AS Sociology

Revision Mapping

Mass Media

“The role of the mass media in representations of age, social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability”.

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Representations

Portrayals

Connor (2001): "…representation is not just about the way the world is presented to us but also about how we engage with media texts...representation is, therefore, just as much about audience interpretation as it is about the portrayals that are offered to us by the media".

Interpretations

Chandler (2001): Representation refers to how the media constructs realities in terms of certain key markers of identity.

Identities

Major key markers of identity include class, age, gender, ethnicity and disability - **'CAGED'**.

Transgressive

In the real world these key categories aren't self-contained; a woman, for example, may be represented differently in the media depending on her class, age and sexuality.

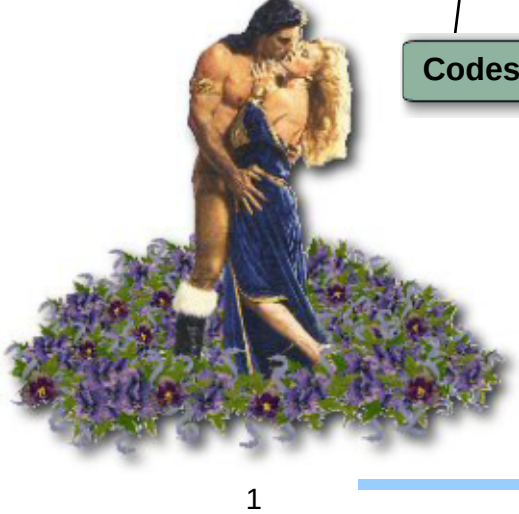
Social

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're interested in here, therefore, is how the media uses representations for a variety of intended and unintended purposes, to construct social identities.

This encapsulates the idea of the way social identities constructed through the media are used to lock people into identities such as "male" or "female".

Stereotypes

One-sided or partial representations of, for example, a social group (such as "white people"); they involve oversimplified expressions of group characteristics and usually accentuate some feature in a negative way (although sometimes groups can be positively stereotyped).



Codes

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're 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.

The media generally presents information through the eyes of middle class professionals or upper class owners. **Example**: News images of the working classes are often framed in term of conflict, whereas fictional images often reflect idealised images of "community". And conflict.

This concept - originally developed by **Mulvey** (1975) as a way of expressing the idea of male power and control over female representation in Hollywood films - can be applied to understand representations of social class across a range of media.

News reporting involves a representation of reality that **Fiske** (1987) calls the *transparency fallacy* - a rebuttal of the idea news reporting represents a neutral "window on the world", reflecting events as they unfold.

Social Class

Transparency

The Gaze

Invisibility

Heider (2004) suggests class visibility or invisibility is related to journalistic (and audience) *news values:* "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

Where some groups (such as the working classes) feature in the media they're restricted to a fairly narrow range of appearances or situations. A *positive* area is sport (especially male professional sport). On the negative side, there is the association with crime and industrial unrest. Middle class representations are broader, involving a wider range of representations across professional employment, taking in work, sport and cultural associations (music, fashion and so forth).

Stereotypes

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".

Marginalisation

The **Glasgow Media Group** (1977) argued lower social classes had less direct access to the media and less control over how they were portrayed.

Codes

Things that tell us something about someone - such as their class or sexual orientation. Here, social class is represented through a number of subtle - and not very subtle - codes. **Fawbert** (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.

Elderly traditionally represented as *social problems* (as a burden for example) and portrayed *unsympathetically* - as senile, ill, unattractive etc.

Youth often represented as being "a problem" (rebellious, disrespectful, ungrateful, sex-obsessed, uncaring...).

Different age groups are neatly compartmentalised into discrete categories. **Connor** (2001) notes how ghettoes exist *within* age groups and **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".

Buckingham et al (2004): Children regarded as **"**a 'special' audience in debates about broadcasting" - they are subject to particularly strong forms of censorship which, in part, reflects the way children are viewed in our society - as a particularly vulnerable group, easily influenced by the media.

Ghettoisation

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.

Technical

Social

Control

Adults urged to control their children's use of the medium.

Classification

Age - perhaps more than any other key marker - involves different categories focused on different interests, attitudes and needs.

The Gaze

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

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) - youth as an arena for folk devils and moral panics.

Age

Normality

The category of youth is represented through various media in ambivalent terms; representations are constantly changing, reflecting the various ways youth can be a highly fragmented category- in terms of media stereotypes at least.

Invisibility

The elderly have, at least in the recent past, been something of an invisible group as far as the media are concerned. This may be changing because of:

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.

Stereotypes

Willis (1999): "…older people were often crudely stereotyped in drama... 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 are used to add a sense of seriousness / moral gravity to a situation (as in the case of news readers, for example).

Population

There are more elderly people (currently 15 million over 55) as a percentage of the overall population than ever before; **Willis** (1999) notes they are the heaviest viewers of television.

Professionals

The mass media is a relatively new phenomenon in our society 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.

Female: **Enciso** (1995) argues women have become more adept at developing a female gaze, one that, according to **Jacobsson** (1999), encourages 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.

Male: 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).

The 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).

Adverts: **Macdonald** (2003) identifies differences in the way men and women are represented in magazine adverts - especially those for alcohol.

Body-shape - traditionally for women but, increasingly, for men (although men are allowed a greater range of culturally-acceptable body shapes). This forms part of wider 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).

Stereotypes

Normality

Gender

Sexuality

A particular form of female (hetero)sexuality is often used to advertise and sell things - combining body-shapes (thin, large-breasted...) with patriarchal notions of "availability".

Almost 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.

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. **Gill** (2003) uses the example of T-shirts with the slogan "Fit chick unbelievable knockers" to demonstrate the idea of both women having the freedom to advertise their sexuality and as an example of how women collude in their own objectification.

Identities

Gender identities are not fixed and unchanging and fragmented social identities are reflected in the way people start to see themselves in new and different ways. **Gill** (2003 argues contemporary representations of women are not "liberating" but rather they're another - more exploitative - form of what **Bordo** (1993) has termed a "new disciplinary regime". Although media representations 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.

Women ("as a housewife or low-status worker") have been replaced by "feisty, successful girl power'

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".

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.

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).

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

Ethnicity

The Gaze

With notable exceptions (which somewhat prove the rule) such as comedy programmes like *Goodness Gracious Me* (an all-Asian cast), ethnic minorities and their lives are generally viewed through a White (largely middle class) gaze. **Carrington** (2002): even "positive" black identities are constructed around cultural spaces like sport, fashion and music. 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").

Stereotypes

Sreberny: Coronation Street introduced a black character who promptly helped burgle a house and an Asian family who took over the Corner Shop. **ITC** survey (2001) also found "The use of stereotypes in TV advertisements can reinforce racism and school bullying".

Representation

Over-representation

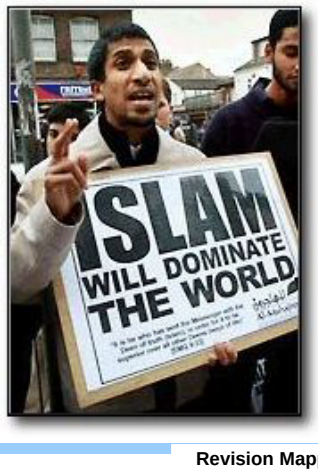
In areas like crime: **Klimkiewicz** (1999) - ethnic minorities most frequently feature as agents of both domestic criminality and international terrorism.

The Other

One significant feature of non-white representation is the way ethnic minorities are 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" but in terms of *social problems*.

Racism

Although it's no longer socially acceptable for the mainstream media to express openly racist ideas and attitudes (a form of *institutional racism*), **Gilroy** (1990) argues **cultural racism**" (or the "**New Racism**") focuses on ideas like "cultural differences" between white and non-white ethnic groups (in areas like language, family life and so forth). **Sreberny** (1999): tendency for the media to think about Asian family life in terms of "arranged marriages"; "forced marriages" and issues of violence surrounding this idea. These ideas link into immigration and political asylum (the "problem" of "economic migrants").



Threat

Cultural

Ethnic minorities portrayed in terms of presenting challenges to a "British" way of life - see "arranged and forced marriages", for example).

Physical

This occurs on both a *societal level* (considered in terms of the various representations of "Muslims" and "Terrorists" following the *9 /11* terror attacks, for example) and a *personal level.* Periodic moral panics about "black criminality", for example, have been highlighted by writers such as **Hall** (1978). More recently, the identification of "muggings in London" as being "predominantly a black crime" by the **Metropolitan Police** (2002) are also part of the representation process.

Disability

Representation

Around 15% of the adult UK population (7 million people) can be classified as "disabled", but a striking feature of media representations of the differently-abled is their under-representation. **Darke** (2003): no series on UK TV currently featured disabilities.

The Gaze

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.

Stereotypes

For the media, disabled people are interesting *because of* their disability, not as people in themselves; a "disabled identity" is established around physical or mental difference. There are exceptions - the physicist, Steven **Hawking,** for example - but even here stereotypes are reinforced because he "triumphs in spite of his disability".

Labelling

The label "disabled" involves a concept of inequality - to be *dis*abled is somehow not as good as being "abled". An alternative, therefore, is to use the label "differently-abled" (or "**difabled**").

Normality

Concepts of normality and abnormality, aside from offering reassurance to the able-bodied ("they" are different to "us") focus, according to **Barnes** and **Mercer** (1996) on "disability as deviance". **Bulsara (**2001): "Disabled people have been presented as socially flawed able-bodied people rather than as disabled people with their own identity".

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 (a "Gay Plague", according to The Sun).

Love

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

Normality

Deviance

Although the tabloid press relishes the idea of "deviant sexuality" the media tends to see one-to-one sexuality as natural, normal and desirable. In the recent past, media concepts of deviant sexualities focused on homosexual behaviour; however, with increasing public and media acceptance of such sexuality, the focus has turned towards areas such as *paedophilia* (with attendant moral panics) and a significant development here has been the *sexualisation* of some forms of child / adult behaviour.

Transgression

Sexuality

Representations refer mainly to differences within and between heterosexual and homosexual representations.

Transgressive sexualities (forms of sexuality that cut across gender categories) tend to both lack expression in the media and invite scorn, derision or fear. An example here is 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.

Codes

The Gaze

One change in the way homosexuality is represented is that the language used to describe gay men and women no longer relies on euphemistic references ("confirmed bachelor" to suggest male homosexuality). This partly reflects changing audience attitudes but it also reflects how gays have organised to promote their own sexuality (the adoption of the term "Queer Theory", for example).

McLean 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. **Caudwell** (2003) questions the extent to which current media representations of lesbians simply reflect a changed male (political) gaze - the decoupling of lesbianism from feminism - returning it to its pre-feminist status as a male fantasy.

Although alternative forms of sexuality are increasingly represented in the media, **Caudwell** (2003) argues this increased representation represents a form of (male) heterosexual voyeurism. In programmes like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Channel 4: 2004), we find a form of gaze that, while seemingly homosexual is mainly viewed through a heterosexual lens; such programmes are about selling a certain type of lifestyle to a heterosexual audience.

The male gaze is not restricted to homosexuality; the heterosexual youth magazine market has developed in recent years with 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.

Representations

Stereotypes

Misrepresentation

Although the media, in terms of representation, deals in stereotypical constructions, are media stereotypes misrepresentations? **Medhurst**(1998): stereotypical representations of gay men or women are the means through which ideological constructions of sexuality are circulated. **Mitchell** *(*1994*):* "Representation constructs knowledge" - it influences the way we think about things.

Medhurst: Stereotypes are not simple misrepresentations since if we reject media stereotypes how can we replace it, except by "creating another stereotype?

Mediation

As with **Fiske's** (1987) idea of a *transparency fallacy*, the world presented through the media is not "real" in the sense of our "first-hand" experiences; rather, what we get is a *reconstructed reality,* filtered (or *mediated*) through a media lens. The media presents an interpreted view of things like gender, class, sexuality and disability.

Reality

Hall (1997): : If something is "represented" through the media there must exist the thing that is being portrayed - "out there", is a reality - a "set of unchanging meanings" - to be *represented*. Thus, for the media to produce *representations* of reality there must, ultimately, be something that is "really real" - otherwise it couldn't have a representation; there would, by definition, be nothing to represent.

Baudrillard (1995): Representations *are* reality. The "reality" of something is different depending on who you are, where you are and your source of information - everything, in other words, is a representation of something (even itself).

Hyperreality

Different narrative accounts sit side-by-side, inter-weave 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 any event you care to name - the Crusades, the 2nd 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.

Simulacra

"Representations that refer to other representations" or *simulations* that are themselves the reality they depict. What this means 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 to miss the point entirely; The media don't simply "mediate the message"; the media - to coin a phrase - *are* "the message".

2 marks

Explain what is meant by a stereotype.

4 marks

Suggest **two** reasons why some groups are represented negatively by the media.

Exam Questions

20 marks

Examine the contribution of sociologists to our understanding of the ways in which the mass media portray race and ethnicity.

20 marks

Examine the ways in which the mass media represent any two of the following: disability; ethnicity; gender; sexuality.

20 marks

Examine the ways in which the mass media portray any two of the following: age, ethnicity, sexuality; disability.

20 marks

Examine the ways in which males and females are represented in the mass media.