gratifications approach directly challenged the hypodermic syringe theory. Rather than asking what the media do to audiences, it asked what do audiences do with the media. It argued that people use the media to gratify certain needs. To find out what those needs are, you ask people what they get from watching particular programmes. Using this method, McQuail et al. (1972) identified four needs that are met by watching television. The first was escapism, the need for people to forget about everyday problems. The second was companionship, the need to feel in contact with others, for example with characters in a TV soap. The third was personal identity, for example the need to confirm how clever you are by taking part in TV quizzes from your armchair. The fourth was information, the need to know what is going on in the world.

The uses and gratifications approach puts the audience in the driving seat – they choose from what the media has to offer in order to gratify their needs.

Evaluation There are two main criticisms of this view. First, how do we identify audience needs? When people say that television provides escapism, are they saying that is what they want from television or that's what they get from television? Second, are audiences as active in their choice of programmes as the uses and gratifications approach suggests? Here research 'indicates that, for the most part, they are not selective in their choice of viewing' – more often than not, they watch what they're given (McCullagh, 2002).

Cultural effects theory

This theory assumes that the media does have important effects on its audience. These effects are not as immediate and dramatic as those indicated by the hypodermic syringe theory. Nor are they relatively insignificant as suggested by the two-step flow theory. Rather, they can be seen as a slow, steady, long term build-up of ideas and attitudes.

Cultural effects theory assumes that if similar images, ideas and interpretations are broadcast over periods of time, then they may well affect the way we see and understand the world. Thus if television and radio broadcasts, newspapers and magazines all present, for example, a certain image of women, then slowly but surely this will filter into the public consciousness.

Like the two-step flow theory, cultural effects theory recognises the importance of social relationships. It argues that media effects will depend on the social position of members of the audience, for example, their age, gender, class and ethnicity (Glover, 1985).

Evaluation Cultural effects theory is difficult to evaluate. Because the effects it claims take place over long periods of time, it is difficult to show they are a result of media output. They may be due to other factors in the wider society.

Media as texts

This approach states that the media output – TV programmes, films, books, advertisements – can be seen as 'texts' which are 'read' by the audience. The way that these texts are 'written' determines how audiences understand

activity23 madonna

question

How would you interpret this image of Madonna?

them. For example, Mulvey (1975) argues that many Hollywood movies encourage us to adopt a 'male gaze' – to identify with male characters and see women as sex objects. This suggests a powerful media which directs audiences to interpret media output in a particular way.

Evaluation This approach pictures a passive audience who simply read 'texts' as they have been 'written'. However, research on audiences suggests that media texts can be read in a variety of ways. As the case studies in the following section indicate, people interpret media output in terms of their personal experience and membership of social groups. For example, their age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class and nationality will all influence their interpretation and understanding of the media. John Fiske (1987) uses the example of Madonna's videos to make this point. Researchers might see these videos as reflecting the 'male gaze' with Madonna flaunting her sexuality for the benefit of men and 'teaching young women to see themselves as men would see them'. However, judging from letters in a teenage magazine, many young girls saw Madonna as a strong, liberated woman who challenged the mainstream model of femininity.

5.2 Case studies of media effects

So far this unit has looked at general theories of media effects. This section looks at case studies which examine how particular audiences respond to particular aspects of media output.

The 1984/5 miners' strike

The 1984/5 miners' strike was regularly reported by the news media. Activity 22 is based on a study by the Glasgow Media Group of television news coverage of the strike (Philo, 1993). The study examines how people interpreted TV news' version of events. It shows that media effects are not simple and direct. Instead, media output is interpreted in various ways in terms of people's beliefs and experiences.

activity24 audience interpretation

Item A *The strike*

Item B *The research*

One hundred and sixty-nine people were interviewed a year after the miners strike of 1984/5. Television news programmes had focused on violent incidents during the strike – clashes between picketing miners and police. Those selected for interview included miners and police who had been involved in the strike, plus a range of people from different parts of the country and with different social backgrounds.

The researchers found that people interpreted the media's version of the strike in terms of their experiences and previously held attitudes and beliefs. 54% of those interviewed believed that the picketing was mostly violent. This reflected media coverage of the strike. However, none of those who had direct knowledge of the strike – the miners and police – believed that picketing was mostly violent. They rejected the impression given by the media. According to them, strikers and police spent most of their time standing round doing nothing.

Source: Philo, 1993

questions

1 a) Which picture is typical of the strike?

b) Why do you think TV news focused on violent confrontations?

2 Why did people interpret the news in different ways?

Neighbours – a Punjabi perspective

The Australian soap *Neighbours* was popular with many young people in the Punjabi community in Southall. Research by Marie Gillespie (1995) shows why. *Neighbours* offered the Southall teenagers a picture of family and community life with which to compare their own. Many of them experienced a tension between British and Indian norms and values as they grew up. 'Soap talk' based on *Neighbours* allowed them to contrast, evaluate and criticise their own family life. Many identified with characters in *Neighbours* and appreciated the freedom that young people appeared to have. By comparison, some felt the restrictions of their family were unfair. One girl talks about the emphasis on respect and obedience to elders: 'It drowns your own sense of identity, you can't do what you want, you always have to think of your family honour'. Another girls comments: 'You can see that families in *Neighbours* are more flexible, they do things together as a family, they don't expect that girls should stay at home and do housework and cooking, boys and girls are allowed to mix more freely'.

The young Punjabis interpreted *Neighbours* in terms of their own experiences, concerns and values. This is an important study because it suggests that there are many different audiences 'out there' and that each will interpret media output in a somewhat different way.

Tyneside rappers

Hip-hop/rap is a global music. Yet young people around the world interpret it in terms of their particular meanings and experiences. This can be seen from Andy Bennett's (2001) study of White rappers in Newcastle upon Tyne. They saw hip-hop as a street thing rather than a Black thing. They dropped the 'Americanisms', rapping with local accents, giving accounts of their own lives and dealing with local problems – for example, crack was replaced by Newcastle Brown ale, problems of excessive drinking and alcohol related violence. In their eyes, they created 'pure Geordie rap'.

Again, we see media output being interpreted in terms of the experiences and concerns of a particular audience.

Media effects – conclusion

This unit began with two views of media effects. The first saw the media as powerful and their audience as passive. The media largely shape the beliefs and values of the audience who tend to accept what they see, hear and read. The second view sees the audience as active – selecting and interpreting media output and constructing their own meanings based on individual experience and group membership.

There is evidence to support both views of audience response to media output. For example, the Glasgow Media Group's study of TV news' coverage of the 1984/5 miners' strike found that over half the people interviewed accepted the TV version of events as 'mostly violent'. Summarising the findings of this and other studies, some members of the Glasgow Media Group concluded that in terms of news: 'Most of us, most of the time go along with what the media tell us to be the case' (Eldridge et al., 1997). On the other hand, those who had direct knowledge of the strike rejected the version given by the media.

The case studies examined in this section indicate that audiences are not passive, that their interpretations and meanings are not simply shaped by the media. They bring with them a lifetime of experiences, concerns, expectations and values in terms of which they interpret and give meaning to media output.

summary

1. There are two main views of media effects. The first sees the media as powerful and the audience as passive. The media are seen to shape the beliefs and behaviour of the audience. The second view sees the audience as active – they interpret media output and construct their own meanings.
2. The hypodermic syringe theory sees the media having an immediate and direct effect on people's moods and actions.
3. Two-step flow theory argues that attitudes and ideas flow from the media to opinion leaders to the rest of the population.
4. Uses and gratifications theory argues that people use the media to gratify certain needs – the needs for escapism, companionship, identity and information.
5. Cultural effects theory sees media effects as a slow, steady, long term build-up of beliefs and attitudes in response to the frequent transmission of similar images and ideas over fairly long periods of time.
6. The media as texts approach sees media output as 'texts' which are 'read' by the audience. It argues that the way these texts are 'written' determines how the audience understands them.
7. Case study research shows how particular audiences draw on their beliefs, values, knowledge and experience in order to interpret media output.

activity25 interpreting hip-hop

Item A Dizzy Rascal

London Black rapper Dizzy Rascal. American rapper Jay-Z said, 'I like his beats but I can't understand a word he says'.

Item B 50 Cent

American rapper 50 Cent performing in Venice, Italy

Item C Chinese hip-hop fans

Dancing to hip-hop music at the Beijing Pop Music Festival, 2007

Item D Skinnyman – White London rapper

question

Use these pictures to support the view that hip-hop/rap is interpreted differently by different performers and audiences.

Unit 7 The new media

keyissues

1. What are the new media?
2. How does the internet affect news output?
3. How do the new media affect the democratic process?
4. What is the significance of social networking sites?

This unit looks at recent developments in the media such as the Internet and satellite broadcasting. It examines some of the key questions addressed in this chapter in terms of the new media. For example, is the internet an instrument for revitalising and expanding democracy? Or does the internet simply extend the dominance and further the interests of the powerful?

Many sociologists believe that we are in the middle of a communications revolution which is transforming the way images, text and sounds are communicated. Three technological developments are seen as particularly important in bringing about this revolution.

- The development of relatively cheap personal computers allowing access to the internet for millions of people at home and at work
- The emergence of new ways of sending audio-visual signals to individual households
- The growth of digital technology causing changes in the way information (images, texts and sounds) is stored and transmitted.

7.1 New media

The internet, along with cable television and satellite broadcasting, are examples of *new media*. The new media share three characteristics:

- 'They are screen based', with information being displayed on a television screen, PC monitor or a mobile telephone.
- 'They can offer images, text and sounds.'
- 'They allow some form of interaction.' (Collins & Murroni, 1996)

The internet The internet is a global system of interconnected computers. It is not owned by any individual or company, but comprises a network that stretches across the world. The best known part of the internet is the World Wide Web (WWW), effectively a global multi-media library.

The internet was created in 1969 by the American military to enable scientists working on military contracts across the US to share resources and information. It developed further in the 1980s within universities, but it was not until the second half of that decade, with the increased availability of PCs in the home, that the Internet really took off (Gorman & McLean, 2003). The growth in internet access has been dramatic. In 2008, 16 million households in Britain (65%) had internet access, an increase of 5 million since 2002 (National Statistics Online, 2009).

Cable television and satellite broadcasting Terrestrial broadcasting by the BBC and ITV operates by sending audio-visual signals through the air which are picked up by ordinary television aerials. By contrast, cable television relies on a physical cable link and satellite broadcasting on dishes to pick up signals.

In contrast to the US and the rest of Europe, cable television in the UK is less popular than satellite broadcasting. In 2002, only 14.7 per cent of homes in the UK where cable is available had taken out a television subscription, compared to 25% with satellite dishes (Peake, 2002). Subscribers to BSkyB have risen steadily from over 6 million in July 2002 to nearly 9.1 million in September 2008 (Ofcom.org.uk, 2008). The development of cable television and satellite broadcasting enables people to choose from a much larger number of television channels.

Digitalisation Of central importance to recent technological developments in the media is *digitalisation* – the shift from analogue to digital coding of information. Digital systems translate all information – images, texts, sounds – into a universal computer language. The use of this common language reduces the boundaries between different media sectors. 'Digital transmission technology has a broadcasting capacity many times bigger than analogue, opening the door on a new era: many more TV channels and radio stations; higher quality pictures and sound; multimedia facilities; and interactivity (home shopping, games, video on demand)' (Peake, 2002).

The impact of the new media

Diversity and choice In one respect, the new media have led to more consumer choice. For example, cable television and satellite broadcasting have increased the number of television channels. While many of these are entertainment channels, the number of news channels has also increased. Sometimes these provide views of world affairs that are very different from British and American sources. For example, the 24-hour Arab satellite news station Aljazeera often provides alternative content and perspectives to Western news programmes.

Quality The government exercises some control over the quality and range of programmes on the BBC and ITV. However, the main providers of cable and satellite broadcasting – NTL, Telewest and BSkyB – face 'no regulatory directives on either the range or the sources of

programme material' (Negrine, 1994). Anxious to make as much profit as possible on their massive investments, cable and satellite broadcasters fill their channels with cheap imported material, films, or sport.

Other broadcasting organisations are tempted to follow suit as they too search for large audiences to generate advertising revenue or, in the case of the BBC, to justify the license fee. According to many commentators, 'there is a consequent loss in both the quality, and the range, of programmes produced' (Negrine, 1994). Increased choice does not therefore mean increased diversity.

Inequality There is also inequality of access to the new media. As subscription channels and pay-per-view become more popular, poorer people become excluded from key world events, especially in entertainment and sport.

7.2 News online

This section looks at news on the internet and its effect on the other news media.

Sources of news

In the US, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press conducts regular surveys of media use. The December 2008 survey showed that the internet had overtaken newspapers as a news outlet. Its growth as a source of news has been rapid. In September 2007, 24% of Americans reported that the internet was one of their main sources of national and international news. By December, 2008, this figure was 40% (see Activity 0, Item 0). Television was still a main source of news for 70% of the population. For young people (aged 18 to 29), television and the internet were neck and neck at 59%. (Figures add up to more than 100% because multiple responses were allowed.) (people-press.org, 2009).

The trend in the UK is similar but slower moving. According to the Office of Communications (Ofcom), the internet is 'the fastest growing platform for news'. However, the actual number of people who use the internet as their main source of news remains small – only 6% of UK adults in 2006, up from 2% in 2002 (Ofcom, 2007). In 1994, adults watched an average of 108.5 hours of television, in 2006 this was down to 90.8 hours. Television remains the main source of news though viewing of TV national news has declined. Newspaper readership has declined rapidly from 26.7 million adults reading a daily newspaper to 21.7 million in 2006 (House of Lords, 2008).

Types of online news

Repackaging Many of the online news outlets are operated by traditional news providers. The major newspapers have their own site as do television news providers. Much of the news they provide online is repackaged from their existing sources. For example, a survey conducted in 2003 in 16 countries compared the front pages of major national print and online newspapers. The results showed that 70% of the main stories in both media were identical (Van der Wurff & Lauf, 2005). One of the main differences is that the internet enables providers to present breaking news immediately, an advantage shared by 24-hour television news channels.

Repackaging means that ways of accessing the news have increased rapidly but this has not been matched by an increase in news content.

News aggregator sites Sites such as Google News and Yahoo! News present stories on particular topics from a wide range of sources. They 'aggregate' – bring together – news stories, hence the term *news aggregator* site. While this allows users to compare the coverage of a particular story, it adds nothing new to existing coverage. News aggregation sites do not invest money in journalism.

User generated content This phrase refers to news content provided by users – by the public rather than the owners of news websites. Some online news sites invite comment from users, giving them the opportunity to broadcast their views. Increasingly the public provides content, often recorded on video cameras and mobile phones.

Blogs *Blog* is short for *weblog*. A blog is an online journal, newsletter or diary which is regularly updated. Usually created by individuals, blogs deal with a vast range of topics from politics and social issues to music and celebrities. Estimates of the number of blogs worldwide vary considerably – one estimate for 2008 gave 184 million (technorati.com/blogging).

Many blogs comment on the news, sometimes they generate news and occasionally they break a big story. Some bloggers such as Salam Pax, 'the Baghdad Blogger' become very influential – see Activity 26, Item C.

News online – conclusion

Although the internet has provided many more ways to access the news, this has not been matched by a corresponding expansion of news content and news gathering services. Much online news consists of repackaging material generated by more traditional media. However, there have been some important changes. User generated content is a feature of many online news sites. And blogging is a growing aspect of online news.

Online news is becoming increasingly important, particularly for young people. It may well compensate for the decline in other news outlets, particularly the fall in newspaper readership. And some commentators argue that it may well reduce the threat of media concentration (House of Lords, 2008).

key terms

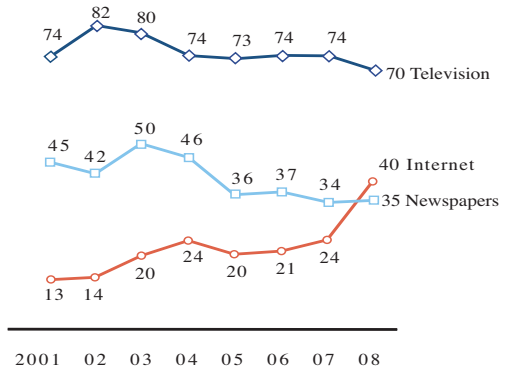
News aggregator sites Websites which present news stories on particular topics from a wide range of sources.

Blog An online journal, newsletter or diary which is regularly updated.

activity26 online news

Item A Sources of news in the US

Where do you get most of your national and international news?



Source: people-press.org, 2009

Item B Young people and online news in the US

Internet rivals TV as main news source for young people'

Main source of news	Aug 2006 %	Sept 2007 %	Dec 2008 %	07-08 Change
Television	62	68	59	-11
Internet	32	34	59	+25
Newspapers	29	23	28	+5
Radio	16	13	18	+5
Magazines	1	*	4	+4
Other (Vol.)	3	5	6	+1

*Ages 18 to 29.
Figures add to more than 100% because multiple responses were allowed.

Source: people-press.org, 2009

Item C The Baghdad Blogger

In early 2003, a special voice emerged in Iraq to tell the world what it was like to be an ordinary person in Baghdad. Salam Pax, 'the Baghdad Blogger' began his online reports of life after the American invasion. 'Closely observed, intelligent, sometimes passionate, frequently funny, he spared neither regime nor invader.' Salam captured a worldwide audience.

Source: Plommer, 2009

Item D Views on blogging

'It's like all the stuff on the web,' Mike Smartt of BBC News Online states, 'dissemination of information is great, but how much of it is trustworthy?'

Robert L Belichick, a health care worker from Chicago, is a regular reader of blogs. 'The main reason for going to the blogs is for information that will never see the light of day in print or TV media. For example, not one major media outlook in the US reported that the US excised (removed) over 8.000 pages from the Iraq declaration since they contained information about the US companies that supplied all the biological and chemical weapons to Saddam.'

Source: Raynsford, 2003

question

XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXX XXX XXXX XXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXX XX XX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXX XXXX

7.3 Politics online – a case study

This section looks at the role played by the internet in Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency in 2008. It shows the potential of the internet in politics as indicated by phrases such as 'the internet election' and 'the first internet presidency'.

Social networking sites Obama's team made extensive use of social networking sites. One count during the campaign showed that Obama had:

- 98,623 followers on Twitter
- 709,606 friends on MySpace
- 2.14 million Facebook supporters (von Leyden, 2008)

myBo Obama had his own social networking site, my.BarackObama.com nicknamed myBo by his supporters. The site has a database which enables volunteers to identify and contact Obama supporters to urge them to vote. It includes a Neighbour-to-Neighbour tool which allows volunteers to find and canvass registered voters in their area. Volunteers are encouraged to feed back local information which is used to direct the campaign. Regular bulletins update volunteers on events and strategy. And myBo and email blasts were used to raise millions of

dollars to pay for the election campaign (Wagner, 2008).

YouTube Specially created campaign videos, often fronted by celebrities such as Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel, were placed on YouTube. The videos were watched for 14.5 million hours. To buy that amount of time on television would cost $47 million (Miller, 2008).

The internet as a news source Surveys by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press show that the internet was a major source of news about the presidential campaign. In 2008, 24% of Americans said they regularly learned something about the campaign from the internet, almost double the percentage in the 2004 campaign.

The internet was particularly important for young people. Forty-two per cent of people aged 18 to 29 said they regularly learned about the candidates and the campaign from the internet, the highest percentage for any news source for this group. (people-press.org, 2008).

Conclusion The Obama team's use of the internet changed the way politicians communicate and organise their supporters. And it engaged their supporters making them feel a part of the whole campaign process.

7.4 Digital citizenship and democracy

Democracy is a political system in which citizens have a say in the way they are governed. Western societies are representative democracies in which the interests of the people are represented by elected officials. Political participation is essential if a democracy is to operate effectively. At a minimum, citizens must vote in elections in order to choose those who will represent them in government.

Researchers who accept this view of democracy argue that the internet is playing a steadily growing part in the democratic process. The previous section, which outlined the role of the internet in Barack Obama's presidential campaign, provides evidence to support this view.

Digital citizenship Many researchers now argue that the ability to participate online is essential for a fully democratic society. The term *digital citizenship* has been coined to describe 'the ability to participate in society online'. '*Digital citizens* are those who use the internet regularly and effectively' (Mossberger et al., 2008)

In *Digital Citizenship:The internet, society and participation*, Karen Mossberger, Caroline Tolbert and Ramona McNeal make the following points. Their analysis is based largely on survey data from the USA .

The Internet is now so important that participation is essential if people are to play a full part in mainstream society. In particular, to become full citizens in a democracy, people must have access to the internet and the skills to use it. Survey evidence shows that internet use increases the likelihood of voting and participating in the political process. Politics online is now a vital part of politics 'on the ground' (Mossberger et al., 2008)

The digital divide Access to the internet is not spread evenly across the population. Social inequalities are reflected in internet use. The higher a person's social class, income and educational attainment, the more likely they are to use the internet. Those who might benefit most from internet use – the poor and the disadvantaged – are least likely to be online. The digital divide means that those who are excluded from terrestrial society are most likely to be excluded from online society (Mossberger et al., 2008).

Repressing the internet The internet allows people 'to participate in a free flow of information and ideas with others across the world' (Amnesty International, 2006). A number of governments have attempted to suppress this freedom of expression by censoring material on the internet and persecuting citizens who criticise them online. Countries accused of internet repression include China, Vietnam, Tunisia, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Western IT companies such as Microsoft, Google and Yahoo! have been criticised for 'helping to build the systems that enable surveillance and censorship to take place' and for participating in the suppression of information and the identification of bloggers who speak out against their governments (Amnesty International, 2006).

key terms

Digital citizenship The ability to participate in online society.

Digital citizens Those who use the internet regularly and effectively.

Digital divide The divisions between those with access to the internet and the skills to use it and those who lack access and appropriate skills.

7.5 The public sphere

The media as a public sphere The idea of a *public sphere* refers to a space where people can freely debate issues that are of importance to them as citizens. Habermas (1992) argues that the public sphere emerged in 18th century coffee houses where individuals could meet to discuss the issues of the day. This sphere was independent of both commerce and the government. The mass media in Habermas's view threaten this space because they are primarily concerned to make profits. This means they seek to manipulate our thoughts and behaviour in order to make money.

This picture of the mass media has been criticised because it ignores the pressures on the news media to be 'objective' and does not take account of public service broadcasting. In Britain, for example, the BBC was established as a public service organisation funded by the license fee and obliged to present news and current affairs in an impartial way. While increased competition for readers and viewers has, in the view of many sociologists, led to more 'infotainment', public service broadcasting survives.

The internet as a public sphere The spectacular growth of the Internet has suggested to some people that the public sphere is being given a new lease of life. There are two main reasons for this.

- In contrast to conventional news media, where editors and journalists define what counts as news, the internet

activity27 democracy and the internet

Item A Blogs in Iran

An Iranian blog in English

In the last five years, the Iranian judiciary have closed down around 100 publications, including 41 daily newspapers. The mullahs – religious leaders – impose strict rules on dress and behaviour and censor media output in line with their views on religious correctness. In the absence of freedom of speech, an estimated 75,000 Iranians have turned to weblogs. Farsi, the main language of Iran, is now the 4th most popular language for online journals. Blogs provide people with anonymity and freedom of expression. They allow them to criticise the government and to indulge their tastes for things banned by the regime – from Harry Potter to Marilyn Manson.

Source: guardian.co.uk, 2005

Item B Riots in France

Both the government and the rioters used the internet during the riots in French towns and cities in November, 2005. Three young bloggers were arrested for urging people to burn down their nearest police station. The interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy took out ads on Google to broadcast the government's point of view. A few years ago, he would have held a press conference – now he speaks through a search engine.

Source: Jarvis, 2005

Item C The Zapatistas

The Zapatistas are a revolutionary movement in Chiapas, a state in southern Mexico. They have formed a grass-roots movement for self-government – in their words, for 'autonomy, justice and freedom'. They have an extensive website and make widespread use of the Internet to organise their movement and gain international support. They invite visitors to their website to express their own views and participate in the movement. They see their struggle in part as a 'cyberwar' – a battle for hearts and minds in cyberspace. In their words, 'The revolution will be digitised'.

Source: Zapatista Net of Autonomy & Liberation, 2005

Riots in Toulouse, France

Zapatista leader, Subcommander Marcos

Item D A presidential election

From Barrack Obama's website

questions

1 What support do Items A, B, C and D provide for the view that the internet has an important part to play in the democratic process?

2 Amnesty International and The Observer launched a campaign against internet repression in 2006. Do you support this campaign? Refer to Item E in your answer.

Item E Repression of the internet

George Brock, president of the World Editor Forum, reads the Golden Pen for Freedom award motivation for Shi Tao in 2007

Shi Tao is a Chinese journalist serving a 10-year prison sentence for 'illegally providing state secrets to foreign entities'. His crime was to use the internet to email a US pro-democracy site about warnings from the Beijing authorities to news outlets against covering demonstrations to mark the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy protests where hundreds of protesters were killed.

Shi Tao sent that email from his Yahoo account. One year later he was in court, where account-holder information provided by Yahoo's Chinese partner company was used as evidence to convict him. While Yahoo was quick to condemn the punishment of people for free expression, it has supplied information to the Chinese government that has led to prosecutions in such cases.

Source: Amnesty International, 2006

provides individuals with the opportunity to access a wider range of information and interpretations. Any point of view, no matter how extreme, can be found on the Internet.

- The internet provides individuals with the opportunity to engage in online discussions and debates across the globe. In contrast to conventional news media, where communication is predominantly one way, the Internet provides a means through which people can interact with others.

The internet and democracy Can the Internet really revitalise democracy? Can people directly participate in the democratic process via the internet? And can their participation in cyberspace actually change things on the ground?

It's early days yet, but some believe that the answer to these questions is 'eventually, yes'. They argue that the Internet gives voice to those who might otherwise go unheard, it allows like-minded people to join together and take action which may lead to social change, it allows the powers that be to be challenged, it provides a means for citizens to direct communication, send and receive messages, discuss and debate. In other words, it may develop into the public sphere which Habermas believes is lost (Livingstone, 2004). Others are not so sure about the promise of the internet. While recognising that there is a lot of political activity online, they believe it will have little effect 'on the ground' – politics will continue as usual

(Graber et al., 2004). Others believe that the digital divide will widen social inequality and that this may discourage low income groups from participating in the democratic process.

key terms

Public sphere A space where people can freely debate issues which are important to them as citizens.

7.6 The internet and e-commerce

E-commerce – commercial activities conducted on the internet – is here to stay. For example, Amazon, which began as an online bookseller and moved into DVDs, CDs, electrical goods and white goods (washing machines, fridges), goes from strength to strength. And every major company has its own website from which it advertises and often sells its goods and services. In the UK, internet sales rose by 30% in 2007 to £163 billion. This represents 7.7% of the total value of all sales by non-financial sector businesses in 2007 (Office or National Statistics, 2008).

Some see e-commerce as a positive development. It offers more choice to consumers, it increases competition, it often leads to lower prices and it puts consumers in control – they can compare prices and pick and choose from a vast range of products. Others see the development of e-commerce in a negative light. It encourages materialism and consumerism and furthers capitalist domination and control.

7.7 Social networking

Social networking sites are internet websites which allow people to communicate with each other online. Examples include MySpace, Facebook and Bebo. Social networking sites are usually free to join, with members having their own homepage with a photograph and some biographical information. Members can register with each other as friends which provides them with access to more private content, for example photographs and videos.

Numbers Social networking sites have grown dramatically in the last few years. MySpace, set up in 2003 and bought by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation in 2005, is the largest with 253 million registered users in 2008. Facebook had 140 million and Bebo 40 million registered users in 2008. This is only one of many measures. An alternative is 'monthly unique visitors' – the number of different people who log on each month. For example, in January 2008, MySpace had 76 million unique visitors in the US and Facebook had 55 million (comscore.com, 2009; techcrunch.com, 2009).

Users Who uses social networking sites? Research conducted in the UK in 2007 by Ofcom (Office of Communications) shows that 22% of adult internet users aged 16+ and 49% of children aged 8-17 who use the internet have joined a social networking site. For adults, the likelihood of joining is highest among 16-24 year olds (54%) and decreases with age (Ofcom, 2008). Research in the USA provides a similar age breakdown, with a higher proportion of each age group using social networking sites (pewinternet.org, 2009).

Friendship Most people use social networking sites to keep in touch with their close friends. However, all their contacts on these sites are usually referred to as 'friends'. A UK questionnaire survey by Will Hallam found that 90% of the 'close friends' that people contacted on the networking sites, they had already met face to face. Most people have about five close friends, whether or not they use a social networking site. The difference occurs with acquaintances – those using networking sites often have many more casual acquaintances (Randerson, 2007)

The Ofcom research

The largest research project on social networking in the UK was conducted in 2007 by Ofcom. It was based on in-depth and structured interviews with over 6,000 children and adults.

Distinct groups The research indicated that social networkers fell into five distinct groups. They are:

- Alpha Socialisers – (a minority) people who use sites in intense short bursts to flirt, meet new people, and be entertained.
- Attention Seekers – (some) people who craved attention and comments from others, often by posting photos and customising their profiles.
- Followers – (many) people who joined sites to keep up with what their peers were doing.
- Faithfuls – (many) people who typically used social networking sites to rekindle old friendships, often from school or university.
- Functionals – (a minority) people who tended to be single-minded in using sites for a particular purpose.

(Ofcom, 2008)

Communication Users communicated mainly with people who they had first met offline. For example 69% of adults used social networking sites to talk to friends and family they already saw regularly. For many, the sites were a means of managing their social relationships (Ofcom, 2008).

User generated content The content of social networking sites is created and shared by users. Profiles often contain detailed information about the user in words, photographs and video. Profile information ranges from 'date of birth, gender, religion, politics and home town, to their favourite films, books, quotes and what they like doing in their spare time' (Ofcom, 2008: 10).

key terms

E-commerce Commercial activities conducted on the Internet, eg advertising and selling goods and services.

summary

1. Digital technology forms the basis for the new media
2. Online news has a rapidly growing audience – particularly among young people.
3. Online news is often repackaged from other sources.
4. There is an increasing amount of user generated content in online news
5. Many blogs comment on the news. They sometimes generate news and occasionally break a news story.
6. Obama's election as president of the US shows the potential of the internet to the political process.
7. A number of researchers argue that digital citizenship is essential for full participation in the political process.
8. The internet has been seen as a public sphere which can provide a space for people to debate freely.
9. The digital divide means that those who are excluded from terrestrial society are most likely to be excluded from online society.
10. A number of governments have attempted to suppress freedom of expression on the internet.
11. E-commerce is growing rapidly.
12. Social networking sites have grown dramatically in recent years.
13. Children and young adults are the main users.
14. Most people use social networking sites to keep in touch with close friends and family – relationships which were formed outside the sites.

Unit 8 Postmodernism

keyissues

1 How do postmodernists see today's society?

2 What is the role of the media in postmodern society?

8.1 Postmodern society and the media

Some researchers believe we are living in a p*ostmodern society*, a society that comes after and is different from modern society. This new age is known as *postmodernity*. Those who take this view are known as *postmodernists*. This section looks at some of the key features of postmodern society and their relationship to the media.

Media realities

Multiple realities We live in a media-saturated society. The media bombard us with images which increasingly dominate the way we see ourselves and the world around us. Media images, it is argued, do not reflect or even distort social reality. They are themselves realities. Our consciousness is invaded by the *multiple realities* provided by news, documentaries, pop music, advertisements, soaps and movies set in the past, present and future, on this world and other worlds.

The media not only provide multiple views of reality – these views are also open to a multitude of different interpretations. Media audiences are active – individuals place their own interpretations on what they see, hear and read.

Simulation Increasing exposure to the media blurs the division between our everyday reality and media images. The media provide us with much of our knowledge about the world. But this knowledge is not drawn from our direct experience. Instead it is reproduced knowledge, it is a *simulation* – it represents the real thing but it is not a true or genuine representation. In this sense, it has similarities to a *Playstation* game.

To some extent, postmodernists apply this view to every aspect of the media – from the news, to soaps, to advertisements. From this perspective media simulations remove the distinction between image and reality – images become part of our reality.

Multiple truths As a result of the multiple realities and the variety of simulations presented by the media, the idea of an absolute truth has gone. There is no longer a single dominant meaning. Instead there are a multitude of meanings. A single truth has been replaced by many truths as the media broadcast different perspectives and different views from across the world and from the past and the present.

Living the image Images we experience from the media become as, if not more, real and significant than things we directly experience in everyday life. For example, the death of Princess Diana resulted in an outpouring of grief across the world – but for the vast majority she existed only through the media. And the same applies to the footballer George Best. His image was kept alive by the media and his death was headlined by TV news and national newspapers.

Even fiction can become 'real'. A death, a divorce or a marriage in a soap opera glues millions to the screen and is talked about next day as if it actually happened. As its name suggests, reality TV brings 'real' people into our homes and conversations. And it sometimes draws audiences further into this reality as they vote for which participants are to stay or go in shows like *Big Brother* and *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here*.

Postmodern identies

Identity and choice In modern societies, people's identities were usually drawn from their class, gender, occupation

and ethnic group. In postmodern society, people have more opportunity to construct their own identities and more options to choose from. For example, a woman can be heterosexual, bisexual or lesbian, a business executive and a mother, she can be British, a Sikh and a member of Greenpeace. And her lifestyle and consumption patterns can reflect her chosen identity. Brand-name goods such as Gucci and Dolce & Gabbana can be used as statements of her identity.

With all the choices on offer, it is fairly easy for people to change their identities, or to have several identities which they put on and take off depending on their social situation. As a result, postmodern identities are more unstable and fragile. They offer choice, but they don't always provide a firm and lasting foundation.

Identity and the media The media offer a wide range of identities and lifestyles from which we can pick and choose and act out. Adverts sell images and style rather than content and substance. Jeans are not marketed as hard wearing and value for money but rather as style in the context of rock, R&B or hip-hop music. Drinks like Tango, Bacardi and Smirnoff Ice are sold on style and image rather than taste or quality. Coca-Cola is the 'real thing' despite the fact that it mainly consists of coloured sweetened water.

According to postmodernists, people are increasingly constructing their own identities from images and lifestyles presented by the media.

Time, space and change

Time and space The media allow us to criss-cross time and space. *Romeo and Juliet* was written by Shakespeare in the 16th century but the film starring Leonardo di Caprio takes place in the present day. Watching TV news we can go round the world in 30 minutes from Iraq to the USA, from Afghanistan to Northern Ireland. Adverts use music from the 1950s, 60s and 70s to sell beer, washing powder and jeans. And fashions in clothes, such as Miss Sixty, recreate styles from the past. As a result, 'time and space become less stable and comprehensible, more confused, more incoherent, more disunified' (Strinati, 1992)

Change Images and styles are constantly changing. The media regularly present new styles of music and fashion, new types of food and drink, new and improved household products, many of which are linked to new lifestyles. Often these products are associated with media personalities – for example, Glow by JLO, advertised as 'the new fragrance by Jennifer Lopez'.

As a result of this constant change and emphasis on the new, things appear fluid – nothing seems permanent and solid. The mainstream culture of modern society is replaced by the fleeting, unstable, fragmented culture of postmodern society.

8.2 Postmodernism and the media – evaluation

Many sociologists are critical of the picture of the media and society presented by postmodernists. Greg Philo and David Miller (2001) make the following points.

- There is no way of saying that reality is distorted by media images because, according to postmodernists, those images and the way that people interpret them are the reality. This is carrying the idea of an active audience to a ridiculous extreme.
- People are well aware that there is a reality beyond the images broadcast by the media. They recognise that media messages are often one-sided, partial and distorted.
- Many people are not free to construct their own identities and select their own lifestyles. For example, people living in poverty simply don't have the money to buy Gucci sunglasses or Jean Paul Gaultier fragrance.

Despite these criticisms, many sociologists accept that the media are increasingly influential in today's society. And they accept that there is something to many of the points made by postmodernists, but see their argument as going too far.

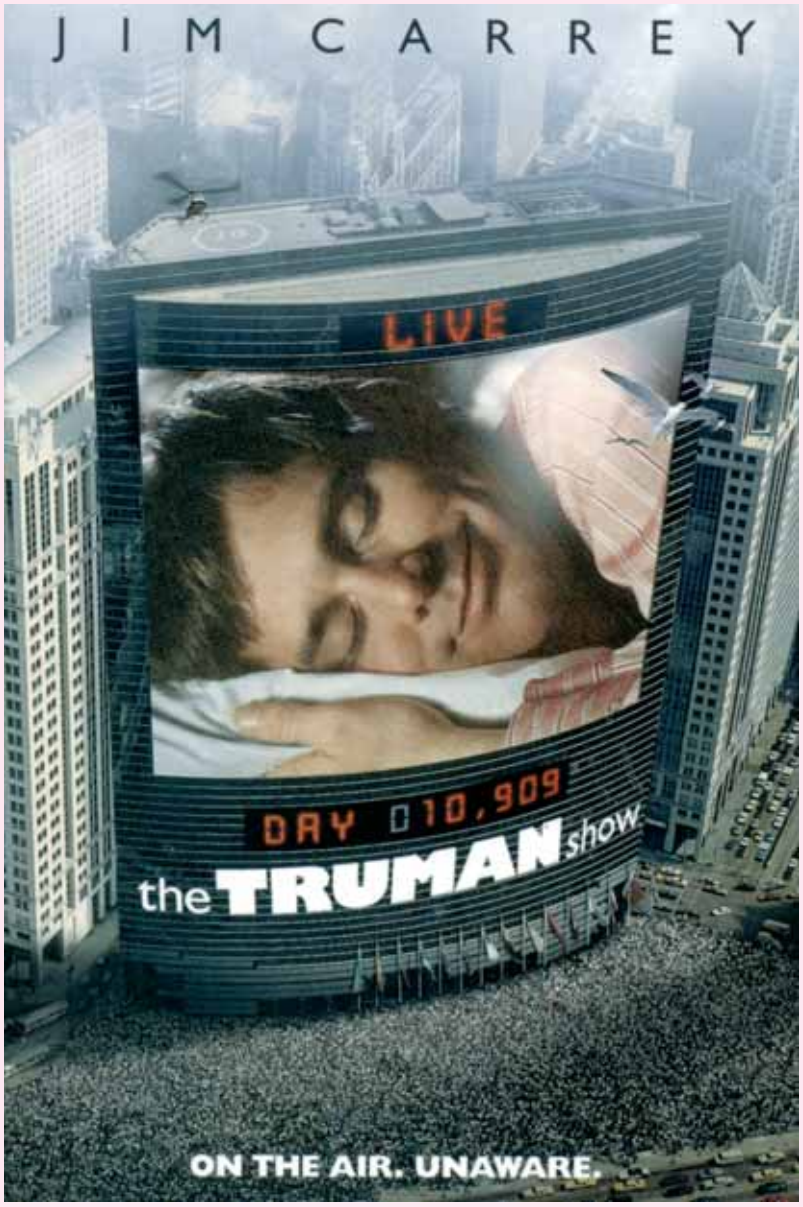
activity28 postmodernism and the media

Item A Identity cards

Will it ever come to this? The Government is planning to sell Identity Scratch Cards. Scratch off the special square and you may win a year's worth of free identity. The winner gets to choose a dream identity, for example, a pop star or a major sports personality.

Source: Iannucci, 1995

Item C *The Truman Show*



In the film *The Truman Show* a man discovers that his life has been constructed as a soap opera. His family, friends and neighbours are all actors and he is the central character. Everything around him is an illusion, created by the media.

question

How do these items illustrate the postmodernist view of the media and society?

key terms

Postmodern society A society that comes after and is different from modern society.

Postmodernists Researchers who argue that we now live in a postmodern age.

Multiple realities The idea that the media present a number of different realities.

Simulation Images projected by the media rather than drawn from our direct experience. Despite this, these images become part of our reality.

summary

1. According to postmodernists, we live in a media-saturated society.
2. The media bombard us with multiple realities. These realities are simulations. Despite this, they become part of our reality. As a result, the division between everyday reality and media images disappears.
3. A single truth becomes multiple truths as the media present different views from across the world.
4. The media offer a wide range of identities and lifestyles from which we can pick and choose.
5. The media constantly present new images and styles. As a result, nothing seems permanent and solid.
6. Many critics argue that postmodernists have overstated their case, but accept there is something in what they say.