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76A4 Society, Media and Culture

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Question 3: Assess the extent to which debates about ‘culture’ are actually debates about power.

The Collins English Dictionary defines culture as: ‘The total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge which constitute the shared bases of social action; the total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions which are transmitted and reinforced by members of the group; the artistic and social pursuits, expression and tastes valued by a society or class; the enlightenment or refinement resulting from these pursuits.

One example of a culture within our world today is Popular Culture, which is generally associated with the entertainment of the lower classes, carrying some negative connotations. Popular Culture consists of, amongst other elements, soap opera, sport, popular television and music, and in more recent years can also be thought of to incorporate the sub-culture of celebrity. Another example from the opposite end of the scale is High Culture. This is seen to be produced for, and aimed exclusively at, the upper class sector of society. It encompasses areas such as opera, theatre, literature and classical music. However those who produce and construct the media possess the ability to turn aspects belonging to a certain culture into cross-

cultural elements. A good example of this, given in the lectures by Raymond Boyle, is in the music industry. Popular artists or groups can take a sample of a piece of classical music and incorporate it into a new song. This makes those associated with popular culture aware of aspects of high culture, and in some cases these can then transcend the cultural boundaries and belong to both popular culture and high culture.

When discussing any aspects of culture we must consider how the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of any social, racial or religious groups are established. It is generally thought that one's upbringing determines the cultural beliefs that one possesses. Our culture is defined by multiple aspects of our personal experiences, such as socialisation and religious beliefs, education and also by the content of the media that we are subjected to on a daily basis.

The relationship between culture and media is seen to be one of co-dependence. One could argue that the media are, to a large extent, producers of culture. The media are our means of accessing information on current affairs, entertainment, the latest trends in fashion, and issues in the public spectrum at that time, such as the current debates over abortion laws. Because of our sole dependence on the media for this information they are consequently given a great deal of power. They have the ability to influence the thought patterns of the masses and to construct the belief systems and basic ideas of a nation regarding what is right and wrong, and what is considered a "normal" and acceptable way of life, fundamentally shaping the various cultures within society. In the same respect cultures rely upon the media to continually change the values and basic ideas that they are based upon, in order to 'keep up' with the ever-changing principles and trends of modern society.

The problem arises when we consider who actually holds this immense power. The media leaders – television executives, film producers, newspaper editors and owners etc. – are not elected by the general public as are our political leaders. The British population are given some degree of control over their own country's government by way of the access they are given to a choice of various political parties and leaders, each with differing views and outlooks. Therefore the leaders with the most popular points of view and strategies are subsequently the same ones that govern our country. If, however, these leaders fail to implement the strategies that they originally set out or they do not meet the expectations of the voters, another party can be elected to take their place. Hence 'the people' control and regulate their own government.

Unfortunately the same cannot be said for the media. The public do not 'own' the media, nor do they have the ability to control it. This task is left solely to a small fraction of the population, who have gained control, more often than not, by means of wealth and situation. It is these people who decide the information that the public are 'allowed' to gain access to, which incidents are worthy of reporting to them and which viewpoints they are subjected to. This small group of media leaders therefore has the ability to set the public agenda on an endless number of issues.

One example that can be used to illustrate the power that the media hold over the shaping of various cultures is the televising of sporting events, particularly the showing of football matches. In recent years all forms of the media have concentrated a large portion of their coverage on sport and in particular, football. The experience of viewing a match has become so highly interactive by means of the internet and digital television that fans now have a choice of camera angle, which players they

wish to focus on and instant replays of live television, all at the touch of a button.

This could have serious consequences on the number of people actually going to the stadiums to see these fixtures, and the whole atmosphere and the traditional aspects of the game will be lost. These traditions are a fundamental part of our society.

Televised football matches have invaded the programme schedules, at peak viewing times, not only over weekends, but throughout the week. This has happened as a result of the rights to the broadcasting of games being purchased by large television companies such as the BBC and ITV. Televised sporting events pull in a sizeable audience, and thus channels are willing to pay vast sums of money for these broadcasting rights. Some have chosen the option of a sponsorship deal, meaning that a large amount of the clubs' funds are supplied by a particular television company. This then results in the teams involved having to adhere to the companies' time schedules and channels now have the ability to dictate when games can be played in order to incorporate them into their own programming schedules. This has massive repercussions on the habits and values of the mass culture and society as a whole. Saturday nights are no longer ones centred around family orientated entertainment, as the channels are dominated by sport, the result being that families are spending less and less time together and the production of such programmes is diminishing drastically. This will affect the basic intrinsic values of our society and have huge knock-on effects for the future.

Those who control the content and form of the media are perceived as being evidently powerful, yet not many could identify them personally, as their names and view points are scarcely detailed. Investigative reporting happens on a regular basis, to

gather evidence to expose a scandal or bring an issue to the forefront of debate. However, we, the audience, are never shown any signs of investigation into the identity of the media leaders or the manner in which they operate and to what intent. This can only arouse suspicion amongst critics and consumers of the media, when information is withheld from them in relation to a topic so central to their everyday lives and basic belief systems. They are prompted to examine what the agendas of these media leaders are. These people who possess so much power and influence over the entire populace, people whom we know very little about. Perhaps we should consider revising the way in which our media operate in this country and attempt to give more power to the consumer. I feel that we should not be told what we should and should not believe, or even be influenced on such matters by such a subjective organisation. Audiences should be given the right to an input on what they are consuming, what issues carry the most weight and therefore should be reported on, and what they wish to be exposed to. Traditional values of spirituality have been replaced by the media, and as a result they can now claim to have a large degree of control over the population with regards to what is perceived as 'the norm'.

It may not be possible to consider such a drastic change as a media based more on a democratic structure of elected leaders than the current autocratic design that we possess today as being a realistic prospect in the foreseeable future. However, through continued coverage and debate concerning the issues raised I believe that what is a possibility is a mediated culture that concentrates on the important events that are occurring around the globe, presented in an objective manner without hidden agenda; one which does not try to alter our cultural beliefs but on the contrary, one

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which celebrates and respects the vast number of differences that distinguish diverse cultures. An ideologically honest media.

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