STANLEY COHEN’S MORAL PANICS THEORY

Some media producers stir up resentment and anger against certain groups. This can influence public opinion and deflect blame away from other causes of social problems.

Stage 1
Popular media such as tabloid newspapers stir up ‘moral panic’ feelings of panic, resentment and hysteria, creating the impression that society is in a state of moral decline (increased crime, pollution, pressure on public services such as schools and hospitals, pressure on housing, violent computer games, sexual excess etc).

Stage 2
These sections of the media blame certain social groups for this situation. They create scapegoats – ‘folk devils’ who they say are to blame for this decline. Targets are often minority or vulnerable groups e.g. immigrants, muslims, Jews, foreigners, refugees, young people, LGBT, unemployed people, single mothers.

Stage 3
Dividing society distracts audiences from the real causes of social problems such as poverty, social injustice, greedy bosses who exploit those who are at the bottom of the social ladder. 
This also strengthens and protects the position of those who already have power and wealth (elites, the ‘establishment’, the ‘ruling classes’ ). Insecurity, anger and resentment becomes directed at the ‘wrong’ targets. Sometimes moral panics lead to the authorities clamping down on dissent and opposition. This also helps to protect the status quo (= keeping things ‘the way they are’): Those who have power keep that power.
Relates to theories of media ownership such as David Hesmondhalgh. The news media are often owned by large conglomerates and they have news agendas which reflect their political affiliations and social loyalties. Connects to concepts such Hegemony (domination, usually of a powerful elite over a mass majority.)

“In every age, the ideas of the ruling classes are the ruling ideas.”

Karl Marx (1818-1883)

1) Discuss the meaning of the Karl Marx quotation with friends/family. How does it relate to media? Think about who owns the media and whose voices influence us today. Who were the influential voices in the past? Has social media made a difference?

2) Have a look for examples of scapegoating in tabloid news sites like the Sun or the Mail Online. Which groups are targeted? How are the representations constructed? – it may be quite hard to spot negativity but look carefully at images, headlines and mode of address (textual codes – the words used).

3) Think of a vulnerable, minority or underrepresented group (e.g. teenagers) in mainstream media. Look for examples of how these groups are represented in media you have encountered.