



# Mass Media



## Media Representations

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## Media Representations of Social Groups

This set of a-level sociology notes examines how a range of social groups are represented in the media, in terms of their *form* (**class**, **age**, **gender** and **ethnicity**) and *function*, considered from different theoretical perspectives.

### Representations

This section examines the way social groups are represented in the media, in terms of their form, based on categories of **class**, **age**, **gender** and **ethnicity** and function, considered from different theoretical perspectives.

Before we look at explanations for how and why the media represents different groups in different ways, we can start by identifying two useful concepts:

- **Stereotypes** are one-sided accentuations of a characteristic or set of characteristics (real or imagined) that are supposedly indicative of a total group. Gender stereotypes commonly used in the media, for example, involve routinely assigning men and women different characteristics based on their biological sex - men, for example, portrayed as cool, calm and rational, women as emotional and the like. One important thing about media stereotypes is how they can be used as master statuses: the stereotypical characteristic is used to define everything about an individual or group.
- **Tropes**, while similar to stereotypes, are commonly used, repeated themes or devices within which different groups are located. A common TV trope, for example, is that working-class women are invariably single parents who are victims of an abusive and largely-absent male partner. The elderly, on the other hand, almost invariably suffer from some form of dementia. Media tropes are, in this respect, clichéd representations of social groups.



*Media tropes:  
The working class all live on run-down council estates.*

### Social Class

While these Notes are mainly focused on explanations for representations it's useful to identify some examples of how different social groups are represented through the media lens. This selection is not, of course, exhaustive, merely indicative. There are many more examples you can bring to bear from your wider reading around the topic.

Although each category is treated separately for theoretical convenience, keep in mind there are always *intersections* of class, age, gender and ethnicity: although classes are represented in different ways there are also differences in representation within them based on categories like age, gender and ethnicity.

Media representations of social class take a range of forms, with different classes **stereotypically** represented in different ways.

### Working Class

Working class representation routinely involves a relatively narrow and limited range of **identities**, from the *historical* - popular costume dramas that focus on servitude, poverty and criminality - to the *contemporary* where a similar range of themes are apparent: working class life represented through a range of socially **problematic behaviours**: crime, welfare dependency, unemployment, sexual promiscuity, divorce, divorce and single parenthood (the latter almost exclusively portrayed as female).



While representations rarely portray the *ordinariness* of working class life, recurrent themes, from news reports, through documentaries to entertainment shows, represent the working classes as:



- *violent* (particularly young, single, men).
- *dangerous* to both themselves (through things like drug abuse) and others.
- *problematic* in their behaviour and attitudes (sexism, racism and homophobia, for example, are particular qualities attributed to working class males).
- *workshy*, unemployed and unemployable.
- *dependent* on both the State and, by extension, the tolerance and generosity of the middle and upper classes.

This suggests a range of further representational themes. The working class are, for example:

- *Largely invisible*, both in terms of their actual media presence and in terms of their particular needs or concerns.
- *Voiceless*: While media commentators frequently talk about them, it's relatively rare to actually hear working class voices in the media. Their "voice", in other words, is invariably that of (middle class) commentators.
- *Part of a Human Zoo*: This aspect of working-class representation involves the lives of working-class people being visited and represented through a middle-class lens. The viewer is invited to observe "working-class lives" much as the zoo visitor is invited to observe the animals "in their natural environment". So-called "poverty porn", for example, invites viewers to watch working-class people struggling to cope with their daily lives.



*Poverty Porn? "Benefits Street" (Channel 4)*

- *Objectified*: We are given, for example, a great deal of factual / statistical information about the working class (from their levels of education through the numbers marrying and divorcing, to levels of poverty) but it's rare for the human elements behind these statistics to be represented in the media.

Further dimensions to this objectification involve the imposition of various attributes, characteristics and failings on this general group - from arguments that poverty is a consequence of "poor life choices" to the romanticising of working class life (its *Downton Abbeyification*).



*Downton Abbeyification: Poor But Happy?*

Overall, these ideas are reflected in the concept of **ghettoisation**: the idea working class representation is generally restricted to a narrow range of situations, attitudes and behaviours. While much of working class representation is generally negative - focused on both the qualities they supposedly *lack* (initiative, motivation and so forth) and those they supposedly *personify* (unthinking aggression, unintelligence and so forth), one **positive** area of working class representation is sport, particularly male professional sport.

## Middle Class

Middle-class representation tends to be broader, ranging across professional employment and cultural associations such as music, fashion and art - representations that help to cement class associations with culture:

While lower class **popular culture** is represented as manufactured, artificial, superficial, disposable, undemanding and culturally valueless, **high culture**, associated with middle and upper class life, is the opposite; difficult, demanding, deep, long-lasting and culturally valuable.

Where working-class lives and experiences are largely *marginalised* - the working classes have less direct access to the media than their middle class peers and less control over how they are portrayed - middle and upper class lives are *emphasised*.

The middle classes, for example, are generally represented *positively* and *actively*; not only are they in control of their own lives, these lives are central to the economic, political and cultural well-being of the Nation.

While working class lives are marginalised by their **invisibility** as both historical and contemporary actors - dramas and documentaries, for example, largely erase their lives and contributions to historical movements - middle and upper class lives take centre stage. British history, for example, is largely represented through the thoughts and actions of royalty and the aristocracy.

Contemporary forms of invisibility exclude working class life by focusing on the interests, actions and activities of business leaders, middle and upper class politicians, philanthropists and the like.



*The meaning of working class life?  
Ask An Expert*

Where the working classes feature in accounts of social and economic development they are more likely, as **Ehrenreich** (1989) observes, to be cast as beneficiaries of middle class help and advice or as subjects for discussion by middle class "experts". While working class identities are overly-represented by **vices**, middle class identities are shaped by **virtues**: their resourcefulness, productivity, culturation and "helpfulness" - particularly in relation to the "less fortunate" objects of such help: from telling the working class how to discipline children properly, to how to find work.



*Supernanny:  
Solving all your (working class) parenting problems...*

While middle class lives are focused around power and control, working class lives are the **subject** of such power and control - a general representation that casts the working class as dysfunctional, dependent and a social problem, while middle and upper class lives are the mirror-opposite: functional, independent (particularly of State aid) and a social solution.

This aspect of class representation ranges from middle and upper class lives being held-up as *ideals* to which all should aspire to the idea that if the working classes followed middle class advice and behaviour their "problems" would be solved.

A further feature of stereotypical class representations is their **aggregation** and **individualisation**.

Stereotypes of working class life are *aggregated*, in the sense of being applied almost indiscriminately to this class as a whole. **Ehrenreich**, for example, argues the working classes are portrayed as inarticulate, old-fashioned, uneducated, feckless and incapable - representations, she suggests, that serve to silence their voices; they are "dumb", both literally and metaphorically. This type of representation frequently sees social classes in terms of their binary oppositions - what one class is, the other is not.

## The Binary Oppositions of Class

Upper class	Working class
rich	poor
have	have-not
privileged	needy
hardworking	lazy
intelligent	ignorant
empowered	disempowered
clean	dirty
worthy	unworthy
financially independent	welfare dependent
powerful	Powerless

These oppositional aggregations generally portray higher social classes in a more-positive light, focusing on their virtues *as a class*. Where higher class behaviour is seen as problematic - in terms of things like greed, selfishness or criminality - it is more likely to be *individualised*: dismissed as the outcome of *individual human weaknesses* rather than symbolic of the failings of a whole class. The 2008 banking crisis that destabilised the global economic system, for example, has been individualised by the media in terms of the actions of a few "rogue individuals and institutions" rather than as indicative of a fundamental social problem of unregulated financial capitalism.



## Youth

While the idea that mass media are controlled by adults isn't exactly a stunning revelation, these aren't, to coin a phrase, "just any old adults".

In the UK, as in countries like the USA, these adults are mainly middle-aged, middle-class, milky-white and male - and this means that representations of young people aren't just constructed through an "adult gaze" (how adults see and represent youth). Rather, they're constructed through a particular and very powerful sub-section of adulthood.

How this power is used, however, varies across time and space; contemporary Western societies, for example, tend to demonstrate levels of **ambivalence** about children and young people.

- On the one hand children may be represented in terms of their 'innocent and uncorrupted nature'. They are, in this respect, requiring of adult supervision and help.
- On the other they may be represented as unruly, lacking self-control and requiring adult discipline and guidance.

Both forms of representation frequently feature in relation to young people and new technologies (from cinema, through television to computers).

In relation to the Internet, for example, representations of innocence combined with (adult) technological fears produce a powerful - if in reality very rare - perception of children as victims of sexual predators that serves as an arena for the development of *folk devils* and *moral panics*. **Pearson** (1983), for example, argues moral panics focused around the behaviour of young people have been a persistent feature of media representations over the past 150 years.

Youth is frequently represented as being a **problematic** life-stage on both an individual and group level:

- Individually youth is frequently represented in terms of traits like rebellion, disrespect, selfishness and obsessions with Self and sex (often at the same time).
- As a group, collective representations frequently portray youth in terms of traits such as delinquency, politically apathy, immaturity, over-sexualisation and a lack of self-control.

Representations also have a tendency towards ambivalence in the sense of changing to reflect both changing social *mores* and youth as a fragmented social category. As with representations of class, however, there's clear evidence of different forms of class and gender representation. Media portrayals of young working class males tend, for example, to the portrayal of young middle class females.

A particularly dominant form of representation over the past 40 or so years has been the distinction between **normal** and **abnormal** youth, with the former being defined in opposition to various **spectacular youth subcultures** (Mods and Rockers, Skinheads, Hippies and Punks blazed a short but very bright trail across the media skyline).

There has however, been a noticeably lower lack of media interest in the activities of "extraordinary youth" over the past 15 - 20 years, for a couple of possible reasons:

On the one hand there's the argument of a general lack of distinctiveness among contemporary youth cultures. There's nothing, in other words, that particularly stands-out about contemporary youth groupings that interests the media: they're not, for example, engaged in behaviour that, in media terms, is particularly outrageous or newsworthy.

On the other is the related idea that "youth" has become a such a *fragmented social category* in late modern societies that no single *homogenous* group (such as Punks or Skinheads) ever comes to the attention of the media.

In terms of the latter argument, **Waiton** (2008) suggests the rigid moral order that once periodically gave rise to oppositional youth subcultures (from *Mods* to *Hippies* to *Punks*) has, in late modernity, fragmented to such an extent that there is little or nothing of any moral substance against which to rebel.



*The changing face of youth:  
from simply Spectacular to  
plain Ordinary?*

More recent representations have, in this respect, tended to focus less on the behaviour and attitudes of “rebellious youth” and more on celebrations of youth, particularly in terms of young people as a vibrant source of social change - particularly, but not exclusively, *political change* in relation to things like concerns about the environment and the like.

There has also been a noticeable change of media emphasis surrounding the *desirability of youth*, albeit expressed in rather abstract terms: youth, in the sense of being *young*, being seen by older adults as a highly-desirable *physical*, if not necessarily mental state.

However we see youth represented through various media, it's evident that while most young people, like their adult counterparts, are irredeemably *ordinary*, their representation in various forms of media - from newspapers, through television to social media - tends to be far removed from that simple condition.

## The elderly

At the opposite end of the age scale, the elderly, in common with their younger counterparts, have traditionally been represented in a narrow range of roles, with a particular emphasis on *social problems*.

Their **problematic status** has recently, for example, been reconstructed around how the burden of an *ageing population* impacts on the rest of society through the increasing costs of state pensions, hospital treatment and social care. Individually, their representation has also been largely unsympathetic, constructed around images of senility, illness, both mental and physical, unattractiveness and so forth.



*The Grey Pound:  
how are representations linked to affluence?*

Historically, for example, **Willis** (1999), notes ‘older people were often crudely stereotyped in drama, with half of fictional portrayals showing them as grumpy, interfering, lonely, stubborn and not interested in sex. Older women are often seen as “silly”, older men as miserable gits’.

Although these images still have currency in some parts of media, the changing nature of representation is reflected, in areas like television, in more sympathetic portrayals that mirror, in part, the changing nature of media audiences; the elderly, for example, are the heaviest viewers of television and they increasingly demand programming that reflects their interests - and, in terms of advertising, their spending power.

Their **invisibility** in areas like popular drama and film has also changed in response to wider social changes. There are now more elderly people as a percentage of the overall population and **Weaver** (2008) reports that:

*"By 2032, those aged over 65 are projected to make up almost a quarter of the UK population".*



*Loose Women, ITV's popular panel show, passed 3,000 episodes in 2018*

Changing representations of older women are particularly apparent; this group, traditionally represented as objects of pity, charity, social work and the medical profession are increasingly represented as fashionable, active and *sexual* beings.

While numbers alone don't guarantee positive representations, two further reasons make this more common.

Firstly, the elderly are an increasingly affluent population segment; the **Institute for Fiscal Studies** (2006) estimate around 80% of wealth in Britain is held by those aged 50+ and the ‘Grey Pound’ is attractive to the advertisers who fund large areas of the British media.

Secondly, television as an important mass medium is a relatively new phenomenon in our society and, as the people who own, control and work in it grow older, their interests are reflected in new and different representations of the elderly.



## Gender

Gender **stereotypes** relating to masculinity and femininity generally focus on two areas - **physical** and **emotional**; while traditional representations tend to reinforce clear gender differences, contemporary representations have started to show a greater gender convergence.

Physical representations of **bodies**, in terms of shape for example, while traditionally focused on women are increasingly relevant to men and these representations are important in two main ways:

- how they've changed - the greater frequency with which sexualised *male bodies*, the 'sixpack' for example, are represented as sexually desirable for women and culturally desirable for men
- how they've stayed the same: female bodies are still used to sell everything from cars to camping equipment and men are still allowed a greater range of body shapes.

Body representation forms part of a wider set of ideas about beauty, attractiveness and how women, in particular, should look and behave - especially through unstated assumptions that female beauty is both *heterosexual* and largely for the benefit of what **Mulvey** (1975) calls the **male gaze** - female bodies viewed and judged through the lens of male desires.

In terms of emotions, **Macdonald** (2003) identifies gender differences in magazine adverts for alcohol, where traditional gender differences emerge through associations with different types of drink.

- Adverts aimed at men, for example, show a restricted range of 'allowed' drinks (mainly beer and spirits) and also maintain a 'harder', more individualistic, image of masculinity.
- Adverts aimed at women emphasise a 'softer', more social, aspect to drinking - bringing people together, easing tensions - as well as allowing women a greater range of alcoholic options.



These representations reflect broader assumptions about male and female behaviour - that women should be cooperative and submissive while dominant females are often represented as figures of fun or (deviant) sexuality.



"1957 called and asked for the return of its childish and demeaning female stereotypes"

Macdonald noted, however, a particular category of female ('ladettes') challenges these stereotypes and breaks down gender barriers through representations that emphasised the ability of women to behave in the same kind of way as their male counterparts (drinking pints, 'behaving badly').

This suggests representations of gender are *"not static and woman are permitted to take on certain masculine behaviours in certain situations"*. Such "abnormal representations" may, however, simply prove the general rule.



Unfortunately not all advertisers got the message...

Female **sexuality**, for example, is routinely used to sell consumer goods, employing an exaggerated form of (hetero) sexuality that combines the physical - thin, large-breasted - and the emotional, such as **patriarchal** notions of 'availability'.

Representations of "normal" and "abnormal" **sexuality** are a recurring feature of tabloid newspapers, with "normal" invariably defined as *heterosexual* (*heteronormativity*).

Male homosexuality has been linked in the British tabloid press to both paedophilia and AIDS - *The Sun*, for example, describing it as a 'Gay Plague'.

McLean (2002) however, argues the nature of tabloid *homophobia* has changed in the face of changing public attitudes:

*"The Sun that once printed '10 Ways to Spot a Gay Priest' and allowed a columnist to call gay people 'poofers' now recognises that much coveted younger readers will not tolerate the knee-jerk bigotry that previously passed for balanced coverage"*.

The general argument here is that contemporary representations of men and women, masculinity and femininity, have moved away from the kind of crude, traditional, stereotypes that were commonplace in the 1950's onwards - although these still exist - towards representations that confront, challenge, mock and break down stereotypical representations. The reasons for this change are partly:

- economic: greater female financial independence means women are increasingly seen as individuals in their own right rather than as appendages of men.
- political: all forms of discrimination are increasingly unacceptable in our society.
- cultural: both gender and media are no-longer simple homogeneous categories.

Gender, for example, is both more **fluid** - people define their gender identity in a range of ways even within the relatively restricted biological categories of "male" and female" - and **fragmented**.

Unlike in even the relatively recent past, where gender identities were arguably *centred* around a narrow range of gendered attributes, identities have become much more *decentred* - there is, for example, no single way to be "masculine" or "feminine".

The media has also become more fragmented across old and new forms and Gauntlett (2002) argues there are increasingly positive aspects to media representations of gender.

He suggests, for example, the media is *"within limits, a force for change"*: traditional stereotypical representations of women, for example, have been replaced by *"feisty, successful 'girl power' icons"*, while male representations have changed, from *"ideals of absolute toughness, stubborn self-reliance and emotional silence"* to a greater emphasis on emotions, the need for help and advice and the *'problems of masculinity'*.





One of the key ideas to recognise here is that, as with related representations of class, age and ethnic there have been major changes over the past 50 or so years around how and why the media represents men and women in different ways. While it's arguable as to whether these changes have resulted from wider social changes that then impact on media representations or from changing media representations that then filter through into wider society, changing forms of male and female representation are relatively clear.

As a case in point to illustrate this idea, the UK **Advertising Standards Authority** signposted a new code of conduct, to be introduced in 2019. As **The Guardian** (2018) reported:

*"British companies will no longer be able to create promotions that depict men and women engaged in gender-stereotypical activities, amid fears that such depictions are contributing to pay inequality and causing psychological harm".*

Examples of the banned forms of representation include:

- **Sexist stereotypes** such as "showing a woman struggling to park a car or a man refusing to do housework while his wife cooks dinner". This will also include advertising that belittles men "for carrying out stereotypically "female" roles or tasks" and "advertises that emphasise the contrast between a boy's stereotypical personality and a girl's".
- **Sex-specific disabilities**, such as someone "failing to achieve a task specifically because of their gender" (a man unable to change a nappy or a woman unable to do DIY, for example).
- **Body transformations** that suggest such changes will make someone romantically successful, happier and the like.
- The **sexualisation** of young women.

Despite such changes, the **Media Literacy Council** (2018) noted a range of *common gender stereotypes* still persist in male and female media representations:

While **women**, for example, are much less likely to be not subjected to the crude forms of gender stereotyping that was common in the past, they remain overwhelmingly represented in ways that "prioritise the importance of beauty over brains". While contemporary media representations may be more-subtle, they nevertheless fall into four main categories:

1. **Body shape**: praising women for being thin and fashionable while criticising ("body shaming") those who, for whatever reason, do not conform to relatively narrow ideas about beauty and style.
2. **Objectification**: treating women and girls as sexual objects who mainly exist for the gratification of men.

3. **Domesticity**: suggesting that while some women can "have it all" (a contented family and work life), for most women their primary roles are caregivers and homemakers.

4. **Emotional**, where women are represented as overly-dramatic, bitchy and prone to be over-emotional.

While, as with their female counterpart, **male** representations have *always* featured in different media (print, film, television and, more-recently, the Internet) these representations have tended to be more-subtle and nuanced, even where they fall into the categories noted above:

1. **Body shape**: although men have traditionally been allowed a much wider range of body shapes recent forms of representation have started to emphasise idealised - and unobtainable save for a dedicated few - male forms based around the "toned body" stereotype.

2. **Domesticity**: where women are most-often represented in the home, men are afforded much more freedom in terms of a life - particularly work and leisure - outside the home. Working men also tend to be represented in terms of their power, status and ability.

3. **Emotional**: media representations of men tend to emphasise "masculine" qualities of mental and physical toughness, grit and so forth as admirable emotions. Any display of "feminine" emotions is generally seen as weakness in man - although there are exceptions that prove the rule. Gay men, for example, are allowed to openly exhibit "feminine emotions" but this, again, is just another feature of how the media construct representations of homosexual and heterosexual masculinity. A further aspect of emotional representation is a tendency for the media to value "bad boys" - those who, for example, engage in various forms of risky behaviour (even where individual risk-taking may endanger others).



Nestlé's "It's Not For Girls" chocolate bar advert ran for around 10 years between 2002 and 2012.

## Ethnicity

One noticeable feature of ethnic representation in mainstream UK media is the gradual disappearance of what might be termed crude forms of stereotypical and demeaning representations of 'black people' (there was rarely, in the past, much media differentiation of black and Asian ethnic minorities).

No television channel, for example, could screen what were, 40 years ago, hugely popular sitcoms like *Love Thy Neighbour* where black characters were routinely described by their white counterparts as "*sambos*", "*nignogs*" and "*darkies*".

To less than hilarious effect.



*Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV: 1972 - 1976)

For **Malik** (2002), the "comedies about race" that started to appear around this time on British television involved underlying themes of (white) social dislocation and "blackness" being synonymous with "trouble" or "disruption", albeit themes played-out in the relatively unthreatening arena of situation comedy.

Another notable popular comedy of this era, "*Mind Your Language*" (1977 - 1979) was set in an EFL Adult Education class. This drew on a much wider range of national stereotypes, from White European (Spanish, Italian, German...) to Indian, Pakistani, Chinese and Japanese ethnicities and led **Malik** (2002) wryly note, "*never before had so many diverse races been seen in the same television frame, and never had they clung so tightly to their popular crude national stereotypes*".

At the height of its popularity the programme attracted 18 million UK viewers.

A further example of the type of programming that would now be considered far too racially offensive to be broadcast is the *Black and White Minstrel Show*. The basic premise of the once hugely popular "variety show" involved white male singers "blacking up" to perform American minstrel, country and show tunes, accompanied by white female dancers. The show ran on primetime UK television for 20 years between 1958 and 1978. A version of the show did, however, run for a further 10 years on the London stage.



*The Black and White Minstrel Show* (BBC: 1958 - 1978)

While it's clear the cruder forms of ethnic representation that were once seen as broadly acceptable to a mass audience, at least as far as television was concerned, are no-longer tolerated, sociologists such as Hall (1995) and Gilroy (1990) laid the ground for the argument that far from disappearing, racist media representations of ethnicity have changed.

**Hall**, for example, argued that the crude racial stereotypes that once dominated the media were essentially based on notions of biological / genetic inferiority and superiority. Once these were successfully challenged, the underlying social forces that gave rise to discriminatory representations simply found a different outlet - what he termed *inferential racism*.

Whereas in the past black ethnicities were represented in ways that stressed their *biological difference and inferiority*, many contemporary representations, **Gilroy** argued, involved a "*new racism*": one where black ethnicities are represented in ways that stress their subtle *cultural, as opposed to crude biological, difference* (and, by extension, inferiority).

While this subtle development has involved a range of representational continuities - the "funny foreigner" trope so beloved of traditional forms of media, from newspapers to TV sitcoms, remains a staple of ethnic representation - some forms of ethnic representation have taken a much darker turn in a post-9/11 world.

Across various forms of old and new media, for example, hugely diverse and complex ethnicities have come to be defined almost exclusively in terms of a single (religious) dimension: that of "Islam" (with all its attendant connotations).



Yarde (2001), argues this 'discourse of threat' has its origins in the large-scale black immigration in the 1950's and that "Since September 11, the stereotypes have become interwoven and confused" leading to the mass media stereotyping of whole ethnic groups as deviant and dangerous.

While the media is frequently criticised for its *under-representation* of ethnic minorities - **Sweney** (2011) reports "Actors from black, Asian or other ethnic minorities appeared in just 5% of UK TV ads" and the producer of the popular crime drama "Midsomer Murders" (2011) justified the almost-exclusively white representation of village life as "a bastion of Englishness" (the implication being that an English identity was synonymous with being White) - *over-representation* in certain areas like news and fiction can also be problematic.

News reporting of Africa, for example, frequently represents black ethnicities as victims of 'natural disasters' such as floods and famines and perpetrators of man-made disasters involving wars and corrupt regimes.

Content analysis of media reporting of "terrorist incidents" by **Signal Media** (2019), for example, also notes a general reluctance to label "white murderers terrorists":

*"Why, instead, are these killers humanised and we, the reader, encouraged to feel for or relate to them? Both in terms of the language used, and the quantity of coverage, media treatment of differing forms of extremism is skewed. A Muslim can be expected to be immediately labelled a terrorist, whilst the media is hesitant to apply this term to white people".*



*Humanising the white Texan serial bomber, Mark Conditt, responsible for 5 explosions that killed 2 and injured 4.*

With notable exceptions, such as comedy programmes like *Goodness Gracious Me* (an all-Asian cast) and black actors like Idris Elba taking leading roles in prime-time UK drama, ethnic minorities are predominantly viewed through a **white** (middle class and male) **gaze** - one that, in terms of news reporting, frequently represents whites as saviours, through things like government and public aid.



Top British Soap Coronation Street, first aired in 1960, introduced it's first black family in 1919.

**Carrington** (2002) used the term *hyperblackness* to suggest how apparently *positive black identities* are invariably constructed around a narrow range of cultural spaces like sport, fashion and music. Hyperblackness, in these contexts, involves representations that promote stereotypes of black bodies solely in terms of 'athleticism and animalism' - the idea these features of black excellence are somehow 'natural' or innate.

A further feature of the white gaze is the representation of ethnic minorities in terms of **Otherness**: how 'They' are different from 'Us'. Ethnic representations are constructed in terms of *cultural difference* as the *cause* of social problems, something **Gilroy** (1990) called a **cultural (new) racism** focused on cultural differences in language, religion and family life (as opposed to discredited "biological" notions of race, characteristic of "old racism"). A further strand of *Otherness* is ethnic minorities represented in terms of threat:

- a **cultural threat** - challenging a 'British' (*white*) way of life through practices such as arranged and forced marriages or, more recently, the notion of Sharia Law (a legal system based on Islamic religious principles).
- a **physical threat**, in terms of terrorism and criminality. This theme has something of a historical continuity - from **Hall et al** (1978) noting **moral panics** about 'black muggers' in the 1970s, through the claim by the Metropolitan Police (2002) that mugging in London was 'predominantly a black crime', to more-recent associations between "Islam" and "terrorism".

## Theoretical Explanations

### Marxism

For **Traditional / Instrumental Marxism**, *economic power* is a key variable; those who own the means of physical production are always the most powerful class. Economic power also brings with it the ownership of **mental production**: in this instance, control over how different social groups are represented.

**Cultural institutions** such as the media are part of the ideological **superstructure** and their role is to support the *status quo* through the creation and maintenance of a *worldview* that favours the political, ideological and, above all, economic interests of a ruling class. How different social groups are represented within this worldview is a crucial aspect of ruling class domination and control - with the focus of explanation being the various ways a ruling class use their economic dominance to represent less powerful groups in ways that enhance and justify their right to power.

While media representations are not *in themselves* a means of controlling behaviour, they are *a means to an end*.

By representing different groups in particular ways the media allows a ruling class to act against such groups if and whenever their political, ideological or economic power is questioned or threatened.

The specific ability of the media to perform their ideological role is explained in terms of the *interlocking cultural backgrounds* and relationships between journalists, editors, owners and wider capitalist elites. **Kendall** (2011), for example, notes:

*"The complex relationship between privileged people and the paid journalists who work on the political, business and philanthropy beats that cover elite activities - for journalists to gain privileged access to elite inner circles they must be careful about what and how they write about the wealthy and powerful members of their communities".*



More specifically, representations take two main forms:

1. Those designed to divide potential opposition to capitalism.
2. Those that **scapegoat** social groups as a diversion from problems experienced under capitalism.

In terms of explaining different types of representation, the focus tends to be on *class*, mainly because this relates directly to economic interests. Representations here reflect a range of themes:

- from those that directly support and enhance capitalism, in terms of things like consumer benefits and living standards,
- to those identifying potentially dangerous and threatening trends in lower class life, both individual, such as crime, and collective, such as Trade Union organisation.

The media is used to highlight and exaggerate "threats" and this becomes the excuse for political action against the working class. As **Kendall** (2011) argues, the media not only "*glorify the upper classes, even when they are accused of wrongdoing*" but also frame stories in ways that "*maintain and justify larger class-based inequalities*".



**Gender** representations are explained on the basis that where men generally have higher levels of economic power than women, representations reflect the aims and interests of the dominant gender.

**Age** representations reflect different perceptions of the young and the elderly; the former frequently represented as a **threat** (deviant youth subcultures, for example) that needs to be controlled, while the latter represent a **scapegoat** for economic problems; blame, for example, can be deflected away from a ruling class through representations of the elderly taking more than their "fair share" in terms of "gold plated" pensions, free social care and the like.

*Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg jogging in public - accompanied by 5 of his personal security staff...*

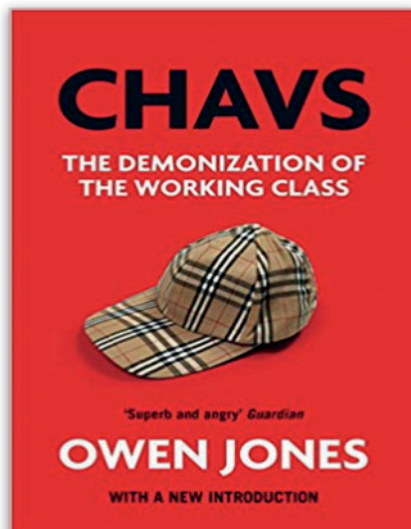


**Ethnic** representations generally combine notions of *division* and *scapegoating*; ethnic minorities, for example, are constructed in various ways, from the collective threat of terrorism and challenges to the "British way of life" to the more-targeted threats of specific minorities such as "black youth gangs".

## Evaluation

There are a couple of major criticisms we can note about this approach to understanding media representations:

Firstly, these types of explanation lean towards a **manipulative**, almost conspiratorial, approach to understanding how and why the media represents groups in different ways. This approach, historically reflected in the work of writers such as **Miliband** (1969) and adopted more-recently by writers such as **Jones** (2016) in his analysis of how the media "demonises the working class", argues that the *common cultural backgrounds* (family, school, work...) of economic elites "automatically" produces a common worldview: one that not only understands the shared economic interests of a range of groups that constitute the "ruling class" but which is able and willing to apply that understanding to protect their interests through media representations of "challenger groups and classes". Neo-Marxists, as we will see, have a rather different take on this relationship.



Secondly, a related criticism is that the general ideological thrust of Instrumental Marxism leads to evidence being *cherry-picked*; forms of representation that fit their general model are highlighted, while representations that don't fit are ignored, marginalised or denied. It's difficult to see, for example, how or why negative representations of women necessarily "benefit capitalism".

*Not members of the upper class...*

## Neo-Marxism

While the concept of *ruling class political and cultural cohesion* remains a central one for Neo-Marxists, their explanation for critical cohesion involves arguing that the role of the media in capitalist societies is not necessarily to divide or scapegoat the lower classes as a way of controlling their behaviour (although this may often be a secondary, if largely unintended, outcome); rather, media representations are a way of creating and maintaining an elite's sense of its own cohesion as a *class*.

Where Instrumental Marxism explains class cohesion in terms of common cultural backgrounds, neo-Marxism uses the concept of **hegemony** to suggest cohesion is maintained through representations of "the Other"; by defining those who are not "part of the ruling class" the media functions to define for the disparate members of the ruling class the thing they have in common that unites them - an opposition to other social classes.

This explanation of the role of the media doesn't rely on a ruling class being a cohesive entity *prior* to using its economic power to manipulate public opinion. Rather, how and why the media represent different social groups becomes the cohesive factor in ruling class consciousness; by defining itself in terms of *what it is not*, it comes to see itself in terms of *what it is*.

Hegemonic control, in this respect, operates in the context of two ideas:

**1. Inclusiveness** defines the things a society *has in common*; from a sense of *nationality*, through shared *religious beliefs and practices*, to a *common territorial origin, political and economic values* and so forth. For neo-Marxists a significant role of the mass media is to define and propagate these *inclusive* characteristics - and while their particular properties may shift and change, the basic principle holds; there are some fundamental characteristics that "define Us" (a ruling class) as opposed to "Them" (not part of the ruling class).



**2. Exclusiveness**, on the other hand, defines "Them" or "**The Other**": people who, for whatever reason, are excluded from - and defined in opposition to - a ruling class.

Explaining representations in these terms - as a way of *defining inclusion and exclusion* that contributes, ultimately, to a sense of ruling class cohesion - means we can explain the differing shape and form of class, age, gender and ethnic representations in a way that doesn't rely on the media being directly controlled and manipulated by a ruling class.



If media professionals see their role in *hegemonic terms* - as definers and protectors of a cultural cohesion that ultimately benefits the most wealthy and powerful - they can be relied upon to perform this role without the need for explicit manipulation.

Representations, therefore, reflect a sliding scale of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, the former defined in terms of complete consensus with prevailing ruling class norms and values and the latter in terms of complete conflict.

**Class** representations, for example, frame inclusion and consensus in terms of groups, such as business leaders, represented by positive virtues (*job creators, wealth creators*...) in tune with inclusive values. Exclusion and conflict is represented by groups, such as Trade Unions, and individuals (criminals, welfare recipients, lower-class single-parents...) whose behaviours conflict with such values.

This explanation of class representations also allows neo-Marxists to represent "*upper class deviance*" as behaviour in need of criticism and control *when* it threatens elite cohesion. Such deviance - and in some cases outright criminality - is condemned and controlled, however, through a particular type of representation - one that individualises wrong-doing among the social elite.

Where "The Other" is invariably represented as a collective (*Muslims, Chavs...*) whose group characteristics are shared by its individual members, the reverse is true for upper class deviance: individual characteristics are not attributed to a whole class of people.



The worldwide banking crisis of 2008 was represented not as a collective ruling class failure but as a consequence of individual failures - such as "Sir" Fred Goodwin: CEO of Royal Bank of Scotland at the time of its dramatic collapse in 2008. His disastrous management of the bank was punished by the loss of his knighthood in 2012.

**Gender** and **age** representations similarly reflect notions of inclusion and exclusion. Feminism, for example, is generally represented in ways that stress conflict and exclusion ("*political correctness*") while various age groups are represented in different ways depending on the contexts of their behaviours; youth subcultures are generally represented negatively precisely because they appear to threaten the media-defined consensus.



**Ethnic** representations, on the other hand, focus on explicit concepts of "the Other", with some minority groups represented in terms of various forms of "threat": to culture and "our way of life" or to society as a whole, in terms of things like terrorism.



## Evaluation

One advantage of neo-Marxist approaches is their ability to explain *continuities and changes* in media representations of different social groups by reference to wider social changes in attitudes and behaviours.

Like their traditional counterparts, however, this approach has been criticised for underplaying the role of **audiences** in understanding representations.

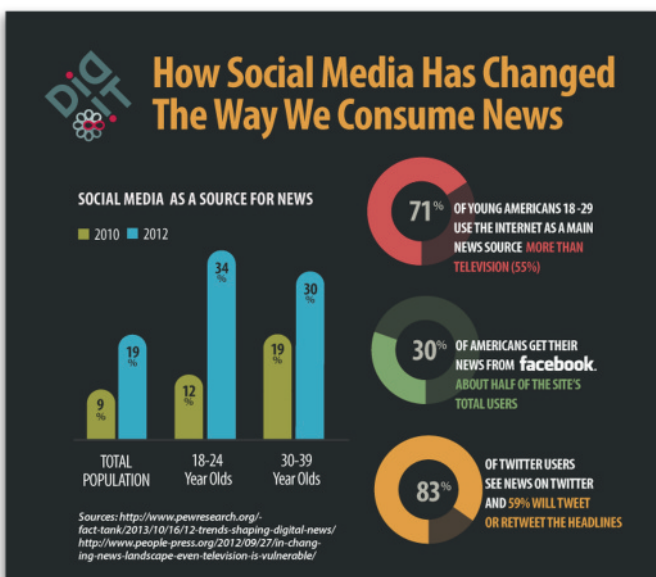
**Connor** (2001), for example, argues representation has two important dimensions:

1. How the world is presented to audiences through the mass media.
2. How people "engage with media texts" through their interpretation of media representations.

While the two are clearly connected - the media represents different social groups in different ways: some positive, some negative - neo-Marxism, in common with their traditional counterparts, tends to focus almost exclusively on the *former*. The critical question here, therefore, is the extent to which the representational messages sent by the mass media are received and understood by different audiences in the way they were initially intended?

The development of mass social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter suggest, at the very least, audiences are no-longer in thrall to conventional mass media messages in the way they perhaps were in even the recent past.

To put this more-sociologically, the rapid development of new media operating on a global scale suggests the *fragmentation* of media messages makes it much more difficult to see how *hegemonic control* through a mass media can successfully operate in contemporary societies.



## Feminism

While the focus for all kinds of feminism is on how and why media representations contribute to *female inequality*, different approaches produce different forms of explanation.

## Liberal

Liberal feminism generally focuses on how the mass media can be purged of *sexist assumptions* and representations, such that women in particular are neither *stereotyped* into a narrow range of roles nor represented in ways that disadvantage them in relation to men.

A combination of *legal and social changes* are the key to changing representations of women; strong **legal** barriers to sexist representations coupled with **moral** changes in how we generally view male-female relationships and statuses are the means to ensuring the media represents gender in more-equitable and balanced ways.

*Slow but sure progress?*

*50 years after their first appearance (in The Sun), topless female pictures have finally been banished from the pages of UK newspapers.*



## Marxist

**Marxist** feminism, drawing on its connections to Marxist economic analysis, focuses on the commodification of women under capitalism: the idea female bodies are represented as **objects of desire**.

**Gill** (2003), for example, argues women are exploited by displays of naked female flesh because it represents them as *consumer objects* that can be bought and sold by men.

Commodification is also expressed in terms of how **sexist** stereotypes are used to sell a variety of consumer goods, from cars to newspapers.

For **Gill** commodification extends into newer areas, such as the use of female bodies as both 'walking advertising spaces' and as a means of making gender statements.

T-shirt branding (for both men and women) is an interesting contemporary example of gendered representations -

whether they involve *free advertising* for popular brands, *sexualised self-presentation* (women, in particular, having the freedom to advertise their sexuality) or an example of how men and women collude in their own exploitation by representing themselves as one-dimensional sexual objects.



## Radical

For **radical** feminists media representations are theorised in terms of **objectification**; women are represented in demeaning ways that suggest and cement their *lower social status* compared to men.

Media representations are an important dimension of **patriarchal control** and reflect how female lives and bodies are refracted through a **male gaze** that sees women as subordinate to men.



## 125 Years Of Evolution

1886

2011

125 years of evolution mechanically ... yet 0 years of evolution socially.

www.BEAUTYISINSIDE.COM /PURPLE

**EURONICS**

Your local independent electrical retailer

**BOSCH**

Invented for life



Their representation through male eyes reflects male preoccupations and desires and reduces women to objects that exist for male gratification and service.

At its most obvious, the male gaze refers to areas such as *pornography* or the use of female bodies in *advertising*; less obviously, it refers to how images of women are presented from both the male perspective and for the gratification of a male audience – the viewer becomes a *spectator* (or *voyeur* in some cases), who looks, through male eyes, at women reduced to objects - a series of disconnected body parts.

While traditional forms of print (newspapers, magazines...) and electronic (television, websites...) media have produced more than their fair share of sexualised advertising focused around the male gaze, the development of new media platforms such as Facebook - by 2018 it accounted for 20% of the global advertising market - have taken this to a whole new level.

In Mulvey's (1975) original formulation of the concept the *male gaze* was essentially conceived as *voyeuristic* - seeing the world (and female bodies) through the eyes of men in a way that was both immediate *and* distant: although female bodies were *on display* for male gratification there was a relatively clear boundary between "looking" and "doing".

Some forms of social media advertising have, in some respects, blurred this boundary by attempting to co-opt male viewers into a form of *active collusion* in the material they are viewing - a case in point being this 2011 Facebook advert for a brand of vodka.



On the plus side, the Belvedere ad only ran for *around an hour* on the platform before an outraged public response forced its removal and an apology from the company.

On the negative side, Belvedere Vodka received an unprecedented amount of free advertising...



*Blurring the boundaries?*

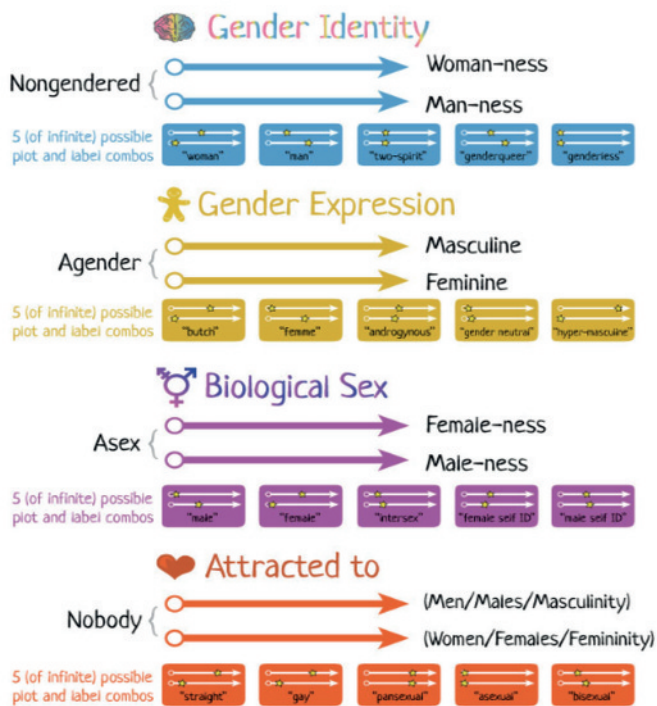
## Post-feminism

**Post-feminism** takes a different approach by seeing both men and women represented in terms of traditional stereotypes and ways that challenge, confront and break stereotypical gender barriers - ideas that reflect both the **heterogeneity** of media and gender in contemporary societies.

There are now, for example, many different ways of "doing gender" compared with the relatively simple *binary oppositions* (male and female) of even the recent past. This has led to writer's such as **Butler** (2004) arguing that we have now reached a stage where the concept of "*undoing gender*" - breaking it down into a multiplicity of constituent parts that "*undo restrictively normative concepts of sexual and gendered life*" - is a more-accurate form of representation.

In this respect post-feminists emphasise the significance of changing social attitudes towards gender and its representation. Where gender categories have become more **fragmented**, it becomes more difficult to think in terms of "fixed genders" and static forms of representation: where some media feature conventional femininities, others represent women in a range of unconventional ways.

However, the crucial argument for post-feminism is the extent to which men and women can seek-out the media that best reflects their self-perception. In other words, the focus here is less on how the mass media represents and determines gender identities and more on how individuals use the media to construct their own representations and sense of self.



Killermann (2018): *The Genderbread Person v2.0*

## Evaluation

Feminist arguments, although many and varied, turn on both changes to traditional forms of overtly sexist representation and the *meaning* of these changes.

Gill, for example, argues contemporary representations, while no longer depicting women as 'passive objects' of the male gaze, are not 'liberating' but merely a more exploitative form of what Bordo (1993) calls a 'new disciplinary regime'. This reflects the idea that while contemporary media representations offer the 'promise of power' by suggesting women can *choose* whether to become 'sex objects', this promise is illusory since all forms of objectification are demeaning to women.

Gauntlett (2002), however, argues the media can be a force for *change* rather than repression, with the gradual disappearance of traditional representations of women, as housewives and sex-objects.

He argues greater media-literacy means audiences understand representations in an *active way*; that is, we shouldn't simply assume media messages are received uncritically and acted on mechanically by unquestioning, media-illiterate, audiences.

He argues, for example, that young people in particular are able and willing to think critically and reflectively about the media they consume - to *actively construct* a variety of self-representations rather than to simply be *passively constructed* in the (male) media's image.

## Pluralism

*Pluralist explanations* recognise a variety of different media representations involving categories such as gender. They also emphasise the importance of the role of the *audience* in interpreting such representations - ideas that relate to two dominant themes in pluralist explanations.

**1. Diversity:** Contemporary media and audiences are characterised more by their *differences* than their similarities; wide differences *within* categories like class, age, gender and ethnicity makes the Marxist approach of reading audience responses from media representations increasingly problematic.

**2. Choice:** Diverse audiences make diverse **choices** about what, when and how they consume different media - which puts the audience in control of, rather than being controlled by, the media.

For pluralists, *the media follow the market* and audiences are given the types of representation they want. The kinds of (c)overly racist, sexist and homophobic representations once found in British sitcoms, for example, once reflected a society largely tolerant of such things. Where contemporary audiences are less tolerant of such representations this type of programming no longer exists on mainstream television: it would be commercial suicide.



Media diversity, therefore, is encouraged by changing audience tastes and higher levels of economic competition for audience share. General representations of class, age, gender and ethnicity have undergone two important changes that flow from increased competition, audience and media diversity and choice.

1. For relatively **undifferentiated** mass audiences, there is now less tolerance of overtly sexist and racist representations; this stems partly from wider social and legal changes and partly from the way new media, such as Twitter, makes representations easier to police. Audiences can respond quickly and directly, through social media networks, to representations they find offensive (as in the case of the Belvedere Vodka advert we previously highlighted).



2. The development of digital media has lead to **niche programming**. Minority groups can seek out media channels - from TV stations, through magazines to web sites - that reflect their personal tastes and interests.

Diversity of access and consumption, therefore, widens the range of representations available to audiences who are able to pick and choose what they see, hear and read to match their own particular needs.

## Evaluation

Pluralist approaches add an important dimension to our understanding of media representations by their insistence on seeing audiences as *active participants* in, rather than passive receivers of, media messages. This is significant because it starts to *problematise* the simple assumption that audiences passively consume whatever the media gives them - a position that is increasingly untenable in the digital age.

Critics, however, point to the idea Pluralists overstate both the *separation of media ownership and control* and the *power of audiences* to determine media content. Although the Internet makes it more difficult for owners to control what their audience see, read and hear, old media often have far larger audiences than equivalent new media; they may also be **trusted** more by their audience, which makes them easier to manipulate.



*Despite fierce competition from old and new media, the BBC remains one of the most trusted global News services.*

Similarly, **Collins** (2002) argues competition does not automatically guarantee media diversity. Although a wider range of media products are now available, these products are owned by a relatively small number of global conglomerates; similar representations are presented in a range of different packages that merely give the impression of choice.

In addition, where choice does exist it comes at a price. Those who can afford it get unlimited choice; those who can't have to accept what they're given.

## Postmodernism

Throughout this section we've generally talked about representations in terms of how and why they *misrepresent* particular social groups.

**Baudrillard** (1995), however, argues representations shouldn't be considered in terms of whether something is fairly or unfairly represented. This follows, he argues, because *how* something is represented *is* its reality.

Conventional approaches to explaining the significance of media representations suggest the media "re-presents" something like 'news' in a way that's somehow different to the original event: '*something happens*' that is then described (*re-presented*) to an audience.

Conventionally, therefore, sociologists contrast 'the real' - the 'thing' that 'happened' - with its **representation** and examine the media to see if they can disentangle the *real* from the *not real*.

**Baudrillard** however argues "reality" is experienced differently depending on:

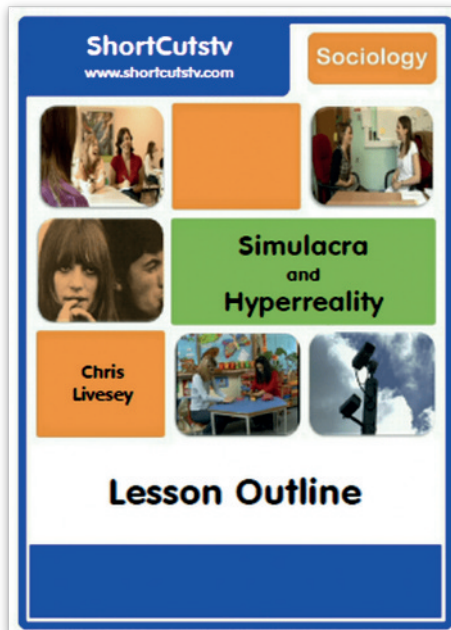
- *who you are* (male, female, young, old, black, white...),
- *where you are* (in a country, such as the UK, that has a diverse media or one, such as China, where media is tightly controlled)
- *your source of information* (one that aims to provide as objective account of something as possible, or one that simply tells you what you want to hear).

Every audience, therefore, constructs its own version of reality and everything represented in the media is experienced as *multiple realities*, all of which - and none of which - are *real*; everything is simply a representation of something seen from different viewpoints. Thus, the 'reality of anything' can't be found in any single definitive account or experience

**Baudrillard** uses the term **hyperreality** to express how different narrative accounts interweave and conflict in an ever-changing pattern of representation-built-upon-representation until they form a 'reality' in themselves - something that is "*more real than the reality they purport to represent*" since our knowledge of 'reality' is itself the product of different representations.

Each reality, therefore, is constructed from the way individuals *pick-and-choose* different ideas to suit their own particular prejudices or beliefs. **Baudrillard** calls this process **simulacra** ('representations that refer to other representations') or **simulations** that are the hyperreality they depict.

To talk about media representations as distortions of some hidden or obscured 'reality' ('*deep structures*') misses the point: The media don't simply 'mediate the message' through representations; as **McCluhan** (1992) argues "they *are* the message".



"Read All About It"

This idea is important in relation to something like the *social construction of news* (and it can be extended to cover the social reproduction of *anything* - from gender to ethnicity) since news reporting involves a representation of reality that **Fiske** (1987) calls the **transparency fallacy** – a rejection of the idea news reporting represents a neutral 'window on the world' that objectively reports events as they unfold. The world represented through the media is always and inevitably a *reconstructed reality* – one filtered through a media lens that is no more and no less objective than any other reality filter.

Postmodernists argue **power**, in terms of control over the production and distribution of information, is no longer concentrated within **institutions**, but within **social networks**, where it is *produced and consumed* by the *same people*. Information flows between different points (nodes) within a network in such a way as to make it impossible to distinguish between producer and consumer. This idea challenges Marxist and Feminist notions of power as **centred**, on class and gender respectively, and that misrepresentations flow from this centred control of information.

**Lyotard** (1984), for example, argues that in postmodernity there are "many centres" and that "none of them hold". In other words, in postmodernity there are many centres of information, each of which pumps-out different representations of categories like class, age, gender and ethnicity.

Unlike in the past, however, there are no dominant forms of representation because there are no dominant forms of media anymore. What we have, in a media-saturated society built on information structures and networks, is a series of shifting representations of these categories.

## Evaluation

While postmodern approaches provide a new and different perspective on media representations, critical evaluations focus on three areas:

1. The extent to which *producers and consumers converge* is overstated; in terms of mainstream mass media, whether old or new, the distinction between producer and consumer is still important. This means how the media represent social categories has far more salience and currency than postmodernists allow.
2. Media diversity and audience literacy is overestimated; we still, for example, find a relatively narrow range of representations in the mainstream media sources used by very large audiences. The critical sophistication of new media audiences and their ability to separate out different sources of information is also questionable.

**Bennett et al** (2008), for example, argue that the claim young people are somehow "*digital natives*", with a sophisticated grasp of "how the media works" lacking in their older counterparts ("*digital immigrants*"), is not one that stands-up to a great deal of critical inspection.



*The ability to use technology is not the same as the ability to understand it...*

3. The idea the media "is the reality it represents" is questioned by **Strinati** (1992); this view, he argues, gives too much significance to the media and ignores a wide range of other information sources - such as our interpersonal relationships - that have stronger claims to influence.





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