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Rethinking 'moral panic' for multi-mediated social worlds

ABSTRACT

It is now over twenty years since the well-established sociology of deviance along with the emergent sociology of mass media produced the concept of 'moral panic'. The various studies of youth culture, drugtakers and the media reaction to these and other phenomena produced some of the most important work in post-war British sociology. This article argues that it is now time that every stage in the process of constructing a moral panic, as well as the social relations which support it, should be revised. It suggests that more attention should be paid to the consequences of the great expansion of the media and to the many more participants involved in public debate (including, for example, commercial promotions departments and pressure groups). We argue that 'folk devils' are less marginalized than they once were; they not only find themselves vociferously and articulately supported in the same mass media that castigates them, but their interests are also defended by their own niche and micro-media. Finally, the article suggests that what were more stable points of social control have undergone some degree of shift, if not transformation.

'Moral panic' is now a term regularly used by journalists to describe a process which politicians, commercial promoters and media habitually attempt to incite. It has become a standard interview question to put to Conservative MPs: are they not whipping up a moral panic as a foil to deflect attention away from more pressing economic issues? It has become a routine means of making youth-orientated cultural products more alluring; acid house music was marketed as 'one of the most controversial sounds of 1988' set to outrage 'those who decry the glamorization of drug culture'.¹ Moreover, as moral panics seem to guarantee the kind of emotional involvement that keeps up the interest of, not just tabloid, but broadsheet newspaper readers, as well as the ratings of news and true crime television, even the media

themselves are willing to take some of the blame. Sue Cameron, discussing 'new juvenile crime' on BBC2's *Newsnight*, asks, 'Is it not the media itself which has helped to create this phenomenon?'

Moral panics, once the unintended outcome of journalistic practice, seem to have become a goal. Rather than periods to which societies are subject 'every now and then' (Cohen 1972/80: 9), moral panics have become the way in which daily events are brought to the attention of the public. They are a standard response, a familiar, sometimes weary, even ridiculous rhetoric rather than an exceptional emergency intervention. Used by politicians to orchestrate consent, by business to promote sales in certain niche markets, and by media to make home and social affairs newsworthy, moral panics are constructed on a daily basis.

Given their high rate of turnover and the increasing tendency to label all kinds of media event as 'moral panic', we think it is time to take stock of the revisions, then consider the strengths and weaknesses of this key concept. Although both the original model of moral panics and the reformulations which introduced notions of ideology and hegemony were exemplary interventions in their time, we argue that it is impossible to rely on the old models with their stages and cycles, univocal media, monolithic societal or hegemonic reactions. The proliferation and fragmentation of mass, niche and micro-media and the multiplicity of voices, which compete and contest the meaning of the issues subject to 'moral panic', suggest that both the original and revised models are outdated in so far as they could not possibly take account of the labyrinthine web of determining relations which now exist between social groups and the media, 'reality' and representation.

THE ORIGINAL THEORY OF MORAL PANICS

Although the argument that media coverage can have an active role in creating deviant behaviour owes its existence to symbolic interactionist theories of 'labelling' (cf. Becker 1963; Wilkins 1964), it was the pioneering studies of Jock Young (1971) on the social meaning of drug-taking and Stanley Cohen (1972/1980) on the media-inspired confrontations between mods and rockers, and their edited collections (Cohen 1971; Cohen and Young 1973) which developed and effectively launched the concept of 'moral panic'. Not only did their studies explore how agents of social control like the police played a role in 'amplifying' deviance, but they developed a vocabulary for understanding the powerful part played by the media. This meant going beyond the sociological accounts which looked at patterns of ownership and control as signs of complicity between media and government. Attention

was now being paid to the ideological role of the media and the active construction of certain kinds of meaning.

In addition, this work explored how deviant behaviour was interactive rather than absolutist. It was more often the outcome of complex chains of social interaction than the product of young people with a predisposition, individually or environmentally, towards crime or rule-breaking behaviour. Finally this approach challenged moral guardians by suggesting that their overreaction was counterproductive. The media coverage of deviance acted as a kind of handbook of possibilities to be picked over by new recruits. Worse still, segregating young people away from the community created a greater risk of long-term social disorder since 'a society can control effectively only those who perceive themselves to be members of it' (Young 1971: 39). Overreaction, therefore, contributed to further polarization, though this might have been the desired effect, as Stuart Hall *et al.* (1979) later argued.

Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* is rightfully a classic of media sociology, embracing a greater degree of complexity than the many summaries of the work indicate. He acknowledges that social control is uneven and much less mechanistic than the model of deviancy amplification suggests. Indeed one group of respondents (drawn from the non-mod, non-rocker public) criticizes the media for over-reporting the clashes, while others describe how they came down to the beach to have a look at the 'fun'. Cohen has a sophisticated grasp of how these events fed into popular folklore ('Where are the mods and rockers today?' was a question he was repeatedly asked while carrying out his fieldwork) and when the panic had finally run its course and de-amplification had set in, the characters in this drama settled into history as recognizable social types belonging to a particular period, sometimes referred to, even by the agents of social control, with a hint of nostalgia.

HOOLIGANS, HISTORY, AND HEGEMONY

Engaging directly with the law and other rhetoric of Thatcherism in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, Geoff Pearson's *Hooligans: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983) focuses on the way moral panics often entail looking back to a 'golden age' where social stability and strong moral discipline acted as a deterrent to delinquency and disorder. However, twenty years previously, the same process could be seen in operation: the 'kids' were seen as unruly and undisciplined, unlike their counterparts of the previous decade. The same anxieties appear with startling regularity; these involve the immorality of young people, the absence of parental control, the problem of too much free time leading to crime, and the threat which deviant behaviour poses to

national identity and labour discipline. Pearson shows how, during the 1940s, there were scares about 'cosh boys' and Blitz kids and how, in the 1930s, there were a string of moral panics about the misuse of leisure time and the decline of the British way of life through the popularity of Hollywood cinema. Pursuing this chain of investigation back through the nineteenth century, Pearson argues that the nature of the complaints and the social response to them provides a normative and consensual language for understanding the turbulence of social change and discontinuity. The value of this historical study is to cast a critical shadow over any claims about the dramatic rise in violent crimes carried out by young people. Instead, it shows how moral panics in society act as a form of ideological cohesion which draws on a complex language of nostalgia.

The studies of Cohen, Young and Pearson show moral panics as acting on behalf of the dominant social order. They are a means of orchestrating consent by actively intervening in the space of public opinion and social consciousness through the use of highly emotive and rhetorical language which has the effect of requiring that 'something be done about it'. The argument about deviancy amplification is precisely that where such strategies are indeed followed by social and legislative action, they also reassure the public that there is strong government and strong leadership.

It is only with theories of ideology that the idea of the media's moral panics as defining and distorting social issues gives way to a more integrated and connective understanding of the construction of meaning across the whole range of media forms and institutions. *Policing the Crisis* (1979) by Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), University of Birmingham marks a turning point in this respect. They introduced a more Marxist and a more theoretical vocabulary to the terrain, which was more palatable to British sociologists than much of the structuralist and semiological analysis of the mass media which followed it, first, because it drew on the empirical model of the moral panic and, second, because of its concern for history and political culture. As a result, *Policing the Crisis* can be seen as bridging the gap between sociology and cultural studies.

Policing the Crisis introduced the Gramscian concept of hegemony to analyse the way in which moral panics around mugging and the alleged criminality of young Afro-Caribbean males created the social conditions of consent which were necessary for the construction of a society more focused towards law and order and less inclined to the liberalism and 'permissiveness' of the 1960s. This particular analysis of the moral panic shows it not to be an isolated phenomenon but a connective strategy, part of the practice of hegemony which enlarges the sphere of influence which Gramsci labelled 'civil society'. The moral panic then becomes an envoy for dominant ideology. In the

language of common sense, it operates as an advance warning system, and as such it progresses from local issues to matters of national importance, from the site of tension and petty anxieties to full-blown social and political crisis. The authors are alert to the complexity of historical and social breakdown which, they claim, can then be managed only through the escalation of the control and coercion. This begs many questions in relation to the scale of social control, but what is particularly important is the recognition that ideology is a suffusive social process, and that it is not a simple question of the distortion of truth, but rather that ideology is a force which works continuously through the mobilization of 'common sense'.

Despite the pivotal position *Policing the Crisis* occupies in the history of the concept of moral panic, the panoramic sweep of its Gramsci-influenced argument across the entire landscape of post-war Britain makes it more a work of classic neo-Marxist scholarship than a sociology of deviance. Critical response has thus been divided between those sociologists who take issue with the study's empirical claims, suggesting as Waddington does that

the evidence cited in support of the view that the situation with regard to crime in general and 'muggings' in particular was not getting dramatically worse, and in some respects shows an improvement, does not in fact support this contention. (Waddington 1986: 257)

and writers like Paul Gilroy who draw from the study a vocabulary for developing further an analysis of race and ethnicity, relocating *Policing the Crisis* within a more distinctly Cultural Studies perspective. (Gilroy 1987) More recently Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) have returned to the sociology of crime reporting and both responded to Hall *et al.* (1981) and re-visited moral panic theory as a whole.

As its title suggests, Simon Watney's *Policing Desire* (1987) looks not at crime but at so-called deviant sexual practice, taking the debates of *Policing the Crisis* further by providing a foundation for a better understanding of how controversial social and sexual issues become inscribed with certain kinds of meaning across a wide variety of media forms. Watney rightly points out that the gradual and staged creation of a 'folk devil' as described by moral panic theorists applies to neither gay men and lesbians nor people who are HIV positive. Instead there is a whole world of 'monstrous' representations. Since sexuality is subjected to regulation and control through a multiplicity of institutions each with their own distinctive discursive practices and textual strategies, moral panics are not, as some have suggested, the key to understanding fears and anxieties about AIDS. As Watney puts it

the theory of moral panics is unable to conceptualise the mass media as an industry intrinsically involved with excess, with the voracious appetite and capacity for substitutions, displacements, repetitions

and signifying absences. Moral panic theory is always obliged in the final instance to refer and contrast 'representation' to the arbitration of 'the real', and is hence unable to develop a full theory concerning the operations of ideology within all representational systems. Moral panics seem to appear and disappear, as if representation were not the site of *permanent* struggle of the meaning of signs. (Watney 1987: 41)

Classic moral panic theorists would ignore the daily endorsement (not to say enjoyment) of heterosexuality as an ideological norm and the consequences this has for those who are excluded. Policies and practices which are concerned with 'policing desire' do not, according to Watney, emanate from one or two centralized agencies of social control. They are endemic in media and society, and in this context the moral panic is best seen as a local intensification or 'the site of the current front line' rather than a sudden, unpleasant and unanticipated development (Watney 1987: 42). Watney suggests that our understanding of moral panics might be fruitfully informed by psychological models which seek to understand the ambivalence, excessive interest and even fascination displayed by moral guardians for the objects of their distaste.

Through considering the meanings which have developed around AIDS and homosexuality, Watney replaces the vocabulary of the moral panic with that of representation, discourse and the 'other'. In so doing, he is able to bring to his work concepts drawn from fields of psychoanalysis, film studies and cultural studies to produce a deeper account of processes of exclusion and regulation than that available in the traditional sociology of social control.

CONTESTING 'SOCIETY' AND 'HEGEMONY'

British society and media, youth culture and 'deviance' have changed considerably since the 1960s, and these historical transformations bring to light some of the theoretical and methodological limits of these various studies. In original moral panic theory, 'society' and 'societal reactions' were monolithic and, as others have already argued, ultimately functionalist. Similarly, Hall *et al.*, Pearson and Watney perhaps over-state hegemony and overlook the counter-discourses from which they draw and to which they contribute. In the 1990s, when social differentiation and audience segmentation are the order of the day, we need take account of a plurality of reactions, each with their different constituencies, effectivities and modes of discourse.

Given the kinds of moral panic to which they attend, it is problematic that Cohen's 'society', Pearson's description of collective memory and Hall *et al.*'s 'hegemony' exclude youth. Ethnographies of

contemporary youth culture (cf. Thornton 1995) find that youth are inclined *not* to lament a safe and stable past *but* to have overwhelming nostalgia for the days when youth culture was genuinely transgressive. The 1990s youth culture is steeped in the legacy of previous 'moral panics'; fighting mods and rockers, drug-taking hippies, foul-mouthed punks and gender-bending New Romantics are part of their celebrated folklore. Whether youth cultures espouse overt politics or not, they are often set on being culturally 'radical'. Moral panic can therefore be seen as a culmination and fulfillment of youth cultural agendas in so far as negative news coverage baptizes transgression. What better way to turn difference into defiance, lifestyle into social upheaval, leisure into revolt?

Disapproving mass media coverage legitimizes and authenticates youth cultures to the degree that it is hard to imagine a British youth 'movement' without it. For, in turning youth into news, mass media both frame subcultures as major events and disseminate them; a tabloid front page *is* frequently a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sociologists might rightly see this in terms of 'deviancy amplification', but youth have their own discourses which see the process as one in which a 'scene' is transformed into a 'movement'. Here youth have a point, for what gets amplified is not only a 'deviant' activity, but the records, haircuts and dance styles which *were said* to accompany the activities.

Knowledge of this youth-culture ethos is such that its exploitation has become a routine marketing strategy of the publishing and recording industries. For example, the 'moral panic' about 'Acid House' in 1988, 1989 and 1990 began with a prediction on the back of the album that launched the music genre. The sleeve notes described the new sound as 'drug induced', 'sky high' and 'ecstatic' and concluded with a prediction of moral panic: 'The sound of acid tracking will undoubtedly become one of the most controversial sounds of 1988, provoking a split between those who adhere to its underground creed and those who decry the glamorization of drug culture.' In retrospect, this seems prescient, but the statement is best understood as hopeful. Moral panics are one of the few marketing strategies open to relatively anonymous instrumental dance music. To quote one music monthly, they amount to a 'priceless PR campaign' (Q, January 1989)².

Following London Records' sleeve notes, the youth-orientated music and style press repeatedly predicted that a moral panic about Acid House was 'inevitable'.³ Innuendo, then full-blown exposés about Ecstasy use in British clubs, appeared in the music press for months before the story was picked up by the tabloids. By the end of August, many magazines were wondering why the tabloids were ignoring the issue, while others, confident of eventual moral panic, imagined possible headlines like 'London Gripped by Ecstasy!' or 'Drug Crazy New Hippies in Street Riot' (*Time Out* 17–24 August

1988). In September 1988, during the 'silly season', the tabloids finally took the bait and subjected the culture to the full front-page treatment. The government, Labour opposition *and* the police were keen to ignore the topic for as long as they possibly could, only belatedly making statements, arrests and recommending legislation. This moral panic was incited by a couple of culture industries (e.g. recording and magazine publishing) well versed in the 'hip' ideologies of youth subcultures.

In addition to the difficulty we have in excluding rather large social groups and industrial activities from accounts of 'society' or 'consensus', so we can't ignore the many voices which now contribute to the debate during moral panics. In the 1990s, interest groups, pressure groups, lobbies and campaigning experts are mobilized to intervene in moral panics. For example, the spokeswoman of the National Council for One Parent Families, Sue Slipman, played a leading role, on an almost weekly basis over a period of three or six months, in diminishing the demonization by the Tories of young single mothers for having children without being married.

One of the main aims of pressure groups is timely intervention in relevant moral panics – to be able to respond instantly to the media demonization of the group they represent, and to provide information and analysis designed to counter this representation. The effectiveness of these groups and in particular their skills at working with the media and providing highly professional 'soundbites' more or less on cue make them an invaluable resource to media machinery working to tight schedules and with increasingly small budgets. They allow the media to be seen to be doing their duty by providing 'balance' in their reporting. At the same time, they show how 'folk devils' can and do 'fight back'.

This phenomenon of becoming an expert, having been a deviant, has a long history in the field of serious crime, drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. However, the proliferation of groups recently set up to campaign on behalf or with folk devils and the skill with which they engage with media is an extremely important development in political culture. When Labour and Conservatives take the same line on law and order, arguing for 'effective punishment' and the need for the moral regeneration of society, many media are inclined to give voice to other, sometimes dissenting, groups. In the absence of an immediate and articulate response from Labour, such groups occasionally function as a virtual form of opposition to the government. A new political sociology, taking into account the prominence of the media, might fruitfully explore the precise sphere of influence and the effectiveness of these organizations.

This marks a series of developments which have occurred perhaps in response to the impact of moral panic theory itself,⁴ i.e. the sociologist as expert. At least some of the agents of social control must

have been listening when figures like Jock Young and Geoff Pearson were invited to add their voices to these debates, because in recent incidents where there have been fears that disorder or outbreaks of rioting might spread to other areas or to other cities, the playing down of the scale of such incidents has been a recurrent feature and a point of recommendation by the police in relation to the media.

Although moral panics are anti-intellectual, often characterized by a certain religious fervour, and historically most effectively used by the right, only a predominantly right-wing national press arguably stops them from being amenable to the current left. Of course, government is always advantaged, due to higher number of authoritative news sources and to institutionalized agenda-setting. But, there is always the possibility of backfire. For example, when John Major attempted to build upon the moral panic around 'single mothers' (if not initiated, then certainly fueled by government spokespeople because it helped legitimize welfare cutbacks) with his 'Back to Basics' campaign, the media, followed by Labour, deflected the empty rhetoric back onto the Tory party, turning the campaign into an ad-hoc investigation into the personal morality and sexual practices of Tory MPs.

The delicate balance of relations which the 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 panics theorists has undergone a process of fissure in the intervening years. New liaisons have been developed and new initiatives pursued. In particular, two groups seem to be making ever more vocal and 'effective' intervention: pressure groups have, among other things, strongly contested the vocality of the traditional moral guardians; and commercial interests have planted the seeds, and courted discourses, of moral panic in seeking to gain the favourable attention of youthful consumers.

This leads us to query the usefulness of the term 'moral panic' – a metaphor which depicts a complex society as a single person who experiences sudden fear about its virtue. The term's anthropomorphism and totalization arguably mystify more than they reveal. Its conception of morals overlooks the youthful ethics of abandon and the moral imperatives of pressure groups and vocal experts. In the 1990s, we need to acknowledge the perspectives and articulations of different sectors of society. New sociologies of social regulation need to shift attention away from the conventional points in the circuit of amplification and control and look instead to these other spaces.

MORAL PANICS FOR EVERY MEDIUM

Not only need the attitudes and activities of different social groups and organizations be taken into account and not subsumed under a

consensual 'society', but also the disparate perspectives of different mass, niche and micro-media need to be explored. Britain saw a remarkable 73 per cent increase in consumer magazine titles during the 1980s – the result of more detailed market research, tighter target marketing and new technologies like computer mailing and desk-top publishing (*Marketing* 13 August 1993). Crucially, the success of many of these magazines has been in the discovery and effective representation of niches of opinion and identity.

As seen above, moral panic is a favourite topic of the youth press. When the mass media of tabloids and TV become active in the 'inevitable' moral panic about 'Acid House', the subcultural press were ready. They tracked the tabloids every move, re-printed whole front pages, analysed their copy and decried the *misrepresentation* of Acid House. Some 30 magazines now target and speak up for youth.

Another area of development is the gay and lesbian press who are represented by several national and regional, weekly and monthly papers, magazines and free sheets, some of which have become sub-divided by age, like the long-established *Gay News* which takes a different editorial line from the younger, less political *Boyz*. Of course, these developments are very much dependent on the development of a 'pink economy' and the commercial recognition of the presence and persistence of high levels of gay discretionary income.

Despite their proliferation and diversification, however, the media are obviously not a positive reflection of the diversity of Britain's social interests. This is partly because there are large groups of people in which the media are not economically, and, therefore, editorially interested – crucially, the D and E 'social grades' which are categorized by the *National Readership Survey* as the unskilled working class and 'those at the lowest levels of subsistence', in other words, the long-term employed and poorly pensioned. But even here, there are glimmers of hope. The *Big Issue* is now perceived as the newspaper voice of the homeless. Other groups and agencies produce a never-ending flow of newsletters and press releases many of which are written in a house-style customized to the needs of the journalists on national and local media. So-called folk devils now produce their own media as a counter to what they perceive as the biased media of the mainstream.

Moreover, these niche and micro-media can even attempt to incite their own moral panics. Take, for example, two rival political groups, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the British National Party (BNP) – both of which have their own tabloid papers, which speak to their members and attempt to reach out beyond. In the wake of the election of a BNP councillor in Tower Hamlets in autumn 1993, the fascist BNP paper wrote hysterically about the lost neighbourhoods of the white working class and vilified members of the Anti-Nazi League (ANL, a branch of the SWP) as 'ANAL' scum. The SWP paper, on the other hand, recounted how fascism was sweeping the country and

full-out Nazism was just around the corner, due to the actions of their chief 'folk devil', not the BNP hooligan, but the police – those 'traitors' to the working class who gave the BNP the protection of the state. Both attempted to fuel violent political action with their respective moral panic discourses – arguably with a measure of success. This case suggests that moral panics, of this localized variety, are not necessarily hegemonic.

But one needn't turn to specialist magazines and newspapers to find the plurality and divergences of opinion that characterize today's (and probably yesterday's) 'moral panics'. Even the national dailies have dependably different stances. The paper whose tone and agenda is closest to 1960/1970s-style moral panic is probably the *Daily Mail*. During the Thatcher years, the *Daily Mail* practised and perfected the characteristics of hegemony, in a way which was in uncanny harmony with Thatcherism. It was a daily process of reaching out to win consent through endlessly defining and redefining social questions and representing itself as the moral voice of the newly self-identified middle class as well as the old lower-middle class. The fact that the *Mail* is the only national daily with more female than male readers – if only 51 per cent female – undoubtedly informs its respectable girl's brand of moral indignity. Hence, hysteria about single and teenage mothers is perfect material for a *Daily Mail* moral panic.

Tabloids like the *Sun* prefer to espouse an altogether different brand of moral outrage. With a topless sixteen year old on page 3 and a hedonistic pro-sex editorial line, their moralism need be finely tuned. But that doesn't stop them from being the most preachy and prescriptive of Britain's daily papers, with page after page of the '*Sun* says . . .' However, the *Sun*'s favourite moral panics are of the 'sex, drugs and rock'n'roll' variety – stories about other people having far *too much* fun, if only because the paper is set on maintaining a young (and not graying) readership. Moreover, these kinds of story have the advantage of allowing their readers to have their cake and eat it too; they can vicariously enjoy and/or secretly admire the transgression one moment, then be shocked and offended the next. When considering the way moral panics work within different publications, one need keep in mind that *Sun* readers take their paper a good deal less seriously than *Mail* readers take theirs. As Mark Pursehouse discovered in interviewing *Sun* readers, one of the key pleasures in reading the *Sun* is the process of estimating what part of a story is true, what parts exaggerated or totally invented. (cf. Pursehouse 1991)

In the last few years, the broadsheets have not only made use of more visual and colour material, they also seem to have adopted tabloid-style headlines to accompany their tabloid supplements. For example, the covers of the *Guardian* G2 section frequently sport exaggerated, sensational headlines. 'BLOOD ON THE STREETS': They're Packing Pistols in Manchester' announces a story about the

increasing use of firearms by young drug dealers on mountain bikes in Manchester's Moss Side (*Guardian* 9 August 1993). Given the more measured copy which follows, the *Guardian* would seem to be using this 'shock horror' language to lighten up the story – the capital letters signifying an ironic borrowing of tabloid style. But, as the *Sun*'s language is understood by many of its readers as tongue-in-cheek, the *Guardian*'s irony gives it an alibi, but not absolution. Moreover, these mixtures of outrage and amusement point to the 'entertainment value' of moral panics – something mentioned but not really integrated into previous models. (cf. Curran and Sparks 1991 for a critique of the 'astigmatic perspective' of accounts of politics and the press which overlook entertainment.)

In considering the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun* and the *Guardian*, we've found that each paper has its own style of in-house moralism. As the British press becomes more competitive, one strategy for maintaining healthy circulation figures is for a newspaper to cast itself in the role of moral guardian, ever alert to new possibilities for concern and indignation. It would seem that professional journalistic style, carefully attuned to the popularity of 'human interest' stories, draws on a moralistic voice which, for the purposes of variety, it is willing to undercut with occasional irony, jokes, etc.

Although the multiplicity of contemporary moral panics is perhaps best demonstrated in relation to print media, the same tendencies can be found in radio and television. Even with only four terrestrial channels, new definitions of youth programming have opened a space for counter-discourses. Television producer Janet Street-Porter, drawing on the cut-up graphic style of punk and indicating a new commitment on the part of broadcasters to take youth seriously, pioneered 'Youth TV' in the mid-eighties through her *Def II* series on BBC2. In keeping with this commitment several of these programmes were explicitly aimed at countering youthful folk devils and moral panics, particularly around drugs. Thus an informative and rational BBC2 *Reportage* programme on the use of Ecstasy in rave culture can be set against the much more traditional sensational and fearful *Cook Report* (ITV) on the same subject (1992).

MEDIATED SOCIAL WORLDS

In addition to unpacking 'society', on the one hand, and the 'media', on the other, the third consideration in updating models of 'moral panic' need be that the media is no longer something separable from society. Social reality is experienced through language, communication and imagery. Social meanings and social differences are inextricably tied up with representation. Thus when sociologists call for an account which tells how life actually is, and which deals with the

real issues rather than the spectacular and exaggerated ones, the point is that these accounts of reality are already representations and sets of meanings about what they perceive the 'real' issues to be. These versions of 'reality' would also be impregnated with the mark of media imagery rather than somehow pure and untouched by the all-pervasive traces of contemporary communications.

The media have long been seen to be embedded in the fabric of society. What may be constitutively new is the degree to which media have become something with which the social is continuously being defined. For example, characterizations like 'Mirror reader' or 'Times reader' often give us as good an indication of social class as the mention of a particular occupation. Social age and generation (rather than biological age) are played out in the relation between Radios One and Two or Capital FM and Capital Gold. Subtle differences of gender identity are negotiated when, say, a working-class woman says she dislikes all soap operas, preferring instead news, sport and nature programmes. Similarly, at the risk of being cliché, for a man to admit his devotion to the films of Joan Crawford and Judy Garland is, in some contexts, tantamount to 'coming out'.

At another level, the hard and fast divide between media professionals and media 'punters' seems to have broken down to some extent. The ownership of home video-cameras, the new space for broadcasting home video material on national television (in series like *Video Diaries*), the existence of 'right to reply' programmes, the possession of degrees in media studies all point in this direction. Audiences can be credited with possessing a greater degree of 'media literacy' than they did in the past. Also important here is the introduction of a distinctively amateurish (rather than professional) style of presentation, developed by Channel Four's *The Tube* in the early 1980s and best reflected in the 'fluffed' mannerism of its two presenters, Jools Holland and Paula Yates. Finally, the increasing reliance on the audience as a resource for successful television, either as visualized participants or audible internal audiences, seems to give a positive place to the audience in the process of programme production.

The strength of the old models of moral panic was that they marked the connection between 'the media' and 'social control'. But, nowadays, most political strategies *are* media strategies. The contest to determine news agendas is the first and last battle of the political campaign. Moreover, the kinds of social issues and political debates which were once included on the agendas of moral panic theorists as sites of social anxiety, and even crisis, could now be redefined as part of an endless debate about who 'we' are and what 'our' national culture is. These are profoundly 'home affairs'. The daily intensity and drama of their appearance and the many voices now heard in the background but in the foreground, punctuating and producing reality, point more

to the reality of dealing with social difference than to the unity of current affairs (cf. Hall, Connell and Curtis 1981).

CONCLUSIONS

What has been argued here is that the model of moral panic is urgently in need of updating precisely because of its success. While the theory began its life in radical sociology, the strength of the argument quickly found its way into those very areas with which it was originally concerned, influencing social policy and attitudes to deviance generally. As a result, the police, as agents of social control now show some awareness of the dangers of overreaction, while sectors of the media regularly remind viewers of the dangers of moral panic and thus of alienating sections of the community by falsely attributing to them some of the characteristics of the so-called folk devils.

Crucially, the theory has, over the years, drawn attention to the importance of empowering folk devils so that they or their representatives can challenge the cycle of sanctions and social control. Pressure groups, lobbies, self-help and interest groups have sprung up across the country and effectively positioned themselves as authoritative sources of comment and criticism. They now contribute to the shape of public debate, playing a major role in contesting what they perceive as dangerous stereotypes and popular misconceptions.

The theory has also influenced business practice, albeit through an undoubtedly more circuitous route. Culture industry promotions and marketing people now understand how, for certain products like records, magazines, movies and computer games, nothing could be better for sales than a bit of controversy – the threat of censorship, the suggestion of sexual scandal or subversive activity. The promotional logic is twofold: first, the cultural good will receive a lot of free, if negative, publicity because its associations with moral panic have made it newsworthy; second, rather than alienating everyone, it will be attractive to a contingent of consumers who see themselves as alternative, avant-garde, radical, rebellious or simply young. In the old models of moral panic, the audience played a minor role and remained relatively untheorized. With few exceptions, they were the space of consensus, the space of media manipulation, the space of an easily convinced public. A new model need embrace the complex realm of reception – readers, viewers, listeners and the various social groups categorized under the heading of public opinion cannot be read off the representation of social issues.

The moral panics we have been discussing here are less monolithic than those the classic model implied. Recent moral panics do remain overwhelmingly concerned with moral values, societal regularities and drawing of lines between the permissible and the less acceptable. However, hard and fast boundaries between 'normal' and 'deviant'

would seem to be less common – if only because moral panics are now continually contested. Few sociologists would dispute the expansion over the last decade of what used to be called, quite simply, the mass media. The diversification of forms of media and the sophisticated restructuring of various categories of audience require that, while a consensual social morality might still be a political objective, the chances of it being delivered directly through the channels of the media are much less certain.

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NOTES

1. Sleeve notes of *The House Sound of Chicago Volume III: Acid Tracks* released in January 1988 by London Records (a label of Polygram International).

2. This may not, in fact, be new. Perhaps the first publicity campaign intentionally to court moral outrage was conducted by Andrew Loog Oldman who, back in the 1960s, promoted the Rolling Stones as dirty, irascible, rebellious and threatening. (cf. Norman 1993)

3. Cf. 'New Acid Daze', *New Musical Express* (6 February 1988); 'Acid Daze', *Record Mirror* (20 February 1988); 'Acid Daze', *Melody Maker* (27 February 1988); Darren Reynolds 'Acid House', *Soul Underground* (April 1988). The repetition of the phrase 'Acid Daze' suggests the stories were PR led.

4. Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* and Young's *The Drugtakers* have been on the syllabi of many A-level sociology courses and university courses in sociology, social policy, social work, and more recently media studies.

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