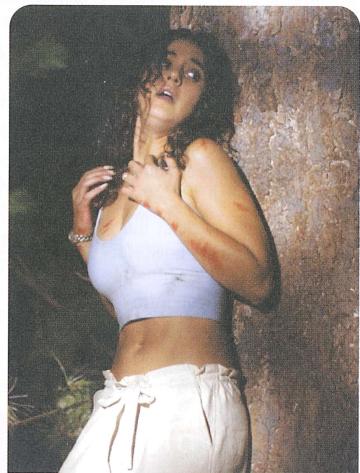


# Representations of the body: gender, sexuality and disability

## Getting you thinking



- 1 Which of these women are playing stereotypical roles? What are these roles?
- 2 To what extent do you think that representations of women in the media are changing? Give examples to support your answer.

Bob Connell (1995) argues that cultural expectations about gender roles in the UK in the 20th century were dominated by **hegemonic definitions** of masculinity, femininity and sexuality. These cultural ideas stressed two broad traditional ideas with regard to gender:

- 1 Paid work was central to men's identity and role. Men were expected to be breadwinners and heads of households responsible for the economic security of their dependants. Masculinity was perceived to be individualistic, competitive, ambitious and aggressive. Men were not expected to openly demonstrate emotion.
- 2 Females were culturally categorized primarily as homemakers, mothers and carers. Women were confined to a life defined by the family, the home and personal relationships. They were expected to be less rational and more emotional and neurotic than men.

Connell argues that these ideas about gender constituted a patriarchal ideology, which assumed that masculinity was

dominant and femininity was subordinate because males exercised economic, social and physical power over females. This ideology was transmitted from one generation to the next through the process of gender-role socialization that mainly occurred in the family. However, the mass media, a secondary agent of socialization, was also seen as playing a key role in teaching and reinforcing these cultural expectations about how each gender was supposed to operate in the social world. Consequently, a great deal of sociological effort and analysis has been expended in the last 30 years examining media representations of gender roles and how these contributed to the dominance of masculinity and the subordination of femininity. However, media research has also focused on how these representations may be responding to the profound economic and social changes that have occurred in the fields of education and employment, which some argue have transformed the power relationship between males and females.

Almy *et al.* (1984) argue that media representations are important because they enter 'our collective social understandings, constituting our sense of ourselves, the positions we take up in the world, and the possibilities we see for action in it' (p.19). In other words, these media representations not only stereotype masculinity and femininity into fairly limited forms of behaviour, but they also provide role models that members of each gender are encouraged to aspire to.

However, Gauntlett (2008) points out that sociological analysis of media representations need to be cautious, because of the sheer diversity of media that exist in the UK. The mass media constitute a range of audio-visual, written and new media. Moreover, media audiences are also wildly diverse. Gauntlett suggests therefore that it would be folly to assume that the ideological messages that are transmitted reflect similar perspectives on gender. Moreover, it is highly likely that, as a result of media and audience diversity, media messages about gender will be contradictory and possibly irreconcilable.

## Traditional media representations of femininity

### Limited roles

It is often argued by feminist sociologists that women are generally represented in a narrow range of social roles by various types of media, whilst men are shown performing a full range of social and occupational roles. Tunstall (1987) is typical of this perspective. He argues:

*<<The presentation of women in the media is biased because it emphasizes women's domestic, sexual, consumer and marital activities to the exclusion of all else. Women are depicted as busy housewives, as contented mothers, as eager consumers and as sex objects. This does indeed indicate bias for family status because, although similar numbers of men are fathers and husbands, the media has much less to say about these male roles; men are seldom presented nude, nor is their marital or family status continually quoted in irrelevant contexts. Just as men's domestic and marital roles are ignored, the media also ignore that well over half of British adult women go out to paid employment, and that many of their interests and problems are employment-related.>>*

Furthermore, feminist analyses often see media representations of working women as a problem in two ways:

- 1 They are portrayed as unfulfilled, unattractive, possibly unstable and unable to sustain relationships.
- 2 It is implied that working mothers are guilty of the emotional neglect of their children. Working fathers are rarely portrayed in this way.

### Symbolic annihilation

Tuchman *et al.* (1978) used the term '**symbolic annihilation**' to describe the way in which women's achievements are often not reported, or are condemned or trivialized by the mass media. Often their achievements are presented as less important than their looks and sex appeal.

### Women (*hardly*) in the news

Gallagher (1980) reviewed the portrayal of women by the media across different continents and found that the activities of women were rarely seen as newsworthy compared with the activities of men. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) published a snapshot of gender in news media on one day across 76 countries in 2005 and suggested that little has changed since Gallagher's observations. The GMMP found that women appeared in, or were the subject of British television news stories much less than men: when they did appear they were usually there as celebrities or in some kind of decorative role, and the stories they appeared in tended to be 'softer' news features, e.g. women were interviewed as consumers. There were very few stories about their professional abilities or expertise, and most press coverage continues to rely on men as experts in the fields of business, politics and economics. In 2000, the Association of Women Journalists studied news coverage of women and women's issues in 70 countries. It reported that only 18 per cent of stories quote women, and that the number of women-related stories came to barely 10 per cent of total news coverage. Moreover, Gill (2007) argues that female issues and news are often marginalized by newspapers, in that newspaper editors see the need to have 'women's pages' which focus on women as a special group with special – often emotional – needs.

### Coverage of women's sport

A good example of the symbolic annihilation of women's activities is the media coverage of women's sport in newspapers and on television. Research into TV sport presentation shows that what little coverage of women's sport there is tends to sexualize, trivialize and devalue women's sporting accomplishments (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation 2006). Evidence collected by the Bristol Fawcett Society (2008) suggests this limited coverage is still the case, even in broadsheet quality newspapers such as the *Observer*. Their analysis of the *Observer Sports Monthly* in 2008 found that 177 men were featured, compared with only 13 women.

Duncan and Messner (2005) note that commentators, (97 per cent of whom are men), use different language when they talk about female athletes. Men are described as 'big', 'strong', 'brilliant', 'gutsy' and 'aggressive', whereas women are more often referred to as 'weary', 'fatigued', 'frustrated', 'panicked', 'vulnerable' and 'choking'. Commentators are also twice as likely to call men by their last names only, and three times as likely to call women by their first names only. Furthermore, women in sports are often described as 'girls', whereas males are rarely referred to as 'boys'. Duncan and Messner argue that this reduces female athletes to the role of children, while giving adult status to white male athletes. The media also subject women in sport to the **male gaze** (see p. 180) because female athletes are increasingly photographed in hyper-sexualized poses.

### Women's invisibility in the media

Another aspect of symbolic annihilation is the invisibility of women in various parts of the media. Recent studies suggest that the male-to-female ratio in speaking parts in

prime-time drama is about 60/40. Even children's television is dominated by males. The Bristol Fawcett Society (2008) analysed a day's output from CBeebies and found that only 30 per cent of main characters were female, all the story narrators were male and a very clear majority of anchors and presenters were also male.

Females are also invisible in new types of media. A content analysis by Dietz (1998) of 33 popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis video games found that there were no female characters in 41 per cent of the games; in 28 per cent of them, females were portrayed as sex objects, while 21 per cent of the games portrayed women as victims of male violence. An Ofcom survey in 2008 found that boys of all ages were more likely than girls to access such games through games consoles. However, on a more positive note, the survey also concluded females were more likely to use social network internet sites that involved creative online activities, particularly those related to communicating or sharing content with other people.

## Ideological ideals

Apart from television, the most popular type of media that women mainly access is women's magazines. These magazines have attracted a great deal of attention from feminist sociologists over the last 25 years, who suggest that they strongly encourage women to conform to ideological patriarchal ideals that confirm their subordinate position compared with men.

### A cult of femininity?

Ferguson (1983) conducted a content analysis of women's magazines from between 1949 and 1974, and 1979 and 1980. She notes that such magazines are organized around '**a cult of femininity**', which promotes a traditional ideal where excellence is achieved through caring for others, the family, marriage and appearance. She argues that, although modern female magazines, especially those aimed at teenagers, are gradually moving away from these stereotypes, they still tend to focus narrowly on 'him, home and looking good (for him)'. Contemporary evidence suggests that not much has changed. The Bristol Fawcett Society analysed 521 covers of magazines in 2008 that featured people, and discovered that 291 (56 per cent) featured idealized images of men and women, of which 84 per cent were women. The other 44 per cent of magazine covers, which focused on subjects such as sport, politics and music, featured a mere 15 per cent of women.

However, Ferguson's ideas were challenged by Winship (1987), who argued that women's magazines generally play a supportive and positive role in the lives of women. She argues that such magazines present women with a broader range of options than ever before, and that they tackle problems that have been largely ignored by the male-dominated media, such as domestic violence and child abuse.

### The sexual objectification of women

Wolf (1990) suggests that the images of women used by the media, especially the print media and advertising, present a particular '**beauty ideal**' through which they transmit the strong ideological message that women should treat their bodies as a project in constant need of

improvement. Cumberbatch (2004) found that being 'attractive' fitted the description for nearly two-thirds of females featured in television advertising but only one-quarter of males. He concluded that women generally occupy a passive 'decorative' role in television advertising.

This media beauty ideal, especially when it is found in pornography, national newspapers and lads' magazines such as *Nuts*, essentially views women as **sex objects** to be consumed by what Mulvey (1975) calls the 'male gaze', whereby the camera lens essentially 'eyes up' the female characters, providing erotic pleasure for men. According to Kilbourne (1995), this media representation presents women as mannequins: tall and thin, often size zero, with very long legs, perfect teeth and hair, and skin without a blemish in sight. Kilbourne notes that this mannequin image is used to advertise cosmetics, health products and anything that works to improve the appearance of the body for the benefit of the male gaze (rather than for female self-esteem).

This beauty ideal makes an appearance in a variety of media. Mulvey notes that physical looks, sex appeal and youth seem to be necessary attributes for women to be successful in television and in the cinema. In news presentation, in particular, with its increasingly intimate mode of presentation, good-looking young women are used to improve ratings, employing at times a flirtatious relationship with their more mature male co-presenter.

### **Slimness = happiness?**

Magazines for teenage girls also concentrate heavily on beauty and slimming. For example, content analysis of teenage magazines in the UK indicates that almost 70 per cent of the content and images focus on beauty and fashion, compared with only 12 per cent focused on education or careers.

Some media commentators, such as Orbach (1991), have suggested that such media can create anxieties in young females with regard to their body image and identity. She notes that the media, especially those magazines that focus on fashion and celebrity, as well as the tabloid newspapers, perpetuate the idea that slimness equals success, health, happiness and popularity. She accuses the media of overemphasizing this aspect of the beauty ideal and for encouraging young girls to be unhappy with their bodies. She notes that they create the potential for eating disorders in several ways:

- by constantly exhorting females to be concerned with their weight, shape, size, looks, etc.
- by using pictures of size-zero supermodels to illustrate articles
- by running features that criticize so-called 'overweight' celebrities
- through adverts encouraging dieting and cosmetic surgery.

Orbach argues that exposure to such ideal images coincides with a period in girls' lives where self-regard and self-efficacy is in decline, where body image is at its most fragile because of physical changes of puberty, and where the tendency for social comparison is at its peak.

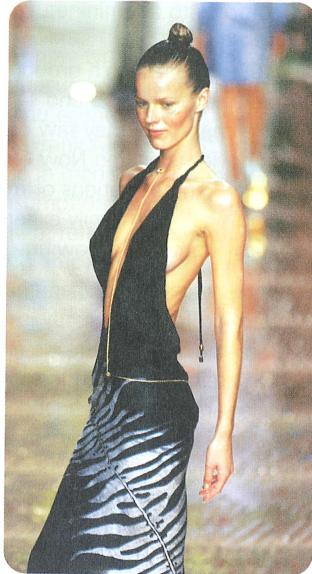
Hamilton and Waller (1993) take a slightly different view to media effects than Orbach. They suggest that the

**Do you think there is a 'causal link between media images of super-thin women and eating disorders in young women'?**

media may act as a negative reinforcer of body-size overestimation – the media does not make women feel a need to be thinner *per se*, but the media focus on thinness may assist them in feeling bigger than they already feel themselves to be.

In 2003, *Teen* magazine reported that 35 per cent of girls aged 6 to 12 have been on at least one diet, and that 50 to 70 per cent of normal-weight girls believe they are overweight. Overall, research indicates that 90 per cent of women are dissatisfied with their appearance in some way. Tebbel (2000) reports that women's magazines have ten-and-a-half times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines do, and over three-quarters of the covers of women's magazines include at least one message about how to change a woman's bodily appearance – by diet, exercise or cosmetic surgery. Television and cinema reinforce the importance of a thin body as a measure of a woman's worth. Fouts (1999) reports that over three-quarters of female characters in television situation comedies are underweight, and only one in 20 are above average in size.

There is no scientific proof of a direct causal link between media images of super-thin women and eating disorders in young women, but all the research points to a direct impact on teenage girls. It is a fact that in societies where there is no established media, there is no culture of thinness and eating disorders are very rare. However, there is evidence that the introduction of Western-style media has led to an increase in eating disorders in several cultures, e.g. Becker *et al.*'s (2003) study of the appearance of eating disorders in Fiji after the introduction of Western television.



- 3 the 'hot lesbian' entwined with another beautiful woman.

However, Gill argues that, although these advertisements claim to **empower** young women, 'the toned, beautiful, heterosexual women featured in these ads come straight out of the most predictable templates of male sexual fantasy, and embody very narrow standards of female beauty and sex appeal'. In other words, the images contained in these advertisements are contradictory.

She concludes:

*<<Instead of passive, 'dumb' or unintelligent sex objects, women in advertisements are now active, beautiful, smart, powerful sexual subjects. In some respects, this shift is a positive one, offering modern representations of femininity that give women power and agency, and not exclusively defining women as heterosexual. However, these limited representations of female desire in the media may also be influencing women to feel that they should fit a mould and look and act in a certain way; that they should not only be beautiful, but sexy, sexually knowledgeable and always 'up for it' – and we must question whether this is how women should be represented – and sold to.>>*

In other words, Gill agrees that there are elements of Wolf's beauty ideal in these representations, which may have the negative side-effect of encouraging ordinary women to pursue the impossible. Orbach notes that, as a result, numerous surveys indicate that a majority of young women are constantly dissatisfied with their bodies and likely to be experiencing low self-esteem.

### Positive role models?

Other sociologists have noted the increasing number of positive female roles, which, they claim, are emerging especially in television drama and films. It is argued that these reflect the social and cultural changes that females have experienced in the last 25 years, especially the feminization of the economy, which has meant that women are now more likely to have careers and an independent income. Moreover, there has been a fundamental change in women's attitudes – Wilkinson (1994) calls this a 'genderquake' – which means that their aspirations have dramatically changed, with education and career replacing marriage and family as priorities.

These cultural changes started to seep into British television culture through American series such as *Sex in the City*, *Ally McBeal*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files*. Westwood notes how many of these series subverted hegemonic definitions of gender by having female lead characters who were just as confident and powerful as the male character. She also argues that we are now seeing more 'transgressive' (i.e. going beyond gendered expectations) programming on television. Traditional gender roles are constantly being experimented with. She cites the example of *The X-Files*, in which the female character, Scully, represents the 'masculine' world of science, rationality and facts, whilst the male character, Mulder, is emotionally open and vulnerable, i.e. traits normally associated with femininity. There are signs that British television series are now well down this path –

### Do the modern media empower women?

Gill (2008) argues that the depiction of women in advertising has changed from women as passive objects of the male gaze, to active, independent and sexually powerful agents. She examined advertisements on television, in magazines and on billboards over a ten-year period and suggests that three stereotypes of women can be seen:

- 1 the young physically toned and smart heterosexual who uses her sexual power to control a man
- 2 the vengeful heterosexual beautiful woman set on punishing her ex-lover

think of the ways in which femininity was represented by the female characters in dramas such as *Dr Who*, *Prime Suspect* and *Gavin and Stacey*. Some cultural commentators have suggested that soap operas, such as *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*, also promote independent and assertive female characters compared with weaker male characters. Women often use their sexuality as a source of power over men.

However, Fiske (2003) argues that despite positive changes in media representations of women, there are also contradictions reflecting those faced by women in their attempt to assert feminine values within a society where patriarchal values dominate. Soaps focus on domestic issues – the domestic setting may be regarded as the only legitimate (accepted) area for female authority in patriarchal societies. Therefore, while soap operas do portray women in a more positive way than advertising and other forms of television, they still ultimately respect and conform to hegemonic definitions of femininity. Soaps often show women as having jobs, but rarely pursuing their careers, and if they do, more often than not, they are unsuccessful. Thus we can see how even a form of television programming aimed at a majority female audience contains subliminal messages reinforcing the dominant male ideology.

Gauntlett (2008), however, has drawn attention to 21st-century media aimed at young women, which, he claims, differ in character from the media of 20 years ago. He argues that magazines:

<<are emphatic in their determination that women must do their own thing, be themselves, and/or be as outrageously sassy and sexy as possible. Several recent movies have featured self-confident, tough, intelligent female lead characters. Female pop stars sing about financial and emotional independence, inner strength, and how they don't need a man.>>

This set of media messages from a range of sources suggest that women can be tough and independent whilst 'maintaining perfect make-up and wearing impossible shoes'. He claims that surveys of young women and their lifestyles suggest that these media messages are having a positive and significant impact on the way young women construct their identities today.

## Traditional media representations of masculinity

Until fairly recently, there has been little analysis of how the media construct, inform and reinforce cultural expectations about men and masculinity. Tunstall (1987) points out that the media rarely focus on men's marital and domestic roles, or claim that fathers' lack of contact with their children (because of their jobs) leads to social problems such as juvenile delinquency. On the other hand, working and single women are often seen as blameworthy for such problems. Tunstall also observed that men are seldom presented as sex objects in the same way as females or judged by the media in terms of how well

they conform to a feminine definition of an ideal male physical form.

In 1999, the research group Children Now asked boys between the ages of 10 and 17 about their perceptions of the male characters they saw on television, in music videos and in movies (Children Now 1999). Their results indicate that media representations of men do not reflect the changing work and family experiences of most men today. The study found the following:

- On television, most men and boys usually keep their attention focused mostly just on women and girls.
- Many males on TV are violent and angry.
- Men are generally leaders and problem-solvers.
- Males are funny, confident, successful and athletic.
- It is rare to see men or boys crying or otherwise showing vulnerability.
- Male characters on TV could not be described as 'sensitive'.
- Male characters are mostly shown in the workplace, and only rarely at home.
- More than a third of the boys had never seen a man on TV doing domestic chores.

These images support the idea that hegemonic images of masculinity generally continue to dominate mass media coverage of boys and men.

## The masculine myth

Easthope (1990) argues that a variety of media, especially Hollywood films and computer games, transmit the view that masculinity based on strength, aggression, competition and violence is biologically determined and, therefore, a natural goal for boys to achieve. He argues that the Hollywood action hero is the embodiment of this view. Easthope argues that, while most men cannot hope to achieve such a masculine image, i.e. it is an ideological myth, they internalize the notion that men have physical, cultural and emotional power and that this is part and parcel of their male identity.

## Men and magazines

### The 'new man'

The 1980s saw the emergence of a new breed of glossy magazines aimed at middle-class young men, such as *GQ*, *Maxim* and *FHM*. Interestingly, their content focused on the masculine experience rather than specifically on interests or hobbies. The content of such magazines often suggested that:

- men are emotionally vulnerable
- they should be more in touch with their emotions or feminine side
- they should treat women as equals
- they should care more about their appearance
- active fatherhood is an experience worth having.

These magazines were seen by some commentators as evidence of a new type of masculinity – the 'new man'. Television advertising in the 1980s and 1990s also focused on this phenomenon, presenting us with a series of commercials peopled with caring sharing men.

### The 'metrosexual male'

Media representations of this new type of masculinity led to postmodern sociologists speculating that masculinity was responding to the growing economic independence and assertiveness of women. Frank Mort (1988), for example, argued that the rise in men's fashion magazines, and the advertising and consumption of male toiletries and designer-label clothing for men, reflected changes in masculine social attitudes and, in particular, the emergence of the 'metrosexual' male. Rutherford (1998) suggests media images of the new man were an attempt – partly in a response to feminism – to express men's repressed emotions and aimed at revealing a more feminized image. However, Tim Edwards (1997) argues that the new man was quite simply a product of advertisers, who invented the concept in order to sell products to both men and women.

Gauntlett (2008) is particularly supportive of men's magazines such as *FHM*, which, he claims, have an almost obsessive relationship with the socially constructed nature of manhood. He argues that such media are positive because they stress that 'the performance of masculinity can and should be practised and perfected'. His study of the content of *FHM* concludes that the masculine values it transmits are 'fundamentally caring, generous and good-humoured'. Gauntlett argues that these magazines are often centred on 'helping men to be considerate lovers, useful around the home, healthy, fashionable, and funny – in particular, being able to laugh at themselves'.

### Retributive masculinity

Collier (1992) notes that men's magazines are often contradictory in their representations of masculinity. He notes that these magazines continue to define success in traditional terms, i.e. in terms of work, salary and materialism, whilst women are objectified in an explicitly sexual fashion. These magazines continue to relegate women to the background. Gauntlett agrees that images of the 'conventionally rugged, super-independent, extra-strong macho man still circulate in popular culture'. Sharples (1999) argues that some of the newer magazines,

**Do you agree with Gauntlett that men's magazines have a positive influence on modern men?**



such as *Zoo* and *Nuts*, have actually rejected metrosexuality. Rutherford suggests they are symbolic of what he calls '**retributive masculinity**' – an attempt to reassert traditional masculine authority by celebrating traditionally male concerns in their content, i.e. 'birds, booze and football'. Some feminist sociologists have seen these traditional representations as part of an antifeminist backlash. However, as Sharples notes, it is unlikely that these magazines set out to be misogynist – rather they simply promote masculinity in what their editors and journalists see as positive ways. Gauntlett suggests that media sociologists tend to be obsessed with the traditional aspects of men's media and consequently fail to understand that 'men's magazines are not perfect vehicles for the transformation of gender roles, by any means, but they play a more important, complex and broadly positive role than most critics suggest'.

Gary Whannel's observations on David Beckham (2002) note that mass media stories about and images of David Beckham are also contradictory, in that they stress Beckham as representative of both metrosexual and retributive versions of masculinity. Whannel notes that media representations of Beckham are fluid – his good looks, his football skills, competitive spirit and his commitment mark him out as a traditional 'real man'. However, this image has been balanced with alternative media representations that stress his metrosexuality, particularly his emotional commitment to his family and the fact that he spends a great deal of time, effort and money on his image.

There are, then, signs that media representations of masculinity are moving away from the emphasis on traditional masculinity, to embrace new forms of masculinity that celebrate fatherhood and emotional vulnerability. In the past 20 years, the media have also become more accepting of homosexuality, as major celebrities have come out and declared themselves gay. However, as the section on sexuality (pp. 185–9) indicates, there are still contradictions in the media representation of homosexuality. Similarly, it is important not to exaggerate changes in representations of masculinity, as the overall tone of media representations still strongly supports hegemonic versions of what it is to be a man.

## Theoretical perspectives and media representations

Feminists are the main sociologists working in this field. They have been very critical of the representations of men and women in the media. However, they differ in their emphasis.

### Liberal feminism

Liberal feminists are concerned about media representations because they believe that the mass media plays a major role, alongside the family and education, in the social construction of gender roles, i.e. how children learn to be feminine or masculine. The media emphasis on females as domestic goddesses and sex objects is seen as a

problem because it is believed to have a limiting effect on young females' behaviour and aspirations, especially in adolescence.

Liberal feminists believe that media representations are slow to change in response to women's achievements in society. This 'cultural lag' is due to the fact that attitudes and ideas change more slowly than social and economic conditions. Women are still ignored or trivialized by the media, although liberal feminists accept that this is happening to a lesser degree than in the past as the number of female journalists, editors and broadcasters increases.

However, liberal feminists are concerned that women's progress in media professions has considerably slowed. The majority of media owners are male, as are the higher position holders within media conglomerates. For example:

- In 2009, out of 20 national daily and Sunday newspapers, only three editors were female (ironically of tabloid newspapers, the *Sun*, *Star* and *Sunday Mirror*).
- In 2006, only 26 per cent of the boards of television and film production companies in the UK were women.
- Women made up 50 per cent of the advertising workforce in 2006, but only 26 per cent of managers and 15 per cent of top executives.
- A spot survey carried out by the pressure group Women in Film and Television into 10 prime-time UK dramas during one week's transmissions showed that only 15 per cent of directors and only 25 per cent of writers were female.
- Women continue to dominate areas in the film and television industries such as costume, make-up and hair, which have less status and are paid less than male-dominated technical areas such as camera, sound and lighting.
- In 2002, the BFI analysed UK feature-film productions of the previous two years (including those in production). Out of the total of 350 films, only eight were directed by women.

## Socialist and Marxist feminism

Marxist or socialist feminists believe that the roots of the stereotypical images of men and women in the media are economic. They are a by-product of the need of media conglomerates in capitalist societies to make a profit. The male-dominated media aim to attract the largest audience possible, and this leads to an emphasis on the traditional roles of men and women in sitcoms, game shows and soap operas. The alternative images of women encouraged by feminism, e.g. as assertive career women, do not fit easily into this type of media content and consequently such women are ignored, devalued or treated critically.

A great deal of the content of women's magazines is shaped by advertising. These types of media make profits from advertising rather than sales, and therefore it is in the interests of these magazines to promote 'false needs' around beauty, size and shape, etc., in order to attract advertising revenue from the cosmetics, diet and fashion industries. By presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain, the cosmetic and diet product industries are

assured of growth and profits. It is estimated that the diet industry alone is worth \$100 billion a year in the USA.

Marxists note that another media marketing strategy that encourages women to invest in the beauty market is an increasing emphasis in media content on retaining youth and resisting ageing. Marxists argue that women are therefore not only exploited by the media as mother/housewives and sex objects, but their anxieties about weight and age are also deliberately manipulated by the media so that they can be exploited as consumers of body-related products.

## Radical feminism

Radical feminists feel strongly that the media reproduce patriarchy. In patriarchal societies, men dominate positions of power and control and have a vested interest in keeping women in subordinate positions. Radical feminists argue that traditional images are deliberately transmitted by male-dominated media to keep women oppressed into a narrow range of roles.

Radical feminists believe that the media deliberately dupe women into believing in the 'beauty myth', i.e. that they should conform to what is a male image of what it is to be a 'proper' woman in terms of good looks, sexiness, ideal shape, weight, size, etc. Women are strongly encouraged by the media to see these goals as central to their personal happiness, rather than competing with men for positions of power. This creates a form of **false consciousness** in women and deters them from making the most of the opportunities available to them.

Radical feminists claim that men's magazines that celebrate and encourage retributive masculinity are examples of a social backlash directed against the gains made by women because of the feminization of the economy, and attempts to compensate for a 'crisis in masculinity' as men's economic and social power declines. They suggest it is no coincidence that, at the same time as women are achieving greater social, political and professional equality, these magazines symbolically relegate them to subordinate positions as sex objects.

## Popular feminism

McRobbie (1999) argues that much of young women's media today constitutes a form of '**popular feminism**' expressed through young women's magazines that promote the concept of 'girl power'. McRobbie argues that young women in the 21st century are promoting a new form of feminism that, on the surface, looks like it is a rejection of the feminism of previous generations that focused on patriarchal forms of exploitation. She argues that:

<>to these young women, official feminism is something that belongs to their mothers' generation. They have to develop their own language for dealing with sexual inequality; and they do this through a raunchy language of 'shagging, snogging and having a good time'.>> (p.122)

McRobbie argues that the key difference in the language used by traditional and popular feminists is that the latter is now in the mainstream of commercial culture, whereas



Girls Aloud: female stereotypes or symbols of popular feminism?

the former was marginalized and often ignored by the mainstream media. Hollows (2000) suggests popular culture in the form of women's magazines is a site of a cultural struggle, in which new forms of femininity and feminism are being defined and negotiated. As Gill (2007) notes: 'the fact that magazines are commercial ventures does not mean that they can not also be spaces for progressive ideas or cultural contestation' (p.204).

## Postmodernism

Gauntlett (2008) focuses on the relationship between the mass media and identity. He argues that the mass media today challenge traditional definitions of gender and are actually a force for change, albeit within limits, for encouraging a diversity of masculine and feminine identities. He notes that: 'the traditional view of a woman as a housewife or low-status worker has been kick-boxed out of the picture by the feisty, successful "girl power" icons'. There has also been a new emphasis in men's media on men's emotions and problems, which has challenged masculine ideals such as toughness and emotional reticence. As a result, the media are now providing alternative images and ideas, which are producing a greater diversity of gender identities.

Gauntlett argues that, as far as identity goes, the media provide consumers with a greater degree of choice as they provide the tools for the social construction of identity. However, he also acknowledges the contradictory nature of modern media and notes that, 'like many toolkits, it contains some good utensils and some useless ones'. In particular, Gauntlett suggests that media role-models, alongside parents, friends, teachers, etc., serve as 'navigation points' to assist individuals in making decisions and judgements about their own lifestyles. Gauntlett rejects the view that young men are attracted to magazines that focus on retributive forms of masculinity because they are experiencing a crisis of masculinity. He notes that young men in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have adapted to the modern world and have grown up with women as their equals. They therefore do not feel threatened or emasculated by the way femininity has changed.

Gauntlett argues that the power relationship between the media and its audience is complex. Both media producers and consumers subscribe to traditional ideas

about gender as well as new ideas. However, he notes that in contrast with the past, we now no longer get singular and straightforward media messages that suggest that there is only one ideal type of masculinity or femininity. In response, the audience borrows bits and pieces from media content in order to help them to construct their own identities. Gauntlett suggests, therefore, that media content, despite its contradictions, should be seen as resources that people can use to think through their identities and how they might present themselves to the world. The media, in turn, will be influenced by these myriad new forms of identity and lifestyle that result from consuming media messages.

## Pluralism

Pluralists claim that critiques of the media representations found in modern media underestimate women's ability to see through gender stereotyping and manipulation. They believe that feminists are guilty of stereotyping females as impressionable and easily influenced. They claim that there is no real evidence that girls and women take any notice of media content or that it profoundly affects their attitudes or behaviour.

Pluralists believe that the media simply reflect social attitudes and tastes – in other words, public demand. They argue that the media are meeting both men and women's needs and that if women were really unhappy at the way they were being represented, they would not buy media products such as women's magazines. However, in criticism of pluralism, the question remains: to what extent are the media actually creating those needs in the first place?

## Representations of sexuality

### Moral panics and sexuality

The concept of 'moral panic' (explored in Topic 3) is important in understanding media representations of sexuality; the way in which both tabloid newspapers and television news have reported aspects of sexuality have resulted in the social construction of social anxiety or moral panics. Society learns to fear, or to be critical of, particular social groups, i.e. folk devils who are consequently vilified, condemned and discriminated against by society and its social agents. The most obvious example of such a group in recent years have been child sex offenders or paedophiles. However, other groups have also been subjected to the moral hysteria that accompanies a moral panic. For example:

- Homosexuals experience periodic moral panics with regard to their supposedly 'unnatural' practices and, in the 1980s, were actually blamed by the media for the spread of the HIV virus and AIDS – the media even referred to AIDS as a 'gay plague'.
- The 1990s saw a moral panic focused on the alleged promiscuity of teenage girls, who supposedly were getting pregnant in order to obtain benefits and council housing.

## Young people's media and representations of sexuality

Batchelor *et al.* (2004) argue that the mass media have an important role to play in shaping the knowledge and attitudes of young people with regard to sexuality. They carried out a content analysis of media, such as magazines and television programmes consumed by young people, in order to examine how sexuality is represented. They discovered that some aspects of sexuality were represented very positively in terms of publicizing sexual health information, the exploration of issues such as consent and whether couples were 'ready' to have sex. For example, the right of girls to 'say no' was given prominence in several teen dramas and magazines (see 'Focus on research' below). However, Batchelor and colleagues' findings also suggest some limitations in media coverage of young people's sexuality:

- It was assumed in most media texts that young people, if they were aged over 16, were sexually active.
- Contraception and managing 'how far to go' sexually were clearly represented as female responsibilities.

The focus on female responsibility for contraception was emphasized in references to pregnancy and letters to problem pages centred on girls' worries about getting/been pregnant.

- There were no examples of how people might raise concerns such as safer sex, e.g. to avoid STIs.
- There were distinct differences in terms of how young men and women in media texts talked, felt about, and acted, in relation to sex. For example, the study found that female media characters discussed sex with their friends, whereas male characters boasted about their sexual prowess. Girls were portrayed as being more interested in emotions, while male characters were represented as being more interested in sex. The general picture, therefore, both in magazines and in television drama was of boys/men as pursuers and girls/women as the pursued.

- There was a lack of positive images of lesbian and gay teenagers, and a failure to represent sexual diversity.

Read the 'Focus on research' below to discover more about the methods used in Batchelor and colleagues' research.

### Focus on research



#### Batchelor *et al.* (2004) Representing young people's sexuality in the 'youth' media

This research examines how sexuality is represented and the level of sexual health information provided in some UK magazines and TV programmes targeted at young people.

The researchers describe how they analysed a cross section of media during a randomly selected week. They examined nine top-selling magazines for young people, ten daily and eight Sunday newspapers (involving 68 newspaper editions over the seven days), and recorded all television programmes between 16:00 and 18:00 on each terrestrial channel (BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4 and 5). They also recorded a series of programmes that fell outside this time slot, but which have a large teenage audience. These included 'teen dramas' such as *Dawson's Creek* (pictured above) and *Hollyoaks*, as well as a range of soap operas, including *Eastenders* and *Brookside*. The magazine sample consisted of five publications aimed at teenage girls/young women (*Mizz*, *Sugar*, *Bliss*, *J-17* and *19*), two music magazines

(*M8* and *Top of the Pops*), one computer gaming magazine (*PlayStation Plus*) and one 'lad's mag' (*frOnt*).

From the above sample, every item involving sexual content relating to young people was collected. Sexual content was defined as any depiction of sexual behaviours, discussion of sex or sexuality, sexually suggestive behaviour/images/language, sexual health, or sexuality-related issues (e.g. sexual identity).

Sexual suggestiveness included flirtatious behaviours (intended to arouse sexual interest in others), sexual innuendoes and double entendres (composed of veiled references to sexual behaviour or sexual organs), and sexualized presentations of the body (such as a woman positioned on her back in a posture of sexual display). Each item was then subject to content analysis. In brief, content analysis is the study of the frequency with which certain identifiable elements occur in a given sample. Each item was coded according to its content, type of discussion and/or reference, and its format (e.g. TV teen drama, magazine editorial, newspaper feature). This quantitative analysis was complemented by qualitative analysis designed to capture the subtleties of the various messages presented, e.g. was the behaviour portrayed as humorous or serious, positive or negative.

Adapted from S.A. Batchelor, J. Kitzinger and E. Burtney (2004) 'Representing young people's sexuality in the 'youth' media', *Health Education Research*, 19(6), pp. 669–76

- 1 What is the aim of this research?
- 2 How was the idea of 'sexual content' operationalized?
- 3 How did the researchers use content analysis in their research?
- 4 What did they find out about media representations of young people's sexuality?

## Representations of homosexuality

Batchelor and colleagues found that being gay was not generally integrated into mainstream media representations. Rather, when it did appear, e.g. in television drama, it was represented mainly as a source of anxiety or embarrassment, or it was seen as a target for teasing and bullying. The study also found that, in mainstream young people's media, lesbianism was completely invisible.

Although homosexuality is no longer illegal and social attitude surveys suggest that society views this form of sexuality as more socially acceptable, it still does not have the same status as heterosexuality. Dyer (2002) observes that 'a major fact about being gay is that it doesn't show ... the person's person alone does not show that he or she is gay'. He argues that the media construct stereotypical 'signs of gayness', such as vocal tics, facial expressions, stances and clothing in order to 'make visible the invisible'. Consequently, if a person, whether heterosexual or homosexual, demonstrates these signifiers in the course of their everyday behaviour, they may be labelled as 'gay' and subjected to prejudice and discrimination by others.

Media representations of sexuality in the UK are overwhelmingly heterosexual in character. Gerbner *et al.* (1986) argues that the media participate in the 'symbolic annihilation' of gays and lesbians by negatively stereotyping them, by rarely portraying them realistically, or by not portraying them at all. Craig (1992) suggests that when homosexual characters are portrayed in the media, e.g. in popular drama, they are often stereotyped as having particular amusing or negative psychological and social characteristics.

**1 Camp** – One of the most widely used gay representations, found mainly in the entertainment media, is the 'camp' character or comedian, e.g. Allan Carr, Julian Clary, 'Sebastian' (Little Britain's aide-de-camp to the Prime Minister). Dyer defines camp as 'a characteristically gay way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalization, and an ambivalent making fun of out of the serious and respectable' (Dyer 1986, cited in Finch, 1990 p.75). Camp characters are generally regarded as extremely colourful and flamboyant figures of fun and, probably for this reason, they are not defined or interpreted as threatening by heterosexual media audiences. However, the camp persona probably does reinforce negative views of gay sexuality by being somewhere in between male and female.

**Macho** – Another negative media stereotype that was particularly popularized by the pop group The Village People is the 'macho', which relies on exaggerating masculinity. It is also an openly sexual look, transforming practical male clothing such as safety helmets and police officer's caps into erotic symbols. Research suggests this media representation is regarded as threatening, particularly by men, because it subverts traditional ideas of masculinity.

**Deviant** – Gays are often stereotyped as deviants by media representations, i.e. as evil or devious in television drama, as sexual predators or as people who

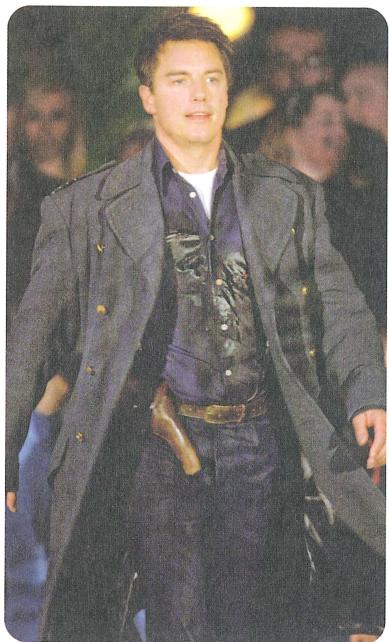
feel tremendous guilt about their sexuality. They are rarely presented in a sympathetic manner, and even when this does occur, plots tend to focus on heterosexual characters' acceptance of their homosexuality. In many cases, gay characters are completely defined by their 'problem', and homosexuality is often constructed to appear morally wrong. Russo, too, notes how Hollywood films have tended to portray gay people as dangerous and psychopathic (Russo 1981).

**4 Gays in the news** – Critics argue that the news media still systematically ignores and distorts the lives and experiences of gays and lesbians. In a 1998 study that analyzed 50 years of coverage of gay and lesbian issues in *Time* and *Newsweek*, Lisa Bennett (2000) found that news media reinforce prejudice and discrimination against gays and lesbians. She observes that gays and lesbians were often linked to deviant or criminal behaviour without evidence to support such claims; and that the media often reprinted offensive and homophobic comments. Bennett concludes that such practices reinforce assumptions that gays and lesbians are inherently inferior to heterosexuals. In the UK right-wing press, homosexuality is often presented as wicked, sinful and unnatural. This section of the news media have often strongly opposed legislation aimed at bringing about social and political equality for gay people such as gay weddings, the adoption of children by gay people and so on.

**5 Coverage of AIDS** – Watney has illustrated how UK news coverage of AIDS in the 1980s stereotyped gay people as carriers of a gay plague. He argues that news coverage of AIDS reflected mainstream society's fear and dislike of the gay community and resulted in unsympathetic accounts that strongly implied – and sometimes, openly stated – that homosexual AIDS sufferers only had their own 'immoral and unnatural' behaviour to blame for their condition or death.

Media sociologists argue that the portrayal of gays and lesbians in soap operas is different to that of other television genres because soap opera narrative is ongoing and viewers are encouraged to interact with the development of particular characters. There is therefore no need for a character's lifestyle to be immediately identifiable to an audience. British soap operas such as *Hollyoaks* and *Eastenders* have featured homosexual and lesbian characters; none of these characters were visually different from the heterosexual characters and their storylines were not restricted to issues of their sexuality. However, there was some stereotyping of homosexuality in that their sexuality was viewed as a moral problem and some of these characters had problems coming to terms with their sexuality. In this sense, the programmes could be said to be reflecting society's concerns about homosexuality.

Gauntlett argues that lesbian, gay and bisexual people are still underrepresented in much of the mainstream media, but things are slowly changing. He notes that television drama is offering prime-time audiences the chance to 'get to know' nice lesbian and gay characters in soap operas, drama series and sitcoms, e.g. Captain Jack in *Torchwood*. Gauntlett argues that tolerance of sexual



Actor John Barrowman, himself gay, plays Captain Jack Harkness, a character in the TV series *Torchwood*, who is portrayed as bisexual and has been shown passionately kissing other men. In what ways does this open portrayal of same-sex attraction challenge media stereotypes?

diversity is slowly growing in society, and the bringing-about of images of diverse sexual identities with which audiences are unfamiliar may assist in making the population generally more comfortable with these alternative sexual lifestyles.

### The heterosexual portrayal of homosexuality

Gill (2007) argues that when homosexual images and issues are covered by television, they tend to be sanitized and portrayed in ways that do not challenge heterosexual ideology and – most importantly – do not drive away advertisers and their revenue. Gerbner *et al.* (1986) argues that the commercial structure of the mass media limits the opportunity for representing wildly diverse sexual characters because the television networks shy away from portraying gays and lesbians for fear of alienating or offending advertisers, investors and audiences.

This profit-motivation means that networks are careful in their portrayals of gay and lesbian characters. The hugely popular American comedy *Will & Grace*, which features two openly gay male characters, is a good example of this. There is little or no discussion about gay relationships or romance. The two gay characters are friends, not lovers, and are rarely shown in romantic situations. The primary relationship for both gay men is with the heterosexual female characters. In order to appeal to mass audiences, then, television often desexualizes homosexuality – little reference is made to the very activity that defines them as gay in the first place.

In the past few years, Hollywood has developed a new genre: the gay/straight romance. Films such as *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *The Object of My Affection*, and *The Next Best Thing* all portray a gay man and straight woman as the 'perfect couple'. Some media commentators see this as a good thing, but critics suggest that such representations marginalize the experience of gays and lesbians by suggesting that it is not as important as the heterosexual experience. Other critics suggest that gay characters are only tolerated in television and film drama

because they are used to signify the liberalism and sophistication of heterosexual characters – it is assumed that the heterosexual character is an intelligent and tolerant human being if they have a gay friend.

The popularity of shows such as *Will & Grace* or *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* suggests that television networks are willing to feature gay characters, so long as the shows attract large audiences and generate profits for advertisers. However, it is argued that Hollywood is still too cautious in its portrayals of gay themes, characters and experiences because its films are designed to appeal to as large an audience as possible. Producers therefore fear that focusing on gay and lesbian themes risks offending a large portion of the audience, as well as potential investors. Gill argues that most media representations of gay people are constructed with the heterosexual audience in mind and so represent little challenge to the existing patriarchal and heterosexist structures of gender and sexuality.

A good example of this caution can be seen when the Americans decided to develop the British gay drama *Queer as Folk*, which Gill (2007) notes was probably the first UK television programme to portray homosexuality in a realistic light and to acknowledge the range of gay sexual practices through a group of characters who were not bland, saintly or desexualized. However, when the American version was in production, fashion houses such as Versace, Prada, Polo, Ralph Lauren and Abercrombie & Fitch refused to allow their brands to appear in the series because they feared that the drama would upset a predominantly heterosexual audience.

### Advertising and representation of gay people

The last decade has seen a growing amount of advertising that includes representations of lesbians and gay men. By June 2004, Commercial Closet, a web-based organization that monitors gay-themed adverts, had 1700 adverts from 33 countries in its database. There are probably a number of reasons for this:

- 1 Some argue that the visibility of gays and lesbians in advertising is an indication of the increased social acceptance of gays and lesbians generally.
- 2 Others see it as an attempt by advertisers and network executives to access an untapped economic market. The power of the 'pink economy' has now been recognized by advertisers – many gay men and women are professional people with no dependents and large disposable incomes (the so-called 'pink pound') to spend on consumer goods. As a result, companies have actively courted gay and lesbian consumers through gay-positive advertising and marketing campaigns. For example, in 1994, IKEA aired a commercial that depicted two gay men shopping for a dining room set, making the store the first company actively to target gay consumers.
- 3 Gill suggests that advertising that uses lesbian and gay imagery is actually aimed at the conventional heterosexual audience and actually reflects hegemonic definitions of sexuality. For example, she notes that the increasing numbers of lesbian images in advertising are presented as hypersexual chic rather than as promoting a different sexual identity. She argues that women

shown kissing and touching is a 'kind of eroticized imagery' and 'is a sexualized display designed primarily for heterosexual men because it draws on well-established codes from pornography'. It also allows advertising companies to continue to objectify and sexualize women's bodies and evade charges of sexism. Gill notes that, in contrast to media representations of lesbianism, gay men are rarely portrayed kissing or even touching. This is because male gay identity is presented primarily as a style identity rather than a sexual one. This is symbolized by their attractive bodies and faces and beautiful clothes. Gill points out that gay men in adverts often appear as objects of straight women's desire. A frequent theme is female sexual disappointment at discovering the attractive man she is eyeing up is gay.

In conclusion, critics of mass-media representations of homosexuality worry that after almost 30 years of political struggle, gay and lesbian rights have been reduced to increased consumer choice. They agree that there has been an increase in the number of positive representations of gays and lesbians in commercials, films, and television shows but there is still a long way to go before social and political equality is achieved in society, never mind the mass media.

## Representations of disability

There are essentially two broad sociological ways of viewing disability. The first suggests that disabled people are disabled by their physical and/or mental impairments. This view suggests that they need constant care from both medical practitioners and their families. In other words, the disabled are dependent upon the able-bodied.

The second view, held by many disabled sociologists, suggests that the disabled are actually disabled by society, particularly the fact that social institutions, facilities and services are primarily designed and administered with the able-bodied in mind. The disabled therefore have to negotiate a physical environment unsuited to their needs. Moreover, they are also disabled by prejudicial stereotypes and attitudes; these result in discriminatory practices that reinforce the notion that the disabled should be dependent upon able-bodied others or that they should be segregated from the rest of society. The mass media are seen by disabled sociologists like Colin Barnes as partly responsible for the dissemination of these stereotypes and prejudices. As Hevey (quoted in Barnes 1992, p.1) suggests 'the history of the portrayal of disabled people is the history of oppressive and negative representation. This has meant that disabled people have been presented as socially flawed able-bodied people, not as disabled people with their own identities'. This is discussed further in Chapter 7 (see pp. 480–1).

Barnes (1992) identified a number of recurring stereotypes of disabled people, which he claimed regularly appear in media representations of the disabled:

- *As pitiable and pathetic* – Barnes claims that this stereotype has grown in popularity in recent years because of television appeals such as *Children in Need*. He also notes that it is a staple of popular television

drama and news, which often overfocus on children and the possibilities of 'miracle' cures.

- *As an object of violence* – Barnes notes that when disabled people are featured in television drama, they are three times more likely than able-bodied characters to be killed off. This reinforces the notion of the disabled as victims.
- *As sinister and evil* – Disabled people are often portrayed as criminals or monsters. For example, villains in James Bond films often have something physically wrong with them. Morris (1991) notes that disability often becomes a metaphor in drama – 'the writer draws on the prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people knowing that to portray a character with a humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings in the audience' (p.93).
- *As atmospheric or curio* – Disabled people might be included in drama to enhance an atmosphere of menace, unease, mystery or deprivation. Disabled people are, therefore, used to add visual impact to productions. Television documentaries often see the disabled as curios to be watched in fascination by able-bodied audiences.
- *As super-cripples* – Barnes notes that the disabled are often portrayed as having special powers, e.g. blind people might be viewed as visionaries with a sixth sense or super-hearing. He notes 'super-cripple films' such as *My Left Foot*, in which disabled people (often played by able-bodied actors) overcome their impairments and poverty. In Hollywood films, the impaired male body is often visually represented as a perfect physical specimen in a wheelchair. The BBC's coverage of the Paralympics also fits this category because it involved the BBC celebrating disabled people doing extraordinary things. Ross notes that for disability issues to be reported, they have to be sensational, unexpected or heroic to be interpreted by journalists as newsworthy.
- *As an object of ridicule* – Disabled people are often laughed at in comedies, e.g. *Little Britain's* Lou and Andy (pictured on p. 481).
- *As their own worst and only enemy* – The media sometimes portray the disabled as self-pitiers who could overcome their difficulties if they would only stop feeling sorry for themselves and think positively.
- *As a burden* – Television documentaries and news features often focus on carers rather than the disabled.
- *As sexually abnormal* – It is assumed by media representations that the disabled do not have sexual feelings or that they are sexually degenerate.
- *As incapable of participating fully in community life* – Barnes calls this the stereotype of omission and notes that disabled people are 'rarely shown as integral and productive members of the community; as students, as teachers, as part of the workforce, or as parents'. He notes that they are conspicuous in their absence from media representations.
- *As ordinary or normal* – Barnes argues that the media rarely portray disabled people as normal people who just happen to have an impairment. They consequently fail to reflect the real, everyday experience of disability.

A qualitative study carried out by Ross (1996) of 384 disabled viewers' attitudes towards media representations of the disabled found that they were overwhelmingly critical of the way in which disabled characters featured on mainstream television. They particularly objected to:

- the infantilization of disabled characters
- the unrealistic and often sanitized portrayal of disability
- the persistent use of wheelchairs, white sticks and guide dogs to signify a disabled character
- the fact that disabled roles were often associated with anger, bitterness or inability to come to terms with disability
- the restricted repertoire of character types
- the lack of first-hand experience of disability by media practitioners
- the failure to present disabled people as capable of running homes, bringing up families, having loving relations, and as ordinary people rather than disabled people.

### The effect of telethons

Roper (2003) suggests that mass-media representations of the disabled on telethons can create problems for the disabled. She suggests that telethons overrely on 'cute' children who are not representative of the range of disabled people in the UK. They imply that charities rather than governments are responsible for providing funds and services to disadvantaged disabled groups and consequently they very rarely question why people are disadvantaged in the first place. Moreover, Roper argues that these media representations end up creating beggars. She argues that telethons are primarily aimed at encouraging the general public to alleviate their guilt and their relief that they are not disabled, by giving money rather than informing the general public of the facts about disability.

Karpf (1988) argues that there is a need for charities, but that telethons act to keep the audience in the position of givers and to keep recipients in their place as grateful and dependent. She notes that telethons are about entertaining the public rather than helping us to understand the everyday realities of what it is like to be disabled. Consequently, these media representations merely confirm social prejudices about the disabled, e.g. that they are dependent on the help of able-bodied people.

### Representations of people with mental disabilities

The Glasgow University Media Group (Philo 1999) found that television and press reporting of people suffering mental disabilities often focuses on violent incidents despite the fact that only a tiny minority of people with mental health impairments are potentially violent. The GUMG concluded that a high proportion of their sample of able-bodied people felt fear and anxiety when in the proximity of people experiencing mental health problems because media coverage convinced them that mental illness was associated with violent behaviour. They also found that this type of media representation could supersede personal experience. One member of the GUMG sample was a person who worked with the

elderly in a hospital. Despite the fact that these patients were neither violent or dangerous, the respondent felt afraid of them because of what she had seen on the television news.

### Conclusion

Overall, then, those sociologists who believe that people with impairments are disabled by social attitudes have little faith that media representations of physical and mental disability do justice to the everyday experiences of those who are disabled. They also argue that many able-bodied people's only experience of the disabled is through media representations. Barnes concludes, therefore, that:

<>disabling stereotypes which medicalize, patronize, criminalize and dehumanize disabled people abound in books, films, on television and in the press. They form the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people are based. They are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily and contribute significantly to their systematic exclusion from mainstream community life.>> (p.19)

## Check your understanding

- 1 Why does Gauntlett argue that sociological analysis of media representations should be 'cautious'?
- 2 Give two examples of the 'symbolic annihilation' of women.
- 3 What evidence is there that teenage girls' magazines overconcentrate on beauty and slimness?
- 4 According to Gill, to what extent are modern women empowered by the increasing number of positive female role-models in the media?
- 5 Give three pieces of evidence that suggest the depiction of men in magazines is changing.
- 6 Compare the views of two types of feminism on women's representations in the media.
- 7 How does Gauntlett argue that 'the power relationship between the media and its audience is complex'?
- 8 Give three examples of the stereotypical representations of homosexual characters in the media.
- 9 How does Gauntlett argue that representations of lesbian, gay and bisexual people are changing?
- 10 Give three examples of:
  - (a) stereotypes of disabled people identified by Barnes
  - (b) objections of disabled viewers to media representations of the disabled.

# Activities

## Research idea

Compare the views of young men and young women about the representations of men and women in the media. You could do this by conducting in-depth interviews or by using a questionnaire. Try showing respondents examples of men's and women's magazines to get them talking.

## Web.task

David Gauntlett is the author of *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*. Go to his book's website at [www.theoryhead.com/gender](http://www.theoryhead.com/gender)

Select 'Bonus discussions and interviews' and read his articles and the discussions about men's and women's magazines. To what extent do you agree with Gauntlett's views?

Also, it is well worth exploring some of the 'related features', including links to other websites.

## Key terms

**Beauty ideal** the idea that women should strive for beauty.

**Cult of femininity** the promotion of a traditional ideal where excellence is achieved through caring for others, the family, marriage and appearance.

**Empower** make powerful.

**False consciousness** Marxist term used to describe the way in which people's values are manipulated by capitalism.

**Hegemonic definitions** the dominant ways of defining something.

**Male gaze** the camera 'inspecting' women in a sexual way in films and TV.

**Popular feminism** term used to describe the promotion of 'girl power' in women's magazines.

**Retributive masculinity** the attempt to reassert traditional masculine authority by the celebration of traditionally male concerns such as football.

**Sexual objectification** turning into objects of sexual desire.

**Symbolic annihilation** the way in which women's achievements are often not reported, or are condemned or trivialized by the mass media.

## An eye on the exam

## Representations of the body: gender, sexuality and disability

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### Item A

The media put forward representations of many different social groups. However, the picture they offer is not always a fair or accurate one, but rather one that distorts, misrepresents and underrepresents certain groups. For example, Lesley Best's (1993) study of reading schemes for young children showed that females are portrayed in a narrower range of roles than males, and generally portrayed indoors. Similarly, Cumberbatch and Negrine (1992) found that, compared with able-bodied characters, disabled characters in TV drama were more likely to be pitied, patronized, feared, avoided, mocked or abused, and less likely to be respected or shown as attractive. Gays and lesbians too are often portrayed in negative ways. However, the media do not all portray a given group in the same way. For example, women characters in action movies are shown differently from those in soaps. There is also some evidence of change occurring in the way the media portray gender, sexuality and disability.

Using material from Item A and elsewhere, assess sociological explanations of the ways in which the mass media represent any two of the following: gender; sexuality; disability. (33 marks)

### Grade booster

### Getting top marks in this question

You need to deal with two of the areas in the question in a reasonably balanced way. You could begin by describing the patterns of representation, e.g. in terms of negative stereotyping and underrepresentation. You should then examine a range of reasons and explanations for each of the two areas you have chosen. Remember to make use of relevant material from the Item in your answer, both to describe the patterns and also to discuss how far representations are changing. You should also consider both males and females if you choose gender, and both gays and heterosexuals if you choose sexuality. You need to use relevant feminist theories if you choose gender, but Marxism, pluralism and postmodernism can also be applied to all areas.

# Representations of ethnicity, age and social class

## Getting you thinking



- 1 How do you think most people would interpret what is happening in this photograph?
- 2 Why will they think this?
- 3 What other possible interpretations can you think of?

According to the 2001 UK Census, ethnic-minority groups represent 7.9 per cent of the UK population. The UK, therefore, is a multicultural society. Moreover, the majority of the main ethnic-minority groups – African-Caribbeans, Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis – are British-born and British citizens. An Ofcom survey conducted in 2008 suggests that members of these ethnic-minority groups are at the forefront in terms of their use of new media such as mobile phones, the internet and multichannel television take-up. For example, members of ethnic minorities in the under-45 age group are more likely to own a mobile phone and access digital TV and the internet than the average person under 45.

Furthermore, adults from ethnic-minority groups are more likely to be confident about using interactive functions on digital devices such as televisions than the general UK population. They are more likely to have downloaded music, video clips, films and television programmes than the UK population as a whole. For example, between 65 and 79 per cent of ethnic-minority groups say that they use the internet to listen to or download music online, compared to 57 per cent of the UK population. Indians and Pakistanis spend more time online than any other adults in the UK (13.5 hours per week compared to the UK average of 12.1 hours per week).

The take-up of media technology among ethnic-minority groups is, therefore, well developed. With this in mind, you might assume that mainstream media institutions and agencies such as newspapers, magazines,

advertisers, television, film-makers, record labels and internet providers would be constructing media content that reflected the everyday experiences of all sections of society and bore their media needs in mind. However, this is not the case.

Evidence suggests that media representations of ethnic-minority groups may be problematic because these are shaped by what media professionals believe the majority White audience want to read, see and hear. These media representations may also be contributing to the maintenance – and even reinforcement – of negative racist stereotypes. In this sense, media representations of ethnic minorities may be undermining the concept of a tolerant multicultural society and perpetuating social divisions based on colour, ethnicity and religion.

## Representations of ethnic minorities

Evidence suggests that, despite some progress, ethnic minorities are generally underrepresented or are represented in stereotyped and negative ways across a range of media content. In particular, newspapers and television news have a tendency to present ethnic minorities as a problem or to associate Black people with physical rather than intellectual activities, and to neglect and even ignore racism and the inequalities that result from it.

## Stereotypical representations

Akinti (2003) argues that television coverage of ethnic minorities overfocuses on crime, AIDS in Africa and Black underachievement in schools, whilst ignoring the culture and interests of a huge Black audience, diverse in interests and age, and their rich contribution to UK society. In other words, news about Black communities always seems to be 'bad news'.

Van Dijk (1991) conducted a content analysis of tens of thousands of news items across the world over several decades. He noted that news representations of Black people could be categorized into several types of stereotypically negative types of news, as outlined below.

### Ethnic minorities as criminals

Black crime and violence is the most frequent issue found in media news coverage of ethnic minorities. Van Dijk found that Black people, particularly African-Caribbeans, tend to be portrayed as criminals, especially in the tabloid press – and more recently as members of organized gangs that push drugs and violently defend urban territories. Akinti (2003) suggests that television often reflects an inaccurate and superficial view of Black life, focusing almost exclusively on stereotypical issues such as gun crime.

Agbetu (2006) suggests that 'a Black person constructed in the media has three attributes: they are involved in criminality, involved in sports or involved in entertainment'. He suggests that anything that lies outside those classifications is not of interest to the media. He notes that the media frequently focus on Black people as the perpetrators of crime rather than as victims. The word 'Black' is often used as a prefix if an offender is a member of an ethnic minority, e.g. 'a Black youth'. The word 'White' is rarely used in the same way. Furthermore, African-Caribbean people are portrayed as 'only interested in carnival and dancing and, of course, they all come from Jamaica, and they're all yardies'. He argues that 'Black people are troublesome but exciting for the media'. In other words, they are newsworthy because they almost always constitute 'bad news'.

### Ethnic minorities and moral panics

Watson (2008) notes that moral panics often result from media stereotyping of Black people as potentially criminal. This effect was first brought to sociological attention by Stuart Hall's classic study of a 1970s moral panic that was constructed around the folk devil of the 'Black mugger' (Hall et al. 1978). Hall argues that some sections of the right-wing newspaper media colluded with the state and its agents, such as the police, to create a moral panic around the criminal offence of 'mugging'. Sensationalist news stories in the tabloid press were based on information fed to them by the police. The result of these stories was the labelling of all young African-Caribbeans as criminals and as a potential threat to White people. Hall claims that this served the ideological purpose of turning the White working class against the Black working class. He argues that this classic 'divide and rule' strategy diverted attention away from the mismanagement of capitalism. Moreover, the subsequent demands from the media and general public for an increased policing of Black communities

because of the fear of being mugged led to the introduction of more repressive laws, which eventually ended up restoring ruling-class hegemony, i.e. domination.

Back (2002) notes that the reporting of inner-city race disturbances involving members of ethnic-minority groups in the UK over the last 25 years, often stereotypes them as 'riots'. This implies that such disturbances are irrational and criminal, and conjures up images of rampaging mobs that need to be controlled by justifiable use of police force. Journalists very rarely use the word 'uprising', because this suggests that members of ethnic-minority groups may have a genuine grievance in terms of being the victims of racial attacks, discrimination by employers and police harassment. The idea that people are angry enough to take to the streets because they want to rebel against injustice very rarely forms part of the media coverage of such events.

### Moral panics and rap music

Further moral panics have developed around 'Black crime', which is seen by the media as characterized by drugs, gangs and gun culture. In 2003, 'gangsta rap' lyrics came under attack for contributing to an increase in gun crime. Zylinska (2003) notes that this moral panic was initiated by the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, who announced that he was 'appalled' by some lyrics in rap and hip-hop music, whilst the Culture Secretary, Kim Howells, claimed that the London garage collective So Solid Crew were glorifying gun culture and violence. In 2005, a poster of rapper 50 Cent's film *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* featuring the rapper holding a gun and baby was criticized by the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) for glamorizing gun crime. The ASA noted that 50 Cent had such cultural credibility, especially among young people, that his association with gang culture and criminal behaviour was likely to be seen as glamorizing and condoning the possession and use of guns.

There were also calls for stores in the UK to withdraw 50 Cent's computer game *Bulletproof*, in which players follow 50 Cent from crack-dealing gangsta to superstar by gunning down, stabbing and strangling rivals. Gun-crime campaigners were particularly angered by graphics that allow a bullet's-eye view of a gunshot as it ploughs into a rival's exploding head and the fact that 50 Cent's bullet wounds miraculously heal. More controversy followed 50 Cent's television commercials for Reebok that showed



him counting to nine – the number of times he has been shot.

In 2006, the leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron, criticized BBC Radio 1 for playing gangsta rap because in its lyrics, such music 'encourages people to carry guns and knives' and consequently become more violent, sexist and intolerant. This is not a new debate. The African-British pressure group Ligali protested at the 2003 Music of Black Origins Awards (MOBO) about the music industry's support, promotion and awarding of artists who promote the ownership of illegal firearms and the ideology of shooting others in order to gain respect, and who have previously engaged in criminal activity and refuse to show remorse for their crimes. Furthermore, Ligali highlighted the **misogynist** nature of rap lyrics and videos, which it claimed devalue, disrespect and damage women by treating them as inanimate objects who exist purely for the purpose of male sexual gratification.

Topic 4 focused on media effects and highlighted how hard it is to determine whether there is a direct causal link between media content and everyday behaviour. However, a number of themes are worth exploring with regard to the relationship between rap/hip-hop and gun crime:

- **A form of cultural identity** – Best and Kellner (1999) argue that rap articulates the experiences and conditions of young Blacks living on the margins in inner-city areas or deprived council estates who feel that they are being stereotyped and stigmatized. They argue that rap provides the means through which they can communicate their anger and sense of injustice. It also shapes their lifestyles and gives them an identity. As Best and Kellner note, 'rap is thus not only music to dance and party to, but a potent form of cultural identity'.
- **Ambivalent effects** – Best and Kellner argue that rap 'is a highly ambivalent cultural phenomenon with contradictory effects'. On a positive note, it highlights racism and oppression, and describes the hopelessness of the inner-city and deprived experience. It is a symbol of Blackness in that it celebrates Black culture, pride, intelligence, strength, style, and creativity. It supplies a voice for people excluded from mainstream society and mass media and enables White people to better understand the everyday experiences of the Black community. However, Best and Kellner note that at its worst, it is 'racist, sexist, and glorifies violence, being little but a money-making vehicle that is part of the problem rather than the solution. Many of its images and models are highly problematic, such as the gangsta rap celebration of the outlaw, pimp, hedonistic pleasure seeker, and drug dealer'. Best and Kellner, therefore, argue that rap music is complex and many-sided with contradictory effects. It attracts a large White audience who can gain some insight into the Black experience. They argue that 'rap music makes the listener painfully aware of differences between Black and White, rich and poor, male and female. Rap music brings to White audiences the uncomfortable awareness of Black suffering, anger, and violence'. However, successful male rap artists undermine this potential awareness by expressing misogyny, violence towards women and homophobia in their lyrics. Ironically, some rappers direct their rage

## Focus on ...

### Rap music and role models

Grammy Award winner Rhymefest (pictured here) wrote this response to David Cameron's comments on rap music.



«I agree that rap music and urban music depicts a life in the inner cities and poor communities that is often violent. I also agree that by glorifying and promoting violence via radio, TV and videos, it does give an acceptance for that behaviour that is then negative for the community. As a Grammy Award-winning artist, who has worked and written with many other rap artists such as Kanye West and ODB, I myself on occasion am guilty of contributing to the culture. I believe that the hip-hop community is definitely in a state of denial about our complicity with the glorification of drugs and violence... However, although I agree with you that we are role models that affect our community and our music does play a role in people's behaviour, beneath the surface there are artists making changes and making the difference and there is more to rap than what you see ... >>

Do you agree with these comments? Give your reasons.

towards other members of their community, i.e. women and homosexuals, rather than those who are responsible for their oppression and subordination.

- **Negative role models** – In 2007, the REACH report commissioned by the government suggested that violence within the Black community was partly the result of the media's failure to portray the image of Black boys and young Black men positively (REACH 2007). The report suggested that where children are without positive role models, 'they will seek them from the world of fantasy and the media'. Young Black participants in the research specifically cited the negative media portrayals of young Blacks, focused around criminality, guns and gangs as having a detrimental effect on their aspirations. Some even suggested that their teachers give up on them too easily because of these stereotypes. Moreover, these portrayals negatively influenced their self-image, lowered their expectations and resulted in low self-esteem and low confidence.
- **Role of education and family life** – The REACH report does not solely blame the media; it also suggests that the education system and Black family life are also to blame for why some young Black men may turn to negative role models in their communities. Sewell (2004), too, identifies three major risk factors, which he claims are responsible for the relatively high levels

of crime among African-Caribbean boys. One of these is media culture, particularly MTV, rap music, advertising, etc., which encourages the idea that status or respect can be achieved by adopting a consumer street culture that views material things such as designer labels, trainers and jewellery (i.e. 'bling') as more important than education. This street culture often takes its lead from deviant or questionable role models, such as 50 Cent, who boast about their sexual conquests and gun-centred lifestyles. However, Sewell also notes that Black family life, especially the absence of fathers and young Black's experience of the White education system, institutional racism and, especially, aggressive policing, are just as important as the media in shaping Black subcultures on the street.

- *Reinforcing capitalist ideology* – Cashmore (1996) suggests that it is not media representations of violence that are responsible for shaping the identities of Black youth, but the lifestyle that is promoted and promised by media culture. Media messages about the lifestyles that can be achieved only reflect the dominant ideology of capitalist societies, which suggests that material success in meritocratic societies is within the reach of anyone if they are intelligent and prepared to work hard. However, the experience of racism convinces young Blacks that legitimate ways of achieving such success are impossible. As Mitchell (2007) argues, the real message that young Blacks pick up from rap is 'that if you're not loaded, you're not happening'. Mitchell argues that the real problem with rap is that far from undermining society's values it's reinforcing them, and the most fundamental of all our society's values at the moment is that 'you are what you own'. The videos show the stars by the swimming pool, in a fast car, wearing designer clothes and jewellery, and surrounded by attractive available young women. Mitchell notes that these images do not do any harm to middle-class youth because they have access to materialism via their parents, higher education and decent jobs and pay. However, he notes:

*<<For working-class youngsters, taught by our culture since the 1970s that they're losers and failures, it's part of a profoundly poisonous cocktail of attitudes. Pride and self-respect are at the heart of this debate and it's the lack of those, or the wrong sort, that's really driving the violence on our streets. >>*

It is probably too simplistic to suggest that rap and hip-hop lyrics are responsible for gun and knife crime in British cities. As Sewell and Cashmore point out, socio-economic factors, are a far more reliable explanation for gang activity than the music teenagers are listening to. In any case, Rhymefest (see 'Focus on ... rap music and role models') and Mitchell point out that hip-hop is about much more than violence – artists rap about a wide spectrum of issues, including politics and race awareness. Also, according to social historians such as Pearson (1983), gang violence existed well before rappers started talking about it. Critics of rap music conveniently ignore the violent content of other music genres, e.g. a moral panic did not arise when the popular Country and Western singer, Johnny Cash sang 'I shot a man just to watch him die'. Finally, some commentators suggest that music, along with films,

television and recently computer games have always been a convenient scapegoat to blame for social problems which are both complex and most probably the result of structural inequalities.

## Ethnic minorities as a threat

Van Dijk's (1991) content analysis suggested that a common news stereotype was the idea that ethnic minorities are posing a threat to the majority White culture. The concept of 'threat' is central to both news values (i.e. it is an essential component of bad news) and moral panics. In recent years, three groups seem to constitute the greatest threat in the UK, according to newspapers and television. Moral panics have, therefore, been constructed around:

- *immigrants* – who are seen as a threat in terms of their 'numbers', and because of the impact they supposedly have on the supply of jobs, housing and other facilities
- *refugees and asylum seekers* – who are often portrayed as coming to Britain to abuse the welfare state and take advantage of a more successful economy than their own
- *Muslims* – who both before and since 9/11 have been subjected to **Islamophobic** media coverage.

## Race, migration and media

Philo and Beattie (1999) argue that moral panics often arise focused on immigrants and asylum seekers. They traced how one such panic developed in the wake of a government trade minister resigning in 1995 because he was unhappy about a lack of European border controls which, he claimed, made the UK vulnerable to mass illegal immigration. Philo and Beattie note that this resignation set off media hysteria about immigration. Television journalists, in particular, presented their stories about immigration in an extremely negative and alarmist way; they focused on borders being 'dangerously' underpoliced, and presented immigration as a 'threat' to the UK way of life, using sensationalist language such as 'flood' and 'tidal wave'. Moreover, the media used the terms 'illegal immigrant' and 'immigrant' interchangeably. Philo and Beattie suggest this coverage also had racist overtones in that journalists focused on illegal immigrants from Africa. Furthermore, the media presented estimates as to the extent of possible immigration as facts.

Philo and Beattie argue that this coverage created fear and concern among the general UK population. No consideration was given by television journalists to the fact that immigrants to the UK had made a substantial contribution to the economy, nor were the complex reasons why people might want to come to the UK explored. The notion that the vast majority of such refugees may be genuinely escaping political persecution, torture and poverty in their home country was neglected or ignored. In fact, it was broadly hinted that immigrants wished to take advantage of the UK's benefit and health systems. Philo and Beattie conclude:

*<<the result was a news which was sometimes xenophobic in tone, which reinforced our identity and their exclusion and, perhaps more importantly, provided a rationale for the apparent need for exclusion. >> (p.196)*

The Information Centre about Asylums and Refugees (ICAR) notes that studies of media coverage of asylum seekers have shown that the media have constructed an image of this group as problems or threats (Greenslade 2005). The ICAR study found the British media often repetitively used certain terms and types of language. Asylum seekers are described as a 'flood' or 'wave' and as 'bogus' or 'fraudulent'. ICAR argues that there is often a link between media coverage and community tensions. They conducted research in London and discovered that unbalanced and inaccurate media images of asylum seekers made a significant contribution to their harassment by local residents.

### *Media representations of Islam and Muslims*

Poole (2000), pre 9/11, argued that Islam has always been demonized and distorted by the Western media. It has traditionally been portrayed as a threat to Western interests. Representations of Islam have been predominantly negative and Muslims have been 'homogenized as backward, irrational, unchanging fundamentalists and misogynists who are threatening and manipulative in the use of their faith for political and personal gain'. Poole's content analysis of broadsheet British newspapers between 1993 and 1996 found that representations of British Muslims suggested that they were a threat to UK security and mainstream values. Patel (1999) suggests that Islam is purposely misrepresented because it commands an allegiance that goes beyond boundaries of wealth, nationality, sex, race or culture and consequently is seen to challenge Western cultural power.

Richardson's (2001) empirical study of representations of British Muslims in the broadsheet press suggests that:

- British Muslim communities are almost wholly absent from the news.
- When they do appear, it is usually in a predominantly negative context.
- British Muslims are very rarely called upon as providers of informed commentary on news events.
- The everyday issues and concerns of Muslim communities in the UK are not being addressed.

In his analysis of Muslims and Islam in the British press, Whitaker (2002) notes the existence of four very persistent stereotypes in news stories and features: Muslims are presented as 'intolerant, misogynistic, violent or cruel, and finally, strange or different' (p.55). Nahdi (2003), too, argues the Western news agenda is dominated by hostile, careless coverage of Islam that 'distorts reality and destroys trust amongst Muslim readerships and audiences'. He argues that the general decline in the standards of Western media and journalism, with the move towards sound bites, snippets and quick and easy stories, has actually legitimized the voice of extremist Islam. Nahdi argues that this way of newsgathering focuses on extreme minority or fringe groups, which represent a very small minority of the Muslim population and which are often unacceptable to other Muslims. Most importantly, it disguises the vast diversity and range of perspectives amongst Muslims and equates the outlook and actions of a few individuals to over one billion people worldwide.

However, positive or balanced stories about Islam and Muslims do exist. Both the BBC and Channel 4 have

## Focus on research



### **Ameli et al. (2007)**

#### **The ideology of demonization**

Ameli et al. (2007) analysed the mainstream news programmes of *BBC News*, *Newsnight*, *ITV News* and *Channel 4 News* before and after the events of 7 July 2005. They particularly examined the language used by journalists to discuss that event. They found that 'asylum-seekers' and 'immigration' were frequently focused on, despite the fact that the suspected bombers were British born and raised. The researchers argue that this had the effect of reinforcing the view that all Muslims are of the same mind and that they should be suspected of being 'others', i.e. not integrated into British society. Moreover, the media also focused on the issues of 'loyalty' and 'belonging' and it was generally accepted that, despite a British upbringing, Muslim youth had the potential to develop extremist views and be led away from 'normality'. They had now become 'the enemy within'. In fact, this media portrayal strongly implied that any Muslim, especially any young male, had the potential to become an extremist. Ameli and colleagues conclude that despite the good intentions of these news networks, issues regarding Islam were discussed within a very narrow ideological framework.

Adapted from Ameli, S., Marandi, S., Ahmed, S., Kara, S. and Merali, A. (2007) *The British Media and Muslim Representation: The Ideology of Demonisation*, London: Islamic Human Rights Commission

**What evidence does the passage contain to support the researchers' conclusion that 'issues regarding Islam were discussed within a very narrow ideological framework'?**

websites that explain Islam in a balanced fashion, whilst the *Guardian*, *Observer* and *Independent* have sympathetically focused on Muslim Britain. Even the *Sun* ran a two-page editorial in 2005 declaring 'Islam is not an evil religion'. However, despite these positive representations, surveys of the Muslim population in the UK suggest that they see the British media generally as unsympathetic towards Islam. Many media sociologists argue that certain negative images and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims (referred to as Islamophobia) propagated by the British mass media over the past 30 years are now deeply embedded in journalistic practices and the popular consciousness.

## Ethnic minorities as abnormal

Sections of the British media may be guilty of creating false cultural stereotypes around the value systems and norms of other cultures. A survey of ethnic-minority audiences conducted by the BBC in 2002 found that Asian audiences were unhappy at the way that the media failed to differentiate between different Asian groups, which have very distinctive cultures. They did not want to be labelled as 'Asian' and they called for their own distinct cultural identities to be shown. They were also concerned that some of their cultural practices were called into question by the media, and were labelled as deviant or abnormal.

Many of the Asian sample felt that the treatment of arranged marriages was often inaccurate and did not reflect the way that the system had changed over time. The distinction between 'forced' marriage – an extremely rare occurrence, strongly disapproved of by Asian communities – and arranged marriage, which is based on mutual consent, is rarely made by the media. A survey of Asian viewers, by the market research company Ethnic Focus (2004), cited the most common complaint 'was that the media divided Asians into two camps; either miserable folk being forced into loveless marriages or billionaires who had come to Britain with nothing and had now made a fortune'.

Ameli *et al.* (2007) note that media discussion around the issue of the wearing of the hijab and the veil is also problematic, often suggesting that it is somehow an inferior form of dress compared with Western female dress codes – and that it is unnecessary and problematic. It is often portrayed as a patriarchal and oppressive form of control that exemplifies the misogyny of Islam and symbolizes the alleged subordinate position of women in Islam. Ameli and colleagues note that the underlying questions being asked by the media include: 'Why must Muslim women insist on wearing hijab when other women don't?' and 'Why is it that Muslims have so much trouble accepting and adopting our values and dressing accordingly?' As Watson (2008) notes, the general media theme is that the wearing of such apparel symbolizes divisiveness, which Watson argues further encourages suspicion and distrust of Muslim people.

## Ethnic minorities as unimportant

Van Dijk (1991) notes that some sections of the media imply that the lives of White people are somehow more important than the lives of non-White people. News items about disasters in other countries are often restricted to a few lines or words, especially if the population is non-White. The misfortunes of one British person tend to be prioritized over the sufferings of thousands of foreigners.

It is argued by the British-African pressure group, Ligali (2006), that Black victims of crime are not paid the same degree of attention as White victims of crime. This view was especially developed after Sir Ian Blair, the Metropolitan police commissioner, claimed that institutionalized racism was present in the British media in the way they reported death from violent crime. He highlighted the discriminatory nature of media coverage given to the murder of the Asian taxi driver Balbir Matharu and that of the White solicitor Tom ap Rhys Pryce on the

same day in 2006. He noted 'that the death of the young lawyer was terrible, but an Asian man was dragged to his death, a woman was chopped up in Lewisham, [an African] chap shot in the head in a Trident murder – they got a paragraph on page 97'. A BBC survey of the coverage of the Matharu and Rhys Price murders, showed that Tom ap Rhys Pryce received 87 per cent coverage in the tabloid press compared with 13 per cent for Balbir Matharu. Both the *Independent* and the *Mirror* are reported to have not covered the Matharu story at all.

Piers Morgan, editor of the *Daily Mirror* from 1995 to 2004, described decision-making by newspaper and television editors as influenced by 'subliminal racism':

<<[there is] a perception that the public would be more interested in, for example, five young 'White' teenagers dying in a car crash than they would be if they were five Asian or 'Black' teenagers dying in a car crash, and I remember decisions like that coming along and feeling somehow that we were making the wrong decision here and it was by any sense a racist view to down play one against the other.>>

However, some sections of the media have been very positive in their exposure of problems such as racism. The murder of the Black teenager Stephen Lawrence by White racists in 1993 received high-profile coverage, both on television and in the press. Even the right-wing *Daily Mail* presented a front-page story highlighting police racism, and attempted to 'name and shame' the racists who had allegedly committed the murder. However, critics suggest that such coverage is actually quite rare. For example, Sir Ian Blair's comments about institutional racism in the media resulted in a hailstorm of media criticism, focusing on his ability rather than engaging with the debate he was attempting to initiate.

## Ethnic minorities as dependent

<<Africa is helpless, Africa is poor. Africa is a world of dread and fear.>> Do they know it is Christmas?  
written by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure

The government report *Viewing the World* (Glasgow University Media Group 2000) points out that stories about less developed countries tend to focus on a 'coup-war-famine-starvation syndrome'. The implication of such stories, both in newspapers and on television, is that the problems of developing countries are the result of stupidity, tribal conflict, too many babies, laziness, corruption and unstable political regimes. It is implied that the governments of these countries are somehow inadequate because they cannot solve these problems. Such countries are portrayed as coming to the West for help time and time again. Live Aid and Comic Relief are portrayed by the Western media as the only way the people of these countries, which are nearly always African, can survive the calamities and disasters that allegedly characterize their everyday lives.

Pambazuka (2005), an African organization working to increase understanding of African issues makes a number of criticisms of British news coverage of Africa:

- The media constructs myths about Africa, such as Africa's current situation is the fault of African people, which means that people of the West need not feel a sense of responsibility about African issues. Pambazuka

notes a media overemphasis on African corruption and inefficiency and a reluctance to discuss the West's role in keeping some parts of Africa poor by:

- propping up corrupt regimes for political reasons
- failing to give African producers a fair price for their goods
- not controlling the illegal and immoral activities of Western transnational companies.
- Informed African experts are ignored in favour of Europeans who talk from a Eurocentric perspective about African affairs, ultimately to the benefit of their respective nations.
- Media reporting about Africa is too dominated by Western campaigns such as Make Poverty History and Live 8. The agenda of Bob Geldof is highlighted at the expense of Africans themselves.
- There are signs that the media are now suffering from 'Africa fatigue', which reinforces their usual apathy about Africa.

There is some sociological evidence for Pambazuka's observations. The Glasgow University Media Group (2000) found that there has been a drastic reduction in factual programming (i.e. 50 per cent in ten years) about the developing world. A third of media stories about the developing world were focused on bad news, such as war, conflict, terrorism and disasters. Much of the remaining coverage was devoted to sport or visits by Westerners to developing countries – for example, some countries were only featured because Richard Branson's balloon had floated over them! Little time was devoted to analysis of why countries were underdeveloped and poor, and the role of the West with regard to domination of world trade, debt and multinational exploitation was very rarely explored. It can be concluded that British news reporting is ethnocentric, i.e. shaped by the view that British White culture is superior in its values and norms compared with other cultures. As a result, the activities of other cultures are likely to be generally reported as deficient, inferior, strange.

### Ethnic minorities as invisible

A survey by the BBC (2002) asked the question: 'Are ethnic minorities better represented on TV than they were 10 years ago?' The answers are shown in Table 3.3. Although the responses were generally positive, members of ethnic-minority groups were less likely to respond positively to the statement. However, since 2002, surveys do indicate that there has been some perceived improvement in the way that television dramas, such as soap operas, deal with race. In 2005, a BBC News Online survey noted that Black and Asian people were better

represented as newscasters and television journalists, as well as in comedy and children's television. However, it was also clearly stated by the same sample that things still have some way to go before the UK's multicultural character is fully represented in the media. A number of problem areas still exist:

- 1 *Limited roles* – In popular drama, the perception of ethnic-minority audiences is that when actors from ethnic minorities appear, the range of roles they play is very limited and often reflects low status, e.g. Africans may play cleaners or Asians may play shopkeepers. This may reflect the fact that ethnic groups are more likely to be found in low-status, low-paid semi-skilled and unskilled work. It fails to be a true representation of the range of jobs that members of ethnic minorities have, e.g. as successful business people and media professionals.
- 2 *Cultural irrelevance* – Research carried out by the Open University and British Film Institute (Bennett et al. 2006) found that the UK's main ethnic-minority communities do not relate to much of the nation's TV culture and do not identify with television programmes that have strongly White, middle-England associations. A central problem identified by the report was not that minority groups failed to integrate with the national culture, but rather that aspects of the national film and television culture offer little space for ethnic-minority interests or identities.
- 3 *Invisibility* – One area of the media that has attracted considerable criticism for excluding Black and Asian images, and thus rendering ethnic-minority groups invisible, is the advertising industry, and especially the beauty industry. Gill (2007) has noted that images of feminine beauty in women's media tend to over-emphasize Whiteness. Naomi Campbell has long complained about the relative lack of Black and Asian models. Gill argues this is caused by the assumption that Anglo-Saxon blondes have the ideal feminine look.
- 4 *Tokenism* – Ethnic-minority audiences are hostile towards **tokenism**, where television programmes, such as soap operas, include characters from ethnic-minority groups purely because they 'should'. The characters themselves are often so unimportant that they are rarely in a series for very long; dramas set in workplaces seem to be a convenient place to include an ethnic-minority actor for cosmetic purpose without being obliged to look at their culture or what happens in their homes. Such tokenism is often the result of positive discrimination or equal opportunities practices by television companies such as the BBC. An ex-BBC executive, Shah (2008) argues that broadcasters overcompensate for the lack of executives, producers, directors and writers from ethnic minorities by putting too many Black and Asian faces on screen regardless of whether they authentically fit the programmes they are in. In this sense, they are 'props'. For example, a Black character will pop up incongruously in a drama like *Emmerdale*, despite the fact that the racial profile of the Yorkshire Dales is overwhelmingly White.
- 5 *Realism* – Ethnic-minority audiences complain that Black and Asian people are rarely shown as ordinary citizens who just happen to be Black or Asian.

**Table 3.3** Responses in BBC survey: Are ethnic minorities better represented on TV than they were 10 years ago?

	Total	White	Black	Asian
Yes	78%	80%	73%	67%
No	8%	7%	12%	16%
Don't know	13%	12%	15%	17%

More often they play 'Black' roles, in which their attitudes, behaviour and interaction with other social groups are shaped by their ethnic identity. Research suggests that ethnic-minority audiences want to see more realistic representation of ethnic-minority people, in areas and situations that occur in their real world, enjoying life in very similar ways to the White majority and facing similar problems often unrelated whatsoever to race.

- 6 Ghettoization** – Other critics have suggested that television programmes dedicated to minority issues effectively **ghettoize** such issues by scheduling them at times (i.e. very early or late) or on channels that ensure small audiences. This has two effects. First, it means that White audiences, who may not have direct contact with ethnic-minority groups, are unlikely to access and increase their understanding of minority culture – if programming is labelled as being 'for minorities', the positive representations within them end up simply being preached to the converted. Second, the mainstream media assumes certain issues are being dealt with by minority programming, so mainstream news and documentaries may be less likely and willing to report them.

- 7 Media personnel** – Audience research suggests that members of ethnic-minority groups believe that media institutions produce a media content geared to the interests of White people because, as Shah has noted, it is dominated by a metropolitan, liberal, White, male, public-school and Oxbridge-educated, middle-class cultural elite. There has been some acknowledgement of this problem from inside the profession. For example, Greg Dyke, Director-General of the BBC, said in 2002 that the BBC was 'hideously White' in terms of both management and creative types. A survey of media advertising and marketing (Institute of Practitioners in Advertising 2006) found that less than 7 per cent of people working in these fields were from ethnic-minority backgrounds.

## Conclusions

Despite these problems, media professionals from ethnic-minority backgrounds have responded to these inequalities and prejudices by developing media institutions and agencies that specifically target the interests and concerns of ethnic-minority audiences. Some have chosen to work within the established system by developing aspects of institutional media, such as the BBC Asian digital network and (despite the risk of ghettoization described above) programmes such as Ebony and Café 21.

Other ethnic-minority media originate from outside the UK, e.g. Bollywood and Asian satellite channels such as Asia TV and Zee TV, that keep people in touch with Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi culture and news.

Finally, there is a range of homegrown media agencies that are owned, managed and controlled by ethnic minorities themselves, including:

- newspapers and magazines – e.g. *Eastern Eye*, *Snoop*, *The Voice*, *The Indian Times*, *New Nation*, *Desi Xpress*
- radio stations – e.g. Sunrise Radio, Asian FX
- new media websites – e.g. [www.brasian.co.uk](http://www.brasian.co.uk), [www.asianlite.co.uk](http://www.asianlite.co.uk) and [www.easterneyeonline.co.uk](http://www.easterneyeonline.co.uk).



What are the arguments for and against having media agencies that specifically target ethnic-minority groups, as this website does?

## How does the media represent social class?

Mass media representations of social classes rarely focus on the social tensions or class conflict that some critical sociologists see as underpinning society. In fact, as previous topics have indicated, some neo-Marxist sociologists suggest that the function of the media is to ensure the **cultural hegemony** of the dominant capitalist class and to ensure that inequality and exploitation are not defined as social problems so that they do not become the focus of social debate and demand for social change.

## Representations of the monarchy

Nairn (1988) notes that the monarchy has successfully converted much of the modern mass media to its cause, so that, until fairly recently, it was rare to see any criticism of this institution or the individuals in it.

Nairn argues that this is because, after the Second World War, the monarchy, with the collusion of the media, reinvented itself as a 'Royal Family' with a cast of characters, not unlike our own families, who stood for national values such as 'niceness', 'decency' and 'ordinariness'. Members of this 'family' were presented as 'like us' but 'not like us'; for example, the Queen was just an 'ordinary' working mother doing an extraordinary job. This successful make-over resulted in a national obsession with the Royal Family, reflected in media coverage that has focused positively on every trivial detail of their lives, turning the Queen and her family into an on-going narrative or soap story, but with a glamour and mystique far greater than any other media personality.

Mass-media representations of the Queen are also aimed at reinforcing a sense of national identity, in that she is portrayed as the ultimate symbol of the nation. Consequently, the media regards royal events, such as weddings and funerals, as national events. It was not until the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997 that the Queen started to receive some criticism from the media for misjudging the popularity of Diana. However, the media's very positive reaction to the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 2002 suggests that the Royal Family has again succeeded in convincing the media and the general public that British identity is wrapped up in the Queen continuing to be the Head of State.

Recent media coverage has continued this process, with Prince William being portrayed as the 'pin-up prince' and Prince Harry as the 'hero prince' after his stint in Afghanistan. Consequently, this royal populism, which is simultaneously created and fed upon by a ravenous tabloid media, celebrity magazines such as *Hello*, and even the BBC and ITV with its 'Royal correspondents', can also engage in damage limitation when members of the Royal Family make mistakes. In 2009, for example, both Prince Harry and Prince Charles were accused of casual racism, but this controversy was quickly defused by a forgiving media, that, only two years previously, had crucified the working-class celebrity, Jade Goody, for similar remarks.

## Representations of the upper class and wealth

Neo-Marxists argue that mass-media representations of social class tend to celebrate hierarchy and wealth. Those who benefit from these processes – i.e. the monarchy, the upper class and the very wealthy – generally receive a positive press as celebrities who are somehow deserving of their position. The UK mass media hardly ever portray the upper classes in a critical light, nor do they often draw any serious attention to inequalities in wealth and pay or the overrepresentation of public-school products in positions of power.

Sociological observations of media representations of the upper classes suggest that popular films and television costume drama tend to portray members of this class either in an eccentric or nostalgic way. In films such as *Gosford Park* and *The Queen*, and television costume dramas, a rosy, idealized picture is painted of a ruling elite characterized by honour, culture and good breeding.

## Representations of wealth

Reiner (2007) and Young (2007) have recently argued that the media tend to represent the UK as a meritocratic society, in which intelligence, talent and hard work are rewarded. Marxists point out that this is an ideological myth because the evidence suggests wealth is more important than ability in opening up access to Oxbridge and top jobs. Moreover, Cohen and Young (1981) suggest that British culture is a monetary culture characterized by a 'chaos of rewards', whereby top businessmen are rewarded for failure and celebrities are overrewarded for their 'talents'. In contrast, ordinary people in functionally important jobs struggle to get by. However, the media very rarely focus on these issues. Rather, they celebrate celebrity culture and its excesses, and encourage their audiences to engage in a popular culture underpinned by materialism and conspicuous consumption.

Newman (2006) argues that the tabloid media dedicate a great deal of their content to examining the lives of another section of the wealthy elite, i.e. celebrities and their lavish lifestyles. These media representations invite media audiences to admire the 'achievements' of these celebrities. However, very little of this is critical or, if it is, it is superficially focused on issues such as weight or taste.

Newman argues that the media focus very positively on the concerns of the wealthy and the privileged. He notes that the media overfocuses on consumer items such as luxury cars, costly holiday spots and fashion accessories

that only the wealthy can afford. In the UK, the upper class have magazines exclusively dedicated to their interests and pursuits such as *Country Life*, *Horse and Hound* and *The Tatler*. Newman also notes the enormous amount of print and broadcast media dedicated to daily business news and stock market quotations, despite the fact that few people in the UK own stocks and shares. He notes that 'international news and trade agreements are reported in terms of their impact on the business world and wealthy investors, not on ordinary working people'.

## Representations of the middle classes

Some sociologists argue that the middle classes (i.e. professionals, managers, white-collar workers) and their concerns are overrepresented in the media. There is not a great deal of British sociological research in this area, but four broad sociological observations can be made:

- 1 In general, the middle class are overrepresented on TV (whilst the working class are underrepresented). In dramas, apart from soaps and situation comedies, middle-class families are predominant. They are generally portrayed as concerned about manners, decency and decorum, social respectability, etc.
- 2 A substantial percentage of British newspapers, e.g. the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*, and magazines are aimed at the middle class and their consumption, tastes and interests, such as computers, music, cars, house and garden design, that can only be afforded by those with a good standard of living.
- 3 The content of newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* suggests that journalists believe that the middle classes of middle England are generally anxious about the decline of moral standards in society and that they are proud of their British identity and heritage. It is assumed that their readership feels threatened by alien influences such as the euro, asylum seekers and terrorism. Consequently, newspapers like the *Daily Mail* often crusade on behalf of the middle classes and initiate moral panics on issues such as video-nasties, paedophilia, asylum seekers and so on.
- 4 Most of the creative personnel in the media are themselves middle-class. In news and current affairs, the middle classes dominate positions of authority – the 'expert' is invariably middle-class.

## Representations of the working class

Finally, it can be argued that some mass-media representations of the working class are also part and parcel of capitalist ideology. Newman notes that there are very few situation comedies, television dramas or films that focus on the everyday lives of the working class, despite the fact that this group constitutes a significant section of society. Newman argues that when working-class people are featured, the media depiction is often either unflattering or pitying. Blue-collar heads of households on prime-time television have typically been portrayed as well-intentioned but dumb buffoons (e.g. Homer Simpson) or as immature macho exhibitionists (e.g. Phil Mitchell in *Eastenders*). Research by Butsch (1992) argued that working-class men were more likely to be portrayed as flawed individuals compared with middle-class individuals.

Moreover, these flaws are highlighted by the portrayal of working-class women as more intelligent, rational and sensible than their husbands.

Newman argues that when news organizations focus on the working class, it is generally to label them as a problem, e.g. as welfare cheats, drug addicts or criminals. Working-class groups, e.g. youth subcultures such as mods or skinheads, are often the subject of moral panics, whilst reporting of issues such as poverty, unemployment or single-parent families often suggest personal inadequacy is the main cause of these social problems, rather than government policies or poor business practices. Studies of industrial relations reporting by the Glasgow University Media Group (2000) suggest that the media portray 'unreasonable' workers as making trouble for 'reasonable' employers.

Other representations are more sympathetic. The 'kitchen-sink' British cinema of the 1960s, represented by films such as *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* and *Kes*, television drama such as *Our Friends in the North* and films such as *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off* have portrayed working-class life and problems in a dignified, sensitive and supportive way, and even commented upon and challenged social inequality, class exploitation and racial intolerance.

Curran and Seaton (2003) note that newspapers aimed at working-class audiences assume that they are uninterested in serious analysis of either the political or social organization of UK society. Political debate is often reduced simplistically to conflict between personalities. The content of newspapers such as the *Sun* and the *Star* assume that such audiences want to read about celebrity gossip and lifestyles, trivial human interest stories and sport. Marxists see such media content as an attempt to distract the working-class audience from the inequalities of capitalism (see cultural effects in Topic 4).

## Representations of poverty and underclass

Newman argues that when the news media turn their attention to the most destitute, the portrayals are often negative or stereotypical. Often, the poor are portrayed in statistical rather than in human terms by news bulletins that focus on the numbers unemployed or on benefits rather than the individual suffering and personal indignities of poverty. Some sociologists note that the dumbing-down of television has led to a decline in serious dramas and documentaries highlighting the personal costs of poverty and degradation.

A very recent development in media interest in the poor has been the labelling of some sections of the poor as 'chavs' or 'charvers', which Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) suggest is another way of suggesting that the poor are undeserving of public sympathy. As Hayward and Yar (2006) argue, the label 'chav' is now used by newspapers and websites as a familiar and amusing term of abuse for young poor people. Lawler (2005) notes that 'though the term chav/a now circulates widely in Britain as a term of disgust and contempt, it is imposed on people rather than being claimed by them'. He argues that the media use this discriminatory and offensive form of language to vilify what they depict as a peasant **underclass** symbolized by stereotypical forms of appearance (e.g. tracksuits, bling).

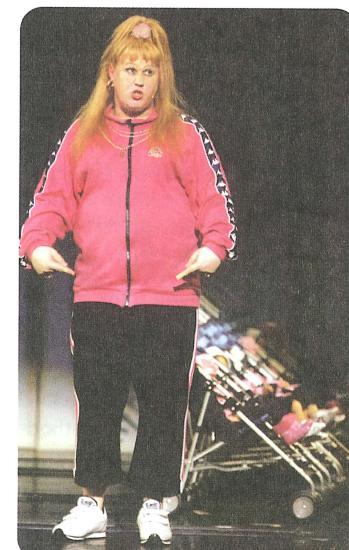
This 'dangerous class' is portrayed by the media as consisting of irresponsible parents with 'out of control' children, living in council housing, welfare-dependent and probably criminal. As Webster (2007) argues, these media representations of the poor as 'chavs' define them as 'social scum' and hence neutralize any public concern or sympathy for their social and economic plight.

Swale (2006) notes the conservative social and moral agenda that underpinned some of the media's reporting of the poor in 2005. She notes that newspapers such as the *Sunday Times* started using the term 'Neet' meaning 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' to describe youth whom the paper described as antisocial and feckless. The paper alleged that many of the young poor were responsible for their own poverty because they had dropped out of school, refused work and training when it was offered, and, in the case of girls, become single mothers. Swale argues that this type of coverage negatively stigmatizes sections of the poor as an 'out group', encouraging readers to label those on benefits as the undeserving poor.

McKendrick *et al.* (2008) studied a week's output of mainstream media in 2007 and concluded that coverage of poverty is marginal in the UK media, in that the causes and consequences of poverty were very rarely explored across the news, documentaries or drama. Dramas such as *Shameless* presented a sanitized picture of poverty, despite featuring characters who were economically deprived, whilst family issue-based programmes such as *Jeremy Kyle* treated poverty as an aspect of entertainment (see 'Focus on research', p. 202).

Cohen (2009) argues the UK mass media was so concerned about 'trumpeting the good fortune' of British capitalism that it paid less attention to its 'casualties'. Cohen argues that journalists, entertainers and artists were hopeless at realistically reporting or dramatizing the plight of the poor. He argues that some sections of the media revelled in the suffering of the poor. He notes that:

<<Media executives commissioned shows such as Little Britain and *Shameless*, in which the White poor were White trash; stupid teenagers who got pregnant without a thought; alcoholic fathers with delinquent children who wallowed in drugs and sex ... The poor were the grasping inhabitants of a parasite paradise, scrounging off the ... middle classes in television comedy, or freaks to be mocked on the British versions of the *Jerry Springer Show*. >>



**Little Britain** character  
Vicky Pollard.  
What stereotypes of  
poverty and the  
underclass does this  
character exemplify?

## Focus on research

McKendrick et al. (2008)

### The media, poverty and public opinion in the UK

Interviews were conducted with nine key informants involved in producing media coverage of poverty – journalists, editors and press officers. Three aspects of media output were examined. First, a systematic content analysis of news content over a study week (30 July to 5 August 2007) sampled over 150 newspapers, 100 radio news programmes, 75 television news programmes, a selection of news magazines and a range of new media. Second, the varying treatment of six poverty-related news reports was examined across a range of media. Third, interpretive analysis was undertaken of the portrayal of poverty in selected drama, documentary and ‘reality TV’ broadcasts. To explore audience responses to media coverage, eleven focus groups were conducted with different socio-demographic groups across a range of geographic areas in Britain. The key findings were as follows:

- Coverage of poverty is peripheral in mainstream UK media. The causes of poverty and the consequences of poverty were rarely explored.
- Non-news broadcasts rarely mentioned poverty, although they often featured those experiencing deprivation. Coverage tended to focus on extreme cases, highlighting the inherent ‘failings’ of undeserving people. Some documentaries explored the inequities of poverty and complex circumstances of those experiencing it, but reached limited audiences.
- In news media, poverty in the developing world received as much coverage as poverty in the UK, but was reported differently. Depictions of extreme poverty outside the UK correspond with and may influence how the public perceive and define poverty.
- Audiences tend to interpret representations of poverty and its causes in accordance with their beliefs and understandings. A key limitation of media coverage is the tendency to marginalize accounts that confront negative public attitudes.

Adapted from McKendrick, J.H., Sinclair, S., Irwin, A., O'Donnell, H., Scott, G. and Dobbie, L. (2008) *The Media, Poverty and Public Opinion in the UK*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

- 1 What do you think the aims of this research were?
- 2 What three main methods of research were used?
- 3 Explain why each method was used.
- 4 What perceptions of poverty are the British public likely to develop?

The media therefore reinforced the popular view that the poor were poor because of their own depravity and weakness. Most importantly, says Cohen, the media failed to see the connection between deprivation and wealth.

## Conclusions

Despite the lack of empirical research in this area, it can be argued that media representations of the powerful, i.e. the upper class and the middle class, tend to be more positive than representations of the less powerful working class and poor.

## Representations of age

Media representations of different groups of people based on age (i.e. children, adolescents and the elderly), also generalize and categorize people on the basis of stereotypes. The media encourage audiences to assume that specific representations in terms of image and behaviour can be applied wholesale to particular age groups.

### Childhood

British children are often depicted in the UK media in fairly positive ways. Content analyses of media products suggest that seven stereotypes of children are frequently used by the media:

- 1 As victims of horrendous crimes (e.g. Madeleine McCann, James Bulger, Holly Chapman and Jessica Wells) – Some critics of the media have suggested that White children who are victims of crime get more media attention than adults or children from ethnic-minority backgrounds. Note, too, that the media ethnocentrically portrays foreign children in quite a different way from British children; for example, African children are often represented as emaciated and dying, whilst 2009 saw many sections of the British media publishing pictures of the dead bodies of Palestinian children in Gaza.
- 2 As cute – This is a common stereotype found in television commercials for baby products or toilet rolls.
- 3 As little devils – Another common stereotype especially found in drama and comedy, e.g. Bart Simpson.
- 4 As brilliant – Perhaps as child prodigies or as heroes for saving the life of an adult.
- 5 As brave little angels – Suffering from long-term or terminal disease or disability.
- 6 As accessories – Stories about celebrities such as Madonna, Angelina Jolie or the Beckhams may focus on how their children humanize them.
- 7 As modern – The media may focus on how children ‘these days’ know so much more ‘at their age’ than previous generations of children.

Heintz-Knowles' (2002) study of children on television found that children are often portrayed as motivated primarily by peer relationships, sports, and romance, and least often by community, school-related, or religious issues. They are rarely shown as coping with societal issues such as racism or with major family issues such as child abuse and domestic violence. However, most representations of children are positive and show them

engaged in prosocial actions such as telling the truth and helping others. About 40 per cent of television drama depicted children engaged in antisocial actions, such as lying or bullying. However, one very noticeable feature of children's television that has occurred in the last 15 years has been the move to more realistic drama featuring issues from a child's rather than an adult's point of view.

Children are also represented in television commercials in ways that socialize them to become active consumers. They are encouraged by television advertising and film merchandizing to have an appetite for toys and games. Some family sociologists note that this has led to the emergence of a new family pressure: 'pester power', the power of children to train or manipulate their parents to spend money on consumer goods that will increase the children's status in the eyes of their peers. Evans and Chandler (2006) suggest that pester power is creating great anxiety among poorer parents, who will often go into debt to provide for their children's needs.

## Youth

There are generally two very broad ways in which young people have been targeted and portrayed by the media in the UK. On the one hand, there is a whole media industry aimed at socially constructing youth in terms of lifestyle and identity. Magazines are produced specifically for young people. Record companies, internet music download sites, mobile telephone companies and radio stations all specifically target and attempt to shape the musical tastes of young people. Networking sites on the internet, such as Facebook, Bebo and MySpace, allow youth to project their identities around the world.

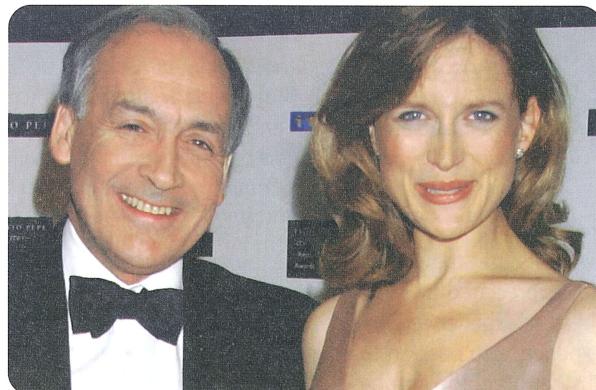
However, as described in Topic 3, youth are often portrayed by news media as a social problem, as immoral or anti-authority, and consequently constructed as folk devils as part of a moral panic. The majority of moral panics since the 1950s have been manufactured around concerns about young people's behaviour, such as their membership of specific 'deviant' subcultures (e.g. teddy boys, hoodies) or because their behaviour (e.g. drug-taking or binge drinking) has attracted the disapproval of those in authority.

Research by Wayne *et al.* (2007) confirms this overwhelmingly negative portrayal of youth in the UK. Their analysis looked at 2130 news items across all the main television channels during May 2006 and found 286 stories that focused specifically on young people. Of these, 28 per cent focused on celebrities, but 82 per cent focused on young people as either the perpetrators or the victims of violent crime. In other words, young people were mainly represented as a violent threat to society. Wayne and colleagues also found that it was very rare (only 1 per cent) for news items to feature a young person's perspective or opinion. They note that the media only delivers a one-dimensional picture of youth, one that encourages fear and condemnation rather than understanding. Moreover, they argue that it distracts from the real problems young people face in the modern world – such as homelessness, not being able to get onto the housing ladder, unemployment, mental health, etc – that might be caused by society's or the government's failure to take the problems of youth seriously.

## The elderly

Research focusing on media representations of the elderly suggests that age is not the only factor that impacts on the way the media portrays people aged 65 and over. For example, Newman (2006) notes that upper-class and middle-class elderly people are often portrayed in television and film dramas as occupying high-status roles as world leaders, judges, politicians, experts, business executives, etc. Leading film stars such as Harrison Ford and Clint Eastwood are well beyond retirement age. Moreover, news programmes seem to work on the assumption that an older male with grey in his hair and lines on his face somehow exudes the necessary authority to impart the news. However, female newscasters, such as Anna Ford, have long complained that these older men are often paired with attractive young females, while older women newsreaders are often exiled to radio. Leading female film and television stars are also often relegated to character parts once their looks and bodies are perceived to be on the wane, which seems to be after the age of 40.

It can be argued that old age is generally devalued by the media industry. This is particularly apparent in the advertising of beauty products aimed at slowing down the ageing process or hiding it altogether. On the whole, however, research into media representations of the elderly shows that the elderly are largely invisible across a range of media and, when they do appear, they are often negatively stereotyped.



Alastair Stewart (born 1952) and Katie Derham (born 1970) were paired by ITN for various news bulletins. How do they illustrate the point made by Anna Ford above?

## The invisible elderly

Age Concern (2000) argue that the elderly are under-represented across a variety of mass media. For example, in 2000, 21 per cent of the population was aged 65+, yet only 7 per cent of representations on television were of that age group. Older men constituted 70 per cent of these representations despite making up only 43 per cent of the 65+ population. Landis (2002) conducted an analysis of media representations in popular magazines. She found that in *Family Circle* only 8 per cent of stories and images focused on people aged 55+, whilst in *Good Housekeeping* only 6 per cent of the magazine was focused on the elderly. She found that, in most popular magazines aimed at women, only 9 per cent of features or images were focused on elderly people.

## Stereotypes of the elderly

When the elderly do appear in the media, they tend to be stereotyped as having specific characteristics, many of which are negative and one-dimensional:

- *Grumpy* – This stereotype paints elderly women as shrews or busybodies and males as curmudgeons who spend their time waxing lyrical about the past, bemoaning the behaviour of young people and complaining about the modern world, e.g. Victor Meldrew in *One Foot in the Grave*. These characters tend to be portrayed as conservative, stubborn and resistant to social change.
- *Mentally challenged* – This stereotype ranges from those elderly who are forgetful or befuddled to those who are feeble-minded or severely confused, i.e. suffering from senility. This stereotype suggests that growing old involves the loss of or at least, the decline of people's mental functions.
- *Infantile* – Media representations of the elderly portray them as children, who need to be treated as such, or as helpless and dependent on other younger members of the family or society. The 'sweet little old lady' stereotype is typical of this representation.
- *As a burden* – The elderly are portrayed as an economic burden on society (in terms of the costs to the younger generation of pensions and health care) and/or as a physical and social burden on younger members of their families (who have to worry about or care for them).
- *As enjoying a second childhood* – Sometimes films or television show the more affluent elderly attempting to relive their adolescence and engaging in activities that they have always longed to do before they die, as, for example, in the film *The Bucket List*.

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Research in the early part of the 21st century generally suggests that the contribution of the elderly to society is not appreciated by media agencies, who rarely consult them as experienced or wise elders with a wealth of experience to pass on to younger members of society. Furthermore, the emphasis in television, film and advertising on youth and beauty imply that ageing should be avoided at all costs, which in itself strongly implies that to be old is a stigmatized identity.

However, recent research suggests that media producers may be gradually reinventing how they deal with the elderly, especially as they realize that this group may have disposable incomes, i.e. extra money to spend on consumer goods.

Lee *et al.* (2007) note that representation of the elderly in advertisements is still fairly low, i.e. 15 per cent, but the majority of these advertisements (91 per cent) portray the elderly as 'golden agers', who are active, alert, healthy, successful and content. However, this research suggests that this stereotype may be unrealistic in that it does not reflect the wide range of experiences that people have as they age, including loss of status, poverty, loneliness and loss of their partner.

Robinson *et al.* (2008) compared how older adults and college students perceived the stereotypes of the elderly

found in magazine adverts. They found that the elderly sample liked those adverts that showed them as clever, vibrant and having a sense of humour. Interestingly, neither the elderly nor the student respondents liked those adverts that poked fun at the elderly or presented them as out of touch or as unattractive.

## Conclusions

Media representations of age, alongside other agencies of socialization such as family experience and education, are important in shaping our attitudes towards other age groups and perhaps to our own futures as we go through the ageing process. However, research in this field, especially with regard to the very young and the elderly, is fairly limited. Perhaps this fact, too, is illustrative of the low status that society generally accords to these age groups.

## Key terms

**Islamophobia** fear of Muslims.

**Misogyny** hatred of women.

**Tokenism** including a limited number of minority group members only because it is felt that this is expected.

**Underclass** group below the working class, dependent on benefits and unlikely to secure employment.

## Activities

### Research idea

Interview a sample of over-60s about their feelings about representations of the elderly in the media. Focus the discussion by showing participants some well-known personalities. To what extent are they concerned about stereotyping in the media?

### Web.task

Read the following newspaper article and web column about the links between rap music and gun crime.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4578818.stm>  
[www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DBBE.htm](http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DBBE.htm)

To what extent do you agree with:

- 1 the Advertising Standards Authority's verdict on the 50 Cent poster?
- 2 the columnist in 'Spiked'?

Explain your answers.

## Check your understanding

- 1 What evidence is there that 'the take-up of media technology among ethnic minority groups is ... well developed'?
- 2 According to Agbetu, what are the three attributes of a Black person constructed in the media?
- 3 How did Hall argue that the moral panic over mugging served an ideological purpose?
- 4 What are the arguments for and against the view that rap music has a negative influence on young Black men?
- 5 Give evidence to show how media coverage can represent asylum seekers and refugees as 'a threat'?
- 6 What evidence is there for Islamophobia in the British media?
- 7 How has media reporting of less-developed countries been criticized?
- 8 How do ethnic-minority audiences perceive race issues are dealt with in dramas?
- 9 How have media professionals from ethnic-minority backgrounds responded to inequalities and prejudices?
- 10 How has the use of the term 'chav' been criticized by sociologists?
- 11 Identify and explain three examples of often-used stereotypes of children in the media.
- 12 In what ways are youth often represented as a problem in the media?
- 13 Explain how it can be argued that 'old age' is generally devalued by the media industry.

### An eye on the exam

### Representations of ethnicity, age and social class

#### Item A

The media often portray Black people and members of other ethnic minorities in negative and stereotypical ways. In addition, they may suffer 'symbolic annihilation', where they are ignored or under-represented in the media. The poor and the working class often suffer a similar fate – either absent, or presented in a bad light, for example as social security scroungers or incompetents who are responsible for their own poverty. The media also tend to treat different age groups differently. For example, while young people are often portrayed as a threat, the very old are largely ignored or shown as difficult, forgetful or feeble – while representations of them avoid the subject of dying. For Marxists, such stereotypes exist because they play an ideological role for capitalism. By contrast, pluralists see them as a reflection of public views.

Using material from Item A and elsewhere, critically examine sociological explanations of mass-media representations of one of the following: ethnicity; age; social class. (33 marks)

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#### Grade booster

#### Getting top marks in this question

For this question, don't be tempted to write about a second area, as you will not gain any marks for doing so. Once you have selected one of the areas, you can begin by describing the patterns of representation, both in terms of stereotyping and under- or overrepresentation. Use material from the Item and your own knowledge to do this. If you choose class, you should look at two or more classes (e.g. middle, working, underclass). If you choose ethnicity, look at two or more ethnic groups. If you choose age, look at several age groups. You need to consider a range of reasons and explanations. General theories of the media (e.g. Marxism, pluralism and postmodernism), as well as more specific theories (e.g. deviance amplification), can be applied to all these groups.

1 Read **Item A** below and answer parts (a) and (b) that follow.

## Item A

Sociologists see the news as a social construct – that is, they regard it as something that has been created or ‘manufactured’ by journalists and editors, and not something that is simply out there waiting to be found and reported.

In the manufacturing of the news, bias enters the process, both in terms of which items get selected for reporting (and which ones are rejected) and in the way in which they are presented. Various factors shape the news ‘product’, in ways that favour some groups at the expense of others. For example, journalists’ news values play an important part in deciding whether a story is newsworthy enough to be covered. Similarly, economic factors such as the cost of sending a team abroad may determine whether or not the news organization covers an important event.

- (a) Identify and briefly explain **three** possible controls over the ways in which the media portray individuals or groups. (9 marks)

(1) Libel laws – newspapers can be sued for publishing false and defamatory things, e.g. falsely accusing someone of being a paedophile. (2) The Race Relations Act makes it a criminal offence to incite racial hatred, so newspapers can be prosecuted for portraying racial groups so as to stir up racist feelings.  
(3) Advertisers may put pressure on a newspaper media to change the way it portrays potential customers.

8/9

- (b) Using information from **Item A** and elsewhere, assess the view that the selection and presentation of the news are biased. (18 marks)

According to Marxists such as the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG), the media are biased in their presentation of the news. For example, in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the news media consistently take the side of the Israelis. GUMG also found similar patterns when looking at industrial disputes. For example, in their coverage of strikes, the language used and images broadcast make it appear to be the strikers’ fault. They are portrayed as ‘demanding’ whereas the employers are ‘offering’. Often strikers are interviewed in the street with lots of noise and disorder, whereas the employer is interviewed in a calm, comfortable office, making him look more rational.

GUMG argue that this presentation of the news has an ideological function, to discredit anyone who opposes capitalism and prevent them gaining support. This is why news coverage rarely explains the causes of strikes, because this might make the strikers seem to have a just cause. It also makes capitalism look like a reasonable system. In this sense, the news is part of the ideological state apparatus (Althusser).

As Item A says, economic factors are also involved in news production, and these can produce bias. For example, if a TV company has a limited news budget, they may decide not to send teams abroad as this is more expensive, and concentrate on home news instead. However, this has the effect of making it seem that things happening abroad are not worth knowing about, and can contribute to ethnocentrism in the audience.

Item A also mentions ‘news values’. These are the ideas journalists use to decide whether it is worth reporting a story. They include things like personalization, stories about elites and stories with negative effects (e.g. disasters). Thus news values are an inbuilt bias that journalists are socialized into, in favour of some kinds of stories and against others.

### An examiner comments

The first two points score full marks, but the third needs more explanation – e.g. that negative portrayals of customers will put them off reading that paper and stop them seeing the adverts.

Overall, this is a reasonable answer. It focuses on the question of bias in the news and says something about both selection (e.g. economic factors and news values) and presentation (e.g. GUMG), although it doesn’t spell this out. It uses the Item and puts the discussion into the context of Marxist theory. It could be improved by reference to other theories of news production, e.g. interactionism, and to other studies.

13  
18

## One for you to try

Assess the view that the mass media have only limited and indirect effects on audiences. (33 marks)

### An examiner comments

You need to examine a range of models of media effects. These should include models supporting the view in the question, e.g. two-step flow, selective filter and uses and gratifications. Describe evidence from studies in support of these models. Evaluate the view by using models that

challenge it, e.g. hypodermic syringe. Consider also models that suggest a strong but indirect effect on audiences.

Answers to the ‘One for you to try’ are available free on [www.collinseducation.com/sociologyweb](http://www.collinseducation.com/sociologyweb)