

Race, representation and the media

How we perceive race

- How are the identities of race and ethnicity formed.
- Race and identities **are not fixed** - Group identities change as a result of collective action.
- People who are considered to be in the same **racial and ethnic group** may not share the same identities.
- Hence, racial and ethnic identities are not the only identities that anyone has, but our understandings of these terms **affect our perceptions/stereotypes** as well as how we see ourselves
- The ways in which we perceive race and ethnicity have been much debated and have changed over time.

Definitions of race and ethnicity

- In some sources – ethnicity refers to a group or community that is assumed to share common cultural practices and history
- Religion, language, territory are all included in the term ethnicity. It is, to a large extent, defined by the people who feel they belong to a group.

Relevant to all people

- However, ethnicity is a concept that refers to everybody.
- The majority ethnic group is sometimes used to refer to ethnic groups that have more power, because their cultural practices and presence is taken for granted and perceived as natural.
- The term minority ethnic group refers to those groups whose cultural practices and history make it likely that they will be less powerful within a society.
- So although race itself is a social construct, it can have real effects as it continues to be treated as socially significant because inequalities are reproduced through practices of racism

Problems with the concepts of race and ethnicity

- If we treat an ethnic group or race as if it has characteristics that make it different from other groups we are treating people in ways that have come to be known as essentialist.
- It treats groups as if they have a fundamental fixed essence which exaggerates differences and understates similarities between groups

Race and ethnicity are not fixed

- Racial and ethnic identities may change over time – the change might refer to who is included/excluded from a particular racial or ethnic identity.

- Our identities are produced from a negotiation between those identities we adopt and those that other people ascribe to us

Race and the media

- Discussions of issues of race in the media are significant because it impacts on **life outside the media**.
- There are some dominant **discourses** of race that are present in the media.
- Whilst we may sometimes celebrate **cultural diversity** in media representations, there are discourses that **reinforce stereotypes** and perceptions of some **minority ethnics** in a homogenous way.

Framing

- Framing is a concept that is often applied to news analysis, but we can use it to look at race and the media more generally.
- Framing is about the notion of **highlighting if something important** is excluded from the **media picture**
- So concentrating on what is **in the frame** and what is **left out**.
- This coverage over time, then, is extremely **restrictive and blocks** out the potential of the media for wide ranging communication.
- Framing considers **motivations, conscious or habitual** of media professionals who daily reproduce these frames.
- I suppose another way of thinking about frames is to use a familiar word that it is related to – **discourses**.
- So we direct attention away from interpreting a single news story exclusively in **terms of its specificity** and instead think **about the context over time** and the **wider context**.
- If the media frame **excludes depth and variety** at the same time as it obsessively focuses on one trait or a handful of them, then it is difficult for **alternatives to subvert** the frame or discourse

Orientalism and neo-Orientalism

- European representation of the Orient has included a place of romance, **exotic beings and** remarkable experiences.
- It is also the place of Europe's greatest richness and oldest colonies.
- The Orient is one of the deepest and most recurring images of the other which puts the **east/west into a binary** relationship which is hierarchical and one of [power which we could argue is **European-Atlantic** power over the Orient.

- And these discourses which are present in a wide variety of writings, paintings, academia, are also manifest in and through the media.
- In the late 20th century many western cultural themes began appearing in Asian art and culture – especially Japan including English words and phrases are prominent in advertising.

Late 20th Century

- Others suggest that the Occident is able to develop **distinct, non-western traditions of modernity**
- There are currently two ideas around **neo-Orientalism**
- The first suggests that Orientalism as an ideology belongs to **a past period of history**
- The second is that although many preconditions for Orientalist discourse are no longer present, it's influence is **still present**, that there is still a dualism that exists between East and west, which focuses **on Islam and the west**.
- I draw on the ideas of Orientalism to highlight notions of **'the other'** and how the other is **exoticised**, and perceived as remarkable which is anyone perceived as different.

Exotic

- In this discourse the other is represented as **strange**, different as part of the other.
- The discourse itself is **not perceived as strange** or wrong.
- The exotic is sometimes associated with **costume, architecture or culinary** delights.
- The **black=danger equation is less explicitly played** out in recent media fictions but is still there.
- This gender and race **fusion lends** extra viability to **racial stereotyping** because it draws on more detail and offers a variation in so called knowledge about supposed **differences in others**.
- So for example, **wild, savage and dangerous** becomes associated with the other (and are compared with the **friend, the civilised noble savage**)

Documentary

- Whether the documentary is about a **local or global topic** it often involves **engagement with others**.
- Documentary film and programmes are often a mixture **of emotion and information** and tell the audience what places **look and feel like** and what it would feel like to be there.
- The presentations that the photographer or journalist or documentary maker produce are related to their **personal interpretations of events** and are assumed to have **some truth value**
- But they are involved in the **process of construction**. The images are **edited and placed alongside commentary or textual information**. They are selected, **placed, framed and connected** with the text.
- And the commentary is often **the Voice of God** – which suggests it is to be **taken as true**.

Comedy

- All discourse is **placed, positioned and situated** and all knowledge is **contextual**.
- The role of television programmes such as comedy also provide a discourse **about the other**, often set against the **hegemonic conception of Englishness**.

Sitcoms

- For example by making a situation comedy humorous they often draw on **crude stereotypes**.
- Superiority is often **reinforced through** speech where minority characters are portrayed as **unintelligent** or perhaps not speaking **in regional accents** which reinforces an othering.
- Humour provides an opening within **ideological structures** to **challenge, disrupt or ridicule** dominant values.
- Whether it achieves this and how it is read may **depend on the individual** interpretation.

News

- News on television (or online) is still a **critical site of how imagined communities** and nations are framed.
- There is **recurrent exclusion of minority viewpoints** and perspectives in news.
- When **minority ethnics come to the fore**, reports often touch on recurring aspects of **racial and cultural different**.

Television news

- News bulletins **are shorter and more sound bite based**.
- Television news still has **large audiences** – though news is also watched **via the internet**.
- It is assumed that if the **camera shows us something then it must be true**.
- So it is capable of producing **powerful images (e.g. Haiti)**.
- News often links **Black youth with crime and statistics** without questioning this – or without questioning the need to mention white as the norm against which **black youth are measured** or put into **subject positions**.
- Minority ethnics are less often seen in **non-race related news stories**.
- **Crises and conflict** become attached to **minority ethnics** in wider contexts.

News presenters

- The presence of **minority ethnic news readers and reporters**, may hide the deeper **imbalance in terms of news knowledge**, news **agendas** and news **bias**.

News and tabloid journalism

- Tabloid journalists realise that the power of a media discourse often resides in the way in which it can ring prejudicial and ideological beliefs which are significant beyond media discourse.
- Where issues of race are commented upon, other issues are often also highlighted – such as a nation under threat.

Film

- The same dominant discourses tend to dominate film, particularly Hollywood film. If you are interested in this topic, there is a really useful chapter in the following book (available in the library).
- Benshoff, H. and Griffin, S. (2009) *America on Film: Representing race, class, gender and sexuality at the movies*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- There are also films by directors such as Spike Lee and others that challenge such representations, although they are not so dominant (e.g. *Bamboozled* by Spike Lee).
- There are also representations in programmes like *Orange is the New Black* and also in television programmes and other films.

Challenges Minority ethnic media

- Minority ethnic media are characterised by a dramatic variation in scale of operation and by the specificity of the intended audience.
- Some such media are politically conservative and well-funded e.g. the Spanish language TV channel in the USA, others are less conservative which has been dominated by Mexico's giant Televisa corporation.
- However, in carving out communication spaces specially targeted to minority ethnic publics, even purely commercially driven radio stations are significant.
- Electronic media offers new resources and their consumption.
- Appadurai stresses the powerful fusion of media and interpersonal communication flows among migrants, and between them and their communities of origin.
- The wide spectrum of minority ethnic media, is part and parcel of the variety of minority ethnic social locations.
- Questions of ethnic cultural identities, of migrants, refugees and aboriginal people's rights, of the range of diasporic situations and varying responses to white racism, all jockey for position in such media.