



Understanding Political Context

The aims of this **Media Studies Factsheet** are:

- To identify some aspects of the contemporary political context.
- To consider the relationship between the media and the political context.

All exam boards require you to understand how media products reflect the political contexts in which they are made through their representations, themes, values, messages and ideologies. In addition, you will need to consider the political contexts of production in terms of the industrial background of the media product.

You should investigate the specific political context of the CSPs/set texts selected by the awarding body.

What is Political Context?

Definition: *Politics can be defined as the focus on government, laws and political elites who have governance over the majority of people. Politics are the actions of governments and law-makers and the impact their decisions have on people's lives.*

At the age of 18 a British citizen is able to vote for a political party of their choice during elections. These elections select the politicians who will work to create laws and choose how to spend money in order to run the country or the local area. The political choices we make are mainly influenced by family, peers, education, personal experiences and by the media we access.



It would be true to say at the moment (2019) we are experiencing some very politically complex and confusing times. The problems of fake news, conspiracy theories and social media manipulation are impacting on the political processes and some argue that they are challenging the ability to have honest, democratic elections. The 'information age' allows for many different political voices to be heard but, as Diana Owen suggests, it has also resulted in an 'Age of Perplexity.' She argues that technology has transformed the political landscape from something that used to be easily understood to something which has become confusing and multi-faceted. This is because the traditional media that predated the internet such as newspapers, radio, and television news programmes now coexist with new media that is the product of technological innovation but often do not go through a **gatekeeping** process. Websites, video-sharing platforms, digital apps and social media are continually developing in innovative ways and this has brought with it a degree of instability and unpredictability to the political context but also arguably wider public engagement with political issues and debates. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know whether the information presented online is accurate and honest.

Political context can impact on media products in various ways:

1. At an **industry level**:
 - a) laws and regulations that control media production.
 - b) where companies communicate and promote their own political values.
2. Through **media language** choices which communicate political messages and ideas.
3. Through **representations** which construct political ideas about people, groups and ideas.
4. Through the **ideologies**, messages and themes which dominate or are challenged.
5. On **audience** perceptions, beliefs and value systems.

Theorist Noam Chomsky argues that the media has long since been a tool for *propaganda* to get people to believe in ideologies which serve the ruling elites. Put simply, areas of the media work to support the value systems of the structures of current political and economic power. Chomsky calls these influential people, 'architects of mankind.' They are influential political policy makers



and media owners who want to maintain the status quo because it benefits them. He further suggests that in order to maintain the elite's power in society they must persuade the masses that what the elites stand for is also what is best for the majority, he calls this 'manufacturing consent'. Most media products will therefore reflect and reinforce the dominant values of the producing culture. Media products that question or challenge mainstream values do exist but are not as prevalent as those that consolidate them.

Activity: Where do you see these ideas reinforced or challenged?

Political Ideology	Reinforced?	Challenged?
A person's success or failure is a direct outcome of the personal choices they make.		
A person's value is related to their earnings/wealth.		
British values are superior to the values of other cultures.		

The values above come from ideologies such as individualism, nationalism and neo-liberalism. Three ways of thinking that have some power in the UK in 2019. The dominant political ideologies of a culture are, however, not the only way to think.

Where do you see these ideas reinforced or challenged?

Political Ideology	Reinforced?	Challenged?
A person's success or failure is often impacted on by the economic and social inequalities that exist in society.		
A person's value is related to the positive impact they have on others.		
National cultural values are a combination of positive and negative ideas.		

We live in a specific political context. Political events here and around the world shape the way we think about the world, how it should be organised and our place within it. The political context changes over time. After World War 2, the UK had a socialist government that favoured spending on public services for the communal good. This government created the National Health Service offering medical treatment for everyone funded by everyone. This focus on everyone supporting people from impoverished backgrounds and the importance of community is reflected in many media products in the mid 20th Century.

Political ideas develop and change. New ideas emerge over time. The political context tends to shape the dominant ideological values of the culture and political ideas can be seen in all sorts of media products; some explicitly cover political ideas like news, others explore political context in a more implicit way through representations, themes and ideas.

Political Context and Media Products – A Case Study – Climate Change

Climate change has been a political issue for some time now. High-profile scientists, journalists, activists and celebrities have worked to bring it to the attention of politicians and mainstream audiences. Some argue, however, that politicians are not acting effectively to deal with the issue. It is suggested that many Western governments often act to support those who have economic power that derives from, for example, fossil fuel, therefore, climate activism actively challenges the current power structures of the West. It was recently revealed that the UK police have classed climate activism as an 'extreme ideology' and climate activist groups are categorised with terrorist organisations in official documents.

Extinction Rebellion have been at the centre of drawing attention to climate change issues. Abbreviated as XR they say they are 'a socio-political movement with the stated aim of using civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance to compel government action on climate breakdown, biodiversity loss, and the risk of social and ecological collapse.' XR have used organised rallies, stay-ins, disruptions and



artistic performances to bring their political cause into the media agenda and to the attention of politicians. Climate concerns have only just become a mainstream concern despite protestors and pressure groups being around for many years. Greenpeace, for example, have campaigned since the 1970s for a 'greener, healthier and more peaceful planet, one that sustains life for generations to come.'

The Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg has drawn attention to climate change through her activism. She has worked with XR and has mobilised students through social media to stage school walk-outs. Thunberg's activism has been labelled 'The Greta Effect' because of her perceived influence especially over young people. The treatment of Thunberg on social media has sparked debates around gender, age and class. The lack of gate-keeping on social media means that her activities are written about and shared on social media and she has been subject to personal attacks from conservative commentators. Peter Hitchens writing for *The Daily Mail* has labelled XR as 'zealots' and 'Lefties' characterising them as 'crack-pots' rather than campaigners with a valid point. This is a long-standing stereotype used in the mainstream media that acts to discredit challenges to the existing power structures.



Activity: Consider these two opposing viewpoints of Extinction Rebellion.

- **Peter Hitchens - The Daily Mail:** www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-6943713/PETER-HITCHENS-starts-screeching-Lefties-calling-Nazis-ends-police-state.html
 - **One of the founders of Extinction Rebellion, Roger Hallam talking to journalist Owen Jones:** www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ign9ERpNM4
1. Whose ideas do you think are about maintaining the status quo and who is challenging the existing power structures?
 2. Which newspaper do you think Owen Jones often writes for?

The rise in awareness on climate change issues is impacting on the attitudes and values of some members of the audience. Climate change awareness crosses generations but the focus of Thunberg means that these ideas are often associated with young people.

Advertisers are often one of the first areas of the media to acknowledge changes in audience perceptions and behaviours

and big brands are quick to ensure that their target audiences, especially if they include young people, see them as brands who care about issues to do with climate change.

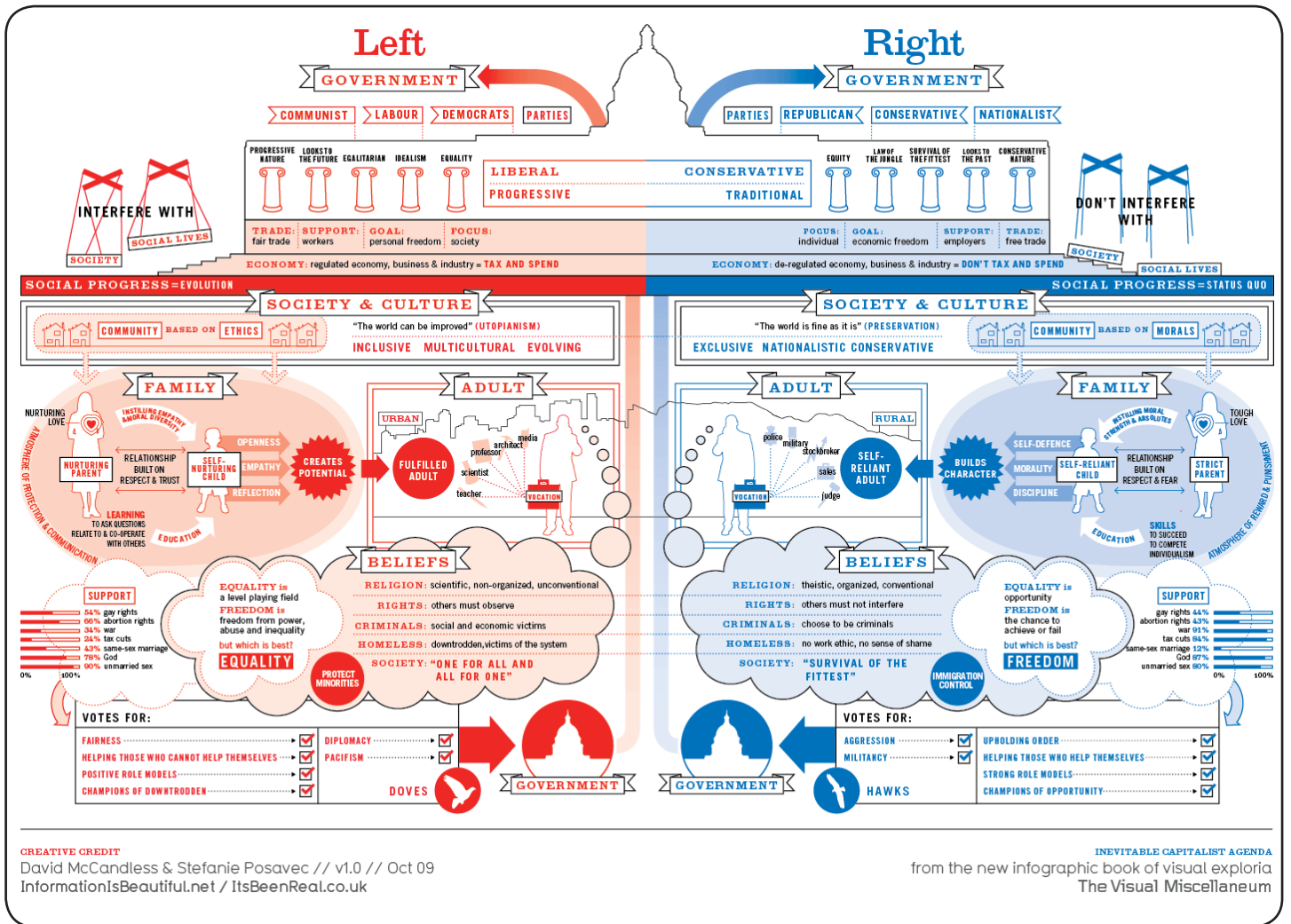
Activity: Complete a semiotic analysis of this advert and use the following questions to develop your points.



1. How do the colour choices connote ideas about being climate aware?
2. Identify three media language choices which represent Heinz as a brand who cares about the environment.
3. What is the intended effect of stating that the bottle has been 'grown' from a plant?

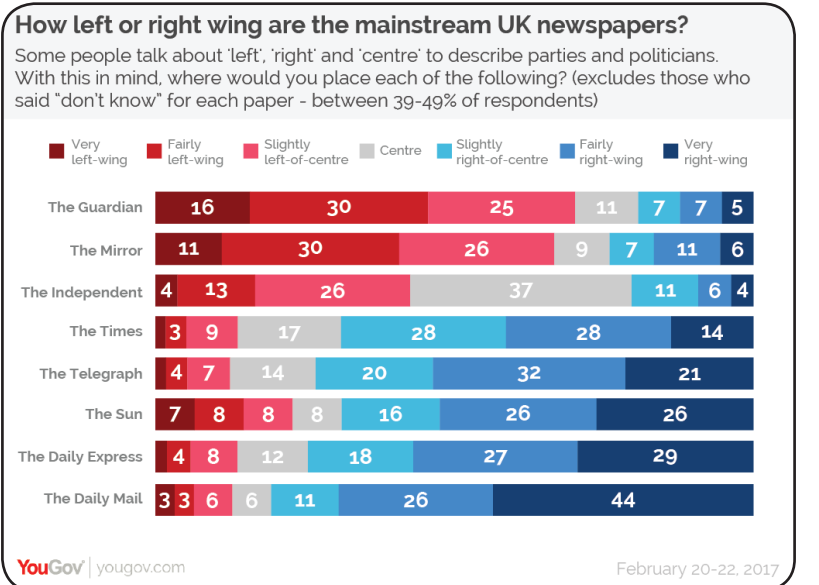
Political Context – Newspapers

Traditional politics is mostly represented in the media in a binary way, it is either shown as left or right. These two opposing political viewpoints have very different ways in which they see the world. The following infographic is a very useful guide to left and right ideologies. Most of the mainstream news institutions take a political left, right or sometimes centrist position when representing news stories. The way they mediate a story reflects and reinforces these values.



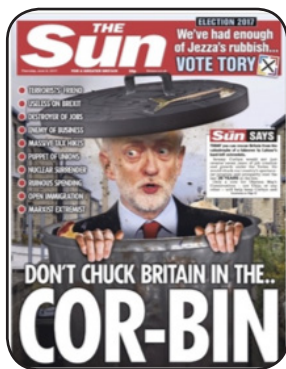
Activity: Look at the image above (the full sized image can be accessed at <https://visual.ly/community/infographic/politics/left-vs-right>)
 Take a look at various ways in which the political left and right are determined. NB. This image shows red as left and blue as right, in the UK the colours are red for Left and blue for Right.
 Do you think the dominant values of our culture fall to the left or to the right?

News institutions have political values that shape the way they select and report on stories. Mainstream newspapers' political values are shaped by the ownership of the newspaper and their editors. News institutions are usually seen as either left, right or centrist. Surveys carried out by YouGov shows the perception of political bias in British Newspapers. *The Guardian* and *The Mirror* are perceived to be more left politically and *The Daily Mail*, *The Times*, *The Sun*, *The Express* and *The Telegraph* are more on the right. The survey also tried to established how people perceived the political biases of the U.K.'s newspapers. Broadcast news however is regulated by Ofcom and it has to present information in a balanced way offering opposing arguments rather than a specific political point of view. Newspapers are free to report stories from whichever political position they choose.



News Institutions and Political Bias

Newspaper institutions have political values that they want to communicate and do so through mediating news stories to create bias. Bias is sometimes explicit, like representing a politician in an obviously negative way, or implicit, which is much harder to spot. If we look at these two front pages of *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* it is clear they hold political values on the right because they are explicitly portraying Labour (left) politicians in a negative light. *The Sun* uses tabloid conventions such as puns and satire. The use of an old-style dustbin connects Corbyn to the idea of 1970s social issues caused by strikes that left rubbish uncollected. These connotations connect Corbyn with ideas of ‘chaos’ and being ‘out-of-touch’. The composite image ridicules him in this personal attack.



The Daily Mail uses both explicit and implicit bias; explicit through the denotation of ‘Apologist for Terror’ stating that the three Labour politicians pictured are making excuses for terrorists. There is also implicit bias because by using a Russian word (‘troika’ instead of three) in the sub-heading, Labour are being linked to the political values of Soviet Russia, specifically anti-capitalist political systems. The images selected also are designed to show the politicians in a negative light. Diane Abbott has her mouth open in what could be construed as an aggressive posture, this consolidates a negative stereotype around black, powerful women as people to be feared. The choice of this image could also create connotative readings with previous racist tropes where black people were associated with bestial qualities. *The Daily Mail* also represents itself as the hero of the story, the defender of Britain stating that the paper is the accuser of people who ‘scorn’ British institutions. This constructs the politicians as anti-British which in turn mediates *The Daily Mail* as the voice of patriotism/nationalism.



The Daily Mail and *The Sun* are the most widely read newspapers in the U.K, circulating around 2.2 million combined (print) and online *The Daily Mail* is the second most accessed news source in the U.K after the BBC. It is also the world’s most read news-specific website. Clearly it has a lot of persuasive power and some critics such as journalist Owen Jones have suggested that the British press is ‘largely run by a very small group of very right-wing media moguls who defend the status quo of which they are part. If you are on the Left and want to change society, the media will always come and get you.’

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/08/front-pages-said-people-should-vote-general-election/>

<https://twitter.com/hendopolis/status/872212742186389506>

One political issue that has divided opinion recently, is Brexit. Much has been written by all news institutions since the 2016 referendum and the narrative has been created around the ‘Leave’ or ‘Remain’ binary.

Activity: Look at the following newspaper front cover.



Complete a semiotic analysis using the observations/terminology below.

Denotation	Analysis using term/idea
The blue skies	Symbolic
The shaded hands	Indexical of...
‘Future’	Anchorage
The shining white sun	Connotations
The use of ‘for your’	Signifies
The use of ‘divisive’	Binary opposition
The use of ‘vile and unpleasant campaign’	Villain

Example: The selection of the blue sky for the front cover of *The Daily Mirror* is symbolic of optimism and a bright future.

Challenging the Mainstream

There are many ways in which dominant political ideologies can be challenged in a new media age. Social media, has the power to inform and persuade and it allows individuals and organisations access to the ability to communicate messages to audiences without corporate backing.

Led by Donkeys is a crowdfunded political movement that has utilised the social media tweets of pro-Brexit politicians to post billboards, create pamphlets as well as claiming the domain name www.thebrexitparty.com to create satires and spoofs to promote its anti-Brexit political position. A recent campaign was

designed to parody and therefore challenge the government's 'Get Ready for Brexit' campaign. Led by Donkeys subverted the codes used in the original governmental promotional material and used an intertextual reference to *It 2* - a recent cinema release at the time.



Activity: Access the *Led By Donkeys* twitter feed. What other things have they done in an attempt to challenge Brexit?

Summary

In order to discuss the impact of the political context on contemporary media products, you will need to engage with relevant political issues and debates connected to each set media product and consider how the set text/CSP reflects or challenges the dominant ideas.

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