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THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MORAL
PANICS

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Abstract

In a society, wherein journalists, detectives, and individuals co-exist within a diverse cultural system, consideration of the relationship between media, society, and criminology is of paramount importance. This article begins by understanding the news-making process, and examining how this process affects the public in perceiving social reality. It also analyzes the interactions between the media and the public, and the role of the media, particularly the news media outlets, in the construction of moral panics with examples of media reporting of moral panics from before the coinage of the term through to more contemporary examples. The term moral panic is a sociological concept which has been adopted broadly both by the mass media and in everyday usage to refer to a magnified reaction to almost all anti-social behaviours. It has recently become a subject of widespread debate since Stanley Cohen's seminal work *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* where he defines the concept as occasional events which subject society to bouts of moral panics, laying a particular stress on the mass media as an "especially important carrier and producer of moral panics". These episodes might be relatively trivial or routine but are fashioned, sensationalized, and publicized by the mass media. Such publicity eventually results in the accretion of general anxiety and concern about these episodes. So, this article focuses on moral panic as a magnified reaction to a sort of behaviour that is believed to be a social problem.

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1. Introduction

The growth of the mass media particularly television since the beginning of 20th century has been tremendous, and therefore their influences on society's norms and values have become apparent. The mass media, as Ray Surette (2015, p. 32) contends, have become an essential social factor in defusing thematic messages and warnings about those whose actions and behaviours are seen as a threat to social values and principles. According to Donna Killingbeck (2001, p. 189), in a single year 1987 one quarter of all prime time shows pertained to crimes whether factual or in forms of entertainment. Both the entertainment and news media have considerable impacts on raising public anxieties, particularly the entertainment media limit an inaccurate portrayal of reality and crime-related events through glossing over its causations. According to Jock Young (1971, p. 85), most of the time society fails to distinguish between fantasy and reality especially media's potential in translating the former into the latter. So in order to examine how moral panics are generated and diffused across society, it is essential to know the news-making process.

2. Problem Statement

Considering the enormous influences of the news media on the social construction of reality, it is very difficult to draw comparisons between entertainment and news media as the messages conveyed by both are remarkably akin to each other. Killingbeck (2001, p.190) asserts that news is basically created and developed on two models: the market model and the manipulative model.

According to the market model, society is of paramount importance; that is, the news agencies determine newsworthiness based on what is of interest to the public. Therefore, news is *reproduced* objectively and realistically. Conversely, in the manipulative model, the public is dismissed, and the news is determined by what interests the news agency owners. Therefore, news is *created* rather than reproduced under a strict manipulative model wherein the images of reality are distorted. Killing the 22-year old television engineer Peter Woodhams in England in 2007 is a good example of this news distortion. The leading British media outlets reported the accident in a quite sensationalized way. The Daily Express, for instance, reported, "Justice for Dad Killed Tackling Hoodies" (28 March 2007). Followed by the killing of the 11-year old school boy Rhys Jones in Liverpool, England in October 2007 and the Daily Mail reporting, "Hoodie who shot dead Rhys", the media whipped up a moral panic around the Hoodies referring them as "the Hoodie Culture".

According to Killingbeck (2001, p.190), news agencies do not fit efficiently into either model (market and manipulative). Rather, "they operate somewhere in the middle." However, Surette (2015, p. 62) developed the organizational model which holds components of both market and manipulative models, which is similar to the manipulative model in that news is selected according to the needs of the news agencies. The time frame and the periodicity of the events together with their suitability to the scheduling needs of the news agency owners play a very significant role in determining what should be reported. Since the organizational model remains in between the other two models, routinization, which is considered as one of the components of moral panic by Cohen (1980; 2002), paves the way for a threat to be portrayed by media in an easily recognizable form. Interestingly, in the routinization process, news agencies count on official sources of news which are respected and credited with providing reliable

information. This process, as Chas Critcher (2006, p.1131) puts it, symbolically reproduces the power structure because a great deal of news is produced which tends to support the status quo. It is important to briefly focus on the role of media's routinization in symbolically reproducing the existing power structure and gradually engendering moral panics. The panic over the Emos in Iraq is a good example.

The panic began after the media's reporting of Iraq's Moral Police statement condemning the 'emo phenomenon' among Iraqi youth since "it's detrimentally affecting the society and becoming a danger" (Trifunov, 2012). The media reporters then started to interview members of emo groups some of whom confessed "to have been sucking each others' blood daily" (Rudaw, 16 March 2012). Furthermore, the media outlets published the interviews under dangerously sensationalized headlines such as "Growing Vampires in Baghdad" or "Devil Worshipping" (Rudaw, 16 March 2012) which eventually led to stoning ninety teenagers (Trifunov, 2012).

Since one of the characteristics of newsworthiness is unpopularity, crime constitutes a large part of the prime time shows simply because they are unpopular. This, according to Surette Ray, eventually results in dis-proportionality, the notion that the existing threat is much more important or dangerous than it truly is. That is what Cohen determines to be one of the key elements of moral panics. According to Marsh & Melville (2011, p.14), Chas Critcher (2005; 2008) cites 25 headlines mentioning child abusers and paedophiles in a single month in the Daily Mail. This influx of crime waves, as Fishman (1978, p. 533) contends, induces public outrage which eventually brings about vagaries in policy from sentencing measures to society's level of fear. It also results in what should be regarded as newsworthiness; that is, a great deal of more important news is neglected because a symbolizing event is much more important for the news agencies than a piece of news which less likely seems to draw the public attention. Hall et al (1978, p. 632) argue that the news media do not intentionally divert the public's attention from more significant problems, Arnold Hunt (1997) argues that the result is the same; the root problems rarely receive attention.

3. Research Questions

One of our research questions is how does this new and challenging concept of moral panics emerge as a valid approach of investigating a phenomenon formally referred to as a "controversial debate"? While this present study diagnoses the phenomenon of moral panics, it is conceived that future research will be conducted to determine other occurrences of this concept, and whether it is suitable to various contexts such as those of the media.

The objectives of this study are: 1. to follow a series of events that started with signal crimes, evolved into moral panics, climaxed with legislative change, and then concluded with significant public backlash; 2. to identify and explain the concept of moral panics, which manifested in response to significant social anxiety. Finally, shifting media representations will be clarified in order to focus on the connection between the public and media channels in terms of what is reported and how it is reported. In order to identify, define and expose the role of moral panics, data was collected via an extensive search of media articles relating to relevant events contained within the prescribed dates and analysed through the method of discourse analysis. The significance of this research is not to simply to identify a phenomenon, but also to lay a foundation for future research by explaining its role in the relationship between the media

and the public, especially in regards to events relating to crime. This grounding will allow other scholars to explore different facets of the phenomenon more profoundly.

4. Purpose of the Study

This study attempts to investigate the phenomenon of moral panics, as well as the media portrayals of crimes and the way in which these crimes connect with moral panics among the media. Our purpose is to show that moral panics is a phenomenon which takes place when there are two particular panics over a distinguished issue or event. is to analyze a phenomenon occurring within the relationship between the media and the public connected to individually psychological issues or events. It intends to emphasize the shifting direction of the media discourse around the concept of moral panics as a result of public adverse reaction and different opinions. The challenging aspect of our purpose is acquired by the demand to introduce the idea that a moral panic is conveyed by conventional media, where each panic is claiming for as much investigation as possible in order for the society to remove the 'folk-devil' that has been associated with. Moreover, the present study aims at revealing that these crimes are being used to enhance or restore the fears related to moral panics focusing on explaining that is the stages and changes that may happen when an important event comes into the public's fear of crime attention.

5. Research Methods

One of the research methods employed in this study is discourse analysis as a qualitative research method that aims to disclose substantial structures, meanings and means of representation due to the nature of the analysed events. In this respect, on one hand, the combination of crimes, moral panics and uncontrolled media portrayals means that total content analysis will not provide a precise or sufficiently comprehensive illustration of the news that are being portrayed by the media in this present study. On the other hand, discourse analysis displays, connects and advocates interpretation over description as a means of understanding the social context, as the media act as a channel for information between the intensive social controllers and the disseminated public opinion. Therefore, the social context (in our case the social environment of the Iraqi youth) becomes important to determining the way in which the media is reacting to certain groups within society. All these are important for interpreting the conscious and unconscious efforts made by the media to sensationalise stories that they wish to promote, and to dissimulate factors which question the legitimacy of their reporting practices. The chosen method of data collection combined with internet searches, also interacts well with discourse analysis, as identifying key themes within each 'phase' of the moral panics timeline are of utmost importance in explaining the phenomena of moral panics and shifting media portrayals of parallel events.

6. Findings

The term moral panics is used to feature the reaction of the media and society together with moral entrepreneurs to youth delinquency. It is essential to remember Jock Young and Stanley Cohen as pioneers in youth deviance studies. In his book, *The Drugtakers*, Jock Young (1971) demonstrates the ideological role of the news media in actively constructing meanings rather than reflecting the already

existing public opinions. He also explicates how the moral panics over the drugtakers led to the accretion of police drug groups which eventually underlay more drug-related arrests. Likewise, in his seminal work *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1980) which involves the Mods and Rockers, Cohen explains the role of the mass media in amplifying these groups' deviant behaviours which eventually caused society to see these groups as a threat to social values. Thus, it becomes clear that moral panics are formed as a result of the influences of the mass media together with the agents of social control. As expected, the only reason is that the media has a major role (this being balanced through personal experience – statistically questionable, especially when affected by violent or sexual crimes) in how the public gain its information regarding condemning issues or events (National School Safety Center, 2001). Intrinsically, the emphasis introduced by the media is often taken as fact. The main purpose of this study is to expose how media portrayals of these events are misrepresented in order to dominate public discourse.

Labelling an unseal event is one of the key elements of moral panics. That is, someone, a group of people, or something is defined as a threat to society's central values or interests and labelled in the way the news agencies favour. It is worth mentioning that the mass media, as Stuart Hall et al (1978, p. 32) suggest, function as both the *definer* and the *distorter* of social reactions. Chas Critcher argues that even defining the threat is not needed because it is obtained through stereotyping. This is where the mass media behave in a very independent way. For instance, in the 1970s mugging was a subject of widespread debate in the UK because it was portrayed by the news media as a new social threat. The historian Geoffrey Pearson (1983, p. 86) argues that the crime 'mugging' was not new, especially for the UK, only the label was, for it is the same as 'garroting', which dates back to the 1850s. Interestingly, the media's reaction to garroting at that time was similar particularly in that it amplified concerns over this crime. The Punch Magazine, for instance, launched an anti-garroting movement promoting the use of various unusual anti-robbery devices such as patent anti-garrote overcoat and spiked metal collars. There was also a rise in the security business with people advertising their services such as the Bayswater Brothers whose "height is respectively 6 feet and 4 inches, and 6 feet 11, and the united breadth of whose shoulders extends to as much as 3 yards, 1 foot, 5 inches" (Marsh & Melville, 2009, p. 59).

Moreover, after the threat has been defined or labelled, the mass media limn it in an easily recognizable form which eventually fosters public anxiety. According to Hall et al. (1978) the media function as secondary definers because they receive their news and information from the primary definers of social reality which are usually authoritative institutions (as cited in Killingbeck, 2001, p.187). The panics over the Emos in Iraq as explained earlier fits this type. The mass media then magnify the existing threat to the social order which, as Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009, p.18) suggest, eventually results in the diffusion of the threat across society.

Public anxiety is often amplified by the media's role in making the threat symbolize and crystallize a wider threat. A good example is paedophilia. In the late 1970s, the term paedophilia was introduced in connection to child pornography and organized child abuse gangs. By the later 1980s, perceptions of paedophilia took another form and were likened to child abduction and murder. The panic surrounding child abuse began to grow which was fleshed out with some wider references by the news media. For instance, in the UK only in March 1998, the newspaper the Daily Mail alone published 25 headlines referring to paedophilia (Marsh & Melville, 2011, p. 14). Also, the publicity over accused Irish Roman Catholic priests of sexual child abuses and concerns over the infamous Belgium child molester Marc

Dutroux together with the sexual murder of the eight-year old Sarah Payne in 2000 caused a media orchestrated public outcry over paedophiles. Thus, the media coverage of paedophilia reached the level of what Cohen calls 'moral panic'.

Furthermore, social barricades, as Howard Becker (1963, p. 207) calls 'moral entrepreneurs' along with right-thinking people also play an important role in stirring up the public. When something or someone is seen as a threat to social values, the news media outlets sensationalize the event, particularly through tabloid newspapers (tabloidization). They then demand public intervention to put an end to their deviant behaviour. Howard Becker (argues that in order to put an end to the threat, moral entrepreneurs or moral crusaders try to rouse public opinion through the mass media in order for the threat to recede. For instance, when the media coverage of paedophilia reached its peak in the late 1990s, over 300,000 white-dressed people marched through Brussels calling for immediate reforms in the judicial system. Likewise, after the sexual murder of the eight-year old girl Sarah Payne in the UK, the British tabloid newspapers led by the News of the World and the Daily Mirror, launched a campaign to force the authority to change the sentencing measures. The News of the World published names and photographs of more than 200 paedophiles followed by the Mirror's headline "Hanging these bastards really is too good for them". Consequently, the press orchestrated panic stirred up the public and eventually sparked a series of brutal bouts on suspected paedophiles; even some innocent families were injured.

It is worth mentioning that sometimes moral panics are generated by the media through granting expert status to a particular group such as advocacy or lobby groups without considering their vested interests to comment on the existing issue. It is in this point, as both Cohen and Becker assert, that the mass media allow such groups to amplify the threat. Experts are less likely invited by the mass media to subscribe to the diagnosis of the issue. News media outlets tend to invite claims makers, among which interest groups are often found, as 'experts' on the issue. Philip Jenkins (1998) argues that this is simply because they share the same perspective. Thus, the threat, as Dr Thompson asserted in the Daily Telegraph (20 March 1991) is "promoted by a particular group in order to achieve a particular end".

A good example might be the shooting accidents in Birmingham in the UK in the late 1990s which were associated with black gangs. Claims makers together with political groups including both conservative and liberal analysts were invited by the leading news papers such as the Daily Mail and The Mirror to comment on the issue. They offered a racist explanation for the crime defining it as "black culture crimes" while ignoring the white gang crimes (Cricher, 2003, p. 137). Although this single factor explanation for the construction of moral panics seems to be so simplistic, it serves a significant role in perceiving contextual factors in constructing moral panics.

In Cohen's terms, folk devils blend into culture and life style which eventually leads the threat to represent a wider problem. The shooting incident in Birmingham was taken as symbolizing a wider problem; that is, no black youth have appeared as a threat to society at large. But because the mass media legitimized the views of claims makers and media made experts, the scope of the shooting was confined to the black people in the UK at large which eventually caused the black community to appear to society as what Cohen calls 'folk devils'.

7. Conclusion

Of the available explanations of the role of mass media, one of the most convincing notions is the idea that we live increasingly in a society which is fraught with fear, and with the presence of the news media our sense of risk constantly enlarge. When observing Stanley Cohen's second edition of the *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1980, p. 171), it can be concluded that sometimes moral panics take mythical forms or "chimera of the existing of those activities", this cannot be taken for granted, as Arnold Hunt puts it, that moral panics are unreal and generated by the mass media. Moral panics, as Allison Cavanagh (2007, p. 10) asserts, reflect social anxieties and concerns over certain actions that are seen as outside social norms and values.

However, the role of the mass media cannot be dismissed especially in that they often amplify these concerns in regard to both scale and frequency. These concerns are sensationalized and symbolized in terms of being a real threat to social values. Significantly, in the heart of this process the news agencies, in an opportunistic manner (Marsh & Melville, 2011, p.18), take advantage of moral entrepreneurs and claims makers who lay considerable emphasis on these concerns. They then reframe the issues in terms of solutions they favour which eventually elevate the threat to the stage of moral panic.

To sum up, it is important to honour Cohen for contributing that moral panics are timeless. They sometimes seem to have disappeared, but often reappear over time with new labels, as observed earlier as 'garroting' was branded a new definition 'mugging'. Finally, it can be concluded that, as Rob Sindall (1990, p. 29) observes, the only prerequisite for moral panics to recur is the existence of a medium capable of transmitting it.

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