UNIT 4

Did mass media promote the growth of a ‘permissive society’ in Britain 1954–69?

What is this unit about?
This unit explores the relationship between mass media and the relaxation of the austere attitudes discussed in Unit 2. The key question is whether cinema, television and the press exaggerated, or contributed towards, more liberal attitudes to sex, social hierarchy and authority, or whether they merely reflected changes caused by more significant, underlying factors.

Key questions
• Was there a ‘cultural revolution’ in Britain 1954–69?
• How far did mass media undermine a social hierarchy in this period?
• How far did mass media change British attitudes to sex between 1954 and 1969?
• Mass media 1954–69: moulder or mirror of popular culture and society?

Timeline

- 1954 Television Act allows the creation of commercial Independent Television
- 1956 John Osborne’s play Look Back in Anger is first performed
- 1957 Wolfenden Committee Report recommends the liberalisation of laws that made homosexuality illegal
- 1959 Obscene Publications Act allows serious works of art to use ‘obscene’ words and images
- 1960 Lady Chatterley’s Lover trial allowed publication of this ‘pornographic’ novel
- 1961 Private Eye launched
- 1961 Suicide Act means that those who fail to kill themselves will no longer be prosecuted
- 1962 Colour supplements first appear in Sunday newspapers
- 1962 The Pilkington Committee Report on television is published
- 1964 Mary Whitehouse launches her Clean-Up TV campaign
- 1964 Television Act increases the regulatory strength of the Independent Television Authority and calls for the creation of BBC2
- 1965 Murder (Abolition of the Death Penalty) Act is passed. This initially suspends hanging for five years, before it is abolished in 1969
- 1967 First colour television broadcasts begin

1967 | Abortion Act legalises abortion during the first 28 weeks of pregnancy through the NHS.

1967 | Family Planning Act allows local health authorities to provide birth control devices. The contraceptive pill has been on sale since 1961

1968 | Theatres Act abolishes censorship of plays on stage in the UK

1969 | Divorce Reform Act allows divorce to be granted after two years of separation if both parties want it, and after five years if one party wants it, on the grounds of ‘irreconcilable differences’

**SKILLS BUILDER**

1. What words would you use to describe these fashionable looks from 1954 and 1967?

2. Can the change in women’s fashion tell us anything about broader changes in British society during these years?

3. How far do the clothes people wear today indicate their values or attitudes?

**Source A**

**Source B**

4.1 and 4.2 Examples of women’s fashion from 1954 and 1967
Was there a ‘cultural revolution’ in Britain 1954–69?

The historian Arthur Marwick has argued that the 1960s marked the end of ‘Victorianism’ and the rise of a more ‘permissive’ society. Many right wing politicians have agreed with this interpretation and blame the sixties for a lot of current social problems. Other historians, including Joanna Burke, have more recently argued that the ‘permissive’ values we so often associate with the sixties were only really held by a small minority of the population: she argues that instead of talking about ‘the Swinging Sixites’ we really ought to refer to the ‘cautious sixties’. Before looking at the way the media portrayed social hierarchy and sex, it is first necessary to consider the legal, financial and technological contexts in which the British people experienced the media. If a ‘cultural revolution’ did happen in the sixties, it could be the case that these contextual factors were more important than the effects of mass media.

The legal context

The timeline at the start of the unit gives an overview of the liberal legislation passed by British governments between 1959 and 1969. These laws decriminalised certain acts and relaxed the laws on other crimes relating to sex. However, just because the laws relating to abortion or homosexuality changed, it does not necessarily follow that people’s attitudes towards these things changed; things may change de jure but this does not always equate to de facto changes. The journalist Peter Hitchens sees the abolition of hanging in particular as ‘a victory for the elite over the people’: only 18 per cent of people supported abolition in June 1966. Polls from the later 1960s consistently revealed that most people, young or old, did not welcome the more relaxed laws on homosexuality, divorce and abortion. Dominic Sandbrook, in his 2006 book, *White Heat*, has concluded that ‘At least as far as the transformation of public opinion is concerned, then, the concept of a permissive sixties makes little sense’.

Demand for these liberal laws came not from the people, but from certain backbench MPs who based their private members’ bills on campaigns that had gone back several decades. Pressure for reform of the laws on homosexuality had gone back to the 1890s, for divorce laws to the 1910s, for birth control to the 1920s and abortion to the 1930s. David Steel’s Abortion Act, or Leo Abse’s Sexual Offences Act were not the result of pressure from their constituents, but were issues that they had felt strongly about for a long time before the sixties. Many MPs came to agree with Steel, Abse and others that laws should be based on the practical consequences of the legislation, rather than on the grounds of moral ethics. For example, rather than debate whether abortion was intrinsically right or wrong, Steel asked the House to consider the high number of deaths and injuries that resulted from dangerous ‘back street’ abortions (about 40 deaths and 100,000 injuries in 1966). Members of Parliament were allowed to vote according to their conscience on these bills, rather than having to vote according to the party line. Although these bills officially had nothing to do with the government, Roy Jenkins, Home Secretary from 1965–67,
unofficially encouraged Labour support for the liberal laws. While conservatives (from all parties, hence the small ‘c’) worried that such laws would create a ‘permissive society’, he saw the changes as the measure of a ‘civilised society’ as shown in Source C.

**Source C**

Let us be on the side of people who want to be free to live their own lives, to make their own mistakes, and to decide, in an adult way and provided they do not infringe the rights of others, the code by which they wish to live; and on the side too of experiment and brightness . . . of fuller lives and greater freedom.

From Roy Jenkins’ *The Labour Case*, published in 1959. Labour were in opposition at the time and did not come to power until October 1964.

In his 1975 book, *Permissive Britain: Social Change in the Sixties and Seventies*, Christie Davies argued that the ‘causalist’ MPs failed to consider the long-term consequences of more liberal laws; they assumed, in his view incorrectly, that moral values in society would be unaffected by these Acts of Parliament. Davies believes that it is the removal of strict, clearly defined boundaries of decent behaviour that have contributed most significantly to the ‘strange death of moral and respectable Britain’ since the 1970s.

**SKILLS BUILDER**

1. In what ways does Source C show Roy Jenkins to have been a ‘causalist’ MP?
2. Using Source C, and the other information in this Unit thus far, how far do you think it is fair to blame permissive attitudes in the sixties for the passing of so many liberal laws during these years?
3. Do you think these laws should have been passed?

**The context of greater affluence**

The historian Eric Hobsbawn called the period between the 1950s and early 1970s the ‘golden era’ of Western capitalism. The huge growth in wealth across the Western world allowed the people of these countries to afford ever more luxuries. In Britain, almost every household had a television by 1970. Ownership of cars doubled between 1960 and 1970 from 5,650,000 to 11,802,000. During the same period the number of supermarkets grew from around 800 to over 5000; this led to the closure of around 60,000 smaller shops and gradually changed the look of the traditional high street. The table below gives a broad overview of the expansion in consumer acquisition of luxuries.
Increased affluence and greater consumerism, contributed to a levelling of the social hierarchy, particularly in terms of dress and leisure pursuits. The Central Statistical Office recorded that watching television was one of the most popular leisure activities among all social groups: men and women spent around 23 per cent of their free time in front of the small screen, twice as much as people in Belgium, Italy or Sweden. The domestication of spare time that had begun with the radio blurred class divisions that had been reinforced by more public leisure pursuits such as dog racing (working class) or playing tennis (middle class). Now anyone could watch similar programmes from their own homes.

New fashions, such as Op Art and ‘the Look’, inspired by designers such as Mary Quant, with their boutiques clustered around London’s King’s Road and Carnaby Street, and made accessible to many by the mass production and sale of such designs in high streets across the country, meant that from the mid-1960s it was almost impossible to tell a young woman’s class from the way she dressed. Barbara Hulanicki’s fashion company Biba, sold cheap clothes from her shops in London and across the country via mail order. The most famous model of the 1960s, Twiggy, said that whereas Mary Quant’s clothes were for ‘rich girls’, Biba ‘was for anyone’. The clothes were given a good deal of publicity in newspapers, in part because of the launch of colour sections after February 1962, and in part because of the work of a new breed of dashing photographer, including David Bailey, Brian Duffy and Terence Donovan. Mary Quant thought fashion attracted

**Definition**

**Op Art**

A style of painting pioneered in Britain by Bridget Riley that made use of black and white (later bold colours) and geometric shapes. This style was thought to be very modern and influenced not only fashion, but design more generally.
so much attention in the newspapers because it ‘reflects what is really in the air’: the growth of affluence, consumerism, the new confidence of youth and the changing role of women (see Unit 9). Opinion was divided about such innovations as the mini-skirt, first brought to prominence by the model Jean ‘the Shrimp’ Shrimpton at a racecourse in Melbourne in October 1965. Source E is a photograph of Twiggy in a mini-dress, while sources F and G are two opinions about fashion in the mid- to late-1960s.

Source E

The way girls model clothes . . . it’s provocative.
She’s standing there defiantly with her legs apart
saying, ‘I’m very sexy, I enjoy sex, I feel provocative,
but you’re going to have a job to get me. You’ve got
to excite me and you’ve got to be jolly marvellous to
attract me. I can’t be bought, but if I want you, I’ll
have you.

From an interview with Mary Quant, published in
the Guardian on 10 October 1967

Source F

Of the 17 women in my [London Underground]
compartment, 12 were wearing cardigans of some
sort, 10 had chosen navy blue as their colour, and
13 were wearing sandals or sandal type shoes. They
all had fairly ordinary haircuts and there wasn’t a
mini-skirt in sight. Most people are interested in
being comfortable rather than smart.

From an article by fashion editor Prudence Glynn,
published in The Times on 16 September 1966
The technological context: the Pill

One of the most commonly held views about the sixties is that there was a ‘sexual revolution’: young people in particular are thought to have had sex more often and with more people. Many historians have sought to explain this change through the rise of the contraceptive pill: the historians Akhtar and Humphries argue, ‘The years between 1965 and 1969 were when the sexual revolution began in Britain. The pace of change was astonishing – and the Pill made it all possible.’ The Pill was developed in America in the mid 1950s and was first prescribed by British doctors in January 1961. By 1964, around 480,000 women were taking the Pill. However, at the discretion of many GPs, and as a rule by the Family Planning Association, access to the Pill was restricted to married women until 1970; it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the Pill rivalled the condom as the contraceptive of choice for most Britons.

Two major surveys, Michael Schofield's *The Sexual Behaviour of Young People* (1965) and Geoffrey Gorer's *Sex and Marriage in England Today* (1971), suggest that notions of a ‘sexual revolution' in the sixties are hugely exaggerated and greatly misleading. Schofield found that only 18 per cent of girls and 10 per cent of boys in his sample of 2000 teenagers had had sex with more than three people, and that 17 per cent of girls and 33 per cent of boys had had sex by the age of 19. He concluded that while promiscuity existed among teenagers, this was far from normal behaviour. Gorer's study revealed that 96 per cent of women and 95 percent of men were married by the age of 45, and that the average age of marriage for women fell below 23 in 1970, down from 25 in 1946. As mentioned above, most people continued to hold conservative attitudes towards divorce and homosexuality; the only significant change was that young people were more tolerant of sex before marriage than their parents' generation had been. These surveys hardly reveal a popular revolution in attitude to sex in the sixties.
How far did mass media undermine a rigid social hierarchy 1954–69?

**Television**

We have already seen that television developed rapidly as a mass medium after the Queen’s coronation in 1953; 4 per cent of households had a television set in 1950, rising to 40 per cent in 1955, 80 per cent in 1960 and 95 per cent in 1969. In 1955, the BBC monopoly on television ended when 14 independent companies were allowed to begin broadcasting funded by advertising. The 1954 Television Act had only given ITV a license to broadcast for ten years and a review was needed to extend this; in 1962 the BBC Charter was also due for renewal. In July 1960, the government set up a Committee of Inquiry on Broadcasting to assess the impact of television thus far, and to make recommendations for its future. The Committee was chaired by Sir Harry Pilkington and its members included Richard Hoggart, whose views strongly influenced much of the report. Source H is a collection of extracts from the report that the committee delivered in 1962.

**Source H**

**Paragraph 38**

For television . . . A large volume of sharply critical submissions reached us. Such a volume of critical interest was to be expected since television now plays so great a part in the lives of many millions. Here, as in sound broadcasting, we find that people are disposed to criticise what they dislike rather than to praise what they admire. But this rapidly developing medium has also inspired great hopes . . . It was perhaps largely because they realised what television had done, and could do, that people and organisations which wrote to us as viewers were conscious of what it had done badly, or failed to do at all; of how it had abused its power, and failed to realise its possibilities.

**Paragraph 206**

Foreign programmes, usually of American origin, were . . . criticised not because they were foreign, but because of their content . . . It is not enough to satisfy the statutory requirement as to the amount of foreign material if the quality is ignored.

**Paragraph 254**

Advertisements which appeal to human weakness could well in the long run have a deplorable individual and social effect . . . More exacting standards would not necessarily make advertising too restricted, drab and unexciting.


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**Definition**

**BBC Charter**

A series of rules by which the BBC must operate to justify its funding by license fee. Legally this is renewed every 10 years by the monarch, but some feel that governments have put ever greater pressure on the BBC to conform to its needs before the Charter is now renewed.
Hoggart was particularly worried about the effects of ‘vulgar’ American-style programmes on ITV. He thought that game shows such as *Double Your Money* and *Take Your Pick* (both 1955–68), would erode traditional British culture, and that crime dramas and Westerns would make people more violent. He also worried that advertising would increase the materialism and commercialisation of British people and popular culture.

A good deal of the Report’s recommendations were ignored by the government, but the 1964 Television Act did increase the power of the ITV regulator, the Independent Television Authority: after 1964, ITV companies had to screen two plays and two current affairs programmes in addition to the news each week, to fulfil their public service obligation. The report also led to the creation of BBC 2 in April 1964 to further increase public service broadcasting.

The Report’s emphasis on the need for quality drama on television led to a demand for new plays from British playwrights. The *Wednesday Play* (BBC 1964–70) helped launch the career of influential writers Dennis Potter and Nell Dunn, and director Ken Loach. Sydney Newman, the head of drama at the BBC at the time, insisted that ‘great art has to stem from . . . the period in which it is created’. Writers responded with hard-hitting, ‘social realist’ plays such as *Up the Junction* (1965) with a powerful home abortion scene and *Cathy Come Home* (1966) about homelessness.

Producers and directors were hugely innovative in this period. At the start of the sixties, plays on television, such as those of *Armchair Theatre* (ITV 1956–63), were broadcast live and were essentially the same as plays at the theatre. By the mid-1960s, Loach and others had begun to shoot many scenes on location and ‘vision mix’ them with live studio footage. This made the films much more realistic: many viewers were unsure whether the scenes shot on location were fiction or news clips. The BBC Board of Governors was so concerned about this, that in 1965 it banned *The War Game*, a play about a nuclear attack on Britain; it was not broadcast until 1985.

While these plays had a tremendous impact on the 6–10 million people who saw them, they did not directly change things very much. The passage of the 1967 Abortion Act was possibly eased by the popular reaction to *Up the Junction*, but clearly had far more to do with David Steel’s campaign.
Similarly, the launch of Shelter, a charity for homeless people, on 1 December 1966, had been planned for a long time; it was sheer co-incidence that *Cathy Come Home* had only been screened two weeks before this. Shelter acknowledges that it did gain a surge of support in the light of public discussion of the play. Birmingham City Council also relaxed its rules about husbands and wives staying together in their shelters, after the play was screened.

While the *Wednesday Plays* discussed controversial topics, they did not portray or inspire a rebellion of working-class opinion against their social superiors. On the contrary, the working classes generally held the most conservative opinions about liberal reforms. The programme that working-class viewers identified with the most was the soap opera *Coronation Street*. Launched in December 1960, it had a twice weekly audience of 20 million within its first year. Northern viewers in particular identified with the ordinary backdrop to the drama – the home, the shop, the pub – and the strong female characters, such as Elsie Tanner, who evoked a feeling of nostalgia for war-time community. *Coronation Street* represented a genuine working-class culture; it portrayed those who longed for change and advancement, such as Ken Barlow (see the Introduction), as exceptional in a community where people may have grumbled about life, but got on with things in a practical fashion.

A programme that did genuinely challenge social superiors and figures of authority was *That Was The Week That Was* (*TW3*), launched in November 1962. It represented the pinnacle of the ‘*satire* boom’ that had begun in the late 1950s with comedians such as Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, and evolved in the early 1960s through their contribution to the highly successful *Beyond the Fringe* stage show. *TW3* combined current affairs with stand-up comedy; at its peak it received 12 million viewers a week and was said to empty many pubs late on Saturday night when it was screened.

### Definition

**Satire**

Humour that makes fun of (usually famous) people; it often exposes their vices.

### Source 1

Something new was happening in the way that the general public was allowed to perceive its rulers . . . Television opened up politics and the political debate to everybody. You opened the door between the servants’ quarters and the respectable folk and allowing the servants to see what was going on. That I think was what offended people who wrote in to the newspapers and shouted that this kind of television shouldn’t be allowed.

I think a lot of people are just outraged. I occasionally watch it with my parents. After a while my father would say, ‘Do we have to watch this stuff’. It got your teeth on edge sometimes when it started being rude about the Queen. I think that was something that really upset people. It was one thing to discuss the monarchy as an institution, quite another to be personal about the Queen.

From interviews with John Bassett and Mary Balmer on *Carry on Up the Zeitgeist: Saturday Night Saturnalia*, first broadcast on Radio 2 on 17 April 1992
Reginald Bevins, the Postmaster General who oversaw broadcasting, tried to have *TW3* stopped; he was prevented by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (even though he was the target of many jokes) who recognised the damage that would be done by attacking such a popular programme. Despite its short run of two series, *TW3* did help to make journalists less deferential to politicians. In doing so, it paved the way for investigative journalists who subsequently unearthed many political scandals. It was not popular with everyone as the following two interviews show in Source I.

*TW3* was one of the programmes that inspired Mary Whitehouse (see Biography on page XXX), a housewife from Nuneaton, to launch her Clean-Up TV campaign on 27 January 1964. The first meeting, held on 5 May in Birmingham Town Hall, was attended by around 2000 people, mostly middle-aged women. By this time, she claimed that she already had 120,000 signatures in support of her Manifesto, of which Source J is an extract.

### Source J

We women of Britain believe in a Christian way of life... [We shall] fight for the right to bring up our own children in the truth of the Christian faith, and to protect our homes from the exhibitions of violence. We object to the propaganda of disbelief, doubt and dirt that the BBC projects into millions of homes through the television screen. [The BBC should] encourage and sustain faith in God and bring Him back to the heart of our family and our national life.

*From the Manifesto of Clean-Up TV, written by Mary Whitehouse and her friend Norah Buckland in 1964.*

In 1965, she renamed the organisation the National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVLA); she continued to attack all sorts of programmes but toned down the Christian basis of her criticism to attract more supporters.

### SKILLS BUILDER

1. How far does Source I support the idea that television undermined figures of authority in the 1960s?
2. How far do Sources H, I and J agree about the impact of television on British society in the 1960s?
3. Using Sources H, J and the other information from this unit, which do you think had the greater effect on class relations in Britain in the 1960s: satire or social realism on television?
Cinema

We have already seen that cinema attendance began to fall after 1946. Despite the government's abolition of the Entertainments Tax on cinema tickets in 1960, attendance figures fell even further between 1954 and 1969 as the table in Source K shows.

Shrinking audiences meant that over half the cinemas in the country were forced to close between 1955 and 1963. Despite this, a number of memorable British films were made in this period. One of major genres of British film in the late 1950s and 1960s was the ‘New Wave’. These were hard, gritty films about the everyday life of working-class people, usually in the north of England, shot in black and white. Part of their inspiration came from the stage, where John Osbourne’s play, Look Back in Anger, was first performed in May 1956. The play, the first example of what became known as ‘kitchen sink’ drama, was different from anything else around at the time, as shown in the interviews in Source L. (All the interviews in Source L are from Carry on up the Zeitgeist, first broadcast on Radio 2 on 3 April 1992.)

In 1958, Look Back in Anger was made into a film. A number of other ‘New Wave’ films followed:

- Room at the Top (1959)
- Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1960)
- A Taste of Honey (1961) (The only one with a female lead character)
- A Kind of Loving (1962)
- The Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner (1962)
- Billy Liar (1963)
- This Sporting Life (1963)
- Kes (1969)

**Source K**

A table showing total cinema attendance figures in the UK, published in 1998 and 2005 by the Office of National Statistics

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>2004</td>
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**Question**

What do you think was the major reason for the fall in cinema admissions during this period?
While the ‘New Wave’ films placed working-class lives, concerns and accents on the big screen, many working-class people did not enjoy them, preferring the comedies discussed below. One reason is that these films were written and directed by middle-class men. The films presented a stereotyped view of the working classes as earthy and pleasure seeking. The films were also dominated by tough men, and did not deal with important issues of race, gender or sexuality. As such, the films tell the historian more about middle-class concerns about ‘the state of the nation’, than about the working classes.

**Source L**

I was living in London and one morning one of my friends said let’s go the theatre. It was *Look Back in Anger*. We heard so much about it we just had to see this play. I was just transfixed. The curtains drew back and the first shock was the stage: it was just so depressing. Normally when the curtains open we’d seen the drawing room the rather elegant furniture, the desk, the windows, the long curtains charming furniture, charming people. We knew it wasn’t that sort of play, but it was the first time I saw this rather dingy room, and there was this rather drably dressed woman at an ironing board. I was sitting in my chair getting really incensed. I couldn’t wait for it to be over so I could give my friend a piece of my mind! He was rude, coarse and his poor wife was standing there ironing; he couldn’t stand that she had upper class accent and upper class manners. She was so patient that it made the viewer really impatient.

From an interview with London housewife Bernice Coup

[Jimmy Porter] was a hero! He was right! His discontent, his anguish, his disgust at the world is the proper way to regard a disgusting world. I thought it absolutely wonderful! Terrific – witty, fast, it gave a young man like me a modish aggression. Lots of young artists, writers, rebels suddenly found their rebellion licensed and suddenly found a behaviour pattern for their aggression.

From an interview with Edward Pearce, a student in London in the late 1950s.

Jimmy Porter was the lead character, a young man who shouts angrily about the monarchy, the church, the middle classes, and even his mum. He famously says ‘People of our generation aren’t able to die for good causes any longer. There aren’t any good, brave causes left.’

For the first time I was recognising people on stage that I lived with . . . For the first time my own generation was on stage by right, saying the kinds of things that we argued about at university, but saying them in public to an audience that were not used to hearing them. This was a challenge, a confrontation with a generation that was saying to their generation ‘What kind of a mess have you made and what are you going to do about it?’ And not saying it tragically, saying it with a cock-sure, derisory self-confidence.

From an interview with the *Guardian* theatre critic Kenneth Tynan
The Press

Between 1951 and 1970, newspaper circulation fell from 16.8 million to 14.6 million; five national daily newspapers were forced to close after 1960. Source M gives figures for the sales of the leading national newspapers between 1939 and 1999.

In a bid to boost sales, and attract some of the huge amount of advertising revenue that had gone to commercial television since 1955, newspapers tried ever more populist tactics. News headlines became punchier and an ever greater share of the front page was given over to images rather than words. A further innovation to attract advertising revenue was the introduction of colour supplements in Sunday newspapers in 1962. In the wake of the satire boom, tabloid newspapers in particular became more scathing in their treatment of politicians and political scandal. A good example of this is the treatment in the press of John Profumo, Conservative Minister for War, in June 1963.

Whereas in the past politicians had usually been allowed to keep their private lives out of the media (for example David Lloyd George, Prime Minister 1916–22 had an affair with his secretary for years), this was increasingly no longer the case. Not only had Profumo had an affair with a ‘call-girl’, Christine Keeler, but there were rumours she was simultaneously having an affair with a Soviet spy, hardly good for national security. Even so, Profumo might have escaped the attention of the national press, who only ran the story after his resignation on 5 June, had it not been for the satirical stories run by Private Eye magazine. The Eye, founded by Richard Ingrams, Christopher Booker and Willy Rushden in October 1961, did not target one political party in particular, but wanted to ‘simply poke fun at the powers that be’. Although it only had 10,000 readers at the time, its exposé of the scandal in March 1963 led Labour politicians to demand that Profumo deny the allegations in parliament, and that a Commission of...
Enquiry be set up to investigate the affair. Profumo did deny the rumours on 4 June, which made his resignation the next day all the more scandalous: he had lied to parliament.

Prime Minister Harold Macmillan asked Lord Denning to lead the Commission of Enquiry. When his report was published on 26 September 1963, it became a best-seller. When the *Daily Telegraph* published the report in full, readers were amazed by such scandalous stories about political elites as ‘The Man in the Mask’, about a member of the Cabinet who ‘had served dinner at a private party while naked except for a mask, a small lace apron, and a card around his neck reading ‘If my services don’t please you, whip me’. The publication of the Report did a great deal of damage to the reputation of the Conservative party; although Macmillan had been ill for some time, the scandal surely contributed to his resignation in October 1963.

Politicians had generally not been held in high regard by the British people since 1945, but this was usually due to what people saw as their self-interest or untrustworthiness. The sixties, because of the increased willingness of the press to attack political elites on a personal level, saw the association of political elites with ‘sleaze’. As we shall see, this trend increased in the 1970s and 1980s and began to extend even to members of the royal family.

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**Source M**

A table showing the circulation of British national newspapers in thousands of copies from 1939 to 1999

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<tr>
<td>News Chronicle</td>
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<td>1,586</td>
<td>1,206</td>
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<td>The Times</td>
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<td>245</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>727</td>
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<td>Today</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL circulation</strong></td>
<td><strong>10,434</strong></td>
<td><strong>16,809</strong></td>
<td><strong>16,184</strong></td>
<td><strong>14,643</strong></td>
<td><strong>14,978</strong></td>
<td><strong>13,935</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,491</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations
How far did mass media change British attitudes to sex between 1954 and 1969?

Television
We have already seen that Mary Whitehouse felt that there was too much violence on television, but she also complained about ‘sexy innuendoes, suggestive clothing and behaviour’ on the BBC. While some of the Wednesday Plays did deal with sexually related issues, and you could see girls in mini-skirts on the pop music shows such as Ready! Steady! Go! (ITV 1963–66), there was no sex on television in this period. Possibly the most sexualised element of all broadcasting were the advertisements on ITV: see the research task in Unit 9.

Cinema
While the ‘New Wave’ films were artistically important, they were not the biggest hits at the box office. The most successful film of those listed above was Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, and even this was only the fourth most popular film of 1960. The biggest British hits of the 1960s, the Carry On comedies and James Bond films, were overtly sexual in very different ways. At least one, and sometimes two, Carry On films were released every year between 1958 and 1976. The jokes were largely centred on the music hall staples of slapstick, toilet humour and sexual innuendo, with busty Barbara Windsor often the centre of attention. Sean Connery starred in five hugely successful Bond films in the sixties, starting with Dr. No (1962). The key to Bond’s success was undoubtedly the backdrop of the Cold War, with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Vietnam War from 1965 to 1975, and, in Britain, the discovery of a spy ring in the highest positions of authority in the secret service between 1955 and 1979. However, the powerful glamour of Bond, and the scantily clad Bond girls, such as Ursula Andress as Honey Ryder in Dr. No, contributed to the films’ success. Other British films that had a sexual focus included A Taste of Honey (1961) about single parents, Victim (1961) on homosexuality and Darling (1965), starring Julie Christie as Diana, a socialite who uses sex to get to the top. Source N is how one modern film reviewer summarised the film.

In terms of their influence on British people’s attitudes to sex, it is highly questionable whether these films had much of an impact at all. As discussed in Unit 2, such films are usually about escapism and the values depicted on screen are not necessarily those by which people live in the real world. The popularity of such films suggests the British were far from prudish about sex on screen.

The Press
The launch of colour supplements, sexualised adverts and scandalous news stories contributed to a generally more permissive air in the media. However, it was not until 1969 that the first exposed female nipple was published in a British newspaper; media tycoon Rupert Murdoch
Mass media and the ‘permissive society’, Britain 1954–69

(see Biography in Unit 7), clearly thought this was one way to boost the circulation of his new newspaper, the Sun. Like cinema however, it is questionable how far the press altered British attitudes to sex. Source O shows the opinion of two anonymous ‘men on the street’ from 1971.

Unit summary

What have you learned in this unit?
The years 1954–69 did see a number of changes in British popular culture. These changes were in large measure driven by the greater affluence of a society that enjoyed the ‘golden era’ of capitalism. British people bought more luxuries and increasingly came to define themselves in terms of what they bought. Mass media encouraged this through advertising and the depiction of glamour. However, while the media was more permissive in what it portrayed, it is not clear how far this altered people’s morals and attitudes.

There were a number of important liberal laws passed in this period, but this does not necessarily mean that the British people themselves became more liberal in their outlook. While young people may have gone for the latest, more revealing look, and a minority had promiscuous sex lives, most people continued to dress and think conservatively.

Mass media did begin to democratise society through its portrayal of the working classes, more so on television than at the cinema, and through its attacks, especially satirical ones, on political elites.

What skills have you used in this unit?
You have not only analysed the information contained in a range of sources, but also considered the inferences made by those sources. You have compared and contrasted sources to try and arrive at a convincing conclusion about the impact of mass media on British society and popular culture between 1954 and 1969. You have weighed up the significance of mass media when compared with other important factors that may have influenced British attitudes on a range of issues in this period.

Definition

Democratise
The removal of barriers of class or rank in society.
SKILLS BUILDER

1. Which mass media do you think had the greatest impact on British society and popular culture between 1954 and 1969: television, cinema or the press?

2. Set up a debate: ‘This house believes the sixties were swinging’. Remember to use people’s views from the time (for and against) when you set out your case.

3. Look back over Units 3 and 4. What evidence is there that the British people became commercialised between 1954 and 1969? What role did mass media play in this?

Exam tips

This is the sort of question you will find appearing on the examination paper as a (b) question.

Study Sources F, J and O and use your own knowledge.

Do you agree with the view, expressed in Source O, that the existence of a ‘permissive society’ in the 1960s was ‘a mass media thing’?

Even before you read them, make a list of the possible points that could crop up in the sources: what other factors could have contributed to a permissive society apart from mass media? In what ways could mass media have contributed to a more permissive society? You could make a table like the one shown below to set down these factors before you look at the sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
<th>Factor 3</th>
<th>Factor 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Points in favour of this factor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points against this factor</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall paragraph shape</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- With your factors in mind, look at Source O. Pick out different bits of information that support or challenge the importance of each factor; note these extracts in your table under the appropriate factor heading.
- Now do the same for Sources F and J. Remember to consider the provenance of the Source when deciding how far its opinions can be trusted.
- Not all the columns of the table will be filled as some factors may not crop up in the Sources. In your essay, focus on the factors that have cropped up in the Sources.

You are now ready to write your essay, using each column of the table as the basis of a paragraph.

Remember to:
- directly answer the question in the first line of each paragraph
- use cross-referenced extracts from the Sources to support the point
- evaluate the provenance of the Sources to show which views ought to carry more weight than others
- include some of your own background knowledge to further illustrate which Sources give a more accurate view of the historical question in hand.
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RESEARCH TOPIC

1 Watch clips from one of the ‘New Wave’ films listed on page XXX. If possible, watch the whole film. As you watch the film, make notes on the following questions:

- Which problems face the working class characters in this film?
- How does the director emphasise the focus of the audience on the working classes?
- Which characters do the audience sympathise with most and why?
- What can we learn from this film about working-class life and attitudes in the 1960s (for example, living conditions, jobs, leisure pursuits, family relationships, attitudes to sex and gender)?

2 Once you have seen the film, compare your notes with others in groups of four, or as a whole class.

3 If possible, split into groups to research the same questions and feed back to the class on each film listed on page XXX.