3. The mass media

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this opening section is an examination of different explanations of the relationship between ownership and control of the mass media and, in order to do this, we need to begin by thinking about how the mass media can be defined.

Defining mass media

⚠ Preparing the ground

We can start by breaking down the concept of a 'mass media' into its constituent parts. A **medium**, is a 'channel of communication' – a means through which people send and receive information. The printed word, for example, is a medium; when we read a newspaper or magazine, something is communicated to us in some way. Similarly, electronic forms of communication – television, telephones, film and such like – are **media** (the plural of medium). **Mass** means 'many' and what we are interested in here is how and why different forms of media are used to transmit to – and be received by – large numbers of people (the audience).

Mass media, therefore, refers to channels involving communication with large numbers of people. This is traditionally seen as 'one-to-many' communication – 'one' person (the author of a book, for example), communicates to many people (their readers) at the same time. This deceptively simple definition does, of course, hide a number of complexities – such as, how large does an audience have to be before it qualifies as 'mass'?

In addition to thinking about a basic definition of the term, we can note how **Dutton** et al (*Studying the Media*, 1998) suggests that, *traditionally* (an important qualification I will develop in a moment), the mass media has been **differentiated** from other types of communication (such as interpersonal communication that occurs on a one-to-one basis) in terms of four essential characteristics.

- **Distance**: Communication between those who send and receive messages (media-speak for information) is impersonal, lacks immediacy and is one way (from the producer/creator of the information to the consumer/audience). When I watch a film, for example, no matter how emotionally involved I become in the action, I can't directly affect what's unfolding on the screen.

- **Technology**: Mass communication requires a vehicle, such as a television receiver, a method of printing and so forth, that allows messages to be sent and received.

- **Scale**: One feature of a mass medium, as we've noted, is it involves *simultaneous* communication with many people; for example, as I sit in my living room watching Chelsea play Manchester United on TV, the same behaviour is being reproduced in thousands of other living rooms across the country.

- **Commodity**: An interesting feature of mass communication – in our society at least – is that it comes at a price. I can watch football on TV, for example, if I can afford a television, a license fee (to watch BBC or ITV) or a subscription to something like Sky Sports if it's on satellite or cable.

WARM UP: IDENTIFYING MASS MEDIA

Using the following table as a guide, in pairs or small groups, identify as many media as possible and decide (by ticking (✓) or crossing (✗) the appropriate box) whether or not they qualify as a *mass medium* (of the ones I have identified, television does qualify but the telephone, for example, doesn't).

⚠️ Digging deeper

In the above exercise, you will have found it reasonably easy to identify a range of mass media. However, I suspect you will have identified some forms of communication (such as mobile phones and email) that don't fit easily (if at all) into traditional definitions, mainly because they have the capacity to be both:

- **interpersonal** ('one-to-one') communication and

- **mass** ('one-to-many') communication.

Depending on how it is used, for example, email can involve exchanging interpersonal messages with friends and family ('Hi, how are you?') or sending one message to many thousands – potentially millions – of people; customers of on-line retailers, such as Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk), for example, can request email notification of special offers and so forth. Unrequested mass emails – commonly known as 'Spam' – also come into this category.

In defining the mass media, therefore, we have hit upon something that, as recently as 25 years ago, wouldn't have been a problem; namely, the development of *computer networks*. The ability to link computer technology (to create something like the

| Medium	Distance	Technology	Scale	Commodity
Television	✓	✓	✓	✓
Telephone	✗	✓	✗	✓
Daily newspaper	✓			✓
Mobile telephone		✓		✓
Further media?				

Internet or mobile phone networks) has created a subtle – but incredibly important – change in the way we both define and conceptualise the mass media. To make matters even more complicated, computer networks open up the potential for '**many-to-many**' communication, where a mass audience can, simultaneously, interact and communicate with each other. In other words, a mass medium based on interpersonal communication.

To clarify this idea, think about things like:

- **Internet chatrooms**. These conform to three of the components of a 'mass medium' identified above (technology, scale and commodity). However, the 'distance' component is a problem. This is because, rather confusingly, a chatroom can, simultaneously, involve one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication.
- **Peer-to-peer** networks involve using software to link individual computers, such that anyone connected to the network can exchange information directly with anyone else. In the workplace, for example, this can mean any number of people can contribute to the same piece of work at the same time. We can also note, however, this type of network can also be used to breech copyright laws through the (illegal) sharing of music and films.

In the light of these developments, therefore, we need to redefine the concept of mass media by creating a distinction between:

- **old mass media**, such as television, books and magazines, that involve 'one-to-many' communication, based on a one-
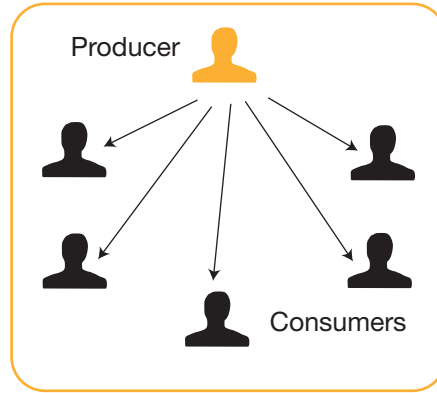
'Old' forms of mass media involve one-way communication between a producer and a mass audience.

way process of producers creating information that is transmitted to large numbers of consumers, and

- **new mass media**, such as peer-to-peer networks, involving 'many-to-many' communication based on two-way communication with participants as both producers and consumers of information.
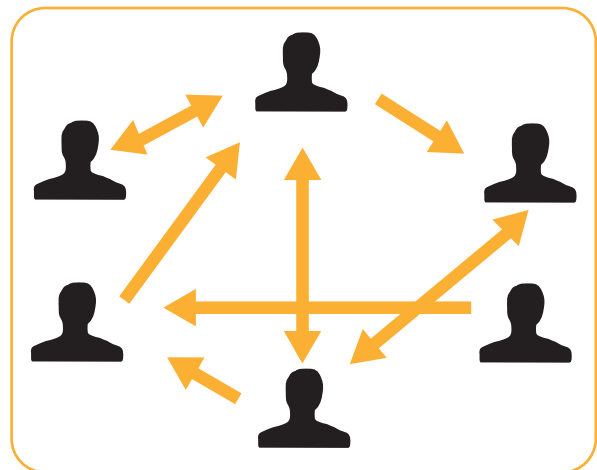
'New' forms of mass media can involve two-way communication within a mass audience who are both producers and consumers.

Crosbie ('What Is New Media?', 2002) argues that new (mass) media have characteristics that, when combined, make them very different to other forms of mass media. These include:

- **Technology**: They cannot exist without the appropriate (computer) technology.

- **Personalisation**: Individualised messages (either tailored to the particular needs of those receiving them or having the appearance of being so constructed) can be simultaneously delivered to vast numbers of people.

- **Collective control**: Each person in a network has, potentially, the ability to share, shape and change the content of the information being exchanged.

Crosbie uses the following example to illustrate this idea:

> Imagine visiting a newspaper website and seeing not just the bulletins and major stories you wouldn't have known about, but also the rest of that edition customized to your unique needs and interests. Rather than every reader seeing the same edition, each reader sees an edition simultaneously individualized to their interests and generalized to their needs.

Ownership and control

⚠ Preparing the ground

The distinction just drawn between old and new media forms is important when considering the relationship between media ownership and control, since the old and new media involve potentially different relationships between owners, controllers, producers and consumers. To understand this, we need, initially, to define what we mean by **owners** These, as you might expect, are the people who own whatever medium in being used to communicate information. We can identify two *basic* types of media ownership.

- **Private ownership**, where companies are owned by individuals, families, shareholders and so forth. Rupert Murdoch, for example, owns a controlling interest in News Corporation, a company that publishes books, films and magazines and broadcasts satellite TV programmes, among many other things.

- **State ownership**: The BBC, for example, is state owned – it is funded by the taxpayer and doesn't have private owners or shareholders. As an aside, however, we can note there are different *types* of state ownership around the world. In somewhere like China, for example, the government directly controls media content (the media is, in effect, state-run); the BBC, on the other hand, is overseen by a Board of Governors who, although directly appointed by the government, have a degree of

independence from both the state and direct political control.

Ownership is significant here because owners have the potential to decide what sort of information an audience will be allowed to receive. For example, private owners may decide not to publish a book critical of their company, whereas state-owned companies may be subject to political control and censorship over what they can broadcast or publish.

Controllers are the people who actually run (or manage) a company on a day-to-day basis – the editor of a newspaper or the head of a film studio, for example. Usually – especially when talking about very large media companies – managers are not outright owners of the company for which they work (although they may own shares in that company).

Debates over the relative importance of ownership and control have traditionally been framed in terms of the significance of a *separation* between ownership of, and management roles within, media companies to prevent, in **Paul Mobbs**' ('Media Regulation and Convergence', 2002) phrase 'Undue influence over, or bias in, content'. In other words, in this section we are going to examine the extent to which there is a separation between the roles of owners and managers (controllers) within the mass media that, in turn, relates to debates about the control of information.

In basic terms, those writers who argue owners are the most significant players in the media industry suggest they use their control over information to show the world in a particular light (one favourable to their own particular viewpoint). On the other hand, those who argue managers are most

significant are suggesting this creates a diversity of media involving different forms and sources of information, such that audiences are able to pick and choose information to suit their own particular tastes and, indeed, prejudices.

⚠️ Digging deeper

We can dig a little deeper into the background to this debate, prior to examining some sociological explanations of the relationship between ownership and control, by identifying and explaining a number of significant ideas.

Concentration of ownership refers to the idea that the ownership of various media (television, books and newspapers for example) is increasingly restricted to a relatively small number of companies. Table 3.1, for example, demonstrates this idea in terms of the ownership of national newspapers.

In the wider global context, **Nenova** et al's ('Who Owns the Media?', 2001) examination of media in 97 countries found that 'almost universally the largest media firms are owned by the government or by private families'.

The concentration of media ownership (on both a national and global scale) is important for a couple of reasons.

- **Product diversity**: If the number and range of information sources is restricted, audiences increasingly come to depend on a small number of media corporations for that information. However, since even in terms of the above table, British consumers have a choice of nine national daily newspapers, the concentration of ownership doesn't necessarily affect the range of products on offer (Table 3.1).

Daily Mail, *Mail on Sunday*	Daily Mail and General Trust
Daily and *Sunday Mirror*, People	Trinity Mirror
Daily Star, *Daily* and *Sunday Express*	Northern and Shell
Daily and *Sunday Telegraph*	Telegraph Group
Guardian, *Observer*	Guardian Media Group
Independent, *Independent on Sunday*	Independent Newspapers
News of the World, *Sun*, *Times*, *Sunday Times*	News International

Table 3.1 English newspaper ownership 2003
(Source: Department for Culture, Media and Sport)

The question here, therefore, is, does concentration affect information diversity?

- **Information diversity**: **Robert McChesney** (*Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, 2000), for example, argues we have the 'appearance of choice' in various media – lots of different products all selling much the same sort of (limited range) of ideas. As he argues about MTV: 'it's all a commercial. Sometimes it's an advert paid for by a company to sell a product. Sometimes a video for a music company to sell music … Sometimes a set filled with trendy clothes to sell a look that includes products on that set'.

- **Compaine** ('Mergers, Divestitures and the Internet', 2000), on the other hand, argues such an interpretation is mistaken – the global trend is not necessarily for an increased concentration of media companies. In addition, he argues media organisations are not static entities – they develop, grow, evolve – and disappear.

In 'The Myths of Encroaching Global Media Ownership', 2001, for example, he notes how the dominant global media companies in the 1980s were not necessarily the dominant media companies in the year 2000. For example, ten years ago Amazon.com didn't exist. In 2005 it's one of the world's largest media outlets – will it still exist in 2015.

Conglomeration is a second important aspect of media ownership and involves the idea the same company may, through a process of *diversification*, develop interests across different media. For example, Silvio Berlusconi (the current Italian Prime Minister), through his ownership of Fininvest, has a diverse range of media interests – television, book, newspaper and magazine publishing and so forth. One important – and useful if you are a large, transnational company (one that operates in a number of countries) – aspect of conglomeration is **diagonal integration**. *Cross-media ownership* can be used enhance the profile and profits of different businesses. Rupert Murdoch, for example, used ownership of *The Sun* newspaper to promote his satellite company Sky Broadcasting (later called BSkyB after it took over a competitor company) in its early years when it was losing money. The Sun ran competitions to win satellite dishes and subscriptions, gave

Sky and terrestrial (BBC and ITV) programme schedules equal space (even though Sky had a fraction of their audience) and publicised Sky through feature and entertainment stories.

Murdoch also wanted to attract subscribers by offering 'first-run' films before they were available to rent. However, to protect cinema and rental markets, Hollywood Studios refused to allow TV companies to show their films until at least two years after their initial release.

Murdoch solved this 'problem' by buying a film studio (20th Century Fox) to supply Sky with films – which eventually forced other studios to follow suit.

In the next section (dealing with the relationship between the mass media and ideology) we will pick up and develop the above ideas in more detail, but to complete this section we can outline a number of different perspectives on the ownership and control debate, starting with those suggesting ownership is most significant and ending with those arguing the reverse – that control is most significant.

Traditional (Instrumental) Marxism

⚠ Preparing the ground

This variation of Marxism takes a distinct position on the relationship between ownership and control of the media, based on **social class**. An individual's economic position in society (their class) influences the way they see and experience the social world. For instrumental Marxists, society is seen in terms of a particular class structure involving a distinction between the bourgeoisie and proletariat (upper and lower classes). Those who own the means of production (the bourgeoisie) are the most powerful and influential grouping in any society and they try to keep their powerful position through their ownership and control of **ideological institutions**. Cultural institutions, such as the media, are used as a tool (or *instrument*) to spread ideas favourable to the bourgeoisie throughout society. Writers such as **Milliband** (*The State In Capitalist Society*, 1973), argue the ruling class has a common **economic status** (as owners and controllers – people who are generally drawn from the same social class) and **cultural background**, created and reinforced through education (public schools, Oxford and Cambridge Universities etc.), family networks, interlocking directorships (where the same person is a director of numerous different companies), media ownership and so forth. **Scott** (*National Patterns of Corporate Power*, 1991) for example, noted the significance of banks and insurance companies in the USA and Europe as centres of corporate networks through which businesses develop and are controlled.

⚠ Digging deeper

From this perspective the relationship between ownership and control of the media is straightforward.

- **Owners** have ultimate control over a company – they decide, for example, who to employ to run their businesses.
- **Managers** only 'control' a business (such

as a newspaper) in the sense they oversee its operation. The editor of a newspaper may control things like the stories appearing each day, the hiring and firing of employees and so forth. The owner, however, ultimately controls the political stance of the paper, the type of audience it aims to reach and the like.

Ownership and control, therefore, needs to be seen as part of the same process, which has two, interconnected, objectives.

• **Economic**: One objective, you probably

won't be too surprised to learn, is usually to make profits. However, a second (in some cases more important) objective is:

• **Ideological**, in the sense of trying to control how people see the social world. This aspect is significant because it is designed to create the conditions under which profit is not only created – and kept in private hands – but is seen as legitimate ('right and proper'). In other words one objective, common to both owners and controllers, is to protect and enhance the interests of a capitalist ruling

⚘ Growing it yourself: editorial control?

Identify some of the ways owners try to ensure employees reflect their views (the following extracts may give you some ideas to get you thinking).

Investigating the Media (1991), **Paul Trowler**

The following was cut from Trowler's book (for HarperCollins – owned by News Corporation)

Source: http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/trowler/ressite/cut.htm#murdoch

> Murdoch is well known for intervening in editorial policy. He sacked Harold Evans, editor of The Times, after disagreements over policy. Frank Giles, former editor of the Sunday Times, said Murdoch would make a point of dropping into his office just to check on the first copies of the paper. Fred Emery, home editor of the Times in 1982 reported Murdoch as saying 'I give instructions to my editors all round the world, why shouldn't I in London?'.

'Patten and Murdoch Quarrel – David and Goliath Again?' (1998) Terry Boardman

> Worried that Patten's criticisms of China in his forthcoming book 'East and West – The last Governor of Hong Kong' would upset Beijing and thus spoil the strenuous efforts he had been making to reingratiate himself with the Chinese . . . Murdoch, with his current audience of 36 million Chinese viewers and a potential further 240 million in mind, promptly ordered HarperCollins to drop the book.

'Newland Unleashed', *The Guardian*: **15/11/04**

'Black [the ex-owner of the Daily Telegraph] is not there anymore, the new owners do not interfere, it is basically down to us in a way it hasn't been for many years' . . . The Barclays [the new owners of The Telegraph], he says, have not laid down a clear political line. 'There are still occasional conversations. I might call about something. Normal, friendly, conversations'.

Examples:

• Hiring people who reflect owner's views.

• Not hiring journalists who don't reflect the owner's views.

class and this is achieved, according to instrumental Marxists, through the media. Because the media is a major source of information about society it is used as a **tool** (or instrument) through which ideas, beliefs and behaviours are manipulated. Ownership and control, therefore, is used to create a picture of the social world beneficial to the interests of

the most powerful people in society – and a key idea here is **false consciousness**. By their ability to control and limit the information people receive, a ruling class is able to control how people think – both directly and indirectly – about the things happening in society.

An example of false consciousness can be demonstrated with respect to the war in Iraq. From this perspective people were manipulated into supporting the war on the basis of Iraq having 'weapons of mass destruction' (which, we were repeatedly informed, could be used to launch an attack 'within 45 minutes'). We will return to this idea when, in the next section, we look at the relationship between the media and ideology in more detail.

Neo-(hegemonic) Marxism

Preparing the ground

Neo-Marxists such **E.O.Wright** (*Classes*, 1985) take a different approach to their traditional counterparts and, initially, the main points to note relating to this perspective are:

- **Social class** is *not* a static (unchanging) classification system; rather, it's seen (or conceptualised if you prefer) as a dynamic system of shifting and changing social relationships. This suggests:
- **Conflict**, divisions and contradictions occur *within* a dominant (or ruling) class.

Discussion questions: evaluating this perspective

To help you reflect critically about this perspective, think about and discuss the following questions.

- **Conspiracy theory**: Does this perspective develop a conspiratorial view of the media and the role of owners? Why do some parts of the media criticise the activities of powerful individuals, companies and governments?
- **Ruling class**: Do all members of the bourgeoisie have the same interests and, if so, what are they and how do media owners know what they are?
- **Choice**: In terms of old media there is a range of choices available, giving audiences access to different viewpoints; many people also have access to a wide range of new media. How easy is it for a ruling class to control the way people think when such choices are available?
- **Audience**: Are media consumers simply passive recipients of whatever owners want to publish, or are they more sophisticated and reflecting? Are some parts of the media audience (such as children) more open to influence than others?

A simple example here might be to note how some parts of the bourgeoisie in our society are pro-Europe while others are anti-Europe.

- **Class associations** can involve ethnic and gender dimensions (for example, individuals from some ethnic groups may be economically successful while seeing themselves, culturally, as not belonging to a middle or upper class).

- **Professionals** and **intellectuals** (the upper middle classes) have significant roles in the class structure. They occupy, according to **Poulantzas** (1975), 'contradictory class positions' – neither wholly bourgeois nor wholly proletarian. This, for neo-Marxists, is a significant idea in any explanation of the relationship between media owners and controllers.

Digging deeper

In developing the above ideas we can note how neo-Marxists stress the distinction between:

- **social structures** – the web of social relationships surrounding us and

- **consciousness** – people's ability to interpret behaviour in many different ways.

They argue this is an important distinction because it is impossible for any individual (let alone a very large group such as a ruling class) to directly control how people think and behave (the 'conspiracy aspect' of traditional Marxism). Rather, they use the concept of *hegemony* to show how both owners and controllers are locked into a (structural) relationship that is, in one sense, mutually beneficial.

- **Owners** have to make profits – this is their guiding principle (since if businesses are unprofitable they may cease to exist).

- **Managers** also see profitability as important, since their jobs, salaries and lifestyles depend on it.

In other words, both owners and controllers have a basic *common interest* that binds them together, expressed in terms of **core values**. They are likely to share, for example, beliefs about the importance of profits, which in turn presupposes a (fundamental) belief in capitalist economic systems. Marginal disagreements may occur between these groups over such things as the most efficient way to make profits, but not over the basic principle of the need for profitability.

Although media owners and professionals share a common cause in promoting and preserving certain basic values this doesn't necessarily mean – as we have just noted – they will always agree on the best way to promote and preserve such values. From this perspective, managers enjoy **relative autonomy** (a certain amount of freedom to make decisions). Transnational media companies, for example, are too large and complex to be easily controlled by a single owner/board of owners on a day-to-day basis. They employ people (managers) who can be trusted to:

- **Reflect their views**: Editors who insist on ignoring the policies laid down by their employers are likely to find themselves unemployed, unless they:

- **Make profits**: As long as it is legal (and sometimes if it is not) the key principle is profitability – some modern media owners may not care too much about the behaviour and activities of their managers as long as the money continues to roll in.

Pluralism

Preparing the ground

An alternative way of looking at the relationship between ownership and control is a framework that stresses how social groups compete against each other in the economic market place. For example, two types of group we could note are:

- **interest groups**, an example of which might be a *business* (such as a publishing company) pursuing some economic or social objective

- **status groups**, for example, a *Trade Union* publishing information specific to the members of a particular occupation. One aspect of the Union's role might be to promote and enhance the reputation (status) of its membership.

From this perspective, societies involve groups pursuing their own (sectional) interests and, in so doing, they create:

- **explicit competition** involving, for example, different newspaper groups competing for readers

- **implicit competition** involving political groups promoting different economic, political or cultural views they want reflected in the media.

For pluralists, competition is based on the desire for *power*, which can, for example, be expressed in terms of:

- **economic** power – such as making profits or gaining market share

- **political** power – such as influencing decisions made by governments.

Digging deeper

Media owners are clearly powerful players in any society since they are in a position to have their views heard. However, Pluralists argue those who control the day-to-day running of the media are also powerful, for a couple of reasons. Modern ('joint-stock') media companies tend to be owned by groups of shareholders rather than by all-powerful individuals. **John Burnham** (*The Managerial Revolution*, 1943), for example, argued that, where no single shareholder had overall control of a business, this meant directors and managers were the main policy-makers. Thus, the day-to-day running of a business was in the hands of a **technocratic managerial elite** – people whose job it was to run a business in the best interests of the shareholders. This is a powerful group,

according to pluralists, because their job depends on knowing what an audience wants and being able to provide it.

To survive, a business must compete successfully in a market place which means consumers (the people who buy the product being sold – or not as the case may be) influence the behaviour of an organisation: if consumers don't like – or more importantly buy – what's on offer the seller either improves or changes their product or they go out of business.

For pluralists, the private ownership of the media is significant because it promotes

Discussion questions: evaluating this perspective

To help you reflect critically about this perspective, think about and discuss the following questions.

- **Murdock** and **Golding** ('Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations', 1977) argue Pluralists overstate the distinction between owners and managers – do you think the interests of these two groups really are as separate as Pluralists claim? Although owners may not *personally* oversee the content of the media they own, how likely is an owner to employ managers opposed to their social and economic interests?
- **Shareholding**: Are individual owners more powerful than pluralists suggest? Although modern companies may have many shareholders, it's still possible for individuals to control a business. Rupert Murdoch, for example, has a 35% share in News Corporation, giving him control over the company. As James Curren ('Global Media Concentration', 2000), notes:

  The power potentially at the disposal of media owners tends to be exerted in a one-sided way . . . this power is qualified and constrained in many ways – by . . . consumers and staff, the suppliers of news, regulators, rival producers, the wider cultural patterns of society. But it is simply naïve to imagine that it does not exist.

- **Old and new media**: Although the development of the Internet makes it more difficult now, than in the past, for owners to control what their audience see, read and hear, old media (such as newspapers and television) may have far larger audiences than most new media; they may also be *trusted* more by the general public as sources of information. How significant are new media, therefore, in ensuring a diversity of views and opinions in our society?
- **Diversity**: Does media diversity guarantee choice? For example, if I want to watch reality TV shows (like *Big Brother*), I have a wide range of programmes from which to choose on various channels. However, does this 'choice' alter the fact these programmes are basically offering slight variations on the same theme? This idea also leads to questions of:
- **Regulation**: To what extent should governments be involved in the oversight and regulation of media companies and the activities of their owners? **Richard Collins** ('Comments on the Consultation on Media Ownership Rules', 2002), for example, argues:

  Promoting effective competition will not necessarily achieve pluralism and diversity . . . the potential economies of scope and scale in the media sector may mean that supply can efficiently be provided by few, or very few, firms. Accordingly, regulatory action to ensure pluralism and diversity is likely to be required.

competition and *diversity*. As **Bernard** and **McDermott** ('Media Ownership Rules', 2002) put it: 'Current media ownership rules in the UK prevent any one entity acquiring excessive influence in the sector, thereby ensuring plurality of voice and diversity of content'.

Different perspectives on the nature of the relationship between ownership and control of the media are, as we have just seen, significant in terms of both how the media is controlled and the information created and distributed to audiences. In the next section, therefore, we need to explore the significance of this 'information distribution' in terms of the relationship between the mass media and ideology

Ideology

Introduction

In the previous section we touched upon a number of ideas relating to different explanations of the relationship between the mass media and ideology and in this section we can develop these ideas to provide a more in-depth analysis of the ideological role of the mass media.

⚠ Preparing the ground

The concept of *ideology* has a relatively short – but chequered – history. First coined in the early nineteenth century (by a Frenchman, Destutt de Tracy), its original meaning was the 'science of ideas' – a science to be used to evaluate the truth or falsity of different ideas. However, somewhat ironically, the term came to have a different meaning in the twentieth century; if something was 'ideological' it was held to be based on *untested ideas* and was, as **Blake** ('What is Systematic Ideology?', 2004) notes, not to be believed because it involved a *partial*, or *biased*, account – a meaning that, in some respects, we find attached to present day uses of the concept.

More recently, postmodernists have tended to reject its use (preferring instead to use concepts like *narrative* and *discourse* because of their more precise definition and usage – although the term is still implicitly used when postmodernists refer to the idea of *metanarratives*. Whatever you may think about postmodernism, a useful way to understand the concept of ideology is to think about the idea of a *narrative* (or story if you prefer).

WARM UP: IDENTIFYING IDEOLOGIES

When we write or talk about something, we reveal our ideas to the world. For this exercise, choose one of the following:

- What are families for?
- What is the purpose of education?

Identify as many ideas as you can about the topic and write them up into a story you could, if required, talk about for about 5 minutes (about 400 – 500 words). You can do this individually or in small groups and each should, in turn list the basic ideas on which their story is based on the board for the whole class.

Read the story to the class.

From this exercise, we can identify a number of characteristics of ideologies.

- **Interrelated beliefs**: The important idea here is the beliefs we hold about

something are related to each other. For example, you may believe the purpose of education is to achieve qualifications. This basic (or core) belief will influence other beliefs, such as how to achieve qualifications (through attending school, for example), your relationships with others in the education system and so forth.

- **Norms and values**: Ideologies involve ideas about norms (for example, your family ideology may see it as the norm for parents to raise their own children) and values (you may, for example, believe parents should provide for their children).

- **Truth or falsity**: The ideas that make up a particular ideology don't have to be true – you only have to believe them. It may or may not be true, for example, that the purpose of education is to achieve qualifications, but if you believe this is – or is not – the case it will influence how you behave in school.

- **Collective/personal**: Ideologies can be believed by large numbers of people (for example, many people in our society believe in conservative and socialist political ideologies) or they can be unique, personal, things (you may, for example, believe you were once abducted by aliens from the planet Zilog who, after conducting extensive experiments, then returned you to earth with superior powers of intelligence).

⚠️ Digging deeper

We can develop these ideas by noting a couple of definitions that extend the concept in various ways. **Martin Joseph** (*Sociology For Everyone*, 1990), for example, argues ideologies involve:

- **A set of beliefs**.
- **Explanations** for something (for example, why some people are rich and some poor in our society). **Penny Henderson** (*A-Level Sociology*, 1981), for example, notes: 'An ideology is a pattern of ideas, both factual and evaluative [based on our values], which claims to explain and legitimise the social structure and culture of a particular group in society'.
- **Justifications** for people's behaviour (for example, why women, in the main, do the majority of housework in our society). Henderson again notes how ideologies are used 'to justify social actions which are in accordance with that pattern of ideas.'
- **Social groups**, in the sense ideologies are learnt and relate, in some way, to people's behaviour.
- **Mapping**: **Steve Chibnall** (*Law-and-Order News*, 1977) introduces a useful idea to help us understand the concept when he notes: 'Ideological structures permit events to be "mapped", i.e. located within wider contexts and related to similar events'.

In other words, if we think about ideologies as a form of *mental map* that can be used to tell us not only where we have been (our personal and social history) but also the right route to take to get us safely to where we want to go, we start to understand both a function of ideology and, by extension, its power and significance in relation to the mass media.

In relation to this last point, imagine, for example, society is like 'uncharted territory'; to travel around it we can:

- **Experience** it for ourselves. In other words, we map the territory as we go

along, creating a *personal ideological map* of the society in which we live.

- **Buy** a map someone else has already created.

If you think about this for a moment, we actually combine these two things as we move through society. On the one hand, people (such as parents and friends) socialise us, using the mental maps they have developed and, on the other, we experience things 'for ourselves' (self-socialisation); in this respect, we combine the two to create our map of society.

At this point you could be forgiven for wondering what this has to do with the mass media. The answer is the media are a *socialising agency* (a potentially very powerful one) who, in essence, try to sell us **social maps** (or ideologies) that explain where we have been as a society and, potentially, where we should be going.

What we need to do next, therefore, is to look at how different sociological perspectives explain the significance of the mass media's role in creating and perpetuating ideological maps since, as **George Orwell** (*1984*, 1949) argued: 'Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.'

Traditional (Instrumental) Marxism

⚠ Preparing the ground

Traditional Marxist perspectives emphasise an important role of the media as being one of *policing the values* of (capitalist) society. In this respect, we can note three initial points:

- **Owners and controllers** are powerful, both in terms of economic ownership ('those who own the physical means of production') and the ownership of ideas (control over the 'mental means of production' – how people think about their world and how they behave on the basis of the beliefs they are encouraged by the media to hold).

- **Ideology**: Media owners are able to control ideas because they control the information people are allowed to have. In other words, the media are not just biased (all forms of ideology, as I have suggested, involve bias because they select certain types of information as important and discard other, alternative sources and interpretations) but *consciously biased*; they propagate a *world view* (or ideology) that explicitly favours the rich and powerful.

- **Manipulation**: This perspective is sometimes portrayed as offering a *manipulative model* of media bias, in the sense those who own and control the media use it as a tool to manipulate public opinion in ways favourable to a ruling class.

From this perspective, therefore, the media is an (increasingly) important agency of *social control*. Media ownership affords the ability to manipulate information and ideas and, in basic terms, if you own a newspaper and want to put across a particular version of events there's no-one to stop you doing just that. Social control, therefore, involves things like:

- **Access**: People whose views reflect those of media owners are given access to the media, whereas those whose views do not are denied access to air their (alternative or contradictory) ideas.

- **Dominant ideology**: Related to questions of access, from this perspective ideas favourable to a ruling class are consistently highlighted and promoted in the media. For example, daily newspapers in our society consistently seek out and promote the views of business leaders, whereas the views of Trade Unionists are rarely featured unless they agree with the line taken by business or they are being subjected to a process of:

- **Marginalisation**: On occasions, alternative views are not simply ignored but explicitly attacked. In other words, alternative interpretations of events are *marginalised* (pushed to the edges of any debate) by being labelled as 'extremist', 'misguided', 'lunatic' and so forth.

The **Glasgow Media Group's** series of *Bad News* books contains a range of examples illustrating how television news, for example, manipulated the way business and trade unions were portrayed during strikes in the 1980s and **Mustafa Hussain** ('Mapping Minorities and their Media', 2002) outlines how ethnic minority groups have been targeted by

the Danish media when he notes: 'The media . . . began to display openly an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric . . . ethnic minorities' exclusion and marginalisation in the . . . mainstream media . . . remains quite conspicuous'.

- **Entertainment and diversions** that stop people thinking about how they are exploited and oppressed.

- **Scapegoating**, which, for example, involves identifying particular social groups as the cause of social problems – in the examples here, asylum seekers are portrayed as the cause of 'racial problems'. For instrumental Marxists, scapegoating is designed to create divisions within and between social classes, ethnic groups, genders and the like.

War on minicab sex attackers: 27/11/03 From *The Evening Standard*.

[This report] used one case out of 167 – a rapist jailed last March who happened to have applied for asylum – to illustrate news that police can now take DNA samples from minicab drivers stopped for operating without a licence. The story warned that such sex attacks by 'illegal minicab drivers' are likely to increase over the Christmas period.

SWAN BAKE Asylum seekers steal the Queen's birds for barbecues: July 2003 From *The Sun*.

'Callous asylum seekers are barbecuing the Queen's swans, The Sun can reveal. East European poachers lure the protected Royal birds into baited traps, an official Metropolitan Police report says.'

Steve Knight of the Swan Sanctuary said he could not confirm the incident described ever happened.

Source: http://www.ramproject.org.uk/

⚠ Digging deeper

From this perspective, the role of the media is that of ensuring the views and interests of a ruling class are presented to the rest of the population in such a way as to ensure people accept things like social and economic inequality as 'normal and right'. The media, through their owners, are tightly integrated into both economic and political elites in ways that reflect the basic interests of such groups.

The roots of this media perspective can be traced to Germany in the 1930s and the work of the *Frankfurt School* – a group of writers who developed ideas about both the nature of the media in *totalitarian societies* (ones ruled by a dictatorship, such as in Nazi Germany) and, most importantly, concepts of **mass society: Kristina Ross** ('Mass Culture' 1995) notes a *mass society* is one where 'the masses' (as opposed to the small ruling elite) have the following characteristics.

- **Wide dispersal** across a geographic area. People are not in daily face-to-face contact with each other and this creates:

- **Social isolation**: People have little or no meaningful contact or social interaction. What interaction there is (work, for example) is largely *instrumental*. In other words, people lack strong social ties binding them together in communities.

- **Anonymity**: Where social interaction is limited, people rarely feel they are part of a functioning social group, community or society – which is where the media enters the picture; Ross suggests that if society is characterised by 'demographically heterogeneous [mixed] but behaviourally homogenous [similar] groups', the media can be used to create a sense of community and culture.

Hence, the importance of a related idea, namely **mass culture**. The 'culture of the masses', sometimes called – not entirely accurately – *popular* or *low* culture (to distinguish it from the *high culture* of the social elite) is the *social glue* that binds mass society. From this perspective, it provides the 'things in common' (such as values and beliefs) socially isolated individuals can share to create the *illusion* of a common culture – the characteristics of which are:

- **Manufacture**: This culture is artificial, in the sense of not being created by the people who consume it. People are, as **DeFleur** and **Ball-Rokeach** (*Theories of Mass Communication*, 1989) note merely '… acted upon by external forces'.

- **Mass Production**: As **Fiske** ('Popular Culture', 1995), *notes:* 'The cultural commodities of mass culture – films, TV shows, CDs, etc. are produced and distributed by an industrialized system whose aim is to maximize profit for the producers and distributors by appealing to as many consumers as possible' – an idea related to the concept of a:

- **Lowest Common Denominator** (LCD): To appeal to 'the masses', cultural products have to be safe, not intellectually demanding and predictable. In other words, to appeal to 'as many consumers as possible' they have to be bland, inoffensive and relatively simple to understand.

⚠ Growing it yourself: LCD culture

Using the following table as a guide, identify examples of the 'cultural artefacts' of mass culture (I've identified some to get you started). Briefly explain why each artefact you've identified can be considered part of 'LCD culture'.

Medium	Examples	Explanation
Print	Mass circulation newspapers (*The Sun*, *The Mirror*) *FHM*, *Nuts*, *Just 17* . . .	Focus on 'celebrity' gossip and trivia.
Electronic	Reality TV shows (*Big Brother*, *Wife Swap* . . .) Soap operas (*Coronation Street*, *EastEnders* . . .) MTV	Subjecting people to intrusive surveillance, ritual humiliation and conflict for our 'entertainment'. Involvement in the lives of 'realistic communities'. Dealing with 'real life' issues (AIDS etc.).

Neo-(Hegemonic) Marxism

⚠ Preparing the ground

From this perspective, the role of the media is a complex one that reflects the complexity of class relationships and interests. In this respect, the ideological role of the media is considered in terms of how they act to create and sustain a broad political consensus in society around a set of core or 'fundamental' values. By their ability to do this, the media are able to reflect a variety of different opinions while, at the same time, absorbing critical views that may threaten the stability of the system.

Society as a supermarket

A simple way to understand how this works, is by using the analogy of the supermarket to represent society.

- **Core values**: To shop successfully in the supermarket, you have to accept a number of basic values. These include things like: paying for the food you want; not eating something before you pay for it; not going behind the counters or into the storerooms and so forth – it actually doesn't matter what these core values are, you simply have to recognise they exist (and that you'll be punished in some way if you deviate from them).

- **Conflict values**: Once inside the supermarket, you are faced with an array of choices to make: Premium or Value baked beans? Persil or Daz? Pay by cash or by credit card? These choices are real, but also limited – you can only buy what's on the shelf. If you value freerange eggs but they are not on sale you can't have them. You can, of course, go to the farm shop that's handily situated just next door, but the general process is the same – the eggs may be freerange but they are not free, so even though you're making a choice, core values are still preserved. Supermarket owners prefer you to buy certain things (and the advertising industry depends on convincing you one brand of toothpaste is better than another) and they use certain tricks and techniques to shape your choice – special offers, brighter packaging, eye-catching displays and so forth are all designed to make you choose one product over another.

Keeping the above ideas in mind, we can relate them to an understanding of the ideological role of the media which, from this perspective, is not one of providing a 'common culture for the masses'; the concept of mass society is seen as unrealistic and over-simplified – think of the range of (cultural) choices available within the supermarket, for example.

Rather, the role of the media is considered in terms of how it helps maintain the broad status quo in society (protecting those core values). Just as a major problem for a supermarket owner is how to win customer loyalty (and increase profits), the central problem for a bourgeois (ruling) class is how to win control of people's behaviour in a way that encourages them to contribute to their own (economic) exploitation. The key idea here, therefore, is the **manufacture of consensus**. The media, from this perspective, play a crucial role in both *socialising* audiences and, by extension, *manufacturing* a consensus around which people can be socialised (those core values again). In other words, people have to either accept fully the core values of the society in which they live or, if they try to reject them, be unable to change them. We need to look next, therefore, at how this ideological process of manufacture works.

⚠ Digging deeper

For hegemonic Marxists, the role of the media is an implicitly ideological one – the trick is to influence the way people think about their world while appearing to do no such thing. The manufacture of consensus is, therefore, achieved in a number of ways, using a number of devices.

- **Hierarchy of access**: Traditionally, access to the media (in terms of producing a newspaper, film or television programme and creating information that reaches a wide audience) has been restricted by both cost (producing and distributing a national newspaper is, as you might have guessed, very expensive) and the fact that

in order to be 'heard' (as a reporter, for example) you have to work for a media owner.

The development of the **new mass media** has, of course, made this process easier and more accessible, although access restrictions still apply – you need a computer, Internet access, the ability to set up web pages, web logs (or 'blogs' – a type of online diary) and so forth. Having noted this, access to some forms of new media is significantly cheaper and, in a sense, poses a problem for instrumental Marxist perspectives because it holds out the prospect of a much wider spread of views being heard. For hegemonic Marxists, however, this isn't a particularly significant development, one reason for this being:

- **Hierarchies of trust**: Information (such as news) is not equal, in the sense that people place different levels of trust in information depending on how they perceive its source. **Hargreaves** and **Thomas** ('New News, Old News', 2002), for example, found most people (91%) used and respected television news (comparable figures were: 73% for newspapers, 59% for radio and 15% for the internet). In addition, young people were more likely to 'pay attention' to broadcast news 'when they know something interesting is going on'. Having said this, they also found a minority (43%) thought television news represented all sections of society and 'The internet is now the preferred news medium among some younger ethnic minority groups'.

- **Voices**: In general, the old mass media (and to some extent the new) give greater access and prominence to 'The Great and the Good'; in other words, the views of the rich and the powerful are more likely to be sought out and reported. They are also more likely to be given a platform (a newspaper article, a TV programme and the like) that lets them speak directly to an audience (rather than have their views reported by a journalist). Hegemonic Marxists argue this results, in part, from the way the media is organised (something we will investigate in more detail in a later section) rather than it being 'consciously biased reporting'. **Philo** and **Berry** (*Bad New from Israel*, 2004), for example, capture this idea when they report the following from a female journalist:

I think, 'Oh God the Palestinians say this and the Israelis say that' and I have to . . . make a judgement and I say this is what happened . . . I know it's a question of interpretation so I have to say what both sides think and I think sometimes that stops us from giving the background we should be giving, because I think well, bloody hell, I've only three minutes to do this piece and I'm going to spend a minute going through the arguments.

- **Audience**: Just as with different supermarket products, different types of media can be aimed at different audiences; readers of the *Daily Mail*, for example, don't usually read *The Guardian*. Although these two newspapers have different political values (the *Mail* is politically conservative and leans towards a New Right view on things like family life, national defence and sexuality, whereas *The Guardian* is politically liberal) they share many core economic and political assumptions about the society in which they operate.

- **Gatekeeping** describes the idea information presented to an audience is filtered through a (potentially) large number of people, each of whom have to make decisions about what to include and exclude. Gatekeepers include media controllers (such as editors and journalists) but also, on occasions, owners. Gatekeepers also have control over the way information is presented to an audience – which relates to some of the ideas we have just outlined.

- **Agenda setting**: The media conform to certain *taken for granted* beliefs about society and, by so doing, *set the agenda* for debate. An obvious example here is sexual deviance – paedophilia, for example, is absolutely 'beyond the pale' and not up for discussion; any newspaper that advocated this form of sexuality would rapidly find itself in trouble with readers, politicians and the police.

- **Preferred readings**: Just as supermarkets have ways of convincing people to buy one product rather than another (even through they may be side by side on the same shelf), so too does the media. A *preferred reading*, as the name suggests, is the thing or things the producer of a newspaper article, for example, would like

Discussion point: sexual agendas

Now she's Flabby Titmuss
The Sun 02/09/04

'BRAZEN Abi Titmuss flashes her boobs yesterday — as she also reveals her new **DOUBLE CHIN**.

The ex-nurse has been living it up since splitting from shamed John Leslie with TV work and partying.

But blonde Abi, 28 now appears to be piling **ON** the pounds as well as earning them. The satellite porn TV presenter revealed her look at a London bash. Perhaps she wants an even bigger profile'.

Double trouble. . . Abi bares her boobs. . . and her chins.

Svelte. . . Abi in her slimline days.

What sort of sexual (and other) agendas are being set in this report? You might want to think about the following:

Sexuality	How are the 'Before' and 'After' pictures used to suggest 'desirability'?
Celebrity	How is the reference to 'shamed' used to suggest approval/disapproval (John Leslie was cleared in court of a rape charge)?
Weight	What are we being told about body shape and size?

What other agendas can you identify in the report/pictures?

you to believe (without you particularly noticing your opinions and beliefs are being influenced – just like advertising, in some respects). One way to do this is through the use of headlines and sub-headings telling you what to expect before you've read the article; another way is to use captions to tell you what a picture is about or – more significantly perhaps – what it *means*.

If you look at the pictures of Abi Titmuss in the previous exercise, you can see how this process works.

- **The headline** tells you the purpose of the story, a reasonably famous woman has put on weight – and that is a bad thing. You know this because of the word 'flabby' – something not considered attractive.

- **The pictures**: One is clearly posed (the one you're encouraged to consider as the desirable version) whereas the other catches the model in a decidedly unflattering pose.

- **The captions** reinforce the headline's suggestion. 'Svelte', for example, tells you what one picture means, whereas as 'Double trouble' is a simple play on words to highlight both her breasts and her extra chin (and as you may know, for *The Sun*, while large female breasts are considered desirable, overweight women most certainly aren't).

This also illustrates a technique for studying the media called **semiology**, which can be used to interpret the 'hidden messages' embedded within a piece of text. For example, when you look the pictures, there are two levels of meaning.

- **Denotations** or what something *is* – in this instance, pictures of a young women. If you are not told who she is, or the significance of the pictures, this leaves any possible interpretation open to you, the audience. Therefore, as part of the *preferred reading*, you need to be told *why* these pictures are significant, which involves:

- **Connotations** or what something *means*. In this instance, the headlines and captions tell you very clearly how you are *supposed* to understand the story, but if you are interested (and even if you are not), there are other techniques being used to influence your interpretation. In the 'Svelte' picture, for example, the model has her head slightly bowed towards the camera – a submissive gesture in our culture. This is used to present two ideas (at least); firstly, it is a coy gesture used to suggest availability and desire. Secondly, it is a gesture frequently used by children, (they bow their head when being told off, for example) and it suggests youth (something the newspaper uses to symbolise attractiveness).

Pluralism

⚠ Preparing the ground

In this final section we can outline a range of different interpretations about the ideological role of the mass media to the ones we have just examined. These views can be loosely grouped under the banner of pluralist perspectives. The distinguishing characteristics of these perspectives (aside from offering a different interpretation to Marxist perspectives) are:

- **Diversity**: Even in situations where old forms of media are highly – and perhaps increasingly – *concentrated*, pluralist perspectives argue there exists a range of views on offer. Such diversity is even more evident in the new mass media, where relatively low start-up, production and distribution costs have led to a proliferation of media outlets. In other words:

- **Choice** is stressed by pluralists, not just in terms of having a range of different media and views from which to choose, but also in terms of choice being exercised by consumers. Pluralists argue the consumer (not the producer, as Marxist perspectives suggest) is the most important factor in relation to the media and ideology because it is the consumer who decides what to buy. If a producer doesn't offer the things people want to read, watch or listen to, they go out of business. This 'discipline of the market place' – trying to find ways to give people what they want – involves:

- **Competition**: Owners compete with each other to win market share and create profits which, in turn, produces innovation and diversity. Owners and controllers, driven by the need to maintain market share, are continually looking for ways to improve their product – whether this be *technologically* (satellite and cable channels or digital television, for example) or *qualitatively* (such as developing new types of programming). From this perspective, the main imperative is an economic one – making profits – which means:

- **Audiences** are the most important element in the overall equation. Media audiences, from this perspective, are *not passive* (merely buying whatever media owners provide) but *active* – people are discerning consumers; they buy what they like and ignore the things that don't fit their lifestyles or beliefs. Thus, if you don't like the style or politics of *The Sun*, you buy *The Guardian* (and if you don't like their style or politics, you can buy the *Socialist Worker* …).

The rapid development of new media simply increases the diversity and choice available to consumers – there are websites that reflect most shades of political and ideological opinion (and if they don't you can start your own); if you don't like Microsoft products, there are plenty of (free) alternatives on the Internet.

Overall, from a pluralist perspective the situation described by Marxists (that audiences consume whatever owners demand they consume) is reversed; media owners demand from their employees (editors, journalists and so forth) whatever consumers want. In this respect, as we will see in a moment, this places media controllers in a unique and potentially powerful position; part of their job is to seek out and respond to consumer demand and, if they do this successfully, all sections of society are satisfied – owners and consumers each get what they want (profits for the former, entertainment, information and so forth for the latter).

Finally, we can note the ideological role of the media, from this perspective, involves providing:

- **Information** services that keep people in touch with political and economic developments and cater for specialist interest groups (youth, gardening and

Discussion point: different views

NOW WE ARE THE IRAQ EXTREMISTS

Mirror, Aug 22 2003

THE 'liberation' of Iraq is a cruel joke on a stricken people. The Americans and British, partners in a great recognised crime, have brought down on the Middle East, and much of the rest of the world, the prospect of terrorism and suffering on a scale that al-Qaeda could only imagine.

What do the headlines and stories reproduced here tell us about the ideological role of the media?

Do they support a:
- hegemonic Marxist view
- pluralist view?

Briefly note reasons to support your decision.

'Mark Thatcher, son of a former Prime Minister is arrested over possible involvement in an African coup attempt'

'Three police stations a month shut under 'tough on crime' Labour'

'Mirror poll reveals Britain thinks President Bush is threat to world peace and not welcome here'

'Dad of terminally-ill boy is charged with his murder'

cookery enthusiasts to name but three). A diversity of media exist and people can choose from different sources of information. This applies, as we have seen, to both old and new media – access to the Internet, for example, means people can get information from both national and global sources.

- **Policing**: A variety of media, reflecting a range of different viewpoints, means the activities of the powerful can be scrutinised, exposed and criticised, which reflects a form of:

- **Social control**, whereby the diversity of old and new media means some sections will represent the interests of 'ordinary people'. The media can, for example, highlight for public scrutiny the activities of the powerful and, by so doing, call such people to account for their behaviour.

⚠ Digging deeper

The general pluralist perspective has, according to **Graham Thomas** ('Political Communication', 2004), a number of key features, which include:

- **Public debate**: A plurality of media facilitates freedom of speech and allows for public debates around issues. A vigorous public debate, for example, arose around the decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003.

- **State control** of the media, in democratic, pluralist, societies is *indirect*; government doesn't directly control or censor information. Its role is, by and large, a *regulatory* one – it sets certain parameters (or limits) for things like media ownership. The government may also, through associated agencies like the

Office for Communications (Ofcom), set standards for public decency and so forth for things like advertising and broadcasting.

- **Political opinions**: A wide range of opinion is covered within both old and, especially new media. Many of these views may be hostile to the government, media owners and so forth.

- **Attitude formation**: The key argument here is the media do not create people's attitudes; rather, **Thomas** argues, they 'reflect and reinforce them, corroborating attitudes rather than creating them . . . the rather conservative attitudes of the [British] press reflect the prevailing attitudes in society'.

New right perspectives, while echoing much of the above, take issue with the role of government in relation to:

- **Ownership**: The New Right see government media ownership (such as the BBC in Britain) as working against the interests of consumers by distorting economic markets. Since the BBC, for example, is guaranteed funding from the taxpayer (through a licence fee levied on television ownership) it doesn't have to compete against other channels for viewers and revenue. Thus, government media ownership can be used to limit or remove:

- **Competition**: In 2002, for example, the BBC was given a central role in the development of computer software for use in schools. The argument here (whether or not it's true) is that small software companies cannot compete against the BBC's power to distribute free software and this, it's argued, stifles innovation.

From this perspective, competition through diverse media ownership is seen as guaranteeing consumer choice.

- **Convergence**: This relates to the way different types of media can combine to create newer forms (for example, streaming television pictures over the Internet). Unlike Marxist perspectives, New Right perspectives see processes like convergence as something that should be encouraged, rather than discouraged through regulation. Rules governing (and to some extent preventing) cross-media ownership, it is argued, prevent companies developing these new technologies.

- **Regulation**: Anything that hinders the working of economic markets is, therefore, undesirable since only free markets can deliver innovation and economic development. As Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (2004) put it: 'For too long, the UK's media have been over-regulated and over-protected from competition'.

In terms of newspaper publishing, the chairman of the Press Complaints Commission, **Christopher Meyer** argued, in a speech to the Newspaper Society (2003): 'Any infringement of self-regulation would not just erode the freedoms of the press . . . it would curtail the freedoms of the citizen, who, in a democratic society, will always depend on media uninhibited by both control by the state and deference to the establishment to protect their liberty'. **Compaine** ('The myths of encroaching global media ownership', 2001) also argues: 'even corporations must respect the discipline of the market. A diverse media

reflects the plurality of publics in modern society. This is democracy in action'.

Postmodern perspectives can be (very loosely) included within a general pluralist perspective for a couple of reasons relating to:

- **Ideology**: Although postmodernists prefer to talk about the media in terms of *narratives* and *metanarratives* rather than ideologies (the difference – for our purpose at least – is probably academic) they question Marxist arguments about the ideological role of the media.

- **Globalisation**: In a world that, to use **Marshall McCluhan**'s famous phrase (*The Global Village*, 1989), increasingly resembles a 'global village', the media can't be subject to the kinds of controls, checks and balances – characteristic of modern societies – that restricts the free flow of ideas and information.

Where postmodernism differs from Marxist, Pluralist and New Right perspectives is in the characterisation of **information structures**. Whereas the modernist perspectives we have examined view information *hierarchically* (the flow is from producers – at the top – to consumers at the bottom), postmodernists (as I suggested earlier) view information in terms of *networks*. **Castells** (*The Information Age*, 1996) suggests postmodernists characterise societies in terms of the way 'networks have become the dominant form of social organization'. For this reason **power** (in terms of control over the production and distribution of information), is no longer concentrated within institutions (media organisations, governments and so forth) but within *social networks* where information is both produced and consumed by the same

people. Information, therefore, flows between different points (people) within a network in such a way as to make it impossible to distinguish between producer and consumer (because they are, effectively, one and the same).

In this respect, **Tuomi** ('The Blog and the Public Sphere', 2002), identifies the characteristic features of postmodern media (and web logs in particular) in terms of:

- **User as producer** – they are, as I have just suggested, the same people.

- **Backstage is frontstage**: This reflects **Goffman's** idea (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1969) of social interaction as a performance; just like an actor in a play, we prepare and evaluate our public (or *frontstage*) performances 'backstage' – in private, as it were. Tuomi adapts this idea to argue that with something like a web log or chatroom there is no *backstage* – all interaction is played out within the confines of the medium – an idea developed by writers such as **Meyrowitz** ('Medium Theory', 1994).

- **Content reflects interpretation**: In other words, the way different people in the network interpret information contributes to the development of the media – a reversal and rebuttal of the Marxist idea of a *preferred reading*.

The main implication of the above – and postmodern thinking generally – is we have to discard (modernist) concepts such as truth or falsity when thinking about the ideological role of the media. All knowledge, from this perspective, is ideological – which makes it a fairly pointless exercise trying to argue some forms of information are more

(or indeed less) ideological than any other form of information.

⊛ **To identify and explore postmodern concepts (not just those relating to the media) in more detail, see:**
http://www.sociology.org.uk

In this section we have outlined various perspectives on the ideological role of the media (which linked to debates about the relative significance of media ownership and control) and, in the next section we can examine some of the ways media ideologies influence (or not as the case may be) the selection and presentation of media content.

Selection and presentation

Introduction

This section focuses on what **David Barrat** (*Media Sociology*, 1992) has termed the 'social context of media production' or, in less technical terms, different explanations of the processes of selection and presentation of media content. In other words, having examined things like the significance of ownership and control and different interpretations of media bias, we now need to look more closely at some of the factors affecting the way media content is created and distributed.

To do this we can group such factors – for no better reason than our theoretical convenience – around the idea of economic, political and cultural influences on the general process of media production.

⚠ Preparing the ground

The world, as someone probably once said, is a big place. Whether we consider it at a global, national or local level, it is clear there is a lot of information swilling around, some of which finds its way into the media, the majority of which doesn't (for a variety of different reasons). We need, therefore, to think about the information, considered in its very widest sense, that does find its way into the media and, to do this, we need to initially think about two things in terms of media content:

- **Selection** refers to the processes involved in deciding what will appear in the media. As I have suggested, some form of selection process must take place on a daily basis since, on the one hand, the amount of potential content is vast and someone, somewhere, has to decide what – and what not – to select; on the other hand, the selection process is not arbitrary or random. Conscious decisions are made about content that reflect, as we will see, a variety of influences – economic, political and ideological.

- **Presentation** refers to the way this content, once selected, is transmitted to an audience. Media content isn't just placed into the public domain 'as is'; it is subject to a variety of processes and packaging before it reaches an audience and we need to understand how the presentation of content is also part of a social construction process.

The selection and presentation of content are not, of course, unrelated processes. A newspaper, for example, may decide to both select a particular story – from the many available each day – and to present it in a particular way (ideas we have previously met when we noted concepts such as *gatekeeping* and *agenda-setting*). The warm up exercise opposite should help to clarify these ideas.

If you deconstruct (take apart) this report carefully, you will notice how it uses a combination of *selection* and *presentation* to produce content reflecting a particular viewpoint – that 'Britain's youngsters' appear to be indulging in a veritable orgy of drink, drugs and violent, anti-social behaviour. This, I would argue, is not actually supported by the *facts* – as opposed to *opinions* – presented (did you, for example, note the way the headline and sub-heading refer to 'all youth', whereas the survey actually related to a tiny percentage of British youth?).

The type of analysis you have just done illustrates some – but by no means all – of the social processes involved in the selection and presentation of media content. What we need to do next, therefore, is to identify and outline some of these processes.

Economic factors

A range of economic factors come into play when considering media content. These include:

- **Costs**: *Production and distribution* costs, especially considered in terms of old media (although new media costs shouldn't be discounted – some forms, such as news web sites, may be just as, if not more, expensive to set up and run as their old media counterparts), influence the selection and presentation of content since they impact on things like:

WARM UP: SELECTING AND PRESENTING

Have a look at the following newspaper report and think about the following:

- What facts can you identify?
- What opinions can you identify?
- Do the facts presented support the opinions voiced?

Using the *factual* material in the story, re-write the article to show 'British youths' are actually law-abiding.

Shame of our kids
News of the World 19/05/02

BRITAIN'S youngsters are sinking into a pit of crime, drink and drugs, a shock poll reveals. More than a quarter of **ALL** children aged up to 16 admit breaking the law. And the same proportion of kids excluded from school say they have taken heroin, crack or ecstasy. For the first time research lays bare the frightening extent to which Britain's teenagers are rejecting normal society.

The poll exposes a generation of kids who have minimal respect for the law, who embrace a culture of drink and drugs, and who often move on to commit serious crime.

The poll found **HALF** of all 15-year-olds had been offered cannabis. Around **ONE IN FIVE** had been offered a Class A drug such as heroin, crack or ecstasy. The survey discovered that more and more youngsters are losing respect for the police – by committing petty offences such as fare-dodging, graffiti and criminal damage. And serious offences such as car theft, violence and carrying weapons such as knives and guns are on the rise. The research among youngsters aged from 11 to 16 and excluded from school reveals the most frightening facts of all. Besides the quarter who have tried hard drugs, a shocking **78 PER CENT** admit to regularly drinking alcohol. More than **50 PER CENT** drink on street corners or in parks after illegally buying alcohol from an off-licence. **ONE IN FOUR** of expelled kids boasted about stealing mobile phones. Astonishingly, **64 PER CENT** of them each break the law 44 times a year. **ONE IN FIVE** carries a **KNIFE** and **ONE IN 12** boasts of carrying a **GUN**. More than 10,000 pupils are excluded from school **EVERY YEAR**.

- **News gathering**: A national newspaper or television company, for example, will have many more resources at its disposal (journalists, production and administration staff and so forth) than a local newspaper or television company. Having said this, news agencies (organisations, such as the Press Association or Reuters that collect and sell news material) are often used by media outlets to lower the cost of news reporting.

- **Production values** relate to the *quality* of the product presented to an audience. The BBC, for example, routinely spends more on its programmes than small satellite TV

channels and, consequently, tends to produce material with higher production values. Within different forms of media programming, costs may also vary and this goes some way towards determining how content is selected and presented. For example, it is much cheaper to show a video produced by a record company to support one of its artists than it is to produce a one-hour episode of original TV drama (the average cost of which **Chung** (2004) notes is currently around £250,000).

- **Distribution**: The physical delivery of some media forms (such as newspapers, magazines and books) also determines, to some extent, the selection and presentation of content. Print media, for example, have restrictions on space (with associated additional costs related to the production of extra pages in a newspaper or magazine, for example) that don't apply to new media (such as web pages – the cost of whose distribution is relatively minimal).

- **Technology**: A further factor affecting both production and distribution costs is the level of technology available and used. For example, a global media company can select programming from a wide and diverse range of sources unavailable to individuals producing small web sites or documenting events in their local community through a web log. In addition, we can talk here about:

  - **Push** technologies: Content providers (such as a newspaper, book or television producer) send information regardless of whether or not it has

been specifically requested; unrequested (or spam) email is a new media example of such technology.

  - **Pull technologies**: The audience can request specific forms of information from a content provider. When you type a URL into a web browser, for example, you are using a simple form of pull technology.

  - All media has some pull element (you choose to buy *Cosmopolitan* rather than *FHM*) but computer technology takes selection and presentation to a different level since, in theory, the audience can request information from a wide variety of sources tailored to their specific needs – news focused on stock-market information, sport or education delivered to your computer desktop, for example.

- **Competition** between media providers takes place on a number of levels and affects the selection and presentation of content in a variety of ways.

  - **Intra-medium** (within the same medium) competition may result in different organisations capturing or losing different kinds of content. For example, live Premiership football has been an important part of the satellite company BSkyB's audience strategy – it has successfully sold subscriptions to its channels on the back of this 'premium content' (content people are willing to pay extra to receive). However, since BSkyB has exclusive rights to this content, other broadcasters are unable to offer a similar service. The BBC, for example, can currently (2004) show recorded highlights and ITV are restricted to

showing brief clips as part of its news service.

- **Inter-media** (between different media) competition, on the other hand, results in content being selected and presented in ways tailored to the particular strengths of the medium. Music, for example, is packaged differently on radio than it is on TV channels such as MTV or VH1 (where full use is made of the visual dimension to sell the music to an audience).

- **Profits**: For privately owned media, profitability is an important influence on selection and production processes since the creation of profits may be dependent on a precise knowledge of the audience for your content. In technical terms this is known as an *audience demographic* – understanding audience characteristics in terms of things like age, class, ethnicity and gender as well as less tangible things like lifestyles and tastes.

  The audience demographic for the Disney Cartoon Channel, for example, is likely to be very different to that of God TV (a Christian religious channel) and, consequently, media content has to be selected and presented with the audience in mind; if it is not, market share (and profits) may be lost as a potential audience turns to a different provider to give them the content they want.

- **Marketing** relates to the ability to select and present content in different – and appropriate – ways for different markets and audiences. The Hollywood film industry, for example, has developed a way of making films that sell in the widest possible markets and appeal to the largest number of people by the use of:

- Simple themes that translate easily into different cultures, for example, the juxtaposition of 'Good' against 'Bad'; the idea that although 'good' people will suffer trials (and 'bad' people might win small victories), the former will ultimately triumph.

- Standard plotlines: Think about how many films revolve around the 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl in the end' plotline.

- Global stereotypes: The lone, rugged, individual; the straight cop in a corrupt society; the evil drug-trafficker . . .

Political factors

The selection and presentation of information is, to some extent, governed by political rules governing media content, in which respect we can note ideas like:

- **Censorship** (or media regulation): Western governments rarely operate a system of *direct* media censorship (although in times of 'national emergency' – such as war – this may change). During the second Gulf War ('Operation Iraqi Freedom', 2003) the British and American governments operated a system of 'embedding' reporters within fighting units. **Andrew Gray** (*Embedding Gave War Reporters Access – and Anxiety*, 2003) noted this had both advantages ('first-hand' experience of the conflict, the documentation of the horrors and personal dramas of war and so forth) and disadvantages (reporters identifying too closely with the people protecting them and self-censorship of criminal actions, for example). Having said this, the British

government does operate forms of **direct media censorship**, which include:

- **The Official Secrets Act**: Information the government decides is a 'state secret' (or *classified information* to give it its technical name) cannot be published.

- **Defence Notices** (the 'D-Notice' system) are similar to Official Secrets but cover *non-classified information* about the armed forces. Although this is largely an informal, non-statutory, system, the 'D-Notice' Committee has the power to advise about and, in some instances, censor, the publication of information.

- **Positive vetting** of government employees (including those at the BBC) involves checks being made on the background of all prospective employees. Having first-hand knowledge of this process, I wasn't particularly convinced of its thoroughness (although I did remove my copy of Karl Marx's *Capital* from view prior to being interviewed, just in case . . .).

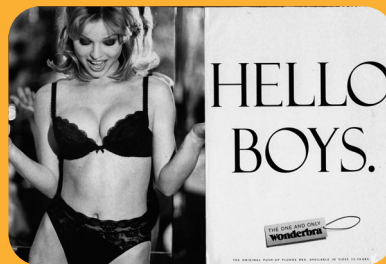- **Legal rules and regulations** cover a

Discussion point: banned

1. 2DTV: George Bush

2. Benetton

3. Club 18-31 Holidays

4. Wonderbra

Three of these adverts received complaints in the UK on the basis of 'taste and decency'; the fourth was banned on grounds of 'offensiveness to the President.'.

Identify as many reasons as you can for censoring/not censoring media content.

Discuss your reasons.

range of things in relation to advertising and broadcasting. Some television companies, for example, operate a 'watershed' (starting at 9 pm) before which sex, violence and swearing is limited.

- **Indirect media censorship** can be noted in a couple of ways.

  - **Commissions** overseeing media content. These are *technically independent* of direct government control, although since they're usually government-funded their actual level of independence may, in practice, be limited. The Office for Communications (Ofcom), for example, recently (2003) took over the regulation of UK communications industries (replacing the Broadcasting Standards Commission, Independent Television Commission, Office for Telecommunications (Oftel), the Radio Authority and the Radio Communications Agency).

  - The Advertising Standards Authority regulates advertising content, while the Press Complaints Commission (funded by the newspaper industry), 'deals with complaints from members of the public about the editorial content of newspapers and magazines'. The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) however, argues ('Britain's Media', 1997) the Commission 'has no effective powers, because of its self-regulatory role, as either a press watchdog or a vehicle for redress'.

- **Distribution networks** – which may, at first sight, seem an obscure form of indirect censorship. However, we can see

their potential for censorship in two main ways:

- **Physically distributing** print media (two companies – W.H. Smith and John Menzies – for example, controlled over 50% of the UK wholesale and retail distribution markets for newspapers and magazines in 1996). Whereas in France, for example, retailers are prevented by law from refusing to stock a periodical on commercial grounds, no such restrictions apply in the UK. Small circulation periodicals may be effectively 'censored' because the public have difficulty buying them or even knowing of their existence.

- **Copyright restrictions** on the distribution of, for example, electronic content (such as the aforesaid monopoly of BSkyB on the broadcasting of live Premiership football).

- **Bettina Peters** (*Corporate Media Trends in Europe*, 2001) argues:

  Companies in control of distribution networks . . . use their position as 'gatekeepers' to distribute mainly information and programme services of their own media group thus limiting free access.

- **Self-censorship** (or self-regulation) plays a part in the selection and presentation of media content, in terms of:

  - **News values** (discussed in more detail in the next section): This relates to the idea all media organisations have certain operating values. Such values may mean organisations don't publish certain things because their audience doesn't want it – The Times, for example, doesn't print pictures of topless women (because it is aimed at a high-culture audience) whereas its sister paper *The Sun* makes semi-naked

women a selling point for its (popular culture) audience. Owners and controllers also apply values when deciding whether or not to select and present particular stories. **Lanson** and **Stephens** (*Writing and Reporting The News*, 2003), for example, argue factors such as the impact of an event (things that affect a lot of people personally, for example, are more likely to be reported) or its uniqueness (unusual situations are more likely to be featured than run-of-the-mill events) are important news values.

- **Omission –** or the failure to report something – is not uncommon in the media. The French, for example, knew nothing of President Mitterrand's sexual affairs until after his death; similarly, President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky – although common knowledge to many journalists – was not reported until the story was broken on an Internet news site. During the 1990s, little or nothing appeared in the British media concerning the British bombing of Iraq following the 1991 war – and the effect of economic sanctions on the country was rarely – if at all – mentioned in the mainstream media.

- **Advertising**: Most forms of privately owned media rely on advertising income for their profitability and, consequently, are unlikely to behave in ways that upset their principal advertisers. **Noam Chomsky** (*Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, 1989), for example, documented a number of occasions where pressure from advertisers resulted in articles and programmes being

withdrawn or 'amended'. Similarly, **Lee** and **Solomon** (*Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media*, 1990) point to examples of pressure by advertisers in the USA: 'In 1989, Domino's Pizza cancelled its advertising on *Saturday Night Live* [a satirical TV programme] because of the show's alleged anti-Christian message'.

Digging deeper

Debates about media content have tended to revolve around the manipulation/ hegemony/pluralism axis we've previously outlined and, while you will be pleased to know I don't propose to go over this ground again, you should keep these ideas in mind since they provide a theoretical context for the interpretation of the material in this section. In this respect, although economic and political factors are important in relation to media content, we can dig a little deeper by examining a range of **cultural** (or ideological) **factors** surrounding a significant aspect of the mass media, namely the production of news. This particular area provides a wealth of material we can use to illustrate how media content is culturally selected and presented and we can begin by noting ideas about the **social construction** of 'news'. In basic terms, this involves the idea that 'what counts as news' is *socially determined*. Although everything that happens in a society is potentially news, the key factor that turns an event (or activity) into 'news' is that someone with the power to construct and enforce such labels decides it's *newsworthy*. In this respect, news is not a neutral, non-ideological, category; rather, it involves a set of *ideological prescriptions* (rules or agendas) that serve to classify events in particular ways.

This being the case, news is whatever people with the power to classify/report an event decides it will be (although, as you are aware, where definitions of news differ between, for example, a producer and their audience, something has to give – either people have to be persuaded they really are receiving news or the provider has to alter their definition to fit that of the audience). Be that as it may, we can think about the social construction of news by identifying some factors that influence the classification of information as news.

News values are, as I have suggested, the values used by organisations and individuals (such as editors, sub-editors and journalists) to guide their understanding of what is – and what isn't – newsworthy. **Steve Chibnall** (1977) in his analysis of British newspaper crime reporting defines this idea as: 'The criteria of relevance which guide reporters' choice and construction of newsworthy stories … learnt through a process of informal professional socialisation' and various writers have, over the years, isolated and classified journalistic news values.

Galtung and **Ruge** (1973), for example, identified news values and their meaning as shown in the table below.

News value	Meaning
Frequency	The duration of an event is an important consideration for different media (visual media like to feature fast-moving stories with plenty of action).
Size	How large and important is the event (in general, bigger equals more newsworthy)?
Unambiguous	The more clear-cut an event, in terms of the issues involved, the more likely it will be defined as news. If an event is complex it will be reduced to simple, clear, issues.
Meaningfulness	The closer the fit between the event and an audience's cultural background, the more newsworthy the event becomes. In our society, for example, 1000 people killed in a far off country is usually less newsworthy than 10 people killed in England.
Consonance	The ability to predict or want something to happen makes it news and relates to ideas such as *folk devils*, *moral panics*, *self-fulfilling prophecies* and *agenda setting*. If the predicted events don't happen, that too becomes news.
Continuity	The extent to which a news story can be given a context – a past and a future, for example.
Composition	News organisations like to feature a mixture of different stories (human interest, celebrity gossip, financial news, comment, etc.).

Steve Chibnall added the following ideas:

News Value	Meaning
Immediacy	'News' is, by definition, what's happening now.
Drama	The more dramatic an event, the more likely it is to become news.
Personalisation	'Important people' (defined in terms of the audience – celebrities are important to readers of The Sun and Mirror, politicians are important to readers of The Times and Telegraph) are given more attention and prominence. Stories also have more value if they can be *personalised*; that is, given a human interest angle.
Titillation	Sex is used to sell some newspapers, magazines and TV programmes.
Convention	Events are explained in ways familiar to an audience and their expectations.
Structured Access	Some people (*primary definers* such as reporters and experts) are given more opportunity than others to define the meaning of an event. This involves *hierarchies of credibility*, where more importance is given to some commentators than others.
Novelty	If an event is unusual or rare it is more newsworthy. New angles on an old event can also be newsworthy.

Lanson and Stephens (2003) noted a few more:

News Value	Meaning
Weight	An event's significance in relation to other, current, stories.
Controversy	Arguments and debates increase the value of news.
Usefulness	The extent to which the story helps people to understand the meaning of something.
Educational value	The extent to which people may be taught something of value.

⚠ Growing it yourself: news values

You will need access to a range of popular tabloid and broadsheet newspapers for this exercise.

Divide into small groups, each taking responsibility for one type of newspaper.

Using the categories of 'news values' identified above, briefly examine each story to see if it conforms to one or more of these values (write down the values represented in the story). Once finished, construct a table like the following and identify the type of story that fits each news value.

	Title of newspaper:
News value	**Story**
Size	
Drama	
Etc.	

☆ **Once you have done this, apply the same news values to an online news organisation. Links can be found at:**
http://www.sociology.org.uk/as4aqa.htm

If, as suggested in the previous exercise, news is not just 'something that happens' (plenty of things happen in the world without ever being classified as news), it follows that the news values of a media organisation are clearly important in terms of the initial selection of events.

However, in terms of the way news is *presented*, a further process – that of interpretation/explanation – comes into play. Hegemonic Marxists (among others), for example, argue the significance of an event is also interpreted *for* an audience – an idea that relates to the concept of preferred reading we've previously encountered or, if you prefer a (post) modern turn of phrase, the 'spin' put on the event. This involves, according to **Chibnall** (1977) the use of:

• **Legitimating values**, involving positive and negative ideas used in news reports to provide *cultural cues* that 'tell' an audience how to interpret something (without actually appearing to do so). For example, in the UK when discussing politics, the media tend to use the following ideas to symbolise positive and negative values:

Positive values	Negative values
Consensus	Conflict
Moderation	Extremism
Order	Disorder
Honesty	Corruption
Communication	Spin
Good	Evil
Democracy	Dictatorship

Thus, positive (legitimate) values and negative (illegitimate) values structure the way we 'read' information and they constitute part of what postmodernists call a:

• **Discourse** (one which, in this instance, refers to news media). **Fiske** (*Television Culture: popular pleasures and politics*, 1987), for example, sees a discourse as a *system of representation*, developed to circulate ideas, beliefs and values about something, that creates a framework for its interpretation by an audience. In other words, part of the function of a *news discourse* is, as we have seen, to define the concept of news itself (different discourses may define it differently). Once this occurs, further refinements take place, involving the ability to define the meaning of something (as 'good or evil', 'freedom fighter or terrorist' and so forth). This definition of meaning, of course, indicates to an audience how they are *supposed* to interpret something and, in some instances, determines their response to whatever is being presented as news. A good example of this is to use **Stan Cohen**'s (1972) concept of:

• **Folk devils**, that involves the periodic identification and selection of individuals or groups as being deserving of special attention, usually because they are believed (rightly or wrongly) to represent a challenge or threat (real or imaginary) to the existing moral order. Current folk devils, for example, might be 'asylum seekers' (portrayed in news discourses as 'foreigners' arriving in this country to seek a better life than that found in their country of origin) and, of course, 'terrorists' (people who seek to disrupt or destroy our way of life through illegitimate means).

Folk devils, in a sense, represent a way of creating a sense of *social solidarity* amongst a population by identifying people who are 'not like us' ('outsiders' or 'others' to use common sociological conceptualisations). Usually, the creation of folk devils in news media is accompanied by a process that presents them in terms of:

- **Moral panics**: These, as you might guess, involve the idea folk devils are sufficiently threatening to require some sort action to be taken to counteract or neutralise their influence. A classic example here might be the panic over the influence of so-called 'video nasties' in the early 1980s and the subsequent introduction of the *Video Recording Act* (1984); prior to this Act videos, unlike films, did not have to be classified by the British Board of Film Classification.

- **David Lusted** (*The Media Studies Book*. 1991), for example, points out how this particular moral panic centred around the development of a new form of technology (the video recorder) that offered a new freedom for audiences to control how they watched films and television. The suggestion here is that such freedom challenged traditional media conceptions of control and led to demands for limits to be placed on this new medium (through indirect means – by focusing on the 'danger to vulnerable children' a consensus could be generated around the desirability of censorship).

Moral panics have a number of features we can briefly note.

- **Scapegoating and stigma** involves individuals or groups being targeted for special treatment, usually by focusing on their perceived *deviance*.

- **Social control**: They represent one way of 'cracking down' on behaviour seen as undesirable by the media. This often occurs (as in the case of video nasties and asylum seekers) during periods of social crisis or change and, arguably, represents attempts to limit the impact and pace of such change. **Hall** et al (*Policing the Crisis*, 1978), from a Marxist perspective, attempted to link a moral panic over 'mugging' in the 1970s to an economic 'crisis in capitalism', arguing the media used such folk devils to distract people's attention from the real problems in society at that time (high levels of unemployment and social unrest, for example).

In terms of a more contemporary example, the US-led 'War on Terror' has seen the introduction, in the UK, of a wide range of government actions designed to 'limit the ability of terrorists to launch attacks on this country' that impact directly on individual (non-terrorist) freedoms; the possible introduction of identity cards, for example, is a case in point, as is the ability to detain non-British nationals 'indefinitely' in prison without charge or trial.

Alternative explanations of moral panics, however, focus on how they reflect news values relating to:

- **Audience share**: A dramatic,

sensational, story can be used to increase audience figures or ratings. This is particularly apparent during 'quiet periods' in terms of news when the lack of anything significant to report often results in 'folk devil' stories appearing in the media.

- **Moral entrepreneurs** (people or groups who take it upon themselves to 'protect public morality') who use news media to promote their individual or group agendas. **Mary Whitehouse**, for example, skilfully used newspapers to promote her National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVALA) campaigns against the 'lowering of public standards of decency' by the broadcast media. It is also not unknown for groups such as political parties to try to promote certain ideas and issues in the media for political gain.

Finally, in this respect, we can note a further concept related to the above, namely the:

- **Amplification of risk**: The concept of *media amplification* was originally floated by **Leslie Wilkins** (*Social Deviance*, 1963) when he developed the idea of a *deviancy amplification spiral* to suggest one result of the way the mass media select and present content related to crime and deviance was an increase (amplification) in the behaviour they were concerned to control. In other words, by publicising certain types of behaviour (such as drug-taking among young people) the media not only served to attract people to the behaviour but also led to deviance becoming criminalised.

- A further aspect of any amplification process is the idea of risk or, to put it another way, the public's perception of danger. **Frewer** et al ('The media and genetically modified foods', 2002), for example, showed how perceptions of risk relating to genetically modified food increased after extensive media reporting in the UK in 1999, whereas **Pidgeon** et al (*The Social Amplification of Risk*, 2003), highlight the way various issues have been increasingly used by media organisations to amplify the actual risks from a range of things (such as AIDS, nuclear power, and the Year 2000 computer bug).

Issues surrounding selection and presentation are many and varied and, in this section, we have identified a range of ways this overall process influences the (social) construction of media content. We can develop and apply many of the ideas we've discussed here in the next section when we look in more detail at the way different social groups (considered in terms of characteristics such as age, class and sexuality) are represented in the media.

Representations
Introduction

This section considers the role of the mass media in representations of age, social class,

ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability and it is important to note the emphasis on the word *role*; the focus is not so much on representations themselves but rather it is on the part played by the mass media in the representation of different groups. In other words, this section doesn't consist of a long list of examples of the way different social groups are represented (although some examples will, of course, be necessary). The main interest here is on how the media contributes to the creation of identities, based on the concepts we have just identified, by the way it represents different groups.

More specifically, this section focuses on the media's role in the creation, promotion and maintenance of *social identities* (its general role as a socialising agency); the final section – which looks at audiences and theories of media effects – focuses on the idea of *personal identities* and how they relate to social identities.

Gerry Connor ('Representation and Youth', 2001) expresses this distinction nicely when he notes: 'representation is not just about the way the world is presented to us but also about how we engage with media texts . . . This concept of representation is, therefore, just as much about audience interpretation as it is about the portrayals that are offered to us by the media.'

⚠️ Preparing the ground

Before we start to examine the role of the media we need to clarify some basic ideas:

- **Identities**: The concept of social identities is outlined in the 'Family and social change' section of this textbook, so I don't propose to outline it further. If you are unsure about the meaning of this concept (and the related one of personal identify) it would be helpful to review it before continuing.

- **Representations**: **Daniel Chandler** ('Media Representation', 2001) argues representation refers to how the media socially constructs realities in terms of certain *key markers* of identity. As I have suggested, some key markers we are interested in are class, age, gender, ethnicity and disability – which gives us the mnemonic **caged** and, rather neatly I thought, encapsulates the idea of the way social identities constructed through the media are used to lock people into identities such as 'male' or 'female' (we are also interested in the key marker of sexuality, but that didn't fit so well).

In this respect, our interest in how social groups are represented focuses on the role of the media in terms of how representations of, for example, gender, contribute to the creation of social identities of masculinity and femininity. What we are interested in here, therefore, is how the media uses representations for a variety of intended and unintended purposes, to construct social identities.

Before we continue, a word of caution needs to be added. The key markers I have identified are *transgressive categories*. In plain English this means 'in the real world' these categories aren't self-contained; a woman, for example, may be represented differently in the media depending on her class, age and sexuality – we need, therefore, to keep this idea in mind throughout this section.

- **Stereotypes** involve a one-sided or partial representation of, for example, a social

group (such as 'white people'); in other words, they involve oversimplified expressions of group characteristics and usually accentuate some feature in a negative way (although sometimes groups can be positively stereotyped). For example, blonde women are often stereotyped as 'bimbos' (and their male equivalent may be stereotyped as 'himbos').

Media stereotypes are not necessarily used in a simple ideological or biased way (to demonise a particular social group, for example). Often – as in television advertising where a message has to be transmitted and understood in about 30 seconds – they are used to ensure a wide audience quickly understands the background to something. In this respect, stereotypes are often used as *codes* to familiarise an audience with particular situations.

WARM UP: STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATIONS

Divide the class into six groups and, using the following table as the basis for the exercise, each group should choose one key indicator and identify as many contemporary examples of media stereotypes/representations as they can.

Each group should then share its examples with the rest of the class to create an overview of stereotypical representations.

| Key Indicator	Examples of media stereotypes/representations
Class	
Age	
Gender	
Ethnicity	
Disability	
Sexuality	

'Mr Muscle' drain cleaner uses a simple stereotype of a 'wimpy man' to show how easy it is to unblock a drain.

We can build on this exercise (which should have demonstrated your extensive knowledge of stereotypical media representations) by considering the media's role in the production and promotion of representations based on each of the key indicators we've identified.

Class representations

These can be examined in terms of a number of ideas.

- **The gaze**: This concept – originally developed by **Laura Mulvey** ('Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 1975) as a way of expressing the idea of male power and control over female representation in Hollywood films – can
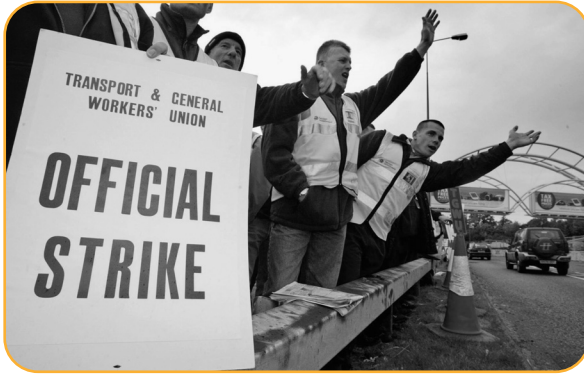
News images of the working classes are often framed in term of conflict, whereas fictional images often reflect idealised images of 'community'. And conflict.

be applied to understand representations of social class across a range of media in a number of different ways.

For example, think about how the media presents information – through whose eyes do we see the world? Almost by definition, it's through those of middle class professionals or upper class owners (depending on where you stand in the ownership and control debate). News reporting, for example, involves a representation of reality that **Fiske** (1987) calls the *transparency fallacy* – a rebuttal of the idea that news reporting represents a neutral 'window on the world', reflecting events as they unfold.

- **Invisibility**: **Don Heider** (*Class and News*, 2004) suggests class visibility or invisibility is related to journalistic (and audience) news values when he argues that: 'people in [American] news rooms each day either choose to cover or not to cover stories depending on whether they think a particular audience will be interested. In many cases, if the victim of a crime is poor, the story won't be given

the attention it would if it were someone with wealth or influence.'

- **Ghettoisation** represents the idea that, where some groups (in this case the working classes) feature in the media, they are restricted to a fairly narrow range of appearances or situations. An obvious positive area is sport (especially male professional sport). On the negative side, there is the association with crime and industrial unrest. Middle-class representations tend to be broader, involving a wider range of representations across professional employment, taking in work, sport and cultural associations (music, fashion and so forth).

- **Stereotypes** relating to class abound in the media – from lovable working-class cheeky chappies (Alfie Moon in *EastEnders*) to sinister and shadowy upper-class cliques. Interestingly, portrayals of the upper classes in recent years in areas such as film and broadcasting have tended to display the same level of limited representation found among the working class. Films such as

Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), **John Sayles'** *Silver City* (2004) or television programmes such as C4's *The F***ing Fulfords* (2004) provide examples of how the upper classes (especially their rich and powerful members) are represented – with increasing frequency – in electronic media.

- **Marginalisation**: The Glasgow Media Group's study of television reporting of industrial disputes (*Bad News*, 1977) argued lower social classes had less direct access to the media and less control over how they were portrayed. This study has, however, attracted widespread criticism within the media – **Martin Harrison** (*Television News*: Whose Bias?, 1985), for example, argued that the study was unrepresentative of industrial relations and selective in its interpretation of evidence.

- **Codes** are things that tell us something about someone – such as their class or sexual orientation. In this instance, social class is represented through a number of subtle – and not very subtle – codes. **Jack Fawbert** (*Social class, replica football shirts and televisual communication*, 2003), for example, notes how the 'replica football shirt' is used throughout the media as shorthand for working class – in much the same way the business suit and the hand-made suit denote middle and upper class respectively. One of the interesting things to note here, of course, is the way changing codes reflect changes in society – 40 years ago, the bowler hat, trilby and flat cap were equivalent class codes. The question is, of course, as **Fawbert** notes: 'Are the media responsible for creating such representations or are they simply articulating (putting into practice) something already existing within society?'

⚠️ 🌷 Growing it yourself: representing class

This simple piece of content analysis can be used to understand media representations of social class.

In small groups, each group needs a daily newspaper, the pages of which can be divided among group members. Skim through each story, noting the occupation of people in the story and the context in which they appear (the following table provides an example for you to follow).

Occupation	Context
School caretaker	Theft of a bike from school grounds (crime)
Further examples	

Once you've done this, rearrange your list into manual (working class) and non-manual (middle-class) occupations. Is each broad social class generally represented differently and, if so, how?

Age representations

These have a number of facets.

- **Categorisation**: Age – perhaps more than any other key marker – involves different categories focused on different interests, attitudes and needs:
  - **Children**, for example, as **Buckingham** et al ('Public Service Goes To Market', 2004) note, 'have always been seen as a "special" audience in debates about broadcasting – an audience whose

particular characteristics and needs require specific codes of practice and regulation'. This group, as far as broadcasting is concerned, is subject to particularly strong forms of censorship (in terms of what they're allowed to watch, when it can be watched and so forth). This, in part, reflects the way children are viewed in our society – as a particularly vulnerable group, easily influenced by the media.

- **Youth**, on the other hand, are often represented in terms of being 'a problem'; for example, they are often portrayed as rebellious, disrespectful, ungrateful, sex-obsessed and uncaring. They are also, to take one example, frequently represented as being 'apathetic about politics', although **Lisa Harrison** ('Media Representations of Young People in the 2001 British General Election', 2002) suggests it is not so much a lack of political interest and more a question of how political parties communicate with young people that is in question here – young people tend to use traditional media far less than they use new media.

- **Elderly** people have also traditionally been represented as social problems (a burden on younger people, the National Health Service and so forth). They have also generally been portrayed unsympathetically – as senile, ill (both mentally and physically), unattractive and so forth. However, although such images still appear, the changing nature of representation is reflected, in television for example, in more sympathetic portrayals that mirror, in part, the changing nature of television audiences – more elderly viewers, for example, who demand programming that reflects their interests and abilities.

- **The gaze**: Since the media, by-and-large, are controlled by adults (and mainly middle-aged, white, male adults), it is not surprising to find children, young people and the elderly are largely viewed through the eyes of this group.

On one level, for example, we see young people represented in terms of their 'innocent and uncorrupted nature', whereas on another we see them represented in terms of their unruliness and need for control **Geoffrey Pearson**'s *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears*, (1983) is a useful documentary source here, demonstrating how 'unruly youth' have been represented in the media over the past 150 years).

One form of gaze recently turned towards children and youth has been in relation to computer games and technology. The Internet, for example, is viewed as both a potentially positive (educational) medium and as a dark, dangerous place where all kinds of traps (and worse) await the innocent and unwary. The (old) mass media's attitude towards the Internet reflects a number of aspects of 'the adult gaze':

- **Social control**: Adults urged to control their children's use of the medium.

- **Technological control**: in situations where children probably know more about the medium than their parents, faith in technology (guardian software/censorship software etc.) replaces faith in adults.

- **Sexual agendas**: The vision of

uncorrupted youth falling prey to sexual predators via chatrooms and the like is almost Biblical (youth as the Garden of Eden and paedophiles as the snake). Once again, youth is an arena for folk devils and moral panics, although in this instance young people are not directly implicated in this particular panic.

- **Normality**: The category of youth – possibly because it is relatively difficult to precisely define in terms of specific ages – is represented through various media in ambivalent terms; that is, representations are constantly changing, reflecting the various ways youth can be a highly fragmented category – in terms of media stereotypes at least.

  A dominant form of representation over the past 40 years, however, has been the distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' youth, with the former being largely defined by default in opposition to various spectacular forms of youth subcultures (spectacular in the sense of the way such subcultures have blazed a short but very bright trail across the media skyline). Categories such as Teddy Boys (ask your grandparents), Mods and Rockers, Skinheads, Hippies and Punks, for example, have all at one time or another featured heavily in the media as examples of abnormal youth (focusing once again on the idea of folk devils at the very centre of repeated moral panics surrounding 'the Nation's Youth').

- **Invisibility**: Although not as evident as it once was, the elderly have, at least in the recent past, been something of an invisible group as far as the media are concerned. This, however, is changing for three reasons.

  - **Ageing population**: There are more elderly people (currently 15 million over 55) as a percentage of the overall population than ever before, making them a significant viewing segment – the heaviest viewers of television, averaging 35 hours a week, according to **John Willis** ('Over 50 and overlooked', 1999).

  - **Affluence**: The 'Grey Pound' (the amount of money the elderly have available to spend on consumer goods) is increasingly attractive to the advertisers who fund large areas of the British media. According to the Henley Centre, for example, around 80% of wealth in Britain is held by those aged 45+.

  - **Media professionals**: The mass media is a relatively new phenomenon in our society (it is only in the past 40 years, for example, that television has become a mass medium) and, as the people who own, control and work in the media grow older it's possible their interests are reflected in new and different representations of the elderly.

- **Stereotypes**: The above notwithstanding, **Willis** (1999) notes that: 'older people were often crudely stereotyped in drama, with 46% 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" '.

In some situations, middle-aged or elderly men (in particular) are used to add a

sense of seriousness/moral gravity to a situation; news readers (such as Trevor McDonald) and current affaires presenters (such as David Frost), for example, often fall into this category.

'Advertising concentrated on false teeth and stair lifts' (Willis, 1999) – although not necessarily at the same time.

- **Ghettoisation**: Different age groups are neatly compartmentalised into discrete (separate and self-contained) categories. The conflicts that supposedly arise at the point where adults meet youth, for example, is an unending source of inspiration for media writers (from 'The Simpson's' onwards).

  Connor (2001) also points to the way ghettoes exist *within* age groups and media: 'In print ... youth magazines are often split along gender lines and it is difficult to find any popular magazine that crosses the gender divide'. **Willis** (1999) notes, in terms of television: 'Everyone over the age of 55 tends to be lumped together as if they were a completely homogeneous group.'

Gender representations

These can be consider in the following terms:

- **The gaze**: 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 body parts).

  While this form of gaze is still evident, feminist writers such as **Nuria Enciso** ('Turning the Gaze Around', 1995) argue women have become more adept at developing a female gaze. **Eva-Maria Jacobsson** ('A Female Gaze?', 1999), for example, argues it is increasingly possible (in some areas of the media) for women to develop a female gaze that encourages

This (Jean Paul Gaultier) advert uses a naked woman to sell perfume

the viewer to see both men and women in non-sexist ways – although Enciso notes this 'reversal of the male gaze' may simply result in men being viewed as objects by women.

- **Stereotypes** take a number of forms, but the most obvious ones include:

  - **Body shape** – traditionally this focused on women but is increasingly relevant for men (although men are allowed a greater range of culturally acceptable body shapes). This does, of course, form part of a wider set of ideas surrounding cultural debates about beauty and how women, in particular, should look (especially in terms of the unstated assumptions that female beauty is both heterosexual and largely for the benefit of the male gaze).

  - **Masculinity** and **femininity** are also heavily stereotyped across a range of media (although factors such as age and class are significant components of the overall picture – young masculinity, for example, is represented in different ways to elderly masculinity).

    Helen Macdonald ('Magazine advertising and gender', 2003) also identifies differences in the way men and women are represented in magazine adverts. Alcohol adverts, for example, generally demonstrate traditional gender differences, in terms of the way men and women are sold different types of drink. Adverts aimed at men, for example, showed a restricted range of drinks 'allowed' to men (mainly beer and spirits) and also maintained a 'harder', more individualistic, image of masculinity associated with alcohol.

Adverts aimed at women, on the other hand, emphasised a 'softer', more social, aspect to drinking (bringing people together, easing tensions and so forth) as well as allowing women a greater range of alcoholic options (wine and liqueurs, for example).

However, a certain category of female (popularly labelled 'ladettes' to emphasise their similarity to 'lads') were seen to both challenge these stereotypes and break down the gender barriers between the sexes. This type of femininity seemed to emphasise the ability of women to behave in much the same kind of way as their male counterparts (drinking pints, 'behaving badly' . . .).

This change in representation indicates, for **Macdonald**, 'that gender is not static and woman are permitted to take on certain masculine behaviours in certain situations.'

- **Sexuality**: Female sexuality is frequently used to sell consumer goods and, in this respect, a particular form of (hetero) sexuality is often used, combining body shapes (thin, large-breasted and so forth) with patriarchal notions of 'availability'. Lynx deodorant, for example, in 2004 advertised using the suggestion young women are sexually attracted to the men who use it (although how this passes the Advertising Standards Authority's requirement an advert be 'honest and truthful' escapes me).

- **Normality**, in terms of gender concepts and relationships, is invariably represented in terms of heterosexuality and, while the wilder representations of gay males and females are largely a thing

of the past, homosexual relationships are rarely portrayed as being part of a 'normal' gender discourse.

Dominant females, for example, are often represented as figures of fun or (deviant) sexuality, although there are significant exceptions – Sigourney Weaver's character (Ripley) in the film *Alien*, for example, was physically and mentally stronger than any of the characters around her. However, this type of representation seems to be just that – a significant exception from the norm.

- **Bodies**: Representations of male and female bodies are important, especially in terms of how they have both changed (think about the current emphasis on images of *sexualised male bodies* – the 'six-pack', for example, held up to be sexually desirable for women and culturally desirable for men) and, to some extent, not changed – the way female bodies, for example, are displayed in magazines and on television. We can see this in terms of:

  - **Advertising**: A significant recent development is the use of bodies as both 'walking advertising spaces' (for global brands such as Nike) and as a means of making gender statements. In this respect, **Ros Gill** ('From sexual objectification to sexual subjectification', 2003) uses the example of T-shirts with the slogan 'Fit chick unbelievable knockers' to demonstrate the idea of both 'sexualised self-presentation' (women having the freedom to advertise their sexuality) and as an example of how women collude in their own objectification (being seen as one-dimensional sexual objects rather than rounded individuals). As she argues:

Growing it yourself: representing gender

As a class, identify consumer products that could be advertised to men and women (I've listed some suggestions below to get you started).

Split the class into small groups and then pair each group with another group (for example, if the class has six groups of three people, this will become three paired groups). Each paired group then needs to choose a product to advertise. Once this is agreed, the task is to design a poster to advertise the product.

For one paired group, the task is to advertise the product to **men**.

For the other paired group the task is to advertise the same product to **women**.

Possible products to advertise: boxer shorts, beer, personal computer, shirt, briefcase, nail varnish, dishwasher, picture frame.

Once the paired groups have completed their advertising posters they should present and explain their poster to the whole class in turn.

A generation ago many women were . . . fighting not to be portrayed in this . . . manner, not to be reduced to the size of their breasts, or to be consumed only as sexual objects, and yet today young women are actually paying good money . . . to present themselves in this way.

- **Objects of desire**: Female (and to a much lesser extent, male) nudity in the media has, in recent years, become a matter for debate. On the one hand, feminists, such as **Gill**, have argued women in general are exploited by displays of naked/semi-naked female

flesh because it represents women as consumer objects (or commodities to be 'bought and sold'), whereas an alternative interpretation is that such displays *empower* women by not only allowing them to express their sexuality but to get paid for doing it – a view expressed in the following extract from *The Sun* (2004)

[Big Brother 5's] Shell believes our topless shots are works of art, which could one day hang in the **TATE**.

She said: 'Those who sneer at Page 3 lack intelligence. It's beautifully shot and tastefully pioneered the celebration of the female form'.

'In many ways it emancipated women, letting them exploit their assets, earn cash and keep control. I see it as a modern art form.'

- **Identities**: In relation to the material we've examined so far, the general impression seems to be of a confused (and confusing) situation in which men and women are represented in terms of both traditional stereotypes and ways that challenge, confront and break down these stereotypical gender barriers. This shouldn't, however, be too surprising for reasons relating to the *heterogeneity* of:

  - **Gender**: 'Men' and 'women' are not (as I've suggested) *homogenous* (all the same) categories; age differences, for example, have a significant impact on both social identities and how gender is represented in the media.

  - **Media**: Similarly, 'the media' is not a simple homogeneous category; it covers a wide range of different types that aim at – and appeal to – a range

of different gender categories (considered in terms of class, age, ethnicity and so forth).

This 'confusion' is, of course, echoed in sociological interpretations of the nature and meaning of media representations of gender. On the one hand, there is a general recognition of:

- **Change** – young people today, for example, are different – in terms of attitudes and behaviours – to previous generations.

- **Fragmentation** reflects the idea that, with generational changes, it makes it harder – if not impossible – to talk about 'men' or 'women' as useful gender categories. Rather, we need to think in terms of the different ways it is possible to be 'a man' or 'a woman' in our society.

- **Fluidity**: Gender identities are not fixed and unchanging. Fragmented social identities are reflected in the way people start to see themselves (their *personal identities*) in new and different ways, some forms of which involve identities that have little or no apparent permanence but which change from day to day and situation to situation.

On the other hand, how this situation is interpreted differs:

Ros Gill (2003), for example, argues contemporary representations of women, while no longer depicting them as 'passive objects' of the male gaze, are not 'liberating' but rather they are another – more exploitative – form of what **Susan Bordo** (*Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, 1993) has

termed a 'new disciplinary regime'. In other words, although media representations of women offer the 'promise of power' by suggesting they can choose whether or not to become 'sex objects', this promise is illusory since, whether they choose it or not, the objective is to please men.

David Gauntlett (*Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*, 2002) on the other hand, takes the view that '*within limits*, the mass media is a force for change'. He argues, for example, that traditional views of women (as a housewife or low-status worker) have been replaced by 'feisty, successful "girl power" icons'. Men 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'.

In this respect, **Angela McRobbie** (*In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music*, 1999) argues the media have (partly in response to traditional feminism), adopted and adapted a form of 'popular feminism', whereby social and sexual inequalities are expressed (through the media and by women) in terms of 'a raunchy language of "shagging, snogging and having a good time".'

Ethnic representation

As with the other categories we have considered, a striking feature of ethnic representation is the change from the *crude* forms of stereotypical, negative and demeaning representations of 'black people' prevalent in even the recent past (see, for example, hugely popular television sitcoms

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Discussion point: art or artifice?

This exercise relates to the work you've just done on 'objects of desire' and identities. You should be able to draw on material like The Sun article and the work of Gill, Gauntlett and McRobbie.

In small groups, make two lists (based on the following table). One list should focus on reasons why semi-naked pictures of women in the media are exploitative (of both men *and* women), the other should focus on how such pictures empower women.

As a class, compare your lists. What conclusions can you draw from this debate (it would be interesting to see if males and females in the class draw similar or different conclusions and, if so, why)?

Exploitative?	Empowering?
Demeans women by reducing them to objects	Well-paid work
Encourages women to participate in their own exploitation (Gill)	Women exploit men by making themselves objects of sexual desire.
Further examples?	

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such as *Love Thy Neighbour* in the early 1970s in which blacks were described as '*sambos*' and '*nignogs*'), to forms of representation that are, at least in some respects, less stereotypical.

However, the main question to note here is the extent to which changes in media representation reflect real changes (towards

less overtly biased and stereotypical images, for example) or what **Stuart Hall** ('The Whites of Their Eyes', 1995) has called **inferential racism**. While representations are less overtly and crudely racist, ethnic groups are still discussed and represented in ways that stress their difference (usually in cultural, rather than biological, terms) and problematic nature (for example, debates about ethnicity revolving around ethnic groups as the source of social problems).

- **Under-representation**: According to the Office for National Statistics (2004), in 2001, approximately 8% of the British population (5 million people) were classified as belonging to 'non-White' ethnic groups. However, when it comes to participation in areas of the media such as television, ethnic minorities are, according to **Annabelle Sreberny** (*Include Me In*, 1999) 'represented by two-dimensional characters, and . . . often negatively stereotyped'. Examples of **stereotyping** noted by Sreberny included *Coronation Street* introducing a black character (Marcus Wrigley) who promptly helped burgle a house and an Asian family (the Desai's) who took over – as if you couldn't guess – the corner shop. An Independent Television Commission survey (2001) also found 'The use of stereotypes in TV advertisements can reinforce racism and school bullying'.

  Rachel Morris ('Gypsies, Travellers and the Media', 2000) also points to another ethnic group (Roma) who have been increasingly stereotyped in the national print media in two ways. Firstly, for *not* fitting the 'stereotype that has been carved out for them: the "true" Gypsy' and secondly in terms of negative

characterisations such as being 'dirty, thieving, parasitic, living outside the law' and so forth.

- **Over-representation**, on the other hand, derives in part from some of the ideas we have just noted and relates to areas such as:

  - **Crime**: **Beata Klimkiewicz** ('Participation of ethnic minorities in the public sphere', 1999) points to the way ethnic minorities most frequently feature as agents of both domestic criminality and international terrorism.

  - **Victimisation**, where the reporting of 'natural disasters', such as floods and famines in places like Africa features heavily in international news reporting. **Klimkiewicz** also suggests ethnic minorities in Britain feature most heavily in news media as victims of racism and discrimination. This is somewhat ironic in light of an ICAR report ('Media image, community impact', 2004) that showed how negative newspaper coverage of asylum issues could be linked to violence and harassment of ethnic minorities.

- **The gaze**: With notable exceptions (which somewhat prove the rule) such as comedy programmes like *Goodness Gracious Me* (an all Asian cast – the title is an ironic reference to film and television stereotypes of Asian speech), ethnic minorities and their lives are generally viewed through a white (largely middle class) gaze.

  Ben Carrington ('"Race", Representation and the Sporting Body', 2002) notes how apparently 'positive' black identities are

constructed around cultural spaces like sport, fashion and music (rap and hip-hop, for example). As he argues 'Consumers can now enjoy the spectacle of blackness 24-7, in a way which is no longer threatening by its mere presence, for those who now actively desire a taste for "a bit of the other" '. However, he also notes the 'spectacle of "hyperblackness" highlights how such representations promote stereotypes of 'black bodies' that reflect white perceptions of race conceived in terms of 'athleticism and animalism' (the idea these features of black excellence are somehow 'natural').

The white gaze also, of course, extends into other areas (the lack of ethnic minority ownership and control within the media, for example) and is probably most evident in relation to concepts of:

- **The other**: One significant feature of non-white representation (in both the media and society generally) is the way ethnic minorities are frequently discussed in terms of their 'otherness' – how 'they' are different from 'Us'. In this respect, representations are produced against a social background that constructs ethnicity in terms of not just 'difference' (since we are all, in some way, different) but significantly in terms of *social problems*. This representational discourse emphasises two main strands; firstly, the idea of ethnic minorities as:

  - **Cultural problems**: Although it is no longer socially acceptable for the mainstream media to express openly racist ideas and attitudes (forms of *institutional racism*, evident in the recent past that saw it acceptable to

talk and write about 'blacks' in discriminatory terms), racism is still apparent, but framed in a different way. **Paul Gilroy** ('One Nation under a Groove', 1990) has termed this **cultural racism** (or the '**new racism**') because of the way it focuses on ideas like 'cultural differences' between white and non-white ethnic groups (in areas like language, family life and so forth). **Sreberny** (1999) noted the tendency for the media to think about Asian family life in terms of 'arranged marriages'; more recently, this focus has turned to the concept of 'forced marriages' and issues of violence surrounding this idea. (**Anthony Browne**: 'Age bar to curb forced marriages': *The Times*, 14 May 2003).

In turn, these ideas link into immigration and political asylum (the 'problem' of 'economic migrants'). The headline 'Forced marriages targeted' (BBC News, 14 May, 2003), for example, suggested changes to immigration law were 'a response to widespread concern about schoolgirls being forced into marriages with men from their parents' home countries, who go their own way once they have been granted residency in the UK'.

The second representational strand is that of:

- **Threat**, which represents ethnic minorities in terms of both a **cultural threat** (presenting challenges to a 'British' way of life – see 'arranged and forced marriages', for example) and a **physical threat** which occurs on both a *societal level*, considered in terms of the various representations of 'Muslims' and 'Terrorists' following the September 11th terror attacks, for

example, and a *personal level*. Periodic moral panics about 'black criminality', for example, have been highlighted by writers such as **Stuart Hall** (*Policing the Crisis*, 1978) when he talked about 'black muggers' as folk devils in the 1970s. More recently, the identification of 'muggings in London' as being 'predominantly a black crime' by the Metropolitan Police (**Hugh Muir**, 'Sometimes a mugger's race does matter': *Evening Standard*, 6 February 2002) can also be seen as part of the representation process.

Rosalind Yarde ('Demons of the day', 2001), argues this 'discourse of threat' is not a recent phenomenon when she notes: 'Asylum crisis, hordes of refugees – after 40 years, papers are still telling the same old lies'. She also points out:

Since September 11, the stereotypes have become interwoven and confused. The storylines have blurred. The demons have interchanged . . . the newspapers chant Asylum seekers, Muslims, Terrorists! . . . It used to be All muggers are black! . . . then like Chinese whispers, the message altered to All blacks are muggers!

Now I watch as three become one. The asylum seeker, the Muslim, the terrorist are transmogrified into – the Muslim, terrorist, asylum seeker. All encapsulated in headlines such as: 'Asylum seeker who helped the hitmen' (*Daily Mail* 19/09/01)'.

Disability representations

These can be considered in the following way.

- **Labelling**: The first thing we can note about representations of 'the disabled' is the label itself since it involves, by definition, a concept of inequality – to be

disabled is somehow not as good as being 'abled'. **Lynne Roper** ('Disability in Media', 2003) argues we should distinguish between *impairment* – a real physical or mental state involving limitations in some situations – and *disability*, which she argues is a cultural construct. That is, a label implying notions of 'damage' and inability.

An alternative way to think about this area, therefore, is to use the label 'differently-abled' (or '**difabled**'); this suggests, I hope you'll agree, a sense of difference without the negative connotations.

- **Under-representation**: The Labour Force Survey (2001) estimated nearly seven million adults in the UK are disabled – a minority, to be sure, but at nearly 15% of the adult population, a significant minority. However, a striking feature of media representations of the difabled is their *omission*; **Paul Darke** ('Introductory Essay on Normality Theory', 2003), for example, notes: 'whereas there used to be (within the last five years) a number of. . . Disability. . . series on a number of UK television channels there is now none'. Part of this decrease, he argues, is caused by an *increased* number of television channels; greater competition and the need to maximise audience numbers to attract advertising has resulted in a decline in 'minority interest' programming.

This is not, of course, to say difability itself is always absent from mainstream media. Under certain circumstances (war, for example) images of disability (sic) are frequently used and these serve to highlight:

Discussion point: what's in a name?

Kelly Holmes won two gold medals at the 2004 Olympics – and you didn't. Compared to her, therefore, does this make you:

- Disabled?
- Differently abled?

Support your argument with clear reasons.

Kelly Holmes
Double gold medal winner: Athens 2004

- **Normality** and abnormality, which clearly feature in portrayals of difability, given 'the disabled' can be easily represented in terms of their physical or mental differences. Aside from offering reassurance to the able-bodied ('they' are different to 'us') the focus, according to **Barnes** and **Mercer** (**'**Exploring the Divide', 1996) is on 'disability as deviance' – or, as **Ashwin Bulsara** (**'**Depictions of people with disabilities in the British media', 2001) argues

'Disabled people have been presented as socially flawed able-bodied people rather than as disabled people with their own identity'. This, of course, leads us to:

- **Stereotypes**: The argument here is that, for the media, difabled people are interesting *because of* their disability, not as people in themselves. The focus of attention therefore – the thing that defines 'disabled identity' – is their physical or mental difference (although, as with most stereotypical representations, there are exceptions – the physicist, Stephen Hawking, for example, is valued for his intellectual abilities).

Jenny Morris ('A Feminist Perspective', 1997) has also noticed a curious aspect of disability stereotyping: 'most disabled characters in film and television in recent years have been men'. She attributes this to the media using disability as a 'narrative device to express ideas of dependency, lack of autonomy, tragedy etc.' and 'Women do not have to be portrayed as disabled in order to present an image of vulnerability and dependency'.
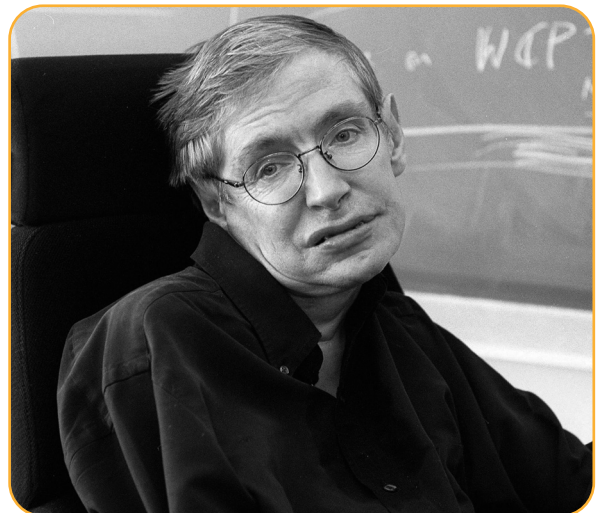
Stephen Hawking

- **The gaze** has two aspects here. Firstly, the world, as expressed through the media, is

almost exclusively seen through the eyes of the able-bodied. Where the difabled appear, they do so largely as 'objects of curiosity' – to be looked at and explained, rather than as 'normal people' living their lives in a world organised in terms of the needs of the able-bodied. Secondly, where the gaze of the latter falls on the disabled, it does so, according to **Colin Barnes** (*Disabling Imagery and the Media*, 1992) in ways that categorise 'the disabled' in highly stereotyped ways – as the following exercise demonstrates.

Sexuality representations

These refer mainly to differences within and between heterosexual and homosexual representations and we can discuss the role of the media here in the following terms.

- **Normal** and abnormal sexuality is a recurring feature of tabloid newspapers, whereby various aspects of sexuality (especially male homosexuality) are represented in ways that 'define the normal'. For example, homosexuality has been variously linked in the British tabloid press to both paedophilia and AIDS (*The Sun*, for example, describing it as a 'Gay Plague' even in the face of evidence to the contrary – the use of 'plague' is also interesting here since it, probably consciously, echoes the idea of biblical plagues – punishments visited on humanity by God).

Gareth McLean ('It's a Male Thing', 2002) however, argues the nature of tabloid press *homophobia* (fear of homosexuality) has changed in the face

Growing it yourself: stereotype spotting

Barnes argues media portrayals of disability fall into 10 basic categories (see table below). Can you find examples in the media of each category?

Representation	Media Examples
Pitiable and pathetic	
Object of violence	
Sinister and evil	Nick Cotton (*EastEnders*)
Curiosity	Dustin Hoffman (*Rain Man*)
Super cripple (someone able to overcome their disability)	Christy Brown, writer (*My Left Foot*) Stephen Hawking.
Own worst enemy	
Burden/dependent	
Sexually abnormal	
Incapable	
Normal	

of changing public attitudes: *The Sun* 'that once printed "10 Ways to Spot a Gay Priest", allowed Garry Bushell to call gay people "poofters" and announced a "gay cult" was undermining public morals … now recognises that much coveted younger readers will not tolerate the knee-jerk bigotry that previously passed for balanced coverage.'

- **Natural** and unnatural sexualities. A couple of interesting areas are covered here.

  - **Love**: The media continuously reinforces this concept (although, unlike in the recent past, no longer necessarily in the context of marriage) as a *natural* state of being for heterosexual – and, increasingly, homosexual – couples.

  - **Deviance**: Although the tabloid press in particular relishes the idea of 'deviant sexuality' – whether it's 'three-in-a-bed sex romps' or some form of sexuality deemed 'unnatural' – the media tends to see one-to-one sexuality as natural, normal and desirable.

    In the recent past, media concepts of deviant sexualities focused, as I have suggested, on homosexual behaviour (male homosexuality has only been legal in this country for about 40 years); however, with increasing public and media acceptance of such sexuality, the focus has turned towards areas such as paedophilia – recent moral panics over this practice have resulted not only in public demonstrations and violence against 'paedophiles', but also legal changes to prevent, for example, 'grooming' through internet chatrooms. A

significant development here has been the *sexualisation* of some forms of child/adult behaviour; in other words, many forms of adult involvement with children have been reconceptualised and reinterpreted as sexual behaviour.

  - **Transgressive sexualities** (forms of sexuality that cut across gender categories) also tend to both lack expression in the media and invite scorn, derision or fear. A neat example here might be the relationship between sexuality and disability; the physically and mentally disabled are rarely represented in a sexual way, either as sexually active beings or as sexually attractive.

- **The gaze**: In general, although alternative forms of sexuality (such as male and female homosexuality) are increasingly represented in the media (in terms of press reporting, TV programming and advertising, for example) **Jayne Caudwell** ('Tipping the Velvet: Straight [forward] voyeurism?', 2003) argues numerous writers have suggested this increased representation represents a form of (male) heterosexual voyeurism – in effect, an example of the way straightforward pornographic images have effectively crossed-over into mainstream (or, indeed, *malestream*) culture.

  In addition, in programmes such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Channel 4: 2004), we find a form of gaze that, while seemingly homosexual (a bunch of gay men putting a heterosexual man straight (pun intended) about clothes and culture), is mainly viewed through a heterosexual lens. In other words, such programmes are not about gay men, as

such, but about selling a certain type of lifestyle – cool, hip, fashionable and ever-so-slightly dangerous – to a heterosexual audience.

In relation to advertising, there has certainly been an increase in homosexual representation (although whether this reflects the media leading changes in public attitudes or – more likely perhaps – finally latching on to more tolerant audience attitudes is an arguable point). However, where gay men feature they tend to be presented as 'stereotypical gays' – camp, suggestive but ultimately sexually unthreatening.

The male gaze is not, of course, restricted to homosexuality; the heterosexual youth magazine market, for example, has developed in recent years with (non-pornographic) magazines such as *Zoo*, *Nuts*, *FHM* and *Loaded* featuring a diet of 'Birds, Booze and Football' as a way of attracting readers and advertisers. Magazines aimed at women, however, tend to stress how to attract the male gaze – including advice on looking pretty, how to attract a man and so forth. Alternatively, writers such as **Gauntlett** (2002) argue women buy magazines like *More* and *Cosmopolitan* for reasons of self-esteem, reassurance and so forth.

- **Codes**: One interesting change in the way homosexuality is represented is that the language used to describe gay men and women no longer relies on the kind of semiological (symbolic) references to gay sexuality common in even the recent past (a classic example being the term 'confirmed bachelor' used by newspapers to suggest male homosexuality). This

partly reflects changing audience attitudes (as noted above), but it also reflects the way gays have organised to promote their own sexuality (the adoption of the term 'Queer Theory', for example, to describe a growing body of social research into gay culture and lifestyles has consciously adopted a term of abuse directed at homosexuals and, by so doing, neutralised its negative impact).

McLean does, however, point to a changing media discourse of homosexuality; it may no longer (or increasingly rarely) be represented as an 'illness' or something secretive and shameful, but as he notes: 'sly homophobia is still rife . . . the fact [Pop Idol winner, Will Young's] coming out was seen as a "confession" . . . is indicative of the idea that homosexuality is something of a sin, a foible to be "admitted" (does anyone, for example, ever have to "confess" or "admit" to being heterosexual?)'.

Similarly, media representations of lesbianism have changed significantly over the past 25 years; depictions of 'butch, shaven-headed, women in dungarees and boots' are largely redundant images (although, on occasions some tabloid newspapers resurrect it, especially if they want to criticise radical feminism). However, as I've noted, writers such as **Caudwell** (2003) question the extent to which current media representations of lesbians simply reflect a changed male (political) gaze. In the recent past the media associated lesbianism with feminism – as something to be feared, ridiculed and marginalised; the decline in feminism's influence

perhaps reflects the decoupling of lesbianism from feminism – returning it to its pre-feminist status as a male fantasy.

⚠ Digging deeper

When we reflect on the role of the media in the creation and promotion of representations relating to the kind of indicators we have discussed in this section, we need to keep in mind the following ideas.

- **Mediation**: As we have seen earlier with Fiske's idea of a *transparency fallacy*, the world presented through the media is not 'real', in the sense of our witnessing or experiencing it first-hand; rather, what we get is a *reconstructed reality* – one that is filtered (or mediated) through a media lens. In other words, the media presents us with an interpreted view of things like gender, class, sexuality and disability. In this respect, when we talk about mediation we are thinking about:

- **Stereotypes**: There is little doubt the media, in terms of representation, deals in stereotypical constructions; however, one question here, perhaps, is the extent to which media stereotypes constitute **misrepresentations**. When we argue, for example, that someone or something is *misrepresented* by the media (because it involves over-simplification, mediation or stereotype), we start to dig into a range of interesting ideas. On one level, for example, we could note **Andy Medhurst**'s ('Tracing Desires', 1998) observation in relation to sexuality that stereotypical representations of gay men or women are

⚠ Growing it yourself: representations

One way of understanding media representations is to do your own research, using a variety of media and generating a range of different examples of the way different groups are represented. The following table illustrates how this can be done, using a range of categories we've already noted for you to apply across the key markers we've identified.

Concepts	Class	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Sexuality
Invisibility						
Codes						
Annihilations						
Under-representation						
Ghettoisation						
Marginalisation						
Categorisation						
Normality						
The gaze						
Bodies						

In small groups in pairs, choose a category (class, for example) and find/suggest relevant examples for each of the concepts we've identified.

'the means through which ideologies about sexuality are circulated'. In other words, by representing gay men, for example, as 'effeminate' or 'camp', the media is articulating not just a simple representation of homosexuality but rather, as **Mitchell** (*Picture Theory*, 1994) suggests, 'representation constructs knowledge' – through the representation of something we may come to (mis)understand it.

Medhurst argues it is a mistake to see stereotypes simply in terms of misrepresentation since, as he argues, if we reject the kind of media stereotype about 'gay men' we have just noted, how can we replace it, except by 'creating another stereotype [which] would do away with "gay men are effeminate" and replace it with "all gay men are masculine"; a positive image is really only a stereotype that suits my ideology rather than yours'. These ideas, therefore, lead us to consider another level of misrepresentation when we think about the nature of any relationship between representations and **reality**. If we think about the idea of something being represented through the media it suggests, as **Stuart Hall** (*Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 1997) argues, there must exist the thing that is being portrayed. The use of this idea suggests that somewhere, 'out there', is a reality – a 'set of unchanging meanings' as Hall puts it – to be represented. Thus, for the media to produce *representations* of reality (which aren't real precisely because they *represent* 'that which is real') it follows there must, ultimately, be something that is 'really real' – otherwise it couldn't have

a representation; there would, by definition, be nothing to represent.

To take this (slightly mind-boggling) idea further we can consider an alternative way of looking at media representations than the one that has been used throughout this section.

Postmodernist writers, such as **Jean Baudrillard** (*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 1995), argue representations should not be considered in terms of things like distortions, misrepresentations or, indeed, simple reflections of 'reality'; this is because, for such writers, representations *are* reality. We can develop this idea in the following way: when we think uncritically about the word 'represent' it suggests the media re-presents something (like 'news') in a way that's somehow different to the original event; in other words, 'Something Happened' (to borrow **Joseph Heller**'s evocative phrase) and now it's being described (*re-presented*) to us. Conventionally, therefore, we contrast 'the real' (the 'something' that 'happened') with the representation and examine the media (and the various processes involved in things like 'news production') to see if we can disentangle the *real* from the *not real*. We can perhaps understand this quite complex idea more easily in the following way.

When Baudrillard argues that 'the [first] Gulf War didn't happen' he's not saying there was no war. Rather, he's saying 'the reality of the war' is different depending on who you were, where you were and what your source of information was. For example, soldiers fighting in battle had one experience of the war; civilians caught up in the fighting had another;

journalists reporting the war another still and people reading about and watching the war from the comfort of their living room had yet another.

In other words, the Gulf War (as, by extension, is everything presented by the media) was *experienced* as *multiple realities*, all of which are real and, of course, none of which are real, since they are simply representations of reality from different viewpoints. Thus, the 'reality of the war' can't be found in any one of the things I have just noted since they were all, in their different ways, 'real' experiences – they are all equally valid *narrative accounts* of the war. In this respect, Baudrillard uses the term **hyperreality** to express how different narrative accounts sit side by side, 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 reality' since, in the case of the Gulf War, for example (or any event you care to name – the Crusades, the Second World War, the death of Princess Diana . . .) our knowledge of 'what happened' simply derives from a range of different representations from which we pick-and-choose to suit our own particular prejudices or beliefs. Baudrillard calls this **simulacra** (or 'representations that refer to other representations') – in basic terms, *simulations* that are themselves the reality they depict. What this means, I would argue, is that to talk about media representations as distortions or misrepresentations of some hidden or obscured 'reality' (or 'deep structures' as post-modernists like to term them) is,

from a postmodern perspective, to miss the point entirely; The media don't simply 'mediate the message'; the media – to coin a phrase – *are* 'the message'.

In this and the previous sections we have examined a range of ideas surrounding the media, from the significance of the distinction between ownership and control, through ideas about media ideologies and the various ways social groups are represented. In the final section we can bring these ideas together by examining possible *media effects*; how audiences are influenced – or not as the case may be – by the media.

The media and their audiences
Introduction

In this final section we are going to look at different explanations of the relationship between the mass media and their audiences, largely in terms of what are called 'Media Effects'; that is, a selection of theories that seek to identify how – and in what ways – the media affect our behaviour.

Although there is a certain chronology to Effects theories – one that reflects changing academic developments and fashions (as a general rule, theories that argue the media *directly affects* audiences precede theories that take a more critical look at audience behaviour) – the approach here will be to consider various theories in terms of three categories of effect.

- **Direct**: These are sometimes called *mediacentric* or **transmission** theories

because they focus on the role of the media as having a strong (usually negative) and direct influence on audiences.

- **Limited**: These are sometimes called *audiocentric* or **diffusion** theories because they focus on the various ways audiences *use* the media to satisfy their own particular needs. For these theories, the mass media has few, if any, direct effects.
- **Indirect**: Theories in this category, while arguing for a range of media effects, sees these as slow and cumulative, rather than quick and direct.

There are two main reasons for using this type of categorisation.

- **Persistence**: Theories that have been challenged or disproved do not necessarily just 'fade away' – they may well reform, evolve and reappear at a later point in a different form. A simple 'theoretical timeline' may not capture these relationships and changes very convincingly.
- **Common sense**: Although academic sociologists may decide a particular theory is redundant, this doesn't mean media commentators or their audiences feel the same way. *Common sense* ideas about media effects often persist, regardless of the efforts of media sociologists to debunk them. In addition, we often find very simple – and simplistic – theories of media effects persist precisely because they represent a way of making the incomprehensible understandable to those not schooled in the darker arts of media theory.

WARM UP: FEELING THE FORCE?

This short exercise is designed to start you thinking about your own beliefs (positive and negative) about how the media affects audiences.

In small groups discuss/identify three or four examples of possible positive and negative effects – situations, for example, where you think the media influences people in some way. These can be from your own experience or from what you have seen, read or heard in the media.

Positive effects?	Negative effects?
Entertainment for the lonely	Does it frighten/panic some people?

Once you have done this, share your ideas with the rest of the class and, for each of the effects identified, discuss whether you think they:

- Affect everyone equally (and if not, why not?)
- Affect an audience directly or indirectly.

One of the things this exercise will have demonstrated is the significance of **Curren's** argument (*Media and Power*, 2002) that: 'The conviction . . . the media are important agencies of influence is broadly correct. However, the ways in which the media exert influence are complex and contingent'. We can translate this idea into a relatively simple statement: We know the media affect people, but the crucial questions are how – and in what ways – are audiences influenced? We can begin to explore these questions by examining a range of 'Media Effects' theories.

Direct Media Effects

⚠ Preparing the ground

One of – if not the – oldest form of Effects theory is based on the idea of a relatively simple, direct and effective relationship between the media (as producers and transmitters of messages) and their audience (who both receive and act on such messages). This theory has two basic forms.

- **Hypodermic syringe** (or *magic bullet*) models: At its most basic, this theory suggests the media transmit 'messages' (ideas, information, beliefs and so forth) that are then picked-up and acted upon by the audience (receivers). Media messages, therefore, are a bit like a drug injected into the body that is the audience.

This theory, as you might expect, presupposes a number of things.

- **Effects** are direct and measurable – we can see the effect of messages on an audience in terms of a **cause and effect**

relationship. The media (cause) does something and the audience reacts (effect) in some way.

Message
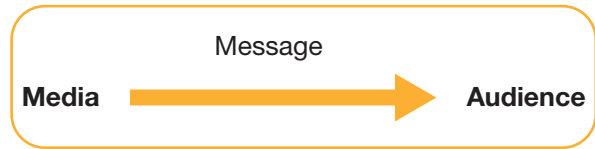
Media ———————————➤ **Audience**

The Hypodermic Model

- **Immediacy**: For the media to be a cause of audience behaviour there has to be some sort of *immediate* audience reaction (otherwise we could not be sure the media was the cause of changes in people's behaviour).

- **Audience**: The consumers of media messages are *passive receivers* (as opposed to *active interpreters* – an idea we will develop in relation to other effects theories) of media messages. The reason for this is found in the idea of **mass society**. As we've seen in an earlier section, this argues people are *socially isolated*; in other words, they have few, if any, strong links to social networks (family, friends, communities and so forth) that provide alternative sources of information and interpretation. In this situation, therefore, audiences are receptive to whatever the media transmits because they depend on it for information.

A second form of this type of theory is a:

- **Transmission** model: Developed originally by **Shannon** and **Weaver** (*The mathematical theory of communication*, 1949) this suggests a slightly more sophisticated form of relationship between the media and their audience, in a couple of ways.

- **Senders**: It splits the transmission process into two parts; the *information source* (which can be anything – a government announcement, for example) and the *transmission source* (a television report of the announcement, for example).

- **Receivers**: Although media messages can be directly sent to a receiver (such as an audience watching a news broadcast), it's possible for people who are not watching the broadcast to also receive the message (or at least, a form of the message) through their interaction with people who did watch it (in other words, people may pass on messages to those who haven't personally experienced them).

  This theory also introduces the concept of:

- **Noise** or **interference** – which can be anything that distracts an audience. For example, when watching a news broadcast, someone may leave the room to make a cup of tea, thereby missing some part of the message.

As we will see in a moment, this variation on the basic 'direct effects' theory paved the way for a more-critical understanding of how the media relates to its audience. However, before we look at such theories, we can identify some criticisms of this general transmission model (to give it a critical kicking, as we say in the trade).

Note: If you wanted to classify this type of theory in terms of sociological perspectives, the closest fit (at least for the earliest types of transmission theories) would be the New Right (later versions, focusing on ideas like globalisation and new types of mass society theory, can, however, be associated with New Left/Marxist perspectives).

⚠️ Digging deeper

As **David Gauntlett** ('10 Things Wrong with the "Effects Model"', 1998) has argued, there are problems with transmission theories we can summarise in the following terms:

- **Audience**: As we have seen, original versions of this theory treated audiences as uncritical, gullible, individuals easily influenced and led by whatever they read, saw or heard in the media.

  One particular piece of evidence often cited to support this idea (and the theory itself) is **Orson Welles**' infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast (1938), a radio play cleverly designed to simulate a Martian attack using the news broadcasting techniques of the time. The received wisdom here is that many Americans believed they were hearing about a real invasion and panicked in a variety of ways; the evidence for this 'mass hysteria' is, however, actually quite thin.

  From an audience of around 6 million people, *some* people clearly did feel unsettled by what they heard (a police station in the area of the supposed invasion answered around 50 calls from worried residents), but accounts of people 'fleeing to the hills' have been grossly exaggerated over the years. The remarkable thing about this story is not so much people believed what they were hearing, but that the behaviour of the vast majority of listeners was not influenced or changed in any appreciable way.

- **Artificial conditions**: Most research into transmission effects has taken place under conditions (in a laboratory for example) that inadequately represent the real situations in which people use the media. **Bandura, Ross** and **Ross**'s 'Bo-Bo doll' experiment ('Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models', 1961), for example, is frequently cited as evidence that watching violent TV programmes produces violent behaviour in children (although I suspect that if anyone was selectively fed a diet of violence they might want to take out their frustration by bashing a large plastic 'Bo-Bo' doll over the head for a few minutes). One of the (many) weaknesses of the study was that the children in the study were 'rated for violence' by adult assessors, which beg questions about the objectivity of the research.

  Belson's study (*Television Violence and the Adolescent Boy*, 1978) is also cited as evidence that prolonged exposure to violence in the media produces violent behaviour (in young males). **Hagell** and **Newburn** ('Young Offenders and the Media', 1994), on the other hand, found a general lack of interest in television (violent or otherwise) among young offenders (they had, presumably, better things to do with their time – or perhaps watching televised violence has a pacifying effect on people's behaviour) – which raises questions about:

- **Immunity**: If the media have direct and immediate effects, why are some (most?) people immune to these effects? This applies equally to media researchers (**Frank Longford**, for example, was a celebrated anti-pornography campaigner

in the 1960s and 1970s who visited numerous strip clubs and viewed hardcore pornography without seemingly being affected by his experiences) and to audiences – the vast majority of listeners to the 'War of the Worlds' broadcast, for example, were unaffected by it. In the same way, people seem able to view violent media content without necessarily imitating the violence they see depicted.

You might be forgiven, at this point, for thinking that transmission models would finally be laid to rest. However, they tend to resurface from time to time, usually in a slightly different or amended form:

Transmission theories are dead – they just refuse to accept this fact.

- **Cumulation theory**, for example, suggests media effects can be cumulative, rather than immediate. Thus, prolonged exposure to violent films or computer games, for example, can result in both changed behaviour and, in the case of violence, *desensitisation* (in other words, the more you are exposed to violent images, the less likely they are to stimulate you, so you seek out increasingly violent material – notice the drug/addiction theme still running here).

Eventually, you become so desensitised to violence you are less likely to be moved, shocked or appalled by real violence. The basic idea behind this version is closely related to a significant change in Transmission theories, namely:

- **Vulnerable audiences**: Rather than everyone being 'at risk', the focus sometimes moves to the idea 'some audiences' are more likely than others to be affected by the media – an obvious 'vulnerable' category being children. This follows from their lack of social experience and, of course, their tendency to copy behaviour around them. Actual evidence for effects tends to be *anecdotal* – the media claim, rather than prove, a relationship between, for example, violent behaviour and violent play.

Researchers such as **David Buckingham** (*Moving Images*, 1996) and **David Gauntlett** (*Moving Experiences*, 1995) have demonstrated how even very young children have a quite sophisticated level of media literacy – they understand more about the media and how it works than adults give them credit for (they are able to distinguish between fictional and factual representations of violence, for example).

Guy Cumberbatch ('Legislating Mythology', 1994) also warns against misleading, partial and slipshod 'effects research'. Responding in 1983 to newspaper headlines such as 'Half of children see film nasties' (*The Daily Mail*), his research showed 68% of the 11-year-olds he studied claimed to have seen what, at the time, were considered exceptionally violent films (so-called '*video nasties*' – a moral panic that arose around the time Video Cassette Recorders (VCRs) were becoming common in the home). As **Cumberbatch** notes, moral panics about detrimental media effects often occur at times of technological change (as is currently the case with computer games). By the way, if 'two-thirds of 11 year-olds' seems a lot, the key point to remember here is these children were admitting to viewing films (*Blood on the teeth of the vampire*!) that didn't actually exist . . .

- **Academic arguments**: **Anderson** et al, in their review of 'effects research' ('The Influence of Media Violence on Youth', 2003) argue: 'Research on violent television and films, video games and music reveals unequivocal evidence media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviour in both immediate and long term contexts'. **Cumberbatch** (Office of Film and Literature Classification Conference, 2003), however, rejected this claim in less than flattering terms when he argued: 'If this analysis was a car, the door would fall off in your hand and the thing would collapse half way up the street.'

Limited Media Effects

⚠ Preparing the ground

Alternative ways of theorising media effects developed in the 1950s – partly as a reaction to the relatively crude *behaviourist* ('monkey see, monkey do') notions of direct effect theorists and partly as a development of such

theories. We can examine a couple of these models by way of illustrating how they argued for a greater understanding of the role of audiences in the effects equation.

Diffusion theories focus on the way media messages spread throughout an audience and are based on the idea of a *trickle-down effect*. In other words, although messages may originate in the media, they are received by an audience in a couple of different ways.

- **Directly** – by personally viewing a news broadcast, for example.
- **Indirectly** – through social interaction with people who received the message directly, through other media sources reporting the original message or, indeed, a combination of the two.

In other words, diffusion theories reflect a form of 'Chinese Whispers', whereby an original message is continually relayed throughout an audience and, at each stage of the retelling, the message may be subtly changed or reinterpreted – think, for example, about how gossip is relayed through a population.

A classic version of this theory is **Katz** and **Lazarfield**'s (*Personal Influence*, 1955) **Two-Step Flow** theory, where they argued messages flowed from the media to *opinion formers* (people who directly received a message, were interested enough to want to relay it to others and influential enough for others to take the message on board).

In this respect, the majority of an audience received the original message in a form mediated through influential people in the *primary groups* to which they belonged (family or friends, for example). The key element in this type of theory, therefore, was
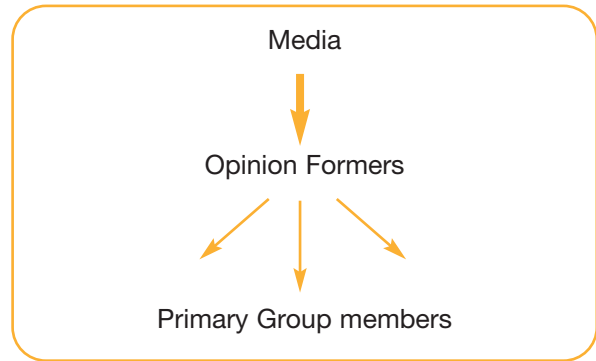
'Two-Step Flow' Model

an audience's involvement in primary groups where media messages were discussed – or, as **Katz and Lazarfield** put it, a recognition of the 'importance of informal, interpersonal relations'.

This version of diffusion theory, therefore, has three main elements.

- **Primary social groups** are a more significant influence than the media.
- **Interpersonal sources** of information are significant influences on how people receive and respond to media messages.
- **Limited direct effects**: Any changes in people's behaviour are likely to result from the way media messages are interpreted, discussed and reinterpreted within primary groups, rather than from any direct media influence. As **Joseph Klapper** (*The Effects of Mass Communication*, 1960) put it: 'Mass communication ordinarily does not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus [network] of mediating factors and influences' – such as, various types of **selective**:
  - **perception**: we notice some messages but not others

- **exposure**: we choose what to watch and read, consistent with our beliefs

- **expression**: we listen to what people important to us think

- **retention**: we remember the important things, consistent with our beliefs.

We can see these ideas in relation to how, for example, in recent years the UK media has transmitted messages about the possible dangers of mobile phone use ('New Mobile Phone Danger': *Daily Express*, 2000); despite the possible dangers, the use of such phones hasn't declined, let alone stopped. One reason for this might be a general audience consensus/belief such warnings are either untrue or exaggerated.

Another way of looking at this (and Klapper's ideas about audience selection) is through **Leon Festinger**'s concepts (*A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 1957) of:

- **Cognitive assonance**: In basic terms, if a message fits with our personal and social (primary group) beliefs we are more likely to consider it favourably.

- **Cognitive dissonance** involves the reverse idea. If the message doesn't fit with what we want to hear then we respond by dismissing it, doubting it, ignoring it and so forth.

Both these ideas fit neatly with 'Two-Step Flow' theory since opinion formers within a group are likely to be seen in terms of the assonance of their message.

A second type of theory – related to the above – which takes the idea of a separation between the media and their audiences even further is **uses and gratifications**. This theory is interesting because it reverses the

way we've been looking at the relationship between the mass media and their audiences for most of this chapter. It suggests audiences 'pick-and-choose' both media and messages – in other words, they *use* the media to satisfy their individual and group needs (gratifications). Thus, rather than asking what the media does *to* people, the theory looks at how different people, in different situations, use the media for their own ends. **Blumler** et al ('The Television Audience', 1972), for example, suggest there are four basic *primary uses* for the media:

- **Entertainment** – media used as a diversion from the problems of everyday life, for example. Alternatively, people may seek entertainment 'for its own sake' (or, indeed, for a 1001 different reasons).

- **Social solidarity**: In societies where the media is part of everyday life, it can be used as the basis for social interaction (talking about the latest events in a soap opera, discussing the news or arguing about who you think will be evicted from reality TV programmes like *Big Brother*). A shared knowledge of the media gives people common ground about which to talk (much like we often use the weather as a topic of conversation), which gives it an *integrating function* – we can feel part of a social group (solidarity) on the basis of our common interests and preoccupations. Even in the virtual world of Internet chatrooms and message boards (where people may not physically know each other), like-minded people can discuss things that are important to them.

Severin and **Tankard** ('Uses of Mass Media', 1997) found the most frequent users of the media were those who were lonely and/or socially isolated, which

suggests for many people the media are an important source of companionship.

- **Identity**: We use the media in different ways to create or maintain a sense of 'who we are'. This may involve reading lifestyle magazines (such as *Hello* or *Homes and Gardens*), using the media as role and style models or, as is increasingly the case, seeking help from magazines and manuals about personal behaviour and problems (through self-help books such as **Milton Cudney's** ever-popular *Self-Defeating Behaviors* (sic), 1993).

- **Surveillance**: In a complex world, the media provides us with news and information about that world. We may use it to keep in touch with what is happening, for reassurance, personal education and the like.

In terms of this theory, the media are:

- **powerless**, considered in terms of their ability to directly influence or change behaviour

- **neutral**, in the sense of not really having any direct affect on attitudes

- **unimportant** as far as researchers are concerned, since the object of study is the *active audience* rather than the media itself.

We can also note a further theoretical variation on diffusion models, namely **Reinforcement Theory**, which focuses on the social context of media use. In other words, the way the media may affect us is dependent on the social groups – and interaction therein – to which we belong.

Klapper (1960), for example, argued people's beliefs were related to the social groups to which they were attached (primary groups being the most significant) and one

⚠ Growing it yourself: uses and gratifications

Using the following table as a template, apply Blumler et al's ideas to your understanding of media use, on both a personal level and in terms of the way you think others may use the media to satisfy certain personal and social needs

Primary Uses	How I use the media	How others may use the media
Entertainment	MTV – Keeping up to date with my favourite music	Relaxation
Social solidarity		
Identity		Reading *The Guardian* reflects their view of society
Surveillance	I'm going to Florida – are there any hurricanes imminent?	

important role of a secondary group such as the media was to reinforce – either positively or negatively – the beliefs we have already formed. This, therefore, suggests a 'media effect' of sorts.

Finally, 'limited effects' approaches are neatly summed up by **Bernard Berelson**'s (*The People's Choice*, 1948) wonderfully imprecise argument that: 'Some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions have some kinds of effects' – and you can't be more definite than that.

⚠ Digging deeper

Theories of limited media effects provided a welcome antidote to the kind of 'simple and direct' media effects that characterised (and still characterise, perhaps) Transmission models. We can, for example, see this very clearly if we consider the relationship between the media and **violent behaviour**. Transmission models have been implicitly criticised, methodologically, by *diffusion approaches* for assuming what they should be testing. For example, simply because we often find people who behave violently enjoy violent forms of media doesn't mean one (the media) causes the other – an idea called the **stepping-stone theory**, (one used extensively in discussions of deviance and illegal drug use, for example), which argues violent people consume violent media and then commit acts of violence as the 'thrill' they get from the former escalates into the latter.

An alternative interpretation here is, that for certain audiences, violent behaviour is something they enjoy (whether it be real or imaginary violence). If this is the case it's

hardly surprising to find a correlation between the two areas; if I like fighting with people in the street, for example, I probably also like to read violent material, watch violent films and listen to aggressive music – in other words, whereas the two may go together (people who like gardening probably read gardening magazines and watch gardening programmes), we can't easily (if at all) disentangle one from the other. In other words, which comes first? Do I watch violent films because I like violence – or does watching violence make me violent?

However, limited effects models do have some major problems we need to consider.

- **Tautology**: If a theory is *tautologous* it contains its own proof – in other words, it involves a *circular argument*; it cannot be disproven because it cannot be objectively tested. **Uses and gratifications**, for example, draws on functionalist ideas (the media performs certain functions for both society and the individual) and suffers from a similar problem. With Functionalism, the tautology comes from the idea 'everything in society exists for a purpose' – if it exists, it is functional because if it wasn't functional it wouldn't exist.

In the previous exercise, it should have been easy to identify a range of people's uses and gratifications; the problem, however, is that being able to do this doesn't test the theory. For this theory to be 'true', you merely have to identify some uses that some people at some time get from the media. Thus, if I use the media to gratify my needs, such needs explain why and how I use the media – but it doesn't explain where my 'needs' come

from in the first place. In other words, we have no way of knowing if the media create – or simply reflect – my needs.

- **Choice**: For an audience to be *active* in terms of their media use, they have to be able to choose between different media options. For example, if I don't like the liberal politics of *The Guardian* I can choose the *Daily Telegraph* as a newspaper closer to my views. In some ways, the two are very different (one is anti-hunting, the other pro; one is anti-Europe, the other isn't and so forth).

While we shouldn't overlook the importance of these differences, in other ways the two newspapers are similar and, in this sense, my choices are limited by the range of media available. Both, for example, promote similar economic ideas about capitalism; both give more credence and space to the views of employer organisations and the ideas of the rich and powerful.

When I read each paper I am subjected to advertising and while the adverts may be different, their function is the same; to persuade me to part with some of the massive amount of money I'm being paid for writing this book (I wish). This idea of consumption ('I shop, therefore I am') can be related to issues of:

- **Identity**: Diffusion models, apart from seeing active audiences, suggest the media is, at best, a *neutral medium* (it has few, if any, effects) and, at worst, completely ineffective in its ability to influence. Such models, therefore, separate the audience from the medium, in the sense I may choose to watch television and may have the choice of many different channels. Within those channels a range of

different types of programming (such as film, drama and quiz shows) are available, within each type (or genre) I can choose, for example, romantic comedy as opposed to horror films and so on, almost ad infinitum. In other words, I chose the media that fit my sense of identity (because they satisfy my needs).

However, the obvious point to note here is the media cannot simply reflect the massive diversity of individual needs this situation implies – at some point my needs cannot be ideally satisfied and I may have to settle for whatever the media is offering. In other words, my behaviour is changed – subtly to be sure, but changed none the less. What this suggests, therefore, is the:

- **Relationship** between audience and medium is more complex than diffusion models suggest.

- **Cultural factors** always intervene in the relationship. At its most blatant, if a newspaper doesn't exactly meet my (political and ideological) needs, I have to settle for the 'closest fit' between my needs and what's on offer; at its most subtle, it suggests the media (consciously or unconsciously) introduces small behavioural changes to their audience. Thus, in relation to something like the Two-Step Flow theory we could note the importance of a cultural factor such as:

- **Authority**: In some situations, we look to the media to *lead* our behaviour – to tell us not only what is happening but, most importantly perhaps, how we should think about and interpret the significance of whatever is happening. A further cultural factor at work here is diffusion

models assume audiences have an almost unlimited *range* of information available, so that all sides and all possible interpretations are covered – but this is not necessarily the case.

Leaving aside your personal feelings about 'violent youths', 'paedophiles' and 'illegal immigrants', they, for example, have no-one putting across their side of the story in the mainstream media. In such situations it's not beyond the bounds of reason to question how 'ineffective' the media actually are (which, spookily enough, is what we're going to do next).

Indirect Media Effects

⚠ Preparing the ground

It is tempting to see the next group of theories (gathered for convenience around the label '**cultural effects**') as some sort of middle ground between the 'direct effects' and 'limited effects' theories we have previously examined. This, however, would be a mistake because cultural effects theories view the media as a very powerful influence in society. Although we have already met the main ideas associated with such theories – when we examined hegemonic theories of media and ideology – we can apply them to an understanding of media effects by noting how these theories see the media as a **cultural** (or ideological) **institution**. In other words, its primary role is to promote – and police – cultural values, or, as **Newbold** ('Approaches to Cultural Hegemony within Cultural Studies', 1995) puts it: 'Cultural

effects theory suggests the media is embedded in the relations that constitute a particular society, working both to produce and reflect powerful interests and social structures'.

From this (neo-Marxist) perspective, therefore, we're looking at the media as an *agency of social control* and, in this particular respect, how the control of ideas – the way people think about the world – can be used to influence behaviour. However, as Newbold suggests, we are not thinking here about direct control, in the sense of forcing people (consciously or unconsciously) to behave in certain ways; rather, the media acts at the institutional (large group) level of culture, not at the level of individual beliefs. In other words, the media exercises social control through its actions as a **socialising agency**, advising and guiding audiences and, by so doing, exercising a *hegemonic role*. We can, for example, see this idea in terms of **George Gerbner**'s ideas ('Communications Technology and Social Policy', 1973) concerning **Cultivation Theory**, which argues television cultivates distinctive attitudes in its audience, rather than directly influencing their behaviour. As **Daniel Chandler** ('Cultivation Theory', 1995) puts it: 'Heavy watching of television is seen as "cultivating" attitudes which are more consistent with the world of television programmes than with the everyday world. Watching television may induce a general mindset about violence in the world, quite apart from any effects it might have in inducing violent behaviour'.

The key idea here, therefore, is 'induce a general mindset'; the hegemonic role of the media creates a situation in which some beliefs are subtly encouraged and others discouraged and, as it establishes this role, its effects are:

- **Slow**: Attitudes and behaviour don't change overnight. Rather, media effects have to be measured in terms of a slow 'drip' of change; in other words, small, gradual and long-term effects that are:

- **Cumulative**, in the sense the media establishes and builds on the general ideas being propagated. It uses a number of standard techniques to achieve a cumulative effect – the consistent promotion of some ideas and not others, the marginalisation of dissenting views and voices, the repetition of certain ideas until they assume a 'common sense' or *taken-for-granted* status.

- **Directional**, in the sense of being limited to particular influences. Only very rarely can the media directly change people's beliefs or behaviour; rather, it operates on the level of leading people in certain directions or ways of thinking.

Gerbner et al ('Living with Television', 1986) draw a parallel between television and religion in terms of its basic cultural functions: 'the continual repetition of patterns (myths, ideologies, 'facts', relationships, etc.) which serve to define the world and legitimize the social order'.

Perhaps the most influential cultural effects theory in recent years has been the **Encoding/Decoding** model developed by, among others, **Stuart Hall** ('Encoding/Decoding', 1980). This involves what is sometimes called a *reception theory* and is based on the idea media messages always have a range of possible meanings and interpretations – some intended by the sender (a newspaper owner or the author, for example) and others read into the message by the audience. For example, even a very simple media text (such as an advert) will involve:

- **Encoding**: The originator of a message has a point they want to get across to the audience. The main point of an advert, for example, might be the simple message 'Buy this product' (it is more complicated than this in reality – not all adverts, for example, are designed just to sell products, but we can keep it simple for our illustrative purpose).

- **Decoding**: The audience viewing the advert will interpret (decode) its message in a variety of ways, depending on such factors as their social background, the context in which the advert is seen and so forth. Thus, how an audience receives and understands even a very simple message will depend on a potentially huge range of factors. For example, if I am not in the habit of buying cheap deodorant, I am unlikely to be very receptive to such an advert. On the other hand, if I see the advert when I'm thinking about a cheap Christmas present for a relation I don't particularly like, I may be receptive. The key idea here, therefore, is:

- **Relative autonomy**: In one sense, I am quite free (autonomous) to interpret a media text in whatever way I choose, depending to some extent on a range of factors (can I afford to buy what's being advertised? Do I really need the product? On the other, I'm being bombarded with messages that may, in some circumstances, be difficult to resist.

For this model, therefore, media messages have a number of possible effects, depending to some extent on the message itself (how cleverly it's constructed, for example) and to other extents on things like my personal cultural background and situation (I may

want to buy the Porsche 911 I've seen advertised but since I can't afford it, I won't). Hall suggests at least three main ways a media message can be read by an audience.

- **Hegemonic**: The audience shares the assumptions and interpretations of the author and reads the message in the way it was intended. Buying a Porsche 911, for example, is something I *need* to do because I can afford it and it will send a message to others about my social status (ironically, of course, I can't actually control what that message may be).

- **Negotiated**: For this type of reading the audience will broadly share the author's views, but may modify their interpretation in the light of their own particular feelings, beliefs or abilities. For example, although I know a Porsche is desirable – and would love to own one – I'll settle for a car that is better suited to my financial and family circumstances.

- **Oppositional**: As someone concerned about the environment, I believe cars are generally not to be encouraged. I would certainly not buy a Porsche because it uses too much petrol and pollutes the environment.

In terms of the above, therefore, we can look at three basic forms of cultural effect.

- **Agenda setting**: As we have noted in a previous section, the media, according to **McCombs** and **Shaw** ('The agenda-setting function of mass media', 1972) identify and select the ideas people are encouraged to think about. An obvious – and over-simplified – example here might be sports reporting. A casual glance

Discussion point: more than words can say

We can illustrate the above ideas by thinking about the following:

Imagine you owned a Porsche 911. List some of the things you want it to say to other people about you.

Reverse the gaze and imagine you see someone driving a Porsche 911. List some of the things you think it says about this person.

through most daily newspapers suggests football is the most important sport in this country – the column inches devoted to reports of matches, boardroom intrigues, managerial sackings and the like far outweighs the attention given to other sports throughout the year. In this respect, while newspapers are unlikely to make you change the team you support, they are *setting the agenda* for what people talk about. If this is true for sport, then it may also be true for areas such as politics and economics.

As **Severin** and **Tankard** (1997) argue, the media have the power to put certain issues in the public sphere – **Denis McQuail** (*Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*, 1994), for example, noted a clear relationship between the order of importance attached to issues by the media and the significance given to those issues by politicians and the public.

However, as **McCombs** and **Estrada** ('The news media and the pictures in our heads', 1997) note, being told what to think about doesn't guarantee the media 'tell us how and what to think about it, or even what to do about it'. A further process, according to cultural effects theorists comes into play here, namely:

- **Framing**: In this respect, issues and stories are framed in ways that suggest to audiences how they *should* be interpreted. In other words, as we have seen earlier, issues are framed in terms of *preferred readings* and *dominant interpretations* – audiences are, therefore *primed* to understand issues (hence this idea is sometimes called *priming theory*) in terms of what **Simon** and **Xenos** ('Media Framing and Effective Public Deliberation', 2000) call 'elite discourses' – in other words, in terms of the way media owners and journalists want their audiences to understand an issue.

In *The Battle for Public Opinion*, 1983, **Lang** and **Lang** found framing worked by using language an audience could understand; in other words, by simplifying issues the media could effectively frame events and set the agenda for their discussion. A more recent example might be the way something like terrorism is reduced to simple ideas, language and solutions. The phrase 'Muslim Fundamentalist' – used repeatedly in the context of terrorism – is a *priming phrase* used by some media to lead their audience to the conclusion the two are inextricably connected. This, in turn, leads us to consider a further cultural effect.

- **Myth making: George Gerbner** ('Reclaiming Our Cultural Mythology', 1994) argues the media have grown so powerful and pervasive in modern (global) societies they create *mythical realities* for those audiences who immerse themselves in media content. In other words, the heavier your media consumption (whether it be watching television, reading newspapers or surfing the Internet) the more likely you are to be drawn into a 'fantasy world' of the media's creation.

For example, we are aware media reporting of crime and violence is far more exaggerated than its actual occurrence in our society. Gerbner (1994) argues, 'heavy television viewers' (watching more than three hours per day) are drawn into 'a distorted concept of reality'. As he notes: 'Most of the violence we have on television is what I call happy violence. It's swift, it's thrilling, it's cool, it's effective, it's painless, and it always leads to a happy ending because you have to deliver the audience to the next commercial in a receptive mood.'

Such exposure, he argues, leads to the development of *mean world syndrome* – the belief, in short, the world is a harsher and meaner place than it is in reality because 'programming reinforces the

worst fears, apprehensions and paranoia of people.'

⚠ Digging deeper

On the face of things, cultural effects theories seem to represent a significant step forward in understanding media effects. However, they do have both methodological and conceptual problems. **Methodological** problems relate to the idea of proving or disproving cultural effects arguments and we can note a couple of such problems.

- **Measurement**: Although these theories suggest the media does have some form of socialising/social control effect, the main problem is how to measure such effects. If they are, by definition, slow, cumulative, indirect and long term, it means that, at best, they will be extremely difficult to identify and track and, at worst, it will be all but impossible to disentangle specific 'media effects' from a wide range of other possible causes. In other words, how is it possible to say with any degree of certainty that attitude or behavioural changes are the result of media – as opposed to some other – effects?

  Cultivation theories also involve some clear problems of measurement and interpretation. For example, the idea 'heavy television viewers' are more open to media influence begs a number of questions: How many hours do you need to watch to be a 'heavy viewer'? How does a researcher decide this figure and, perhaps more significantly, how does the social context of viewing (alone, with family etc.) impact on such ideas?

  In addition, problems of proof relate to:

- **Tautology**: Just as *diffusion models* have problems with proof, so to do cultural effects models. The basic problem here relates to the identification and tracking of effects we have just noted; what exactly is a 'media effect'? Just about anything can be advanced as evidence of the basic theory. If, for example, we are somehow able to identify an effect, this proves the theory (it demonstrates, for example, the media's hegemonic role); on the other hand, an inability to identify effects doesn't disprove the validity of the theory since we could argue 'oppositional readings' of media messages explain why there are no effects.

Conceptual problems, on the other hand, relate to the ideas used within cultural effects theories. For example:

- **Preferred readings**: This idea, although apparently straightforward, is fraught with problems. **John Corner** ('Textuality, Communication and Power', 1983) for example, argues it is difficult to discover which – if any – reading is a dominant one in a situation where, as cultural theorists admit, there are many possible readings. In addition, **Kathy Myers** ('Understanding Advertisers', 1983) argues it would be in the interests of advertisers to create a range of preferred readings for their product to appeal to as wide an audience as possible on a range of different levels. In such situations it doesn't make much sense to somehow restrict the advert to a single, preferred, reading that can be rejected (or opposed) by the people you are trying to influence.

  A further problem is that in order to identify a preferred reading we

presumably either have to research an audience to discover their understanding of a media text or trust to our own media literacy as researchers. In the first instance, as **Justin Wren-Lewis** ('The Encoding/Decoding Model', 1983) argues, does the possibility an audience will interpret a certain message as the 'one intended by the author' necessarily mean this is the preferred reading? Apart from the problem of *author intention* that is discussed in more detail below, we can't simply assume, as I have noted, there is a single dominant reading, nor can we assume the reading identified and understood by the majority of an audience is actually the preferred reading – they may, for example, simply have latched on to a reading they prefer.

In the second instance we arrive at a general problem of:

- **Semiological analysis**: Cultural effects theories depend on this type of analysis (the basics of which we have covered in the *Research Methods* chapter) because they argue a media text has a number of possible interpretations. However, as **Shaun Moores** (*Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, 1993) notes, one problem for a researcher is a form of 'imposition effect'; that is, if we are sure a preferred reading exists there is the possibility that, by trying to identify it, we simply impose *our* reading of the text on both the author and the audience.

- **Essentialising the reader**: A final problem, related to the above ideas, is one noted by **Rob Stam** (*Film Theory*, 2000) when he argues cultural effects theorists tend to resolve the problem of semiological analysis by giving primary importance to

the audience in any interpretation/decoding. However, the logic of such an argument, Stam suggests, is we assume audiences have essential characteristics (they can be relatively easily grouped – as 'oppositional readers' – for example) when the reality is they may hold contradictory, illogical and fragmented levels of understanding. In other words, 'asking the audience' may not be a very fruitful way of establishing effects – not least because it begs the question about media effects in the first place: does an audience interpret a message because of its unique cultural characteristics or, conversely, because it has been shown how to interpret the message by the media?

The last word(s)

To complete this section we can note a couple of further dimensions to the general debate surrounding media effects. The first of these we can call **ethnographic** analyses of audiences: In terms of this general model, the debate has moved on in a couple of ways: firstly, away from an analysis of 'the media' to a cultural analysis of audiences and the various ways they interact with different media. Secondly, analysis has moved away from the idea of *mass audiences* – their actions and reactions – to an interest in audiences *differentiated* by general categories like age, gender and ethnicity as well as by more individualised categories such as cultural and technological competence. In some ways this *epistemological shift* (a change in the way sociologists think about how to generate reliable and valid knowledge about the way audiences use the media) reflects a postmodern-tinged concern with the nature of personal and social identities, an important component of which in the twenty-first

century is how we understand and use available media technologies.

To get a flavour for these approaches (which, as the term *ethnography* suggests, involves the researcher immersing themselves in the cultural behaviour of the people they are studying – observing, questioning and participating in that behaviour, for example), we can note three basic strands to this general approach.

- **Social space**: This particular strand focuses on the way the media is integrated into different *spaces* – especially, but not exclusively, the *private space* of the home. In this respect, understanding how audiences use the media involves examining how domestic spaces are structured – from relatively simple issues such as 'who uses what media in what contexts for what purposes', to more complex issues about control and ownership of technology (who controls the TV remote in your family?) and how media use fits into the general flow of domestic behaviour.

- **Cultural competence**: This strand focuses on understanding how audiences bring different levels of media literacy and competence to their use of the media at their disposal. An obvious example here is the Internet and debates over the extent to which children should or should not be supervised (through both parental and software controls). How people use the media – and what they take from it – will depend to varying extents on their familiarity with that media; this extends from things like understanding the conventions of films, through the expectations we have for different media, to the ability to master different technologies. To use a simple example,

although I consider myself media literate (I can spot a conventional code at 20 paces . . .), the 'joy of text' remains a mystery to me – I have no idea how to send or receive text messages. This, in a sense, make me media illiterate and leads to a further focus:

- **Technology**: This model focuses on how we engage with technology – the media hardware and the software that increasingly surrounds us. Forty years ago British audiences had to cope with television (black and white with two channels, both of which shut down around midnight and daytime TV was but a glint in some advertising executive's eye) and radio – four stations, all government controlled.

  Now, I am surrounded by technology – 200 television channels (the majority of which I watch for about 10 seconds as I continue my fruitless search for something interesting), a digital radio I've no idea how to tune, a computer that can stream films to my desktop, access to hundreds of radio stations around the world, email, message boards, chatrooms, web blogs and a mobile phone I don't know how to answer.

Interesting as these ideas (and my inability to keep pace with technological change) are, a second dimension to the debate revolves around a **theoretical approach** to understanding media and audiences. This type of approach suggests the type of theories we have examined here (from transmission though diffusion to cultural effects and ethnographies) have been looking for the wrong things in the wrong places in the wrong ways (and you can't get more wrong than that). Conventional effects theories, for example, assume a separation between 'the media' and 'the audience', albeit in different ways; transmission theories

assume the media is dominant, diffusion theories the audience dominates and cultural theories suggest the media dominates in some areas, audiences in others.

Postmodern approaches, however, focus on the concept of **meaning**. The majority of conventional media effects theories assume, to varying degrees, a separation between 'the media' and 'the audience', such that one sends out some sort of information that may or may not be received by audiences in different ways. However, if we consider the work of someone like **Janet Staiger** (*Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, 2000), she reworks *reception theory* to argue, for example, **immanent meaning** (the idea the meaning of something like a film or a news broadcast is fixed and unchanging) is not a useful concept. Audiences, in effect, are *perverse spectators* in that they use media in their own way and for whatever purpose.

Activated meanings are created through the various ways an audience interacts with the media. In other words, the meaning of something like a soap opera is effectively created and expressed in numerous ways by whatever a viewer brings to their consumption and enjoyment – or otherwise – of the programme. The significance of this idea, of course, is that the *meaning* of *EastEnders* changes each and every time it is viewed, making it impossible to quantify any form of 'media effect' in any meaningful way. Any 'effect' is changed each time it is identified.

This idea holds true for both the present – the meaning of a media text is changed immediately it is consumed – and, most obviously, the past (films, for example, that were once considered shocking are now more likely to elicit laughter than fear).

Audience as media

Perhaps the most radical way of understanding audience and media is to think about the changing face of media technology and use. If we think, for example, about new mass media (such as weblogs), the circle is completed by the idea the audience becomes, at one and the same time, both the *producer* and *consumer* of media texts. In other words, the audience *is* the media and the media *is* the audience – the two are interchangeable and indistinguishable since the one is a reflection of the other.

This idea (still in its earliest days since access to and understanding of new media technologies is still in its infancy and is shot through with debates about media literacies, competencies and the uneven spread of technological development) is noteworthy because it suggests a different direction for media research and effects theories. It takes the idea of the 'death of the author' (although an author may have some idea about how they would *like* an audience to receive and understand their text, each reader effectively interprets the text in terms of their own ideas, beliefs and so forth) to new extremes of interpretation since it becomes technologically possible to be both author and audience at one and the same time.

⚠ Growing it yourself: author and audience

The message board you can find at www.sixthform.info/forum can be used to explore the above ideas – either individually or as a class.

As you use it, think about how you are performing the dual roles of both audience and mass medium.