

# PANIC ON THE STREETS OF LONDON

## News values and moral panic

Have you ever wondered about the difference between an immigrant and a migrant? Or a Northerner and a Southerner? Whether the choice of word creates a meaning or set of assumptions in your own mind? How are words used and connected to form meaning and whether meaning is added by this connection? What do words represent? What do we talk about when we talk about representation?

‘Representation’ is a very broad concept which may vary according to different theories and disciplines. At a basic level ‘representation’ means depicting or ‘making present’ something that is absent, in different forms. In cultural and media studies, ‘representation’ is the process of production through which meaning is generated within representational texts in any medium. Representation is a form of creating meaning.

For example, within news, minority groups can be defined in many different ways – Ethnicity and/or Gender and/or Race and/or Religion and/or Social Class and/or Language and/or Sexual Orientation and/or Physical Disability and/or Age and/or Citizenship/Nationality to name but a few. How these minority groups are described and represented in the news directly affects our understanding of them.



## KEY IDEAS

Many theorists of democracy have emphasised the importance of fair and inclusive representation in the media as a way to enhance democracy and in order to combat prejudices, sectarianism, 'hate speech', and the 'us/them' divide. Diversity and inclusiveness in representation has been underpinned as key elements by theorists and activists of human rights, plural and deliberative democracy, and multiculturalism. Robert A. Dahl (1915-2014), a 'pluralist', formulated the idea of the **polyarchy** as a political system in which minorities are taken into account and have a fair, non-biased, inclusive representation.

Within news journalism, **news values** are the criteria through which editors, journalists and news media outlets select, prioritise, present and represent events. Their values will impact on their representation of the news. Although the selection of words and journalistic selectivity is arguably not deliberate bias there is the suggestion that news values are learned by journalists as they learn newsroom routine, and that they therefore tend to favour the status quo and any momentary media agenda of an 'us/them' divide.

The moral tone and choice of representation of minorities can lead to representational bias. Consider the question we started with – what is the difference between a migrant and an immigrant? Or even between a terrorist and a freedom fighter? The choice of word and the representation it connotes creates meaning beyond the word itself. This is how moral panics are created.

Moral panics are constructed campaigns aimed to generate fear among the public by identifying a threat. They are not 'actual things', but a construction displaying key characteristics. First, a thing or a group of people is identified as a threat, then once the 'enemy' or 'others' are identified, the good and the bad are separated and the public is informed about the danger they are (allegedly) facing or will face in the future because of the presence of the 'others'. The threat is simplified and represented in an easily recognisable form. This simplification usually involves a distortion of the problem, a prediction that such events will recur (Cricher, 2003).

## KEY READINGS

Cricher, C. (2003). *Moral panics and the media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available from: [bit.ly/2JRUmif](http://bit.ly/2JRUmif).

Dahl, R.A. (2000). *On democracy*. New Haven & London: Yale Nota Bene.

BBC Bitesize (no date). *What is representation?* Available from: [bbc.in/2WqNADx](http://bbc.in/2WqNADx).

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## ACTIVITIES

1. Read through some of the recent tabloid press: can you see evidence of the creation of moral panic? Can you identify an enemy?
2. How are migrants and immigrants represented in the Press? Do different newspapers represent them in different ways?
3. Think about your own response to the news values being created. Where does your moral line lie?

