

## **The trouble with ‘media panics’**

*The concept of ‘moral panic’ – and the related term ‘media panic’ – is commonly used when discussing public debates about children, young people and media. In this article, we identify some problems with these ideas, and argue for a more careful, and more historically contextualised, approach. This is a shortened version of an academic article written with Helle Strandgaard Jensen, published in Journal of Children and Media 6(4), 413-429, 2012, where fuller arguments and references may be found.*

A few months ago, I was contacted by a radio journalist compiling a news item on a new UK government report about the ‘sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood’. ‘Do you think,’ the journalist asked, ‘that this is a just another one of those moral panics?’ The journalist’s question reflects how the notion of moral panic has entered the mainstream of social debate, not least within the media themselves. Like concepts such as ‘stereotyping’ or ‘bias’, ‘moral panic’ has crossed over from academic social science discourse into everyday terminology. Yet in answering the question, I was bound to hesitate. On the one hand, the use of the term ‘moral panic’ provides a handy shorthand means of dismissing exaggerated public concern, and arguing for a more rational and considered approach – an appropriately academic response. Yet on the other, such uses extend the term well beyond its original meaning, and beg some difficult questions about how we understand the nature of popular debate about children and media.

### **Definitions**

The most frequently cited definition of a moral panic is the one with which Stanley Cohen’s classic book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972) begins:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

Like Cohen, some subsequent authors such as Stuart Hall explicitly regard moral panics as a means of neutralising ‘threats to societal values and interests’. Moral panics become a means whereby the state persuades people to accept that it has to deal with threats to the social order through authoritarian means, and thereby preserve the rule of law. However, other analyses have focused not so much on the role of the state or of elites, but on a wider range of campaigners and interest groups who seek to take control of defining the problem and hence its potential solution.

Despite some differences here, there is a recurring sense that moral panics are symptoms of more general anxieties provoked by the rapid pace of social change. Yet panics also frequently entail forms of displacement: concerns about broader issues are typically transferred to, or more narrowly focused upon, more specific issues that can be used to mobilise support. And the figure of the child-as-victim is frequently invoked here. Thus, Philip Jenkins, in his study of moral panics in the UK in the 1980s, describes how concerns about pornography became focused on *child* pornography, concerns about homosexuality were focused on paedophilia, and concerns about the decline in Christian values became focused on the Satanic abuse of children. This displacement typically detracts attention away from broader underlying concerns, on which a wider consensus might prove more difficult to achieve.

### **Media panics and childhood**

Given the importance Cohen, Hall and others attach to the mass media in creating moral panics, it is hardly surprising that many scholars investigating children and media have found this term relevant and useful. Thus, there have been several notable moral panic analyses in this field, including Martin Barker's account of Britain's 'horror comics' debate in the 1950s, John Springhall's historical narrative of moral panics 'from Penny Gaffs to Gangsta Rap', and Ulf Boethius's analysis of the Swedish 'Nick Carter' debates at the beginning of the twentieth century. Kirsten Drotner has developed a more specific term to refer to panics specifically about the harmful influence of media: 'media panics'. Both terms are commonly presented as a standard approach to discussing public debates on children and media, although it is 'media panics' that are our main focus here.

The popularity of this approach in Media and Cultural Studies arises partly from its challenge to simplistic notions of media effects. By showing how adults throughout history have consistently 'panicked' over children's media consumption, it helps to prepare the ground for a more positive account, both of popular culture and of children's engagement with it. Thus, panics over new media are seen to recur, both across time and across different cultural contexts. Studies of children and media (including my own) frequently begin by tracking back through history, from contemporary concerns about the internet or video games to earlier fears about the influence of television and the cinema, on to debates about music hall and popular literature in the nineteenth century, and eventually to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who excluded the dramatic poets from his ideal Republic on the grounds that they had a harmful influence on the young. As each new medium or cultural form emerges, it is argued, essentially the same concerns appear. While each panic may appear specific, the recurrence of similar anxieties is seen to indicate a broader underlying continuity. The panic about children and media is, in this sense, always and everywhere the same.

According to Chas Critcher, this kind of panic has four key characteristics:

[it] reworks the theme of the innocent corrupted by culture; the debate is actually about something else than it appears to be; campaigners often have

ulterior motives; and it is always bound up with anxieties about the state of social order.

Each of these characteristics can be seen in the application of this idea to debates about children's media consumption. In such debates, it is argued, the perennial theme of the corruption of childhood innocence is continually rehearsed and reworked. Yet panics typically involve a form of displacement: they are 'really' about something *other* than they at first appear to be. In the case of children and media, the panic is not ultimately about children or about media at all: it is *in fact* about much broader concerns about 'social change' – technological and commercial innovation, or even modernity in general. The ulterior motives of the debaters are to do with their desire to sustain their own social and cultural power, and the wider 'generational order'. According to Drotner, media panics are 'ideological safety valves whose effect it is to restore social equilibrium'; while in Springhall's terms, moral panics 'attempt to re-establish the generational *status quo* [and] act to prevent the undermining of cultural elites as a critical force'.

Yet while these ideas of moral and media panic remain useful in certain circumstances, they have often been used very loosely, and extended beyond their original application. In the following sections, we identify some fundamental problems with the use of this idea in studying children and media, under five broad headings.

## **Epistemology**

Academic studies of panics tend to see them as something exceptional, and distinct from the more general public debates that surround them. However, this distinction is frequently blurred when the term is used in more everyday discussion. Arguments that apply to rare, explosive outbursts of anxiety are somehow generalised to much more mundane, everyday concerns.

As we have noted, accounts of moral/media panics argue that they are characterised by displacement and disproportionality. Either the panic is not *really* about what it claims to be about, but is in fact about something else; or it exaggerates or misrepresents the scale of the phenomenon. Both positions imply that there is a reality with which the claims of 'moral panickers' can be compared. Yet without denying that such a reality might exist, there are significant questions about how we might gain access to it. This is most obviously the case when we are talking about an historical reality: for example, how do we know whether people were exaggerating the problem of 'penny dreadfuls' in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain? Even with contemporary phenomena, there is a danger of contrasting misleading popular claims with some kind of objective or proportionate account of 'the facts'. In some instances, there may be deliberate fabrication, but this is unusual: there has to be a core of plausibility if the panic is to be believed and to win support. So where do we draw the line between a proportionate, objective response and an irrational panic, and who is to do so?

## **Intentionality**

Moral panic theories do not necessarily imply intentionality or a process of conscious manipulation. On the contrary, a panic is often seen as a displaced symptom of more fundamental social problems that the participants are trying to solve, even if they do not necessarily realise this. Nevertheless, attention is often paid to those campaigners or commentators who are especially active in creating moral panics. On the one hand, we have the media, whose interests may be simply commercial: spectacular stories of sex and violence, and of deviant media practices, play well in the media marketplace. Behind the media, and in some cases overlapping with them, is the group that is often referred to as 'moral entrepreneurs'. As individuals or representatives of a certain group (religious, professional, political, socio-economic), these people are characterised as 'stage managers' or 'self-appointed moral guardians'. These actors are often seen to *deliberately* choose children as a victim group, in order to command assent to their wider position.

There is an implicit distinction here between people's declared motives and their *real* motives. Either such people are actively dishonest and manipulative, or alternatively they are deluded and suffering from some kind of false consciousness. While either or both might sometimes be the case, this argument appears to preclude the possibility that people might actually be quite sincere - that they might genuinely be concerned about what they say they are concerned about. Again, the concept of moral panics appears to begin by dismissing such concerns rather than seeking to understand them in their own terms.

## **Rationality**

The term 'panic' clearly implies that such reactions are merely emotional or irrational, and can be contrasted with a state of rational objectivity. This is of course a familiar form of 'us-and-them' talk, whereby those who do not share our views are dismissed as irrational or deluded. We are logical, while *they* are merely emotional; we carefully assess the evidence, while *they* just spontaneously panic; we see things as they really are, while *they* view the world in wildly distorted ways. Proponents of panic – the so-called 'moral entrepreneurs' – are thereby stigmatised or ridiculed as dangerously irrational.

As we have noted, moral panic theory is typically used in order to challenge simplistic notions of media effects; and yet in analysing the spread of moral panics, the news media are nevertheless seen to have substantial effects on public perceptions. These effects are again seen to bypass reason and to work on an emotional, even visceral level. This creates a problem: we might claim that audiences are not witless dupes of media, but how do we respond when audiences themselves, including children, routinely use such arguments about media effects? How do we respond, for example, when children accuse the media of encouraging violence among those younger than themselves? Do we dismiss this as a kind of false consciousness, or discount it as a rehearsal of what other

people (such as parents) have told them? Do we simply filter out such data in favour of more 'honest' or 'rational' statements that seem to support our pre-defined position?

## **History**

Part of the attraction of moral panic theory is based on a kind of retrospective condescension towards the past. It deals with phenomena that, with the wisdom of hindsight, often seem entirely ludicrous. It is amusing to show how Victorian moralists were concerned about the libidinous desires apparently provoked by waltzing; how early film censors prohibited the merest hint of sexuality, and insisted that actors in bedroom scenes kept one foot firmly on the floor; or how teachers in the 1950s were alarmed by the influence of superhero comics. The ridicule is all the more enjoyable if one can show that something that was feared in the past is viewed as completely innocent today. As we have noted, this process is seen as cyclical and unchanging: old media fade into acceptable respectability, while the new medium assumes the role of deviant subject or scapegoat. This volatility itself shows the fundamental delusion of media panics: if today's mainstream medium was yesterday's pariah, then today's pariah will be accepted tomorrow. This comparison with the errors of the past thus provides a useful means of identifying the disproportionate or irrational behaviour of the present.

Yet this approach is 'presentist' in the sense that it projects present-day values or interpretations onto past events. Texts from the past are read through the lens of contemporary concerns, using contemporary critical methods that appear to show that earlier readers were simply *wrong*. There is also an element of historical oversimplification here. The claim that Plato is making essentially 'the same' argument as a contemporary critic of media like Sue Palmer, for example, appears to confirm the implication that Palmer is merely reactionary, while simultaneously implying that both are wrong. Yet the implication that 'it was ever thus' – that people have always made these kinds of claims about the harmful impact of media – does not in itself imply that such claims are necessarily false: indeed, if such claims keep recurring, one might just as well argue that there must be some truth in them. What is typically lacking here is a strong sense of the historical context in which such claims were made, and why they were being made by those people in that way at that time. The past is judged from the perspective of the present, as though such concerns were merely timeless – and indeed timelessly wrong.

## **Politics**

As we have seen, theories of moral panics tend to regard them as instruments of social control. In the case of panics about children and media, these are accordingly seen as a means of reasserting *adult* authority – or the 'generational order' - although this is often tied to a more general form of cultural elitism. Those who create or sustain such panics are implicitly condemned as anti-modernist, reactionary or conservative (and perhaps

even anti-democratic): they are seen to be merely *using* the moral panic as a means to sustain their own social power.

However, empirical research suggests that public debates on such issues are more diverse, and less monolithic, than moral panic theories tend to suggest. 'Folk devils' can organise and fight back, using self-help and interest groups to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about themselves. The media also typically represent a broader range of competing perspectives; and audiences are also more sceptical, and interpret moral panic narratives in very diverse ways. These arguments are obviously even more readily applicable in the age of 'social media', where the possibilities for debate are in some respects much more extensive. The result here is that the outcomes of moral panics may prove more contradictory: they are not necessarily effective in reasserting social control. In relation to panics about children and media, this should lead us to question the notion of a monolithic 'generational order', and to explore more closely the diverse and competing discourses about childhood that may be in play.

### **Beyond the binaries**

Taken together, these points all imply that we need a more nuanced analysis of moral panics, and of media panics more specifically. Such analysis would need to take account of the full range of arguments that tend to circulate in this area. Self-evidently, moral panics focus on threats and dangers. In the case of children and media, this results in what some would see as an exaggerated emphasis on the potential harm the media might cause to children – or alternatively on the ways in which they might lead children to cause harm to others. Equally self-evidently, this focus leads to a neglect of *positive* accounts of the role of the media in children's lives. Yet at any given moment, such positive accounts are likely to co-exist with negative ones. In addition to hearing about the dangers of exposure to sex and violence, we are also used to hearing about the educational and even cultural value of some forms of media for children. What is inappropriate is necessarily defined in contra-distinction to what is appropriate, wholesome or good for children. These positive accounts may well also reflect power relationships between adults and children: adult power is manifested not only in the wish to 'protect' children but also in the desire to 'do them good'.

Thus, historical research suggests that the advent of new media technologies is often accompanied, not just by fears about their harmful effects but also by utopian claims about the benefits they will bring. My own research about the history of children's television in the UK suggests that at any given time, the public debate on such issues is criss-crossed by a range of competing perceptions of the child audience. This diversity is particularly apparent at present in respect of digital technologies. On the one hand, we find powerfully voiced concerns about the impact of video game violence, internet pornography and paedophiles online; yet on the other, we have a wave of powerful rhetoric about the social, educational and psychological benefits of computers for children. The positive arguments are equally tied up with generalised views of childhood – as in notions of 'digital natives' or the 'net generation' – although these are ones that emphasise children's competence, autonomy and power, rather than their status as

victims. The ambivalence and complexity of these debates is something that moral panics theory appears ill-equipped to understand.

More broadly, we need to ensure that analyses of such debates take proper account of the historical and cultural contexts in which they arise. We need to explain why *these* people make *these* arguments at *this* time, rather than seeing them as somehow timeless or irrational; and we need to understand why and how debates evolve over time. And in doing so, we might begin by assuming that the positions people take up in these debates can be understood as reasonable (rather than devious or hysterical), for instance in the light of their professional background or political convictions.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that the concept of moral or media panic is in danger of being over-extended and mis-applied, to the point where it has ceased to carry much meaning – beyond signalling that it refers to a set of arguments with which we happen to disagree. It might be comforting to distinguish between lazy popular uses of the term and its more rigorous application in academic research, although such distinctions might not be so straightforward. Spectacular, intense outbursts of anxiety about children and media do undoubtedly occur from time to time, and they are certainly worthy of study. However, there is reason to doubt the claim that they should be seen as typical of public debates in this area: they are special cases and they need to be understood as such.

However, as researchers, we do not necessarily have the luxury of standing outside these debates about children and media, studying them with our dispassionate analytic eye. We are also called upon to participate in them – and indeed we have a responsibility to do so. In this context, ‘moral panic’ has become a household term. It is not just an academic label to characterise public debate, but a charge that can be used in the cut-and-thrust of public debate itself. This raises in turn the question of how academic work and public debate (and ultimately public policy) are, and should be, related. Rather than simply standing back and analysing moral panics, we need to find more effective ways of intervening, in order to ensure that public debates on these issues are better informed by the available evidence.

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