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Hegemony

What is Hegemony?

Hegemony is basically the idea that the media continually reproduces images of a dominant group as superior or powerful. In Western society, the dominant group is middle class white males and because the media are predominantly produced by middle class white males, they tend to represent middle class white males as superior. And the rest of society – working class, BAME, LGBT, disabled, female – as less powerful or inferior. But the key point about hegemony is that it is so subtle that arguably the white guys making the media don't even realise they are doing it, and nobody challenges it; and thus the established hierarchies in society that are constantly reflected back to us in the media become the accepted norm. This is what theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and later, Noam Chomsky, meant by saying the media 'manufactures consent'.

I like to teach Hegemony because in the messy relationship between the media and society, it's the theory I most agree with. I always see it as offering

a chance to think about the current *status quo* – where we are now – in terms of how audiences interact with or are influenced by the media. It can also be seen as part of a continuum: a long line of developments in audience theory that stretch back to the beginnings of mass media.

Behaviourism: The 'Original' Audience Theory

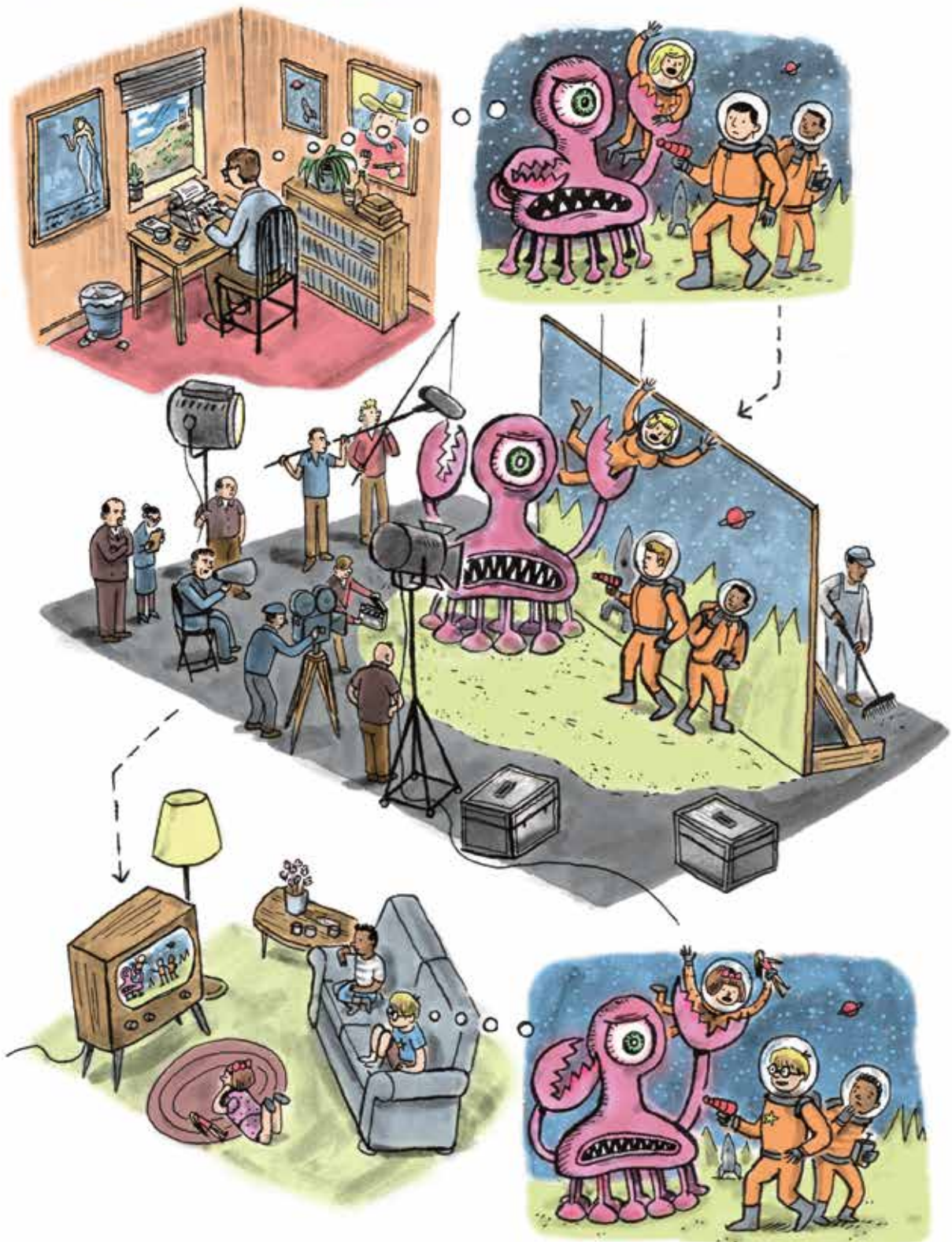
With every new form of media comes a wave of panic about the 'effects' it will have on the individual and society. Many of you will be familiar with the Magic Bullet theory – certainly it's a fave with my own students from GCSE to A2. It's the very simple idea that the media fires messages into our brains; that we are passive consumers of the media who believe everything we are told. Similar to this is the Hypodermic Needle theory; that media messages are injected into our bloodstream. Both of these ideas are 'Behaviourist' or 'passive audience' theories – simply put, the media have a direct impact on our behaviour. Most of us would probably agree that this idea of media

consumers as almost lobotomised zombie-people reacting to or copying what we see in the media is both patronising and utterly ridiculous; and yet it's still pulled out from time to time to deflect from more serious issues in society. For example, Donald Trump this year insisted that violent video games and films were to blame for the high school shooting in Florida, rather than acknowledge that the problem might be with the America gun laws. This tragedy subsequently inspired the March For Our Lives movement where thousands of high school students marched in Washington DC to call for gun reform. So not quite the passive, docile consumers that gun-loving Trump would have us believe.

Uses and Gratifications

As the media became more commonplace, 'active audience' theories developed. Many of you will have studied Maslow's Needs and Motivation theory, but the GCSE Media big-hitter is Uses and Gratifications. Mostly attributed to Blumler and Katz (although, as the media evolves, so

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Legally Black's recreations of famous movie posters were spotted online by advertising activists Special Patrol Group who distributed them across the capital



does the theory – see the Wikipedia entry on Uses and Gratifications for the full evolution) the theory suggests that audiences have control over the media they consume – they pick and choose different media for various needs (uses) and desires (gratifications). This is the antithesis of the magic bullet theory, with the consumer in the driving seat sifting through the available media, rejecting and selecting based on what we like and what we want. Much better! I feel powerful now.

These two theories are in binary opposition to each other. I often ask my classes to choose a side, decide whether they think audiences are active or passive. But it's a trick question. The truth about how audiences and the media interact, lies in the massive grey area between the two.

A Corrupt System

So that's an abbreviated summary of some of the more popular and easier to understand audience theories. Let's get back to the messy business of Hegemony. Women make up more than half the population of this country yet only 13% of working film directors in the UK are women. BAME people make up 14% of our population but according to Ofcom, the regulator for the UK broadcast media, only 12% of employees in the industry and only 6% at senior levels where decisions about what stories get told and how they get told are made. Disabled people are grossly underrepresented. It's a problem. And what these stats don't tell us is about the backgrounds of those people.

Research carried out by the

Sutton Trust found that over half (54%) of today's top journalists were educated in private schools. This is beyond disproportionate when you consider only 7% of the population attend private schools in the first place. A further 33% of journalists went to selective grammar schools, while just 14% attended comprehensive schools, which now educate almost 90% of children.

So it's not easy for the average, lower middle or working class person to get a job in the media, let alone the underprivileged, transgender, ethnic minority or immigrants. And when the lives of these groups are depicted in the news, written into stories or framed by directors, styled by production designers, cast by casting agents in the UK media industry, representations are likely to be constructed from a

Behaviourism/Passive audience
(Magic bullet, Hypodermic needle)

Uses and Gratifications/Active audience

Images like this are immediately eye catching – they do seem weird to most people and if they do to you too, it's not because you're racist, it's because the media is.

middle class, usually white, privileged, and often male, perspective.

If the people who decide what gets filmed, published, reported, screened etc. attended private school from a young age or grammar school as teenagers, their understanding of British society and culture is immediately cut in two as they interact only with the privileged people, the dominant people. How accurate can their understanding of the rest of the population be?

And how do we consent to this system? Well, unless we actively fight against it or complain about it or call it out, we are consenting to it. If we don't trust a politician because he or she doesn't 'look the part', or if

we don't challenge the ideas fed to children from a very young age that doctors, pilots and astronauts, are all posh white dudes, and cute dollies and Barbies are white, blonde and blue eyed with wonderful friends then we are consenting to a corrupt system that prevents us from developing more varied, plural depictions in the media.

Pluralism

The flipside to hegemony, its nemesis, the Black Panther to its Klaw, is 'Pluralism' – the idea that in order to change the way we all think we need to see many and varied representations of people from different social groups, rather than the repeated stereotypical ones. The single best example of the need for pluralism is the poster campaign carried out earlier this year by Legally Black. I almost don't even need to make the point here as they did it so perfectly. Images like this are immediately eye catching – they do seem weird to most people and if they do to you too, it's not because you're racist, it's because the media is. As long as the media is created and dominated by privileged white people then we will never get the pluralism of our society reflected in the media we consume.

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Cultivation Theory

Gerbner's 'Cultivation theory' sits nicely between the polar opposites of the passive and active audience. This theory suggests that although we do pick and choose the media we consume, we are not oblivious to the effects of repeated ideas or images which are constantly reproduced and, over a period of time, can subtly affect our views.

A friend's mum who is an RE teacher in a rural British county once told me that the children she teaches are 'terrified' of Muslims. In a school where there were very few Muslims in a fairly affluent and mostly white area, their only experiences and understanding of the Islamic faith come from stories they see in the news: stories of violence and extremism. This cultivates a fear and a lack of understanding that will, in almost all cases, influence their opinions of Muslim individuals they encounter in daily life. This is still a 'behaviourist' theory but more subtle than the Magic Bullet Theory.

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