Researching the media and popular culture

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SLSP1170 Understanding and Researching Contemporary Society
Today’s lecture:

• Why might sociologists care about the media and popular culture?

• Some key concepts, debates and methodological approaches

• My work on young people and the media: the research process

• Introducing the seminar task: your turn to ‘practice the craft’
Why might sociologists be interested in the media?
• We are increasingly surrounded by the media and popular culture – from film, TV, social media, music.
What is ‘the media’?

- Agencies of communication that transmit information to mass audiences

- Different types of media
  - **Print media**: newspapers, magazines, comics, books and some forms of advertising.
  - **Audio Visual media**: television, radio, film, music
  - **Digital and social media**: websites and social media networks (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube; Snapchat; Tumblr)

- Media helps us connect with others, informs us, entertains us. It provides interpretations of the world and ‘resources to forge our identities and imaginations’ (Paul Hodkinson 2013)
• What we know about the world is ‘mediated’
• Our knowledge of the world is shaped by the circulation of images and stories about people, places, phenomena of which we don’t have direct experience.
• The place of media in our everyday lives suggests that it has significance for the nature of broader society.

• The media and popular culture have become an integral part of our broader social and cultural environment – including areas of life that concern sociologists (e.g. wealth, power, gender, class, race and ethnicity, the self, identity)

• The concern for sociologists is to understand the nature of this relationship between the media, culture and society
Theories and key debates 1:

The role of the media: shaping or reflecting society?
The media: reflecting society?

- The media reflects concerns / problems / values / issues that are already important
- The media mirrors an existing social reality that is waiting to be discovered and truthfully reported
- Media as a neutral medium
- Journalists / media workers as ‘fair’ and ‘objective’
- **Critique**: simplistic model, lacks question of power
Or…. shaping society?

• How people and social relations are represented across media play a role in shaping our sense of ‘reality’ and interpretations of events and issues

• Media are part of the production and exchange of meaning

• ‘Representation’ is a very different notion from reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping.’ (Stuart Hall, 1997)

e.g. Migrant crisis: what stories get told? How? What stories are missing?
Culture, representation and meaning-making

- Media representations are important: they influence public understandings, shape action and organise social practices, behavior and identities (i.e. they have ‘real’ effects)

- The media as a place of representation provides conceptual maps we use to make sense of the world

- Representations - of class, race, gender – circulate a limited range of definitions of who people can be, what they can do (‘the possibilities of identities’ – Stuart Hall)
Studying media representation involves exploring not just what is shown but how social issues, phenomena and groups of people are framed in certain ways and how these framings constitute ‘reality’

In other words… the task as sociologists is to ‘interrogate the text/image’

‘The first wisdom of sociology is that things are not always as they seem ’ (Berger, 1963: 23)
An example: ‘chav mums’, stigma and working class femininity

Media representations of young working class women (news, TV comedy, social media). Associated with a lack of intelligence, sexual promiscuity, multiple children out of wedlock, relying on benefits, ‘laziness’, ‘scum’.

Effects?: generates ‘class disgust’ (mockery and stigma towards working class mothers) (Tyler 2008).

**In whose favour do these representations about teen mums work? Why do these representations appear now? What agendas to they serve?**

Presents certain ‘truths’/ commonsense ideas about working class women, teen pregnancy, welfare-dependency. **In fact…. teen pregnancy is at its lowest level since records began.**

Tyler (2008): The ‘chav mum’ embodies contemporary anxieties about female sexuality, social class and youth at a moment of deepening class inequality and welfare reform.
Theories and key debates 2:

Engaging with the media (media users)
Transfusion / receiving model

- Media transmits a pre-existing message from a sender to a receiver
- Harold Lasswell (1948) in Hodkinson (2011: p9)

E.g. Migration crisis coverage in the tabloid press

Tabloid press (The Sun) → Migrants (not asylum seekers); ‘swarm’ ‘freeloaders’ → Newspaper → General public (who?) → Anti-immigration sentiment
‘Media Effects’ Theory: proposes that media has a powerful and direct influence on audiences

- Video nasties and youth violence (Jamie Bulger)
- ‘thinspiration’ and anorexia

Criticisms of Media Effects theory:
- Audiences as ‘dupes’ that passively ‘receive’
- Media as ‘Hypodermic needle’
- Treats us all the same
- Implies there’s only one meaning in the text
“What is not allowed for is the possibility that ‘recipients’ might do more than just receive, that they might engage with content actively, drawing on their existing identity and surroundings to produce their own interpretations of what senders present to them. The construction of meaning, then, might be seen as a joint project between senders and receivers.” (Hodkinson, 2011)
Encoding/Decoding model

• There may be preferred meanings encoded in the text which are set by dominant groups in society, but there is no guarantee these will work in the way they are intended.

• Rather audiences engage in a process of active interpretation - ‘decoding’

• What meaning we take from a media text is informed by the related wider socio-economic context, our experiences and identities (gender, class, race) E.g. interpreting the migrant crisis

Culture as a space of struggle

- Meaning as ‘dialogue’
- The meaning of a text is not fixed but ‘slippery’
- Meaning is always being produced, contested, remade within a ‘circuit’ of culture

Methodological approaches

Where we pay attention to in this circuit of culture, has implications on what research tools we use. For example:

• A concern with representation involves looking at media texts for the patterns of meanings (discourses) they contain (e.g. textual analysis, content analysis)

• A concern with ‘consumption’ involves looking at how people engage with these encoded meanings (e.g. interviews with media audiences, survey)
Researching youth, celebrity and aspiration

The research process

CelebYouth.org
Sparking my sociological imagination

• Celebrity: a mass media phenomena and part of everyday life

• Concerns about the effect of this on young people: eroding young people’s aspirations? ‘X-factor’ generation?

David Cameron: too many British children want to be popstars and footballers
David Cameron met with school children in Monrovia today and said that too many children in Britain wanted to be "popstars and footballers" when they grow up.

• Celebrity: stories of success, entrepreneurism, upward mobility

"Celebrity culture is an aspirational culture regardless of how much you don’t want it to be."
Paloma Faith
Concerns, tools and jumping off points

• Celebrity is a mass media phenomena that has become an inescapable part of our lives (even if we don’t follow or like celebrity we still engage with it!)

• ‘Celebrity talk is more than just celebrity talk’: Celebrity is an everyday cultural practices of meaning making; a space to negotiate the ‘commonsense’ of everyday life

• Prioritizing young people’s voices and lived experiences (qualitative, interpretative)

• Concern with media representation and media consumption
Research Questions

• What discourses (stories/patterns of meaning) about aspiration, social mobility, success and work are found in celebrity culture

• How do young people engage with and interpret these in their everyday lives?

Research methods

• Textual analysis of 12 case study celebrities

• Group and individual interviews with 148 young people (14-17 years)
Celebrity Case Studies
Textual analysis of celebrity representations

Celebrity culture is an arena where powerful stories and common sense ideas about the self and society are articulated and elaborated.

In particular, celebrity media is encoded with powerful stories of meritocracy, where success is achieved on the basis of hard work and passion.

These powerful ideas are found elsewhere in society....
Young people talking about celebrity: key findings

Young people engage in moral evaluations of celebrity based on a strong investment in hard work and moral worth.

Young people’s interpretation of celebrity representations was informed by classed and gendered stereotypes within wider society.

But evaluations and interpretations of celebrity are not fixed but shaped by young people’s identities, personal investments, resources and positioning.
‘Deserving’ Celebrities

Schmidt: I like Will Smith. He wants to do well in life, wants to achieve something. He’s worked hard for where he is.

Bruno: David Beckham, he had to work for it, day, day in, day out

Bob: Prince Harry could just like sit around because of all the money he’s got, but instead he goes out and does like one of the hardest jobs there is.

Roman: I love Beyonce so much …because to get where she is, she’s tried her hardest. And she gives her all in everything she does.
Class, gender and celebrity representations: ‘Celebrity chavs’?

Dave: Reality TV stars and models like Kim Kardashian and Katie Price, they’re at the **bottom of the celebrity pit** ... they’ve done nothing.

Interviewer: Who doesn't work, for their fame?
Tim: Katie Price....and **people from TOWIE**

Saafi: Kim Kardashian all she did was a sex tape [laughter]. **She didn’t deserve it** ...I think they appreciate it more when they’ve had to work for it.

Jinny: I hate Katie price... just **dumb bimbos** in general.
Ally: She’s the worst. What did she used to do? Just lift up her top for Page 3. That’s one of the worst ways you can earn money.

Mavie: I don’t think you can judge people.

Ally: She’s not talented in any way, is she?

Mavie: She is. She’s got a good business.

Luigi: Yeah, she’s made a lot for herself.

Mavie: Yeah, she worked hard for her kids.

Ally: Katie Price is not a business woman.

Mavie: She owns Mamas and Papas.

Ally: She’s not a business woman, she’s pathetic,

Mavie: No, she made it all herself.
Celebrity media as a space of interpretative struggle

How young people interpreted encoded messages about ‘hard work’ and ‘success’ within celebrity culture was not predictable. Their interpretations of celebrity were different, shaped by their identities and experiences.

‘Recipients [of celebrity media] might do more than just receive, that they might engage with content actively, drawing on their existing identity and surroundings to produce their own interpretations of what senders present to them. The construction of meaning, then, might be seen as a joint project between senders and receivers’ (Hodkinson, 2011)
Your turn: Practicing the craft of sociology of the media
Cited and Further Reading

- Mendick, H. Allen, K & Harvey, L. (2015): ‘We can Get Everything We Want if We Try Hard’ : Young People, Celebrity, Hard Work’. British Journal of Educational Studies