

Chapter 1

This is media studies

This introductory chapter aims to provide some context for the study of the media: to consider how it has developed as an academic subject (and why it is seen as controversial) and to map out the key theoretical frameworks that will be the foundation of your studies. The following is an overview; each area will be developed in greater depth in the following chapters.

- Why do we study the media?
- What are the origins of media studies as an academic subject?

Introduction to the theoretical framework:

- Media language
- Media representations
- Media producers
- Media audiences

Contexts of the media:

- Historical
- Economic
- Political
- Cultural and social

Mapping the territory: defining the media

To understand what is entailed in the study of the media, it is useful to start from first principles by defining what we include when we use the term 'the media'. The definition of the media within the subject of media studies itself, but also within social and political discussions and contexts, is one that is increasingly difficult to pin down. This is in part due to the proliferation of media forms, a consequence of the development of digital technologies, and the changing relationship between producers and audience. A dictionary definition of the media ('the main means of mass communication [broadcasting, publishing, and the Internet] regarded collectively') provides an objective categorisation but little sense of how the media function in relation to an audience and vice versa. In media studies, the term 'media' is most helpfully understood as a process, something that shifts and changes as it is produced and consumed – a form of mediation. Roger Silverstone (2006), an academic who was influential in the development of media studies as a subject, argued that mediation is central to a definition of the media:

Mediation refers to what media do, and to what we do with the media. It is a term that defines the media, both the media of mass communication (radio, television, the world wide web, but also the press) . . . as actively creating a symbolic and cultural space in which meanings are created and communicated beyond the constraints of the face to face. . . . Readers, viewers and audiences are part of this process of mediation, because they continue the work of the media in the ways they respond to, extend and further communicate what they see and hear on the world's multitude of screens and speakers. (Silverstone, 2006, p. 4)

In this definition, the process of mediation – the construction of meaning – is as much a part of the definition of the media as the forms themselves.

The combination of a dynamic process of production and consumption, along with specific forms that we recognise as belonging to the media – broadcasting (television and radio), print, film, websites – is a good starting point for a definition. In conceiving of the media, we also tend to include assumptions about a type of audience: that it is a mass rather than an individual, addressed simultaneously by a mass form of communication. While this definition is still often useful in considering the nature and influence of the media, for example, the millions who watch television programmes like *The X-Factor* or *Strictly Come Dancing* at the same time on a Saturday night, this approach has also altered with the changes to the media landscape. Traditionally, there was a clear distinction between the media that was consumed by a mass audience at the same time (the fixed television broadcast before streaming, the

morning paper before news websites) and other forms such as novels that were consumed individually at the time a reader chose. Part of the concerns about the power of the media explored in theories such as media effects was the fact that it was the media institutions that controlled the time and pace of consumption rather than the audience. This relationship between broadcast and consumption as a definition of the media has clearly undergone a major shift with streaming sites allowing viewers to 'binge watch' television series at a time of their choosing, news websites that are constantly checked and updated, social networks that often rely on a very few posters and consumers operating at a particular time.

To be aware of the changing nature of the media, to understand the media as a continually changing landscape, is an important part of defining what is meant by the media; however, it is also useful to have a framework of forms that we can agree on as constituting the media in order to embark on a study of it.

Media forms

In media studies, the different types of media can be referred to as *media forms* and include the following:

- Television
- Film
- Radio
- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Advertising and marketing
- Online, social and participatory media
- Video games
- Music video

Traditional media

Traditional media refers to the media forms and platforms that existed before the use of the Internet and digital technologies became widespread (approximately the late 1990s). Traditional media is made up of television and radio broadcasting, print media, music and film.

Media platforms

A *media platform* is where a media form is presented – broadcast, print, online etc. This is sometimes a fairly simple definition, such as the media form of television is presented on a broadcast platform such as the BBC, but new technology makes this distinction more complicated. For

example, is Facebook a form or a platform? Perhaps the blurring of these distinctions is another difference between traditional and new media forms.

The list of media forms is a useful framework to mark out the territory of media studies (and are the forms used by the English exam boards for media studies), but it also suggests the problem of defining forms in the contemporary media landscape. For example, advertising and marketing exist across various forms and platforms; radio is no longer simply a form of broadcast but has shifted online as a podcast.

Defining producers and audiences

One of the major shifts in the move from traditional to new media has been the breakdown in the old relationship between producers and audiences. The media landscape is undoubtedly still dominated by powerful media institutions (News International, Disney, the BBC etc.), but there is also much greater access for individuals to become producers of media content, particularly through online platforms such as blogs and vlogs.

Media institutions

A *media institution* is any company that is responsible for the production, distribution or exhibition of a media product. An institution may be local, national or global, and it may be commercial or publicly funded. In media studies there is a particular focus on the role of media conglomerates – media companies that usually have a global presence and own many other smaller companies producing a variety of media forms across platforms. Conglomerates include Time Warner (United States), Vivendi (France) and Bertelsmann (Germany).

Why do we study the media?

It is important to define what the media is because, among other reasons, it is fundamental to defining the area of study. As a media studies student, you are probably aware that the discipline is a controversial one, perhaps attracting criticism that it isn't a 'proper subject', that it is about watching television rather than a serious form of academic analysis. It is interesting to put these criticisms into context as doing so can illuminate some of the reasons that it is important to study the media.

The first courses in the study of the media in the UK were at universities in the late 1960s, but the subject only really became established – and popular – in the 1980s when it was offered at A Level (and later GCSE). Media studies is not the first subject to be accused of not being a serious

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subject. Recent examples would include sociology, which is now much more accepted as a legitimate discipline, but it might come as a surprise to find out that the study of English literature was also initially a controversial one. The concern with all these areas seems to be based on an idea that something we might do for pleasure – reading or playing video games – is not difficult enough to study, that it is something we do naturally. It could also be argued that any new area for study is likely to be resisted by some, but the criticism of media studies is important because it suggests that the media itself isn't a valid focus of analysis and criticism.

New subjects tend not to have the perceived certainties of definitions of traditional academic areas such as maths and physics, often made up of approaches from across other disciplines that can make people suspicious of their status. In the case of media studies, it is certainly true that it is a subject that borrows from a range of subjects – sociology, psychology, communications, English literature and art history – it might be classed as both a social science and a humanities subject, depending on the institution offering it. It is the case, though, that since its beginnings, media studies has amassed a body of critical work and academics associated with it that does distinguish it from other subjects.

Media studies as a subject: a historical context

The Frankfurt School

Media studies, as a subject taught first in universities and then in colleges and schools, really only emerged (or became institutionalised) in the late twentieth century. However, the mass media and other forms of popular culture had been analysed by academics from the 1930s. The Frankfurt School – a school of thought rather than a physical building – was the name given to a group of scholars, including Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, who were influenced by Marxism and who applied this approach in order to analyse contemporary culture. Working in the 1930s at the same time as radio, film and music was starting to be distributed to reach a mass audience (but before the introduction of television), the Frankfurt School saw the effect of popular culture as damaging to society, rendering its consumers inert and passive. They argued that the power of the media came from its form of mass production, which created repetition and sameness across all forms of popular culture. This aspect of everyday life for millions of people had, they argued, been overlooked in examining the reasons for the failure of revolutionary movements outside of the USSR. The effect of the media meant that the people had become too indoctrinated by the pleasures of

popular culture to act. Walter Benjamin, another German scholar associated with the Frankfurt School, had a different and very influential view of popular culture. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1968), he argued that the emergence of technological reproduction was a form of freedom that democratised art, breaking down the divisions between elite and popular culture.

For many media academics, it is precisely because of the role that the media has in our everyday life that makes it essential that we study it, as Silverstone argued: 'it is because the media is central to our everyday life that we must study them. Study them as social and cultural as well as political and economic dimensions of the modern world' (Silverstone, 2006, p. 2). In a recent defence of the study of the media, Dina Matar (2017), a senior lecturer at SOAS, University of London, argues that it is more crucial than ever to study the way media is used politically and socially:

Why we need to study the media today is not different from why we needed to study the media in the past, but what is different are the ways in which the expansion in digital platforms and their accessibility to a variety of individuals and groups, has increased the capacity for manipulation of events, for spectacular politics as well as politics as spectacle, for the manufacturing of global crises around identity politics, security threats, protectionism, migration, displacement and religion as well as for the emergence of new forms of authoritarianism promoted as the new populism of the 21st century.

Media studies: academic or vocational?

A further reason for the controversy around media studies is the confusion about whether it is an academic or vocational subject. A vocational course is one that develops the skill and training specifically designed to equip students to enter the media industry – perhaps as camera operator, video games designer or journalist – upon graduation. These courses can be of a high level, the equivalent of degree-level study, but they have a different nature and purpose from that of the academic study of the media, which focuses on the skills of analysis and evaluation, examining the relationship between media and the society that produces it. Many academic media studies courses will also include some creative aspects, but this will be to demonstrate understanding of media concepts rather than to provide industry training. This textbook focuses on media studies as an academic subject rather than as a vocational one, so it will not equip you with production skills such as being able to use editing software – but it will analyse the effect of the choices made in the production process.

The theoretical framework

As an academic subject, media studies has developed its own approach or framework to organising the study of the media, which is referred to as the theoretical framework. This framework is organised into four areas: media language, media representation, media industries and media audiences, each of which covers a range of theories and arguments. While elements of each are distinct, it is usually productive to think of the different areas as overlapping, with one approach closely related to another. For example, a study of the industrial context of a product is likely to be far more productive when linked to the way the industry targets particular audiences. The following section provides a brief introduction to each of the areas of the framework, which are examined in detail across the chapters of the book.

Media language

The concept of language is usually associated with written or spoken language, clearly central to the study of literature and drama. In media studies, it refers to a different way of understanding how meaning is created in all forms of communication, not just written and spoken language (although, of course, media studies includes this too). The most obvious way to think about this is to consider the way that images create meaning: symbols, photographs, signs are all forms of mediating the world; they are a form of language. This idea that all forms of media use language beyond words to communicate is explored through the use of a semiotic approach to media products, which allows an analysis of the underlying meanings of any kind of sign (see Chapter 2 for further discussion of semiotics).

Activity

The photograph in Figure 1.1, taken at a demonstration against the police shooting of an African American man in Baton Rouge, became a viral sensation.

- What meaning does it have?
 - How have you interpreted the language of the image (the composition, framing, setting, costume, colour etc.) in order to reach that conclusion?
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Figure 1.1 Lone activist Ieshia Evans stands her ground while offering her hands for arrest as she is charged by riot police during a protest against police brutality outside the Baton Rouge Police Department in Louisiana, United States, 9 July 2016.

Source: Reuters/Jonathan Bachman

The application of media language is likely to include the following areas of study:

- How the media languages associated with different media forms (broadcast, print, websites, film) communicate multiple meanings
- Codes and conventions associated with specific genres and how and why these might change over time
- How audiences respond to and interpret aspects of media language (often differently)
- The way media language incorporates viewpoints and ideologies
- How developing technologies affect media language

There are also particular theorists whose work can be helpful in the study of media language. Their work will be explored throughout the chapters of the book and include Roland Barthes's work on semiotics, narrative analysis developed by Tzvetan Todorov and Lévi Strauss, and Jean Baudrillard's theories associated with postmodern media texts.

Media representation

The study of representation has a fundamental place in media studies, distinguishing it from other related subjects. The key concept – of

theory – of representation is central to an understanding of how media texts are constructed by producers and how they are received by a range of different audiences. In media studies, representation is understood to be important because of the belief that the image of the world found in media products shapes the way audiences think about specific people and places. In turn, this might have repercussions for how particular groups and places are treated.

The study of representation involves all three stages of creating, distributing and exhibiting a media text; therefore, representation is relevant across all areas of the course. In the preceding definition, representation as a term doesn't only refer to the finished text but to the processes involved in constructing and receiving the representations. At each stage of the process, key factors of identity – age, gender, race, class and the like – are likely to have an influence. As with the other areas of the framework, processes of representation are also affected by developments in new technology, which create opportunities for self-representation and perhaps alter the relationship between producer and audience.

Activity

- What issues of representation are apparent in the BBC Three sitcom series *Some Girls*? You could consider issues around gender, race, ethnicity, place as well as institution.



Figure 1.2 Still from *Some Girls*, the BBC Three television show.

Source: BBC, 2012

The application of representation is likely to include the following areas of study:

- The way events, issues, individuals (including self-representation) and social groups are represented through processes of selection and construction
- The different factors that shape the way media producers and industries represent events, issues, individuals and social groups
- The way the media, through representation, construct versions of reality – which may be understood differently by a range of audiences
- How and why particular social groups, in a national and global context, may be under-represented or misrepresented
- How media representations convey values, attitudes and beliefs about the world
- The way in which representations make claims about realism
- The way representations may change over time and the reasons for this

There are also particular theorists whose work can be helpful in the study of representation. Their work will be explored throughout the chapters of the book and include Stuart Hall's theories of representation and power relations, David Gauntlett's analysis of how identity is constructed through representation and Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance. Representation is also crucial in theories of 'otherness', of understanding the reasons why particular groups have been represented in specific ways. Relevant theories here would include feminist approaches by bell hooks and Lisbet Van Zoonen, as well as issues of ethnicity and postcolonialism in work by theorists such as Paul Gilroy.

Media industries

The study of the media through an analysis of media industries assumes a link between the media products produced and the industries – including individual companies and producers – that produce them. The study of this relationship has its roots in a Marxist approach that sees the context of production, specifically its form of ownership and need for profit, as having a direct effect on the form and content of the media it produces (see Chapter 9 for a detailed discussion of media in an economic context and the influence of Marxist approaches). Media studies is interested in the characteristics of and comparisons between public service media organisations and the commercial sectors in the contemporary media landscape; this is particularly in relation to the power that media industries have and how they are regulated and controlled. A contemporary feature of media industries is their status as global conglomerates owning the processes of production, distribution and exhibition across a range of media forms.

A study of media industries is likely to include the following:

- The significance of patterns of ownership and control, including conglomerate ownership, vertical integration and diversification

- How products are produced
- The relationship between production and distribution
- How media is produced and distributed globally
- The impact of media on society
- The role of media in the economy
- The effect of media on culture

Many media industries are controlled by a few powerful companies.

Activity

Many of the following are evident in the media industry.

- Research into media industries
- Why is it important to study about media industries?
- Do you think media industries affect society?

Media

The effect of media on society is a controversial issue. The study of media is not just about what people do with media, but also about how media's power and influence is exercised. This power is often used to control the media and to influence the way we think and order to study the media and its effect on people.

- How processes of production, distribution and circulation shape media product
- The relationship of recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation
- How media organisations maintain varieties of audiences nationally and globally
- The impact of 'new' digital technologies on media regulation
- The role of regulation in global production, distribution and circulation
- The effect of individual producers on media industries

Many media academics have analysed different aspects of the media industry. Some of the most influential include Curran and Seaton's work on power and the media, Livingstone and Lunt's study of regulation and control and Hesmondhalgh's examination of the culture industries.

Activity

Many of the issues that are central to a study of media industries are evident in the case study of 21st Century Fox's attempt to buy Sky.

- Research the planned takeover of Sky (a lot of coverage of this in the media and business pages of the UK press is available online; as of September 22, 2018 Comcast won the Sky auction).
 - Why is the bid controversial? What concerns do UK regulators have about the proposed bid?
 - Do you think the power of 21st Century Fox is a concern? Might it affect democratic processes?
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Media audiences

The effect of media on audiences is one of the most fiercely debated and controversial aspects of media studies and can be broadly characterised as the study of what the media do to audiences but also what audiences can do with the media, quite often formulated as ideas of the active and passive audience. The role of the media in peoples' lives and behaviour is something that has caused anxiety and resulted in moral panics about the media's effects, particularly on the young and vulnerable, but is also a feature of the media's power to transform lives in more positive ways. This powerful potential means that the study of the relationship between the media and the people who consume it is of great importance, and media studies draws on approaches from sociology and psychology in order to try to understand this complex relationship. The focus of this study has tended to concentrate on the media's potential to shape people's behaviour ranging from political persuasion to ways of seeing

the world and even physical responses. Anxiety about audience response tends to be provoked by new forms of mass media from television, video games and, of course, the rise of social networks. In audience studies, the development of digital technologies has also blurred the line between producer and audience, leading to the identification of a new role between producer and audience – the so-called prosumer.

The study of media audiences is inextricably linked to industry, where the need to identify and target particular audiences is vital and has become the focus of increasingly detailed analysis by industries as audiences have become increasingly niche and unpredictable in response to the increased number of media forms available.

The study of media audiences is likely to include the following:

- How audiences are grouped and categorised by media industries through demographics and psychographics
- The interrelationship between media technologies and patterns of consumption and response
- How audiences interpret the media, including how they may interpret the same media in different ways, reflecting social, cultural and historical contexts
- How audiences interact with the media and can be actively involved in media production
- How media organisations reflect the different needs of mass and specialised audiences
- How audiences use media in different ways, reflecting demographic factors as well as aspects of identity and cultural capital

There is a wealth of writing and research on the relationship between the media and the audience. Some key theorists and ideas would include media effects theories from early research, such as that carried out by the psychologist Albert Bandura, famous for what became known as the Bobo doll experiment, and the communication theorist George Gerbner, who developed cultivation theory. More contemporary approaches to the media include Stuart Hall's later analysis of the different ways in which audiences can receive and interpret media products. Analysis of how developments in media technology and new media forms have affected audience response can be found in Henry Jenkins's work on fans and Clay Shirky's argument that digital technologies have resulted in the end of the audience.

Activity

You are the audience. Think about your own media consumption:

- Make a list of the different media you might consume on a typical day.
- How many of these did you choose to consume? How many did you receive without choosing to?

- What are some of the pleasures you get from your media consumption?
- Can you think of any positive and/or negative effects of your media consumption?

Media in context

Media studies is an interdisciplinary subject; it blurs the boundaries between different academic subjects, particularly in the way in which it studies the media in wider contexts. This approach suggests that the media – that is, its products and processes – is directly linked to the society that produced them, that the media reflect the values, interests and make-up of the society that produced them. Analysing the media in context is to consider what else was happening in the time and place in which the product was made, to consider how those contexts may shape the product and the way audiences interpret it. In this way, the study of the media is in part also the study of a culture, both contemporary and historical. It is also relevant to consider whether the media itself is able to affect the society that produced it. The following provides a brief introduction to the use of contextual study in media studies; Chapters 4, 7, 9 and 11 look at the different contexts in detail.

The key contexts

The key contexts consist of five areas – which may overlap: social, cultural, political, historical and economic. The contexts will also be related to the areas of the theoretical framework with, for example, economic contexts being particularly relevant to the study of media industries and cultural and social contexts informing feminist approaches.

The following suggests some of the initial approaches to analysing the media in context:

- What characterises the society that produced the media? Gender equality? Class divisions? Repression? Religious or secular?
- Are there any major historical or political events – war, recession, protest movements etc. – that might be relevant?
- If the product was made in the past, it's useful to know some of the key features of that time, such as major historical events.
- Is the product typical of other media products of the time? Does it use typical styles and genres of the period, or does it do something new or experimental?
- What industry produced it? Is it a successful industry or faced with economic problems? Perhaps it is an industry in decline or a new one emerging in response to new technologies and audience habits.

Placing a media product in context

To demonstrate how the study of the media can be illuminated by placing it in a variety of contexts, we're going to look at *The Killing*, the Danish crime drama.

Whichever TV programme you're studying, certain approaches and questions will apply. These will help to focus the analysis but also to evaluate the approach of placing products in context. One approach would be to consider the way in which television can operate symbolically and metaphorically to discuss contemporary issues; in other words, it might seem to be a generic thriller, but perhaps the crime is used to draw parallels with the state of the society in which it took place. In making a link between a media product and its social and political contexts, you're likely to be reading it ideologically, that it is disseminating messages and values about society. This might include content specific to each programme but also the reliance on the reassuring structure of crime-solving as a way of representing an – ultimately – functioning society.

It is also worth questioning how strong the link is between the programme and the society that produced it; perhaps the programme has little to say about the real world. Perhaps of greater importance in the construction of the media are the demands of genre and the need for escapism: to forget about day-to-day life. It's also worth considering that the need to reach a global audience can make references to a specific society debatable. As you will see in the study of audience (Chapter 5), it is also very difficult to reach an agreement about the meaning of media products: multiple audience positions and interpretations complicate the relationship between media products and society.

The Killing in an economic context

The Danish series *The Killing* (2011–2014), a thriller that focuses on a female detective and her investigation of a missing young woman, is a significant series in several ways. In an economic context, it initiated a new distribution strategy, whereby European countries, whose media production had tended to be aimed primarily at domestic audiences, began to produce programmes that could be distributed internationally. This was achieved by drawing on recognisable, global conventions such as genre codes and the use of suspense as well as universal themes around the family and institutional corruption. This economic context, in turn, affected business models in the UK, with BBC 4, where *The Killing* was originally broadcast, following up this ratings success with a series of European imports, initially from other Scandinavian countries (examples included *The Bridge* and *Trapped*, leading to the term 'Scandi noir' to describe the phenomenon) but then also from Italy (*Inspector Montalbano* was about a Sicilian detective) and from Spain (a psychological thriller, I

Know What You Did). While *Spiral*, the female-led French police procedural, had been a cult hit for BBC 4 when it was first broadcast in 2006, it was only with *The Killing* that the exhibition of foreign series became widespread.

The influence of these successful imports was evident in other institutional contexts. Channel 4 launched the digital platform Walter Presents, which curates television series from Europe, the Middle East and Latin America that are likely to appeal to a UK audience. These are sometimes broadcast on Channel 4, but their main exhibition platform is as digital box sets on the Walter Presents website. In the United States, the success of the Scandi noir genre led to a series of successful remakes of *The Killing* and *The Bridge* with a U.S. setting, cast and crew – an industry pattern familiar in the film industry where successful world cinema films would be remade by Hollywood.

The popularity of these non-English language series in the UK was unexpected, partly due to the belief that English-speaking audiences would be put off by the use of subtitles. That this wasn't the case led to a shift in the way in which domestic audiences were perceived, that there was a market for foreign media beyond the U.S. imports, which had always been popular. This openness to other cultures' media seemed to be reinforced by the increased interest in a variety of aspects of Scandinavian culture sparked by the success of *The Killing*. This included food, fashion (*The Killing*'s central character Sarah Lund, became a style icon due to her jumpers) and design and developed into an interest in cultural values that seemed different from our own, symbolised by the concept of *hygge*, an appreciation of the simple – rather than materialistic – aspects of life.

In studying the media in context, this phenomenon raises some interesting issues. While the success of these non-English-language series suggested an increased interest in foreign cultures and a willingness to engage with alternative media, it is important to remember that the audiences for these series were relatively small. As Table 1.1 shows, even the most successful series, Germany's *Deutschland 83*, had a ratings high of nearly 2.5 million. In comparison to other dramas such as the BBC's *Doctor Foster* (Series 2, Episode 1), which had ratings of 6.3 million in its initial broadcast, this is low.

The small audience figures suggest that this phenomenon really only affected a niche part of UK society and that in placing *The Killing* in context, it might be an overstatement to read it as indicative of the UK's attitude to foreign cultures in a more general sense. It is notable that the industry strategy of exhibiting a greater number of subtitled imports has coincided with the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU and the vote to leave, which might suggest a greater anxiety about non-UK culture. While the audience for these series is small, it is also quite an influential one. The middle-class, middle-aged, professional demographic that dominates this particular audience contains many media influencers – journalists, commentators, broadcasters – which might account for the media coverage that seems out of proportion to the number of people who actually consume the series.

Table 1.1 Top 10 highest-rated foreign-language dramas 2010–2016 (highest occurring episode).

Number	Programme title	Channel	Date	Volume
1	<i>Deutschland 83</i>	Channel 4	03/01/2016	2,456
2	<i>The Returned</i>	Channel 4	09/06/2013	2,217
3	<i>The Bridge</i>	BBC 4	21/11/2015	1,813
4	<i>Salamander</i>	BBC 4	08/02/2014	1,349
5	<i>The Killing III</i>	BBC 4	17/11/2012	1,264
6	<i>The Killing II</i>	BBC 4	19/11/2011	1,248
7	<i>Borgen</i>	BBC 4	05/01/2013	1,188
8	<i>Generation War: Our Mothers, Our Fathers</i>	BBC 2	26/04/2014	1,177
9	<i>Inspector Montalbano</i>	BBC 4	09/11/2013	1,083
10	<i>The Young Montalbano</i>	BBC 4	02/01/2016	1,033

Source: www.channel4.com/info/press/news/deutschland-83-becomes-uks-highest-rated-foreign-language-drama

The Killing in social and cultural context

The process of reading a media product through a social and cultural context suggests that the media have a direct link to the society that produced it. However, this relationship is not always a straightforward one. As will be evident in your study of representation, it is impossible for the media to ever directly reflect the world around it, and the media may act as a form of aspiration or even as an attempt to shape the values of the culture it exists in. It is evident that *The Killing*, particularly in its representation of the female detective, can tell us something about Danish society at the beginning of the twenty-first century and, in its appeal to a UK audience, something about our own experiences and aspirations.

The representation of the detective Sarah Lund was interpreted as a new kind of female hero: professional, intuitive, isolated, a single parent, independent, perhaps reflective of increased gender equality in European societies. This representation is evident across the characters in the series, with women playing dominant roles in all the institutions featured: female detectives and senior staff in the police force, female MPs and ministers in government, the representation of the marriage of Theis and Pernille Birk Larsen, emphasising the equality of the partnership. Darker aspects of contemporary society are evident in the focus on violence, intrigue and cover-ups, although these could also be understood as a central aspect of the crime genre.

Activity

Many successful contemporary crime dramas, including *The Killing*, *The Bridge*, *No Offence*, *The Fall*, centre on violent and sexual crimes against women.

- Choosing one or more examples, how can this type of plot be read as reflecting the social and cultural context?
 - Why might these representations be controversial? To develop your ideas here, research some of the arguments about the BBC series *The Fall* (2013–2017) and the launch of the Staunch Book Prize, a prize given for thriller novels that don't include violence against women.
 - What is your view? Is the focus on violence against women part of a justifiable reflection of contemporary society or an objectification of women?
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