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The Journalist, Folk Devil

Paul Lashmar

Moral panics and the media

The media are central to Stanley Cohen's conception of moral panic. In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* he says of the moral panic that 'its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media'. Cohen is quite clear about the centrality of the media to the moral panic and states that 'much of this study will be devoted to understanding the role of the mass media in creating moral panics and folk devils' (1972: 17).

Most subsequent debate, at least in the UK, has maintained this centrality of the media. In *Policing the Crisis* (1978), Stuart Hall and his co-authors see the media as being at the heart of creating a moral panic over 'mugging'. And one of the authors of this work, Chas Critcher, who has in the early years of twenty-first century attempted to place moral panic theory in a much tighter conceptual framework in order to maintain its relevance, again stressed the importance of media (2003, 2006). Critcher argues that 'modern moral panics are unthinkable without the media, though medieval witch trials managed without them' (2003: 131), and notes that this stress on the role of the media is one of the factors which differentiates British approaches to moral panics from US ones, such as the 'attributional' school of moral panic theory lead by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (2009), or the approach taken by the social constructionists. These, he argues, tend to treat the media as mere channels through which passes information about deviance or labels that others have assigned, with little recognition that the media themselves transform information and play a key role

in the ways in which individuals or groups are represented as deviant (Citcher 2003: pp. 28-29)

However, by contrast, the approach taken in Canada by Richard Ericson, Patricia Baranek and Janet Chan fully acknowledges that the media have a dynamic role to play in the creation and sustaining of moral panics and is therefore closer in this respect to that taken by Hall et al. and Cohen. Thus, for example, they argue that ‘news organizations are active in constituting what are social problems and what should be done about them’ (1987: 70). And all are concerned, albeit in different ways, with how, precisely, the media do this.

Hall et al. argue that a key way in which the media direct the debate is by giving voice to the primary definers of moral panic; this primary definition then sets the limit for all subsequent discussions of the topic by framing the ‘problem’ in a particular way.

As they put it: ‘This initial framework then provides criteria by which all subsequent contributions are labelled as “relevant” to the debate, or “irrelevant” – beside the point. Contributions which stray from this framework are exposed to the charge that they are “not addressing the problem”’ (1978: 59). In short, Hall et al. suggest that the media support and publicise the ‘dominant ideas’ of the powerful with whom they are in a hegemonic relationship while ignoring those without power and who may take a very different point of view. In this framework, the media exclude or even demonise anyone who threatens to upset the status quo. Furthermore, Hall et al. point out that the media can themselves act as primary definers and create stories and issues; they are not merely passive reporters of stories created elsewhere.

To count as a ‘classic’ moral panic the media’s reporting of the issue in question has to be in some way disproportionate. It also has to be motivated by moral concerns

and aimed at bringing about some form of change in the law. In this vision of things, the media are seen as moral entrepreneurs who, often in collusion with other moral entrepreneurs, put public pressure on politicians to act; bombarded with the message that Something Must be Done, politicians push through hasty and ill thought-out legislation. The Dangerous Dogs Act 1997 is often used by moral panic theorists as an example of this process at its worst.

Moral panic theory belongs to that body of sociological and criminological thought which, as John Muncie points out, is less concerned with asking behavioural questions such as: What causes an individual to commit a deviant act? than with posing 'definitional and structural questions – why does an act become defined as deviant? deviant to whom? deviant from what?' (1987: 44). However, he also makes the point that the concept of moral panic is an elastic one and 'lacks any precise theoretical grounding'. This, he argues, is in part 'due to its origins lying in a loosely defined labelling perspective rather than a fully blown theory of social structure'. Consequently it can, in his view, 'harbour several diverse theoretical positions and thus opens itself to internal contradiction and criticism from all theoretical sides' (ibid.: 45). And more recently, even a theorist as sympathetic to the moral panic concept as Critcher has argued that there is a danger that 'moral panics distort our capacity for understanding, even when they appear to recognise a genuine problem' (2003: 117). In recent times, these problems have included phenomena as diverse as As happy slapping, helicopter parents, single parents, file sharing, hoodies, boy racers, immigration, binge drinking, gender issues, drug abuse, and paedophilia.

The folk devils fight back

As a long-time journalism practitioner, as well as an academic, the question which most interests me about moral panics is: What does the moral panic concept bring to explaining the way in which the news media work?

As noted above, the moral panic concept has been a much-used tool for identifying and analysing particular social phenomena. That it is still debated after forty years demonstrates its potential productivity and usefulness. However, it is by no means an all-purpose explanatory tool, and its value as a concept has been frequently challenged, with some critics have even suggesting that it is anachronistic and is largely redundant. For example, Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton suggested in 1995 that circumstances had changed since the concept had emerged in the 1970s: ‘The delicate balance of relations which moral panic sociologists saw existing between media, agents of social control, folk devils and moral guardians, has given way to a much more complicated and fragmented set of connections. Each of the categories described by moral panic theorists has undergone a fissure in the intervening years.’ (1995: 567) In particular, they suggested that the rise of radical pressure groups of one kind or another have reduced the influence of the traditional moral guardians on the mainstream media and thence on politicians, and that commercial media interests have used the discourse of moral panic simply to attract youthful consumers, thereby devaluing its explanatory potential.

Similarly Critcher (2006) has observed that Mary de Young’s (2004) analysis of the 1980s day care panic in the US produced similar reservations. In the United States during the early 1980s, hundreds of day care providers were accused of sexually abusing their young charges in ‘satanic’ rituals that included blood drinking, cannibalism, and human sacrifice. These allegations of ‘ritual’ abuse of children then

spread quickly outwards to Canada, Europe and Australasia, in spite of rigorous international investigations which found no evidence to corroborate the allegations and warned that a moral panic was exposing day care providers and other social workers to unnecessary public attention and attracting quite unjustified opprobrium.

But whilst de Young used the notion of moral panic to conceptualise the ‘ritual’ abuse scare she also felt that the original concept needed amending and updating. In particular, she argued that it needed to be recognized that ‘each of Cohen’s stages is contestable. All the way from the initial definition and labelling through to measures resorted to, opposition may prove effective’ (Critcher 2006: pp.252-253) In Cohen’s vision, folk devils tend to be passive victims. De Young’s analysis demonstrated that folk devils have developed the capacity to fight back. Thus she details how the day care providers who were cast as folk devils by what de Young calls ‘the child savers’ organised and used publicity to counter their persecution.

A deflating phrase

While academics continue to debate the value of the moral panic concept, the term has slipped into the public lexicon and now enjoys a considerable popularity in public discourse. In this respect, de Young argues that Cohen’s concept has been ‘facilely appropriated by media pundits, social commentators, and the public at large, and its casual use has divested it of much of its sociological relevance. And that is really a shame. It is a robust term, and the theory that surrounds and supports it, although a tad faded and frayed, still has a great deal of explanatory and analytical power’ (2004: 4).

Two groups particularly predisposed to using the phrase ‘moral panic’ are journalists and media students. A search of *Nexis* reveals a gradual increase in the use

of phrase in UK National newspapers from the late 1990s onwards in major news publications, though the prime users are commentators not news journalists. I can only offer a subjective view of the frequency of its use by students but I have encountered it frequently in both dissertations and essays. Neither of these two groups usually attempts to reference the evolving moral panic framework that gives legitimacy to the use of the phrase. This can be troubling with student academic work, but what is more surprising is that certain academics also use the phrase in published work without reference to any theoretical framework. (Do you want to give examples? - no). In short, the phrase ‘moral panic’ has all too often become a form of coded shorthand to criticize the media as well, on occasion, other primary definers. The question then arises: is this intellectual laziness, or the actions of individuals with a political or ideological agenda? In many cases in which someone labels a particular episode a moral panic I feel compelled to ask: Does the writer have a particular ideological position on the subject of the story in question? In this respect, it’s worth noting that there has also developed a certain resistance to the concept outside academia. So, for example, on 21 December 1993, in the aftermath of the murder of two-year- old James Bulger, an editorial in the Independent *on Sunday* editorial (hardly a paper associated with the creation of moral panics), argued that ‘moral panic is one of those deflating phrases used by sociologists and other allegedly impartial students of human behaviour to condescend to excitements amongst the general populace’. Similarly, a blog on the *Spectator* website which mentioned moral panics elicited the response: ‘What is the term “moral panic” doing in *The Spectator*? There are no “moral panics”. As objective social phenomena they do not exist; they are just a self-regarding phantasm of the left-liberal imagination’.¹

¹ <http://images.spectator.co.uk/alexmassie/3691056/the-pleasures-of-moral-panic.shtml>

Such criticisms suggests that the term also serves a more pernicious purpose, namely to create the impression that certain people take a detached, rational, analytical approach to political and social problems, as opposed those who exhibit a merely reflexive, knee-jerk response to challenges to received opinions and indeed to anyone who thinks differently from them. In that sense the term is more than just a conceit. It is also profoundly anti-intellectual because it attempts to stifle reasoned debate by portraying contrary points of view as simply subjective and irrational, if not indeed infantile and worthy of nothing but contempt. As such it represents not merely a serious misuse of language but a debasement of its purpose as a means of conducting reasoned argument.

The missing voice

If the concept of moral panic is to be of any theoretical and explanatory value, it must be possible to define a moral panic as a journalistic reaction to an episode or event which is demonstrably and empirically different from the reporting of an episode or event which is not defined as a moral panic. However, in the huge amount of literature on moral panics, I can find no substantive research which has taken into consideration the journalism practitioner's experience, and few practitioners are ever quoted. I find it remarkable that there appears to be no published communication between the theorists of moral panic and the very people who are generally accused of being the perpetrators of disproportionate reporting. I would argue that the moral panic concept is significantly flawed by the failure to take into consideration the practitioner's experience, and the processes of journalism more generally.

As a practitioner, I believe that moral panic theory would greatly benefit if the following questions were asked:

- How do media practitioners think about stories identified as moral panics?
- Do journalists/editors write/publish a story with the intention of launching a moral panic?
- What work has been done to demonstrate that moral panics attributed to the media as something negative are different from campaigning journalism that tends to be regarded in a positive light?
- Does calling an episode a moral panic simply reflect the subjective or ideological position of the writer vis-à-vis a particular story or group of related stories?

Jock Young once argued, admittedly a long time ago, that it is possible for the media 'rapidly to engineer a moral panic about a certain type of deviancy. Indeed, because of the phenomenon of overexposure – the glut of information over a short space on a topic so that it becomes uninteresting – there is institutionalised into the media the need to create moral panics and issues which will seize the imagination of the public' (1974: 243). But my personal experience as a practitioner is that journalists start with stories, not with the desire to ignite moral panics. When considering the role of the journalist in the creation of a moral panic it is important to note that the identification of moral panics is almost invariably an *ex post facto* exercise. Of course, it is true that prior to publication or broadcast, the journalist can sometimes and to some degree judge whether a story is going to create a major reaction. But they rarely know the exact trajectory of any story, and generally have no idea whether the story will later be categorised as a moral panic, not least because the story has to go through several stages before it accrues that definition.

It would of course be fair to say that bias or exaggeration in the reporting and editing processes can result in news stories that can then be characterised as a moral

panic. Nor would I dispute the fact that there are newspapers whose reporting standards would lead to their stories more frequently being designated a moral panic compared to stories in certain other papers. But on the available evidence it is extremely hard to prove in specific cases that a moral panic is the *intended* outcome of a story, as opposed to simply a by-product of its publication.

The longstanding lack of detailed attention to journalism practice in the considerable literature on moral panic remains puzzling. The very title of *The Manufacture of News* (Cohen and Young 1973, 1981) suggests an account of the news production process, but, rather than studies of newsroom practice, what both editions of the book deliver, and very effectively too, are detailed critiques of numerous examples of biased and partisan reporting. As in Cohen (1972) and Hall et al. (1978) what we really have here are what were then new and radical ways of interpreting the social role of the media, and in particular their role in helping to maintain hegemony. This is particularly true in the case of Hall et al. Admittedly in their case this was nuanced, and they were careful to point out that ‘since the media are institutionally distinct from the other agencies of the state, they do not automatically take their lead from the state. Indeed, oppositions can and frequently do arise between these institutions within the complex power in society’ (65). But whilst recognising that the news media were not simply a department of state, and whilst providing various caveats to this effect, Hall et al. clearly saw the news media as, ultimately, means for maintaining the status quo. And this view, I would contend, has lingered on in certain academic approaches to the media, and to journalism in particular, in which there is more than a whiff of nostalgia for the Gramscian turn in media and cultural theory in the 1970s. While these are never clearly articulated there are frequent hints that the media join forces with each other and with the state in a conspiracy to deliver moral

panics. But whilst this may indeed be true in certain cases it always needs to be proved and not merely implied or asserted.

Exponents of the moral panic concept do not seem to take into account the fundamentals of newsroom practice at the micro level, and the production of the news is seen very much as a top-down editorial process. And yet the individual reporter can have a considerable influence on how a story is selected, reported and presented. Good journalism and good journalists catch the public zeitgeist often before the public have even articulated a concern. Part of the remit is to get stories first and hope that they will touch the public nerve. The journalist rarely knows how great a response a story will trigger (although it must be admitted that on occasion it can be fairly safely predicted). Every journalist will tell of their great scoop that fizzled out as a sudden and more important story dominated the day's news. This element is completely ignored by the discussion of journalism's role in moral panics, perhaps because it removes the 'conspiracy' element of the concept that emphasizes that the media manipulates the public. Manipulation requires malice aforethought, and time is rarely available in most news organizations for such conspiracy, nor is it thought desirable.

Changes in the media

I was a UK news journalist at the time that *Policing the Crisis* was written, and saw a reality which was much more diverse, complex and counterbalancing than Hall et al. would seem to allow. At the same time, however, I also saw the influence of the state on key parts of the media, from the BBC to national newspapers. In particular I was one of those who revealed the existence of the Foreign Office's Information Research Department, a large, covert Cold War propaganda organisation that was closely

aligned with the intelligence services and had an enormous impact on media output not just in the UK but all over the globe. (Lashmar and Oliver 1998), and who also revealed that MI5 had secretly blacklisted many people applying for jobs in the BBC, frequently on the basis of their political views, and on ‘intelligence’ which was often naïve or inaccurate (Leigh and Lashmar 1985).

However, the relationship between the UK media and the state has changed since the 1970s. In particular, many journalists have broken away from the state pressures on the news media brought about by the Cold War. Intelligence academics Richard Aldrich (2002) and Christopher Moran (2011) have both documented the increasing willingness of journalists in the mainstream media to challenge the state even on the previously sacrosanct grounds of ‘national security’. Additionally, by the late 1970s well-funded news organisations were prepared to support a healthy corps of investigative journalists pursuing stories that were genuinely in the public interest.

On the other hand, and far less positively and more critically, other changes, such as falling newspaper circulations, the rise of the Internet and the profusion of broadcast channels have made competition far more fierce than it ever used to be. The origins of these changes are both political and economic, in that it was the policies of ‘de-regulation’ and ‘liberalisation’ pursued first by the Thatcher government and then equally enthusiastically by ‘New Labour’ which created the situation in which market forces were let rip across the media. In terms of broadcasting, this made competition for audiences far more fierce than it had ever been before, and threatened to make it much more like the national press in this respect. In both cases, the consequence was a significant increase in the amount what has been termed ‘market-driven’ or ‘dumbed-down’ journalism or as Nick Davies puts it the “mass production of ignorance” (Davies 2008: 108). However, it also needs to be stressed that the picture

is not entirely bleak, and that certain news organisations – new and old – are still delivering high quality output and are prepared to undertake and fund investigative journalism which is genuinely in the public interest.

In his recent writing, Chas Critcher has attempted to come to grips with all of these changes in the news production process, in particular arguing against the oversimplification contained in the very concept of the *mass* media and warning of the danger of generalizing about the media as a monolithic whole. As he quite rightly puts it: ‘It is important not to elide distinctions between different types of institutions (broadcasting and the press); newspapers (up-market, mid-market and down-market); constituencies (local and national); and genre (hard, news and background exploration)’ (2003: pp.131-132). But even Critcher does not investigate the experience of the news practitioner and the actual processes by which news is originated.

In the absence of any academic engagement with practitioners, factors that practitioners would consider key to any understanding of the news production process are thus still absent from theoretical discussions of the role played by the media in the moral panic process.

Facts versus opinion

When analysing media coverage, theorists rarely distinguish between the role of the reporter and the role of the commentator/columnist/pundit, and yet the relationship between the two is very important for understanding the trajectory of a story. While reporters tend to be involved from stage one of the story, columnists tend to become involved only when the story has achieved some level of traction with the audience and wider public, although it does have to be admitted that this is not true in all cases

and that the increasing pace of news delivery of news has reduced the time between something being a news story and then the subject of comment.

On certain occasions commentators appear on the scene quickly, as in the James Bulger case – another story to have taken on the dimensions of a classic moral panic. The James Bulger murder story broke on 13 February 1993, and three days later there was an opinion-based piece by Melanie Phillips and Martin Kettle in the *Guardian*, headed ‘The Murder of Innocence’ and arguing that ‘the case of James Bulger exposes once again our society's growing indifference and our own increasing isolation. He trusted a stranger and now he is dead’. [The murder of Jamie Bulger has become iconic in the moral panics canon as a story turning, from a legitimate issue about children falling through every safety net which should have stopped them from becoming killers, into a moral panic about \(a\) ‘video nasties’; and \(b\) evil children. \(Thompson 1998\) \(Barker and Petley 1997\) and \(Petley 2011: 87-114\).](#) The reporter/commentator, news/views contamination issue used to be unique to newspapers but it has even spread into public service broadcasting where specialist reporters comment via blogs. Everybody, it seems, has an opinion, and not least when using the internet.

The audience

Thinking about moral panic in the way in which I am suggesting also leads onto a broader and yet again under-researched and under-theorised area – namely the relationship between journalists and their audiences. Journalists are keenly aware of their audiences because quite simply they depend for survival on fulfilling their requirements. When preparing their students for life in the news media, journalism academics teach them to be always [aware](#) of their audience. ‘Who is your audience?’

we ask, ‘What is your audience’s age, background and interests?’, and ‘Is your news report geared to your audience?’ A news agenda aimed at the eighteen to twenty-five - year-old age group may have to be very different from a report aimed at a middle-aged audience. And yet the impact of this approach to news-making is still an under-researched area.

When one looks at the *Express* or *Mail*, for example, one can see just how effectively they select material that will appeal to their audience. So when these newspapers run attacks on immigration, the EU, human rights, ‘benefit scroungers’ and so on, they are very carefully targeting their audience. Herein lies the \$64 million question: at which point is the journalist ceasing to inform their audience (which is journalism is supposed [raison d’être](#)) and is instead merely confirming and reinforcing their prejudices, either in order to conform to the paper’s ideological line or to deliver a story which the journalist knows will help sell the paper to its target readership?

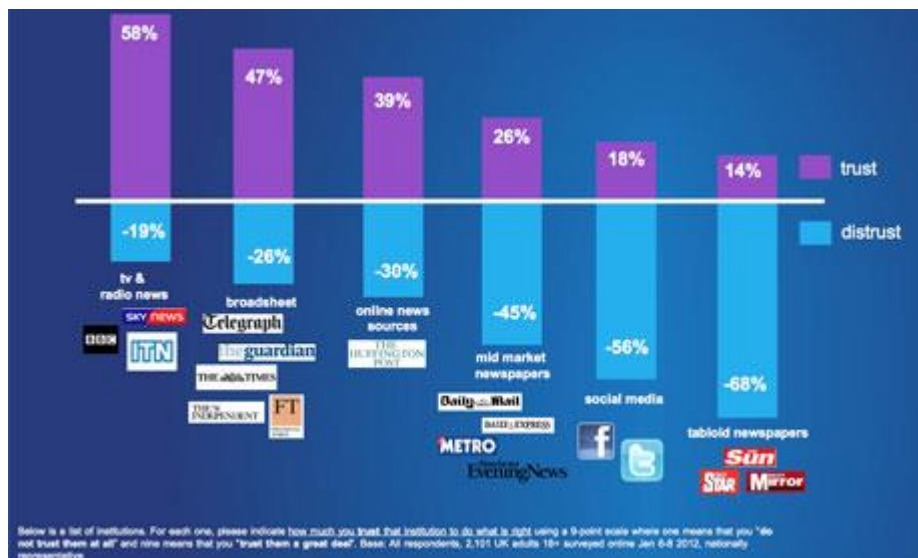
Journalists tend to defend their profession by stating they have a duty to inform the population by delivering the truth. Yet practising spin and bias and delivering stories which may be only partly true (or indeed wholly untrue) merely in order to appeal to your audience is simply not journalism. [Journalist, Richard Peppiatt, said in his evidence to the Leveson inquiry about his former employment at the *Daily Star*: “The truth \(and by this I mean a moral, as opposed to legalistic truth\) is treated with such flippancy, and their motivations so capitalistic as opposed to journalistic, as to be a prime example of the gross irresponsibility that has engulfed this country’s tabloid press, and for which I am ashamed to have been part.” \(Peppiatt, 2011, pg 5\)](#)

As gatekeepers, journalists make decisions about story selection and impose agency at every turn. It is of course easy to decry the [Daily Star](#) or *Mail* for these practices, but to a greater or lesser degree all journalists practise these techniques. For example, the

Guardian is very well aware of the interests of its readers. Are its stories selected in order to confirm their biases? How ready are the *Guardian*, *Times* or *Telegraph* to run stories that may conflict with their audience's beliefs and values, even if these stories are true? This area is under-researched and under-theorised by academics but is also ignored by practitioners, most of whom will simply argue that journalism is an instinctive process, thus avoiding difficult issues such as confirmatory bias and editorial power, not to mention the nature of truth.

The second point about audiences is that, once established, they rarely exercise their power in any orchestrated way. Every journalist is only too conscious that if the audience does not buy the newspaper its future is in peril. The audience thus has the ultimate sanction. Only once have I seen an audience exert real, if still limited, collective pressure on a newspaper. This was when, on 19 April 1989, four days after the Hillsborough football disaster in Sheffield in which 96 people lost their lives, the *Sun* used 'The Truth' as its front page headline, followed by three sub-headlines: 'Some fans picked pockets of victims, 'Some fans urinated on the brave cops' and 'Some fans beat up PC giving kiss of life', all thus alleging truly appalling behaviour by Liverpool FC fans. There was public outrage in Liverpool over what was seen as an outrageous smear and the newspaper was boycotted by most newsagents in the city. Many readers cancelled orders and refused to buy from shops that stocked it. The Hillsborough Justice Campaign also organised a less successful national boycott that nevertheless did have an impact on the paper's sales. [The question still remains as to who the primary definers were of the initial Hillsborough coverage. Did police brief the press to distract attention from their culpability for what happened? \(Scruton, Jemphrye and Coleman 1995\)](#)

Too often accounts of moral panic ignore the audience, and when they do acknowledge them they appear to regard them as [a lumped proletariat with more than](#) a whiff of the old Marxist approach here, with the audience conceptualised as monolithic, easily influenced, and sheep-like. However, there is considerable evidence outside the domain of moral panic theorising that audiences are plural, active, and have varying levels of trust and belief in the various different media which they use. In the present context it is particularly worth noting that there is evidence that newspaper readers are well aware of the differences in the trustworthiness of different types of newspapers. For example, an Edelman survey published in January 2012 showed that of the public sampled: 68 per cent of UK readers distrust tabloids and 47 per cent trust broadsheets



(Curtis, 2012)

Barnett analysed YouGov data in 2008 that showed that slightly more than six in 10 said that they trusted BBC news journalists a great deal or a fair amount. A little more than half gave the same response for Channel 4 and ITV journalists. At the other end

of the scale came the print journalists, with fewer than one in six prepared to trust red-top journalists, and only slightly more for the mid-market titles. (Barnett, 2008)

TABLE 1: The trust league
Public perception of how journalists compare – MARCH 2008

	% saying they trust a "great deal" or a "fair amount"	% saying they do not trust "very much" or "at all"	Difference
BBC news journalists	61	34	+27
Channel 4 news journalists	52	39	+13
ITV news journalists	51	43	+8
Journalists on up-market newspapers	44	49	-5
Journalists on local newspapers	39	55	-16
Journalists on mid-market newspapers	19	75	-56
Journalists on red-top newspapers	15	83	-68

For most of my career, journalists and editors have been acutely aware that the media outlet for which they work has a degree of cultural capital, in this case a reputation accumulated over the years built based on the quality of the journalism which it produces. Reporting which can be shown to be inaccurate or disproportionate lowers the cultural capital of the outlet in which it is found, and this can have serious consequences for the upmarket press in particular. It could be argued that this is not true of more downmarket publications, but it should be noted that Rupert Murdoch closed the *News of the World* precisely because the revelation of its reckless journalistic methods expenditure not only caused readers and advertisers to desert it but threatened to put at risk both the cultural and financial value of the entirety of News Corp.

Disproportionality

As we have seen, there are various models of moral panic, but common to all of them is ‘disproportionality’, the idea that public concern about something is not proportionate to its actual harmfulness. As Cohen puts it: ‘The very usage of the term moral panic ... implies that societal reaction is disproportionate to the actual seriousness (risk, damage, threat) of the event. The reaction is always *more* severe (hence exaggerated, irrational, unjustified) than the condition (event, threat, behaviour, risk) warrants’. However, he also recognises that critics have had difficulties with the notion of disproportionality, in particular asking:

Why is this just assumed? And on what grounds is the sociologist’s view always correct, rational and justified? Even in these limited terms, the assumption of disproportionality is problematic. How can the exact gravity of the reaction and the condition be assessed and compared with each other? Are we talking about intensity, duration, extensiveness? Moreover, the argument goes, we have neither the quantitative, objective criteria to claim that R (the reaction) is ‘disproportionate’ to A (the action) nor the universal moral criteria to judge that T is an ‘inappropriate’ response to the moral gravity of A. (2002: xxviii)

In Cohen’s view, however, ‘this objection makes sense if there is nothing beyond a compendium of individual moral judgements. Only with prior commitment to ‘external’ goals such as social justice, human rights or equality can we evaluate any one moral panic or judge it as more specious than another’ (ibid.). And, as he also notes, it is possible in certain cases to adduce empirical evidence in order to demonstrate that a panic is disproportionate to the danger posed by the cause of the panic. An example here would be having recourse to actual immigration figures in order to dispute the claim that the country is being ‘flooded’ by immigrants.

However, the question remains: how do journalists judge proportionality? This has not been asked. No one would of course disagree that media reporting is sometimes exaggerated or disproportionate. Some media moral positions are so contrived and attention-seeking that it has become common among certain comedians to satirise the media, and the experts and politicians on whom they draw, for their moral attitudinising, and to accuse certain papers of whipping up moral panics in order to increase their sale. And an excellent example of just how easy it is to whip up is provided by Chris Morris in the episode of the series *Brass Eye* (Channel 4, 1997), in which he gets various assorted pundits and politicians to inveigh against the wholly fictional drug ‘Cake’.

But who, ultimately, is the judge of disproportionately? We all have had the experience of thinking that something is disproportionate but how do we remove our own subjectivity and measure it, particularly if empirical evidence is unavailable or ambiguous? Again, as with the phrase ‘moral panic’ itself, can the word ‘disproportionate’ be a code for something which we don’t like for ideological or other reasons? Indeed, even empirically demonstrated cases of moral panics are all too rare. As Critcher notes of the study by Williams and Dickinson (1993) of newspaper crime reporting: ‘[This] is an example of a comparatively rare effort in moral panic analysis: to trace how far media coverage, in this case readership of particular newspapers, has discernible effect on how audiences view their social experience’ (2006: 190).

Iconic and signal moments

Another aspect of journalism practice that does not seem recognised by moral panic theorists are what I would describe as iconic and signal moments and how these interact with moral panics.

Cohen argues in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* that the media, police, local authorities, courts and the public overreacted to what was really a limited case of anti-social behaviour. He may well be right, and it could be an acute case of what moral panic theorists tend to call the 'deviancy amplification spiral'. But this jars with the fact that whenever the emergence of modern youth culture in the UK is discussed in print or on television it is usually illustrated by photographs of Mods and Rockers in confrontation. What happened on those beaches between 1964 and 1966 was an iconic moment in the development not simply of youth culture but of British society. If, as Cohen suggests, the conflict was minimal and was blown out of all proportion by the media and the authorities, why does it remain so iconic in the collective memory? Are these images iconic only because they are the product of a moral panic? Or are these images iconic because they capture a signal moment in time? These are obvious questions, but Cohen does not tackle them.

Journalists, on the other hand, are very aware of capturing the iconic or signal moment. They recognise that a particular event can represent to the public an important social or cultural moment. Therefore the fact that an event is a one-off, or part of a series of linked events which is happening for the first time, does not make media coverage of it automatically disproportionate or moral panic-inducing. It may be symbolic of an important new trend in society, and the journalist works with the first draft of history not knowing which way it is heading.

Moral concern

The very phrase ‘moral panic’ is problematic, as Cohen himself admits, ‘because of its connotation with irrationality and being out of control (2002: xxvii). As de Young puts it: ‘The term “moral panic” has the most unfortunate tendency to conjure up images of folks frantically fending off more demons than hell can hold (2004: 1) Nor has it helped that the phrase has passed into certain areas of journalistic discourse where its ‘loose and often ironic use has compounded the term’s original ambiguities.’(Cricher 2003, 132) ‘Panic’ is a colourful and exaggerated term used to make a point. But it needs to be noted that there are many media reports that create moral concern, and that the term ‘moral concern’ is quite different from and has none of the pithiness or rhetorical impact of ‘moral panic’.

The phrase ‘moral panic’ may be a very convenient form of rhetorical shorthand but it may have served its time unless it can be fitted into a more nuanced, and also more empirically informed, framework. Thus I suggest the stand-alone concept of moral panic needs to be replaced by a continuum of moral concern, which allows for factors such as disproportionality and panic but also justified moral indignation and outrage. It must also recognise, however, that one person’s moral panic is another person’s real concern, and that much great campaigning journalism is motivated by moral concerns. But what is it that makes one example of campaigning journalism an invitation to moral panic, and another an exposé of a social evil? Does our assessment depend simply on our political and ideological perspective? This was a problem addressed, albeit in a different context by former senior journalist at *The Times* and now Head of Journalism at City University, George Brock, in his 2010 inaugural lecture in which he warned of the increased use of ‘synthetic’ moral indignation by certain media outlets. In his view, this is poor journalism because it

devalues the outlets' moral capital and does not resonate with the public, thus jeopardising and undermining the very existence of the outlets in question

Baby P: a case of moral panic?

As we have seen, the concept of moral panic is a very elastic one, and the term has often been used loosely and inconsistently. So, in an attempt to answer some of the points raised above, let us examine the case of Baby P as a possible moral panic.

Baby P was a seventeen-month-old boy who died in Haringey, North London after suffering more than fifty injuries over an eight-month period, during which he was repeatedly seen by Haringey Children's Services and NHS health professionals. He was eventually killed by his mother's boyfriend. Baby P's identity, Peter Connelly, was eventually revealed when his killers were named after the expiry of a court anonymity order on 10 August 2009.

However, the story as reported in the media, and especially sections of the press, rapidly came to be more about the incompetence of social workers rather than the degeneracy of a society where a child can be so brutally treated. [Moral panic theorists suggest that](#) the social workers concerned (and, by extension, social workers in general) came to be represented as 'folk devils'. It has been suggested that the Baby P case was a moral panic in which the media response to a dreadful event was nonetheless disproportionate and with the wrong emphasis. ["Stan Cohen, sociologist and author of the classic study Folk Devils and Moral Panics, suggests that the Baby P story bears all the hallmarks of a classic moral panic. Not because it isn't shocking, but as the attention is fixed on social workers, it switches attention from moral issues to technical decisions about risk \(who should have intervened at this stage rather than](#)

that?) as a way of getting rid of our anxiety. (Karpf 2008) It is worth noting here that idea that social workers are demonised during societal failures is not new and there is a considerable literature on this point. (Franklin and Parton, 1991)

Moral panic theorists suggest that the media focus of the Baby P case was directed on the wrong issues. It may be that the *Mail*, *Express* and *Sun* may have deep ideological dislike of social workers but does that make social workers the wrong target of media attention in this case? Or were they an integral part of the wider problem? In order to address some these issues I thought it would provide a different perspective to talk to practitioner, in light of the central theme of this chapter, who reported in depth on the Baby P story and was critical of the actions of social workers. I interviewed James Oliver, a former colleague and the BBC *Panorama* producer who made two award-winning programmes on Baby P.²

Why did the death of Peter Connelly become such a big story? Oliver responded:

A small boy is dead. A small boy might have been murdered. The police are investigating whether the small boy was murdered by his mother, her boyfriend and a second man. This alone would almost certainly make the national press under normal circumstances. But it would not necessarily say much about our society other than there is cruelty and child abuse in it. The tabloids would cover it extensively, TV news less extensively, and it might be covered by a documentary on Channel 5.

However, he added, the fact that the boy was on the local authority's At Risk register made it a much bigger story, one that justified attention being focussed on the social workers in the case:

² *Panorama* BBC1 hat Happened to Baby P? Transmission date: 17/11/2008 and Baby P: The Whole Truth? Transmission date 04/05/2009

The story immediately has the potential to become much bigger. Why? - because immediately there are questions to answer. If a child who is on the At Risk register is murdered, then something has almost certainly gone wrong. It doesn't mean anyone could necessarily have done anything more to prevent it, or that the decisions made were wrong. But the net result was a dead child, where the state was involved in the role of that child's protector. So this story now has legs.

But why, I asked, did this story become [quite so well covered](#)? Why does *this* dead child become so significant when, sadly, there are many other dead children out there? Why does this one become iconic, and not the others? 'Because', replied Oliver, 'of another murdered child, Victoria Climbié'.

Victoria Climbié died in London in February 2000. She had been starved and tortured to death. At the trial of her murderers – her aunt and her boyfriend – and in the subsequent inquiry it was found that her death had been avoidable and that the local authorities, which included the London Borough of Haringey, should have protected her but had signally failed to do so. But the inquiry, headed by Lord Laming, did not confine itself to what had happened to Victoria, and made 108 recommendations for the reform of child protection, many of which were incorporated into the Children Act 2004. Thus, as Oliver pointed out, when it was realised that Peter died while on the At Risk register, it immediately raised the even bigger question of how a child care system which had supposedly been reformed failed him so completely:

When we started investigating Peter's death and how the child protection system was working we were told by government, the NGO's, the local authorities, that all was well. In effect that this was just the horrendous murder

of one child that had no implications for the system in place. But that was not true. The system was failing. Not only did it emerge that there had been systemic failures in Peter's case, but Haringey's social services were failing. And not just Haringey, Birmingham, Doncaster, and others, and even in those which were not failing we spoke to social workers who had major fears about the way the system was working

What is interesting about this perspective from a news practitioner's perspective (although it is important to note that it is that of a BBC producer, who is bound by much stricter editorial guidelines – particularly those concerning impartiality – than those governing the press) is that it very clearly illustrates why he felt the story to be so important, and also why he believed it vital to focus on the aspect of the story which concerned the social services, and social workers in particular. It should also be noted that never once does he mention the notion of moral panic.

Conclusion

The failure of theorists to engage with practitioners when seeking to understand the moral panic concept is surprising. That, in the forty-year-old canon of moral panic theorising, I cannot find any evidence of sustained interaction with news practitioners or any book or article which gives a news practitioner's perspective on the subject I find shocking. [Academics associated with the deviance school have interviewed journalists for a range of texts \(Cohen and Young 1973\) \(Chibnall 1977\) \(Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994\).](#) But there is no major work on moral panics per se that includes [practitioners' views or experience. Moral panic theorists are the first to cry conspiracy](#)

and bias when voices they deem important are left out of media reports. So why not interview journalists on moral panics?

Given the centrality of the media to moral panic theory the practitioners' view would seem to be well worth exploring. I would argue that experience on the news desk could reveal aspects of news production to which moral panic theorists seem oblivious. This would include observing that news production can on occasions be a bottom-up rather than a top-down process, particularly when the reporter identifies a new zeitgeist-defining event. I would also suggest that those who make use of the moral panic concept need to develop a better understanding of the news-making process in general. And finally I would like to re-iterate the idea of attempting to construct a continuum of moral concern, which would also involve devising an empirical framework within which to measure moral indignation, so that justified moral indignation can be distinguished from unjustified moral panic.

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