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What is This?
Moral panic: From sociological concept to public discourse

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Abstract
This paper examines the nature and extent of news reports using the sociological concept, ‘moral panic’ (MP). Qualitative content analysis reveals that moral panic is commonly used in news reports in the USA, UK, Australia, and other countries, but it is more likely to be compatible with print (e.g. newspaper) formats than television reports. It is also widely used in literary and art reviews, editorials and op-ed pieces, often by social scientists. Use of the concept has increased over the last decade, particularly in news reports as part of an ‘opposing’ voice or the ‘other side’ of articles about deviant behavior, sexual behavior, and drug use. It is suggested that moral panic as ‘opposition’ fits the entertainment news format, and while this sustains its use by writers and familiarity to audience members, it also appears to be associated with certain topics (e.g. sex and drugs), but not others, such as terrorism in the mainstream media. Questions are raised for additional research.

Key words
mass media; moral panic; social control; terrorism

INTRODUCTION

This article examines how ‘moral panic’ (MP) has been used by the mass media in a way that is consistent with entertainment formats. I suggest that the logic of news formats accounts for the linkage of MP to news coverage of select topics, problems and issues about social control. MP refers to

a condition, episode, person or group 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 diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted
to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes visible. (Cohen, 1980: 9)

Unlike most sociological concepts, MP has been widely used by the mass media, particularly in the UK (McRobbie, 1994; Hunt, 1997), and the term is part of daily discourse. Anthony Giddens (1995: 18) referred to moral panic in an essay about the relevance of sociology for public discourse: ‘Many people, for instance, now ask whether a leader has charisma, discuss moral panics or talk of someone’s social status – all notions that originated in sociological discourse’.

And McRobbie (1994) argued that MP became so embedded in social policy discussions that journalists in the UK routinely question politicians if they are stirring up a ‘MP’. Despite its common usage, a review of materials suggests that there is a paradox of MP: on the one hand, mass media are credited with promoting MPs and contributing to exaggerated public fears that support social control efforts and public policy changes designed to reign in anti-social behavior associated with deviance, crime and social disorder (e.g. drugs, sex, gangs, graffiti) (Cohen, 1980; De Young, 2004; Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004; Costelloe, 2006; Millie, 2008). On the other hand, MP is widely used in news reports, especially op-eds and editorials, as well as alternative media (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995) that challenge such social control efforts.

Moral panic has been extensively studied and revised since Cohen’s initial work. Space does not permit yet another review of this extensive literature, but some of the key elements that are relevant for this project include an analysis of the process of MP (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994), an elaboration of the conditions under which a MP will or will not succeed (Cohen, 1980; Jenkins, 1992, 1998; McRobbie and Thornton, 1995), comparative overview of empirical generalizations and suggestions for future research (Best, 2000; Goode, 2000), and analytical insights about the perspective, stance and voice of those who project MP as an appropriate concept to ‘make sense’ of a societal reaction (Garland, 2008), including reflections on the morality of MP by Professor Cohen (2001). This work, as well as a collection of essays commemorating Stanley Cohen’s contributions, invites researchers to continue to analyze the nature, use and consequences of MP for social control (Downes et al., 2007). Young’s (2007: 64) forceful statement illuminates the challenge: ‘The notion of moral panic delves to the very heart of our social order; its occurrence is potent ammunition in the production of division, and it is subtle rhetoric in the fabric of legitimation’. My focus is on the communication process and logic by which MP has become newsworthy and ensconced in news reports, especially the ‘other side’ of efforts to condemn and regulate certain behavior, if not debunk initial claims about a moral crisis that reflect dominant ideology. An analysis of the inclusion of MP within the news framework entails an overview of news formats and the discourse of fear.

NEWS AND THE DISCOURSE OF FEAR

Entertainment-oriented news formats, including the use of ‘op-ed’ and editorial pages for audiences to express other points of view, help account for the expanded use of
MP in news reports. The importance of mass-media formats, as part of media logic, for news content has been developed by Altheide and Snow (1979). On the one hand, formats provide organizing news, while on the other hand, audiences expect certain programming and news material to look a certain way. The concept of MP is critical of claims about disorder that are carried routinely in news reports (Ericson et al., 1989). Gans (1979) found that US commercial news organizations tend to select items and events for news reporting that can be told in narratives that express ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership. News coverage of social disorder and deviance are features of this narrative, and the negative coverage of such topics are often cast in moral terms that reinforce social order (Ericson et al., 1987, 1991). Analytical terms and perspectives that question this narrative are seldom accepted in mainstream media (Kellner, 1995). Hunt (1997) noted that some journalists referred to the use of MP by UK news organizations in the 1980s and early 1990s as ‘sociologese’ of a left-wing polemic.

I argue that MP is used frequently in news reports because it fits well with news formats, which refer to the ways of selecting, organizing and presenting information, and shape audience assumptions and preferences for certain kinds of information. Since the mid-1980s MP has emerged from a counter-narrative to a news narrative that includes opposition or ‘other-side’ views, and is incorporated within news formats (e.g. editorials and op-eds) that are dedicated to offering different views on certain topics. The following materials illustrate how MP fits better with newspaper than with television formats, although both media rely on frames and familiar narratives that with resonate with audiences (Schwartz, 1973). Newspaper formats are more open for diverse views, and the major newspapers examined in this study had sections for ‘opinions’, ‘features’, and ‘reviews’ that accommodate a wider range of views and interpretations about events, issues, and problems. While UK and US television journalism differ in many ways, TV news formats are much tighter and limiting, especially regular news reports (Schlesinger et al. 1983; Altheide 1987). Moreover, national US news relies heavily on official or governmental news sources that seldom critique governmental policy or social control efforts (FAIR, 2003) and are not likely to frame an issue as a moral panic. Certain news forms have been developed as packages or ‘frames’ for transforming some experience into reports that will be recognized and accepted by the audience as ‘news’.

The fear narrative is a staple of the entertainment news formats (Furedi, 1948/1997; Altheide 2002a). The fear narrative described elsewhere as a discourse of fear may be defined as the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of the symbolic environment as people define and experience it in everyday life (Altheide, 2002a). MP has been associated with research on social issues, and especially social problems and deviance, that questions or challenges the fear narrative, particularly about certain individuals and topics (Cohen, 1980; Jenkins, 1992).

Fear of deviants and ‘others’ was the foundation for longstanding efforts to regulate and control deviance. Social constructionist approaches to the study of social problems
and emergent social movements stress how mass media accounts of crime, violence, and victimization are simplistic and often decontextualize rather complex events in order to reflect narratives that demonize and offer simplistic explanations (Taylor et al., 1974; Ericson et al., 1991; Best, 1995, 1999; Ferrell and Sanders, 1995; Johnson, 1995; Fishman and Cavender, 1998) that often involve state intervention, while adding to the growing list of victims. Labeling theorists (Becker, 1973; Lemert, 1962; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977), for example, argued that audiences and officials were implicated in social definitions of crime and deviance, on the one hand, while their branding of individuals had important social consequences, on the other hand. These consequences included promoting self-fulfilling prophecies whereby social stigmas (e.g. ‘criminal’) could not only limit social interaction, but also can promote self-identification with deviant groups, lifestyle and even future deviant behavior.

**METHOD AND MATERIALS**

A qualitative media analysis informed by more than 300 news reports illuminates how MP was presented in media reports, and was ‘socially constructed’ by various actors for several purposes (Cohen and Young, 1973; Cohen, 1980; Hunt, 1997). News reports were obtained from the information base, Lexis/Nexis, which contains thousands of media transcripts as well as government documents from around the world. We wanted to compare coverage in the USA and the UK, assess similarities and differences in TV and print coverage, as well as focus on different sections of the newspaper coverage (e.g. editorial pages). Selected materials were analyzed qualitatively with the use of ‘tracking discourse’, a qualitative document analysis technique that applies an ethnographic approach to content analysis to new information bases that are accessible through computer technology (van Dijk, 1988; Ericson et al., 1989; Weiler and Pearce, 1992; Wuthnow, 1992; Grimshaw and Burke, 1994; Altheide, 1996). The emphasis is on analysis of narratives and discourse involving key phrases and themes. Involving 12 steps, tracking discourse entails initial familiarity with a sample of relevant documents before drafting a protocol, which is then checked for reliability and validity with additional documents. Graduate students in a seminar, ‘Justice and the Mass Media’ (Spring 2008) compared national and international materials, suggested patterns of coverage, and helped develop a protocol to obtain data from selected articles about date, location, author, format, topic, sources, theme, emphasis, use and grammatical use of MP fear (as noun, verb, adverb). Comparative analysis of documents led to theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Altheide, 2002b) that focused on 25 articles containing key concepts, in particular formats (e.g. letters to the editor vs. front page reports). Selected materials were placed in an information base and analyzed qualitatively using a word processor and NUD*IST 6, a qualitative data analysis program. The qualitative materials help track how MP transitioned from sociological concept to public discourse over approximately three decades, and illuminate how popular culture can appropriate, redefine, and even misuse social science to denigrate,
resist, and promote certain problems, issues, and policies (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994), while also clarifying how science as culture relates to the rest of culture (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Miller and Fox, 2001).

MORAL PANIC IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

MP is one of the most successful sociological concepts in finding its way to public media. There are hundreds of web pages on which it appears, and hundreds of news reports throughout its 35-year history. However, the use of MP by journalists and others (e.g. in letters to the editor) varied widely in the years following Young and Cohen’s initial publications.

MP was tracked across Lexis/Nexis from the mid 1980s to 2007, and trends were checked against another major information base, Westlaw. This period was selected because the comparative information bases were more uniform during this period. Our information base (Lexis/Nexis) provides a way to track the usage of ‘moral panic’ from the mid 1980s to 2007. While most of our analysis emphasizes themes, the frequencies of reports in the United States (mainly The New York Times) and the UK (mainly the Guardian) are helpful. Other news media used moral panic, but The New York Times (NYT) and the Guardian were the most likely to present reports pertaining to moral panic. The following data record the number of moral panic articles (in US news and wires) and suggest that the usage of moral panic increased since 1985:

1. 1985–9: A total of 9 articles. About 2 per year;
2. 1990–4: A total of 21 articles. About 4 per year;
3. 1995–9: A total of 73 articles. About 15 per year;

For a total of 309. Of these,

1. 135 were in The New York Times;
2. 33 were op-eds and opinion;
3. 23 were reviews; and
4. the most common topics, events, and issues involved: children, teenagers, sex, drugs, fear, violence, pedophiles, priests, crime, violence, police, politics, and media;
5. the Guardian: since 1985, about 500 reports featured moral panic, but about 135 were not reviews, media listings and comments, and so on.
6. The Times of London: since 1985, about 40 articles referring to moral panic were not reviews, media listings and comments, and so on.

While most of our analysis emphasizes themes, the frequencies of reports in the USA (mainly The New York Times) and the UK (mainly the Guardian) are helpful. Other news media used MP, but the NYT and the Guardian were the most likely to present reports pertaining to MP, mainly pertaining to topics and policies about youth, sex,
drugs, fear, violence, pedophiles, priests, crime, violence, police, politics, and media. (Indeed, I will suggest later that mainstream news discourse connects moral panic to selected terms, but not others such as terrorism.) The use of MP in news reports increased steadily since 1985 in the UK (Hunt, 1997) and US news media. Since 1985, the Guardian has published more than 500 reports featuring MP, but two-thirds were opinions, comments, movie or book reviews and media listings, while 75 per cent of 150 articles published by The Times (London) were of a similar nature. US newspapers published nine reports pertaining to MP, or about two/four times a year from 1985 to 1994, but this more than doubled between 1990 and 1994 (about four per year). US newspaper reports featuring moral panic increased to about 15 per year between 1995 and 1999. Since 2000 (to 2007), the US newspapers we examined published 206 articles, about 30 reports a year. Forty-four per cent of these reports appeared in The New York Times. It should also be noted that the US media, like their UK counterparts, used MP in numerous book reviews and opinion and ‘op-ed’ comments, including many by social scientists.

MP was more likely to appear in print media, like newspapers, than in television news. The distinctive formats for various media clarify why MP is used with print media (e.g., newspapers) but appears less often in electronic media, especially television news reports. Analysis of several information bases shows that there were nearly 1000 reports that referred to ‘moral panic’, but newspapers claimed 934 of these. BBC commentators referred to MP in about 70 reports, but, with the exception of two CNBC broadcasts, major US television networks did not mention moral panic. (National Public Radio (NPR) featured 10 reports pertaining to moral panic.) This is quite remarkable and points to the closed and less reflective nature of US network news formats (Kellner, 2004; Bennett, 2005).

MP is used extensively in news reports – but even more so in ‘letters to the editor’ and ‘op-ed’ pieces – throughout the UK, Europe, the United States, and Australia; MP is also used as a resource – a kind of sociological ‘truism’ – to critique government policies and social control of deviance, especially sex and drugs; further, the use of MP in the news reflects a kind of ‘journalistic career’ in moving, over time, from more concept-specific usage to much broader and ‘looser’ usage that assumes audience familiarity with the term, and more recently to become its own trope and thematic for making critical points as it has become embedded more firmly in journalistic discourse.

FROM CRITIQUE TO PUBLIC DISCOURSE

MP was used in various ways during the observational period. As Hunt (1997) observed, in the mid 1980s MP was used as a cautionary rhetoric for avoiding, negating, and resisting claims about certain social problems and issues. MP became a negative term associated with numerous reactive statements and social policy proposals about sex, drugs, and crime, the very topics upon which Cohen’s work was focused. Consider an example about art and MP in 1989, involving threats from the Helms Amendment to withdraw arts funding if museums displays were inappropriate:
The Whitney ad, in the form of an open letter, was headlined ‘Are you going to let politics kill Art?’ Above the headline appeared a photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe, whose sexually explicit works helped spark the Helms amendment. The text declared that art ‘should be supported by government and protected from politics’, and urged readers not to ‘let moral panic and political pressure kill the Arts’. It asked them to get in touch with an appended list of Congressional leaders. (Glueck, 1989)

A few years earlier, MP was affixed to Margaret Thatcher’s plan to ban surrogate motherhood:

An opponent of the move said the government is in a moral panic and that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is backing the move to win votes.

But Professor Michael Freeman of London’s University College, a leading family law expert, observed: ‘It’s difficult to know why the government is getting into a moral panic’. (United Press International, 1985)

In 1989, there was this report about an increased use of heroin in Israel:

Ms. Hassin [a criminologist, Yael Hassin, of Hebrew University in Jerusalem] said the publicity recently afforded the Israeli drug problem was an attempt to create moral panic by politicians looking for attention and police officials looking for bigger budgets. (Ron, 1989)

MORAL PANIC AND FEAR

MP served to codify or encapsulate the fear narrative for news purposes. Indeed, by the mid 1990s MP was becoming an acceptable way of explaining reactions to social change, especially events and problems that challenged the prevailing narratives of order in news reports, but also government hearings. For example, MP was twice referred to in Congressional testimony by social scientists in 1995 and 2000. In the first case, Stuart Wright (1995) discussed how to avoid another ‘Waco’ mass killing when US agents invaded the ‘Branch Dravidian’ compound. Nearly five years later, in June 2000, Philip Jenkins, well-known authority on MP, cautioned legislators to not overreact to the drug ‘ecstasy’:

Sometimes, the reaction to issues is massively out of proportion to the phenomenon at hand, and in those cases, social scientists use the term moral panic . . . Legislators are naturally and commendably concerned about the need to protect young people . . . But the danger is that in trying to offer better safeguards for youth, they will enact new prohibitions and criminal justice-oriented policies which will result in causing more harm, more injury and death. (Jenkins, 2000)

MP is part of the social control and fear narrative. The common thread for most scholarly and popular analysis of fear, especially in American society, is crime and victimization.
Numerous researchers link crime, the mass media, and fear (Pearson, 1983; Ericson, 1995; Ferraro, 1995; Chiricos et al., 1997; Garland, 1997; Shirlow and Pain, 2003; Innes, 2004). News reports about crime and fear have contributed to the approach taken by many social scientists in studying how crime is linked with fear. There is also an impressive literature on crime, victimization, and fear (Warr, 1987, 1990, 1992; Ferraro, 1995; Baer and Chambliss, 1997; Chiricos et al., 1997). One of the many contributions of ‘MP’ was to delineate further the process by which individuals were ‘constructed’ and given social labels commensurate with ‘folk devils’, with the additional emphasis that the nature and cause of the particular problem (e.g. drug use) had major implications, including the destruction of the moral and social order (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). The mass media played an important role in constructing and demonizing the behavior and individuals. Indeed, sociologists, who pointed this out, were themselves demonized and were accused of proselytization for homosexuals (Hunt, 1997). Thus, MP offered a focus and direction for mobilizing fear in order to stop social destruction and promote more social control. As Stuart Hall (1978) suggested, MP is a way to garner the support of the ‘silent majority’ for the legitimacy of coercive measures. It is also important to stress that entertaining news formats, which favor having ‘two sides’ – especially ‘conflicting’ views – provided a potential slot for claim-makers like social scientists to caution against the creation of a MP, which in most cases was not regarded as legitimate.

**MORAL PANIC AND CRIME**

Notwithstanding the expanding use of MP, the focus on misdirected policies toward crime and crime control continued to get the most play. Consider these two reports in 1994 about cautionary advice toward crime and the popular ‘three strikes’ and mandatory prison policies that swept the United States in the 1990s. A highly regarded criminologist, William Chambliss, cautioned against how fear of crime was launching a ‘MP’:

> A siege mentality so pervasive it extends even to those who, statistically speaking, are among the least likely to be victimized. Sociologists call it moral panic, a term for generalized fear that, as Chambliss put it, ‘is not appropriate to the situation’. (in De Boer, 1994)

Fear is the underlying emotion for most crime control and strong government intervention, particularly the widely supported ‘three-strikes’ legislation that mandated life imprisonment for conviction of a third felony. Recent research has shown the fallacy of such reasoning for effective crime control (Grimes, 2007), particularly for aging prisoners. It is important to note that the social scientists hedge their statements lest anyone think that his/her opposition to tougher sentencing means that he/she is too liberal. Here’s a statement by a sociologist about the cost of incarcerating aging inmates:
We’re in the middle of a moral panic’, says Barry Krisberg, president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. ‘I’m not saying violent crime isn’t a serious problem. But these treatments are worse than the disease’. (Phillips, 1994)

In this case, as in others we encountered, the use of MP can help position the speaker as concerned about the problem (or not), but just decrying the overly aggressive solution(s). So, it is not that prison is ludicrous or likely to structurally target the poor, it is just that MP may result in more imprisonment than is warranted.

Entertainment media formats promote the use of terms and metaphors that audiences will recognize. It may be that US audiences are less familiar with MP than those in the UK, so it is not surprising that writers and commentators use MP more often. It is not uncommon for metaphors to be used when referring to MPs, particularly by social scientists. A favorite metaphor is ‘witch hunts’, presumably selected because of its widespread acceptance in our culture as a reaction that was irrational, emotion-driven and caused great harm. We found 45 examples of witch hunt being associated with MP. Consider the following example:

. . . but only the players and scenarios have changed, according to McConchie and some sociologists. The moral panic, the secular version of the witch hunt, is alive and well and thriving on an ages-old tendency to, as folklorist Bill Ellis of Pennsylvania State University put it, ‘find a neat and tidy, us-versus-them explanation for what’s wrong with life’. (Arnold, 1992)

MP in public discourse was not limited to prisons and overt crime control efforts, but was closely associated with other social control efforts to arrest both problems and conditions. Our research uncovered several examples of control efforts directed at youth, a perennial source of MP through the ages (Grossberg et al., 1998; Giroux, 2003). The artful use of MP by news sources (e.g. the person being interviewed and quoted) also suggests that people with social science backgrounds found MP to be a useful subtext for imparting some basic sociological dimensions about social life (e.g. socialization, symbolic interaction, self-fulfilling prophecy, unintended consequences etc.). Clearly, MP was something to be avoided. Here’s an example by a violence researcher (‘Beware of MP’) reacting to the Toronto Police Chief’s pessimism about violence after a fatal shooting:

To be sure, violence in Toronto has changed in the past few years. But when city, provincial and federal officials generate moral panic, we only worsen the problem. These types of fears have led to ‘three-strikes’ laws, mandatory minimum sentences, criminalizing youth and sentencing them as adults – initiatives that many experts would argue have only exacerbated the situation. A more rational approach would be to look for solutions based on the extensive research that exists on this topic. (Falk, 2005)

MP as cautionary narrative was common in our materials. A newspaper report – a sort of mini-case study of crime control – in The St. Petersburg Times, written by a reporter
in England, discussed how England became aroused about the death of a two-year old (James Bulger) at the hands of two 10-year-old boys (Hunt, 1997). Several articles stressed that violent youth abounded, that moral behavior was disappearing, and that there was a crisis. (Others, like *The New York Times*, acknowledged that Britain was suffering a fit of ‘MP,’ but, the paper added, ‘so are the French, the Germans and the rest of Europe’; Schmidt, 1993). The *St. Petersburg Times* article added that various authorities were summoned by the BBC to discuss the situation and they concluded:

Columnists began to reminisce about the Mods and Rockers, and came to the conclusion that the 1950s were much worse . . . *The Times* announced that we had all been ‘brainwashed by hysteria’ and introduced a diagnosis borrowed from sociologists. Britain was in the throes of a moral panic which had for the most part been generated by the media itself; there was no juvenile crime wave. By the end of the second week a media analyst on television’s What the Papers Say managed to satirize the most sensational of the recent crime epidemic reports by comparing them with similar – often identically headlined – stories run in the same paper some 20 to 40 years ago. (Boren, 1993, emphasis added)

About two weeks later the following ‘case’ was reported in *The Chicago Sun Times*, also about MP in Britain. This piece contrasts with the news reports that urge strong action; it is in opposition or the ‘other side’. Consider the following statement from a British youth worker about a proposed plan to hold youths (aged 12–15 years), who have committed three offenses, in ‘secured training centers’:

*Given recent statistics showing a decline in juvenile crime, many say the steps are unwarranted. ‘It is basically a highly expensive media reaction rushed in on a wave of moral panic’, said Angus Stickler of the Children’s Society.*

*The best way to deal with juvenile delinquency, he said, is not by ‘yanking young boys out of the community, grouping them together where they will learn much more sophisticated ways of committing crime’. (O’Mara, 1993)*

I have suggested that the allure of crime in entertaining news pushed the use of the concept MP to its higher levels in the 1990s as critics – mainly social scientists – would often employ the phrase in stating their case and in providing the other side that is characteristic of conventional news formats. This effort to talk about ‘moral problems’ in a different way was captured by Hunt’s (1997) analysis. And there were a lot of opportunities for this ‘interaction’ with politicians and others during local and national political campaigns. For example, several US politicians took strong stances against crime during the 1994 Florida political campaign. Despite a declining crime rate – the lowest since 1985 – politicians proved to be ideal news sources for news media wedded to fear-as-entertainment. The following comments were contained in the same news report:

*‘Crime is the No. 1 problem in Florida’, Republican gubernatorial challenger Jeb Bush writes in his campaign literature. ‘This has been the case for years, and the situation is getting worse with each passing day’ . . . ‘My own home has been robbed’, Bush*
wrote in his campaign handouts. ‘I thank God no one was at home’ [and, according to his opponent] . . . ‘The system is now beginning to work’, said state Sen. Robert Wexler, D-Boca Raton, former chairman of the Senate judiciary committee. ‘Now try to convince the average guy in the street of that and you can’t. Because all he does is watch the TV news at night and see that random violence is going up. And it is’. (Leen, 1994)

Random violence was not going up, but it was widely covered. As part of the standard news format, criminologist Ted Chiricos conveniently provided a contrary view:

I don’t think I’ve ever seen an election where virtually every candidate, from the school board on up to the governor, is pontificating on the issue of crime . . . I find it, as a criminologist, very cynical, if not disingenuous. There’s nothing happening that would justify the extreme outcry of what I would call a moral panic. (Leen, 1994)

The speaker implies that MP was becoming more normalized and familiar as features of news discourse.

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND MEDIA USE

MP emerged from being a counter-narrative to a central part of the news format as social scientists and others defended conventional targeted groups such as the poor, youth, and minorities. For example, an American sociology professor warned in a review of his book *Gangs, Supergangs, and Kids on the Corner*, about mistakenly identifying the origins and characteristics of Milwaukee’s emerging gangs:

*The book turns out to be a repudiation of the idea that the People and the Folks have spread from Chicago to his city. In fact, a large part of the book chastises politicians, police and the news media for starting a moral panic about the spread of super gangs from metropolitan areas to smaller cities.* (Campbell, 1989: 36)

If MP was to be avoided in dealing with street crime, white-collar crime was another story. One researcher implied that a MP about street crime was more appealing to audiences than white-collar crime. After noting that President Reagan aide, Michael Deaver, was awaiting a prison sentence, he added,

*There appears to be little anxiety about having behind bars a country within a country, a burgeoning prison population of over half a million overwhelmingly poor, overwhelmingly black people. Yet no moral panic has greeted a simultaneous crime wave of virtually unparalleled scope and effect: the wave of white collar crime.* (Lewis, 1988: C1)

The press and various audiences gradually adopted the use of MP because it served their purposes and fit into their discursive practices and guidelines, including finding new ways to say old things (McRobbie, 1994). MP was used more in the 1990s and beyond.
The use of MP began to change in the 1990s as not just something to be avoided, but as synonymous with panic or overreaction. As noted, MP became a useful and interesting term/concept for referring to the ‘other side’ that challenged the legitimacy of processes that, in effect, stirred people up and led them to scapegoat. This change was most apparent in reviews, features, and opinion pieces. For example, in selected US media MP appeared in 23 reviews, 33 op-ed and opinion pieces, while the Guardian featured MP in 59 reviews and 35 ‘Weekend’ discussions (Hunter, 1993).

Social scientists and other critics employ and refine MP in commentary as ‘sources’ in various news reports, but make even stronger statements in editorials as well as book reviews. Mike Males (2002), who has written extensively on erroneous claims about youth decadence, including crime, violence, and drug use, often parodies sociological research against demonizing youth. In a comment about an article in the Atlantic Monthly, he stated that ‘today’s ephebiphobia is the latest installment of a history of bogus moral panics targeting unpopular subgroups to obscure an unsettling reality: Our worst social crisis is middle-Americans’ own misdirected fear’ (p. 107). We encountered many examples where editorial comments cautioned against MP, noting that the mass media played a large role, even to the point of quoting from Cohen’s definitive essay. An article in Thailand in 2006 about the Video Recording Act, decried sensationalistic reporting of children’s deviant acts, noting that the coverage was causing a backlash against juveniles. After the concept was explained, the author blamed the mass media for the ‘sensationalistic reporting’ that contributed to the problem (Gecker, 2006).

NEW MEANINGS OF MORAL PANIC

The range of topics associated with MP seems limitless, although it is also clear that most topics do not become ‘successful MPs’ (Jenkins, 1992), but the use of the phrase is quite common. MP is often used defensively, or as a way to prevent or discourage over-reaction. Other uses appeared at the turn of the century as writers became more familiar with MP. One example was a report about gated communities, with specific focus on the symbolic meanings of ‘gates’. A criminal justice professor noted:

Another syndrome associated with the gates ‘is what social scientists call moral panic, an overreaction to crime’, said Mercer Sullivan, a professor of criminal justice at Rutgers-Newark. ‘People react to rapid changes in society by building walls around themselves’. (Quinn, 2000: 13)

News reports suggest that MP has struck a chord as a general way to attack outrageous claims about social problems and issues that might result in strong policy action and sanctions. MP adds to news discourse by providing a contrary view that is predictable, even scripted. The foundation for articulating what may be termed the ‘implied agency of MP’, or more theoretically, a vocabulary of motives for MP (Mills, 1940), suggests the oppositional role of this concept, and the script is appropriate for some topics in the fear narrative, but not others. Indeed, we found only one instance in which a
progressive movement/orientation was challenged as promoting a MP. This involved assertions by some feminist scholars that not only is rape quite common, but that 25 per cent of women will be raped during their college years. My intent here is not to address the veracity of the claim, but rather, to use the exchange, especially the mass media reporting about it, to illustrate the exceptional use of ‘MP’:

Labeling rape ‘the phantom epidemic’, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley has started a national debate by challenging recent studies by ‘feminist researchers’ who, he said, insult women, trivialize the crime and incite ‘a moral panic’. (Kahn, 1991: A1).

MP is also employed as a combative tool to avoid strong criticism or scrutiny. Essentially used as a verb in these instances, MP is something to avoid, but mainly because it is unfair. Our data include several articles that comment against a MP about Catholic priests’ behavior as pedophiles:

As a result, public perceptions of the pedophile priest and a complicit Catholic Church have promoted a moral panic. Indeed, the ‘sins of a few’ have now been exaggerated and extended to what the media continue to call the ‘sins of the Fathers’. (Hendershott, 2002: B7)

These comments suggest that organizational members are legitimating the concept of MP by arguing that their ‘issue’ does not warrant such extreme results. Thus, they are operating form ‘inside’ the organizational/institutional arena under scrutiny.

**POSITIVE MORAL PANIC**

We have seen in news media depictions of MP that it is often juxtaposed with actual or anticipated programmatic and policy efforts to react politically to reports about certain problems and issues, for example drugs, sexual behavior, child abuse and so on. Such topics have become commonplace in news reports. So basic has MP become as part of discourse of opposition to social control, that proponents of certain actions (e.g. propose sanctions against uncivil teens) anticipate that what might be termed the ‘MP defense’ and actually state that their proposal ‘might be a worthwhile MP’. This becomes more relevant given the very uneven way in which MP is employed. Consider an example in which MP is denied as an appropriate term to describe officials’ behavior that is consistent with MP, for example internet sting operations by Prosecutor Pirro that bordered on entrapment:

Some critics have also said that the recent surge of outrage about child pornography and pedophilia is driven by a moral panic reminiscent of 19th-century vice crusades. But there is nothing censorious about Ms. Pirro . . .

Fighting pedophiles on the internet is simply an extension of her longstanding interest in fighting child abuse and domestic violence, she said. ‘It’s really about protecting the vulnerable, whether they’re senior citizens or children. . .’. (Worth, 2001: 1)
This statement reflects a counter-news format usage of MP in that the customary role of challenging a public reaction must also be reacted to or negated because it is really about ‘protecting the vulnerable’. Using MP as an account is similar to Matza’s (1969) ‘neutralization techniques’ (e.g. ‘denial of victim’ etc.) which serve to qualify the competence and sensitivity of the actor, while still making what may be perceived as a controversial or risky assertion. MP is now widely associated in public discourse (i.e. news reports) with an oppositional view of efforts to regulate or intervene various categories of deviance, including sexuality, drug use, as well as ‘styles’ and subculture behavior. Proponents of regulation – as moral entrepreneurs – may still follow through on their censorship and sanctioning of such behaviors. The following comment was made in response to a ruling in Scotland that viewing child pornography was a victimless crime:

Scots law is not only at variance with that in England and Wales, where there is now a maximum custodial sentence of ten years for such activity, but the possibility has emerged that the ambiguous legal climate north of the Border will encourage activity that we patently do not wish to see. This is not a case of moral panic but of rectifying a questionable legal judgment. Generally, genuine victimless crimes should not be so stigmatised. But in this case, the victims are in front of our very eyes. (Scotsman, 2001: 13, emphasis added)

The writer in this example is aware that MP is often involved in efforts to legislate sexual behavior, but argues that this case is really a legitimate problem. However, most claims about sexual deviance are more widely contested, and even though there is widespread agreement that sexual predators and sex offenders are disreputable (i.e. ‘folk devils’), there is less consensus about state-sponsored remedies to control and punish indiscretions. For example, pornography, especially child pornography, is linked to MP in the sociological literature as well as news reports. The following appeared on a website:

It’s hard to imagine any groups more vilified in society these days than terrorists and child pornographers . . . In a fit of moral panic, some drafted feeble and messy bills to stop cyber smut, most of them reflecting a serious lack of understanding the technical nature of the Net. (Kapica, 2002)

Even claims about promoting sexual purity are subject to charges of MP. Consider this comment published in the Independent about parents and media reaction to a school that was not sympathetic to female students wearing ‘chastity rings’:

As a story of moral panic, this has a truly contemporary feel. There are accusations of religious intolerance and bias against Christianity, with claims that the school allows Muslim girls to cover their heads, Sikhs to wear the Kara bangle. The middle-brow newspapers have whipped themselves up into a state of outrage. The obligatory Tory MP, of whom no one has ever heard, has become involved. We need only a few references to political correctness, human rights or an EU directive for the affair to become the perfect story of contemporary decline for middle England. (Blacker, 2006: 29)
Notwithstanding the revulsion against sexual predators, there remains a contested space about the appropriate societal reaction and to avoid a MP. Terrorism is not similarly regarded.

**MORAL PANIC AND TERRORISM**

My comments have focused on the organization of news reports with MP in order to illuminate the topics and problems associated with this important social science concept. I stressed at the outset that media formats are key organizing features of discourse. Recall the point about the paucity of MP in US network news reports, compared to its more common usage in newspaper editorials and opinion pieces. Newspaper formats, dealing with space rather than time (as in TV), are more accepting of MP arguments, especially in the editorial and comment sections. The borders surrounding familiar contested issues like sex and drugs demonstrate boundaries, but they also separate appropriate from inappropriate issues, acceptable and unacceptable topics for systemic criticism accompanying MP. One such boundary is terrorism. This suggests that we are not likely to find MP associated with terrorism reports.

Terrorism is not contested as a legitimate concern. Terrorism and the terrorist threat are still regarded as legitimate and objectively real by many people in the United States and the UK; it is not viewed as a social construction and the government actions are not treated in the mass media as arbitrary overreaction. Indeed, opposition parties in the USA insist that terrorism is a pressing issue, and offer slight differences in how to combat it (Altheide, 2006). Thus, terrorism has not been joined with MP despite using similar elements of fear as sex and drugs.

The concept MP is all but absent in extensive discussions of terrorism, including fear and terrorism, victimization and terrorism, and numerous negative consequences of propaganda and policies about terrorism (Walker, 2002; Garland, 2008). The United States alone has expended more than $1 trillion on a war allegedly against terrorism, violated civil rights of its citizens, and as part of its ‘extraordinary rendition’ policy, kidnapped individuals throughout the world and transported them to other lands where they would be tortured in order to obtain information about terrorism. However, terrorism is not linked to MP in mainstream media, nor until more recently, in academic reports (Rothe and Muzzetti, 2004; Garland, 2008). Very few news reports place terrorism or threats of terrorism close to MP.

The mainstream media do not associate MP with terrorism, although alternative media do so. Newspaper editors do not appear willing to accept the MP definition of a situation that may potentially involve terrorism, but rather, it is off limits, so to speak, in mainstream news media to extend the discourse to include legitimate opposition and characterization of terrorism with Cohen’s classic definition of MP. However, it is a different story with alternative media: terrorism is joined with MP on thousands of media sites, including academic book advertisements, conference presentations, as well blogs and other alternative media. One author, a professor, wrote an essay (originally published in The Humanist) connecting fear to terrorism and MP:
The terrorism scare is a moral panic, similar to many throughout recent history. Social scientists call these society-wide scares MPs because they are founded upon fear of threats to society from moral deviants of the worst kind. In general, MPs begin when events occur that cause a great many people to feel threatened by an internal enemy, hidden deep within their society. Secret groups of foreign terrorists, believed to be fanatics who kill without guilt, fit the bill perfectly. (Victor, 2006)

Such statements are exceedingly rare in mainstream news media. The use of MP serves to debunk claims about objective and fundamental threats to social order. Since such threats are reflexive of the discourse of fear, it follows that MP implicitly challenges the rhetoric and symbolism underlying claims about threat and danger. That paucity of comments linking terrorism to MP suggests that terrorism is not acceptable as part of the conventional news discourse of point/counter-point (or two sides/opposition) about certain topics, especially those associated with MP. In mainstream news media MP and an informal list of topics are tacitly approved for news discourse and entertainment news formats, but terrorism is not. This is particularly true with US TV network news, which contained virtually no references to MP, although the more restricted TV formats are not fertile grounds for growing moral panics (Cohen, 2001). Just as the accompaniment of MP with discussions of sex and deviance appear to challenge the dominant discourse of propaganda that would have these topics ‘beyond discussion’, it appears that terrorism is sacrosanct in many media, and that it is not legitimate to feature it in public discourse as an example of MP.

As MP challenges the discourse of fear on a certain topic, its absence with other topics, like terrorism, helps sustain the symbolic order constructed by the media logic of the terrorism establishment. The power of an unchallenged symbol like terrorism is sustained as it becomes both nuanced and adapted and melded with other issues that may be cast as ‘terrorist like’. Thus, the economic anxiety in 2008 was described by one journalist as the new terrorism of modern times.

CONCLUSION

This study of news usage of MP demonstrates that it is widely used in newspapers, particularly editorial and op-eds. The data suggest that MP has been used more frequently in news reports during the last decade. I argue that the logic of news formats promotes fear and entertainment also encourages oppositional positions on certain topics. MP fills this bill. Electronic media, most notably US network television, avoid the use of MP altogether, while newspaper formats (e.g. editorials) are more compatible with frames like MP that offer dissenting views on certain topics. However, unlike UK news sources, very few US news sources routinely use MP in discussions in regular news reports. MP is also quite visible in literary and art reviews. Qualitative analysis of the materials suggest that MP has become part of critical public discourse and is widely used in editorials and op-eds that tend to oppose or offer the ‘other point of view’ about proposed social policies and changes in social control efforts directed
toward social deviance, including sexual activity and drug use. Sociologists are often the authors or are mentioned in many of these reports.

The fear narrative played an important part in the success of MP. The major impact of the discourse of fear is to promote a sense of disorder and a belief that ‘things are out of control’. Fear, crime, and victimization, and more recently, terrorism, are experienced and known vicariously through the mass media by audience members. The discourse of fear has been constructed through news and popular culture accounts. Social life can become more hostile when social actors define their situations as ‘fearful’ and engage in speech communities through the discourse of fear. MP captured this process, but it also became a way to defuse it, to identify the alleged problem or crisis as a ‘mere process’, which in most cases, was not regarded as legitimate.

Analysis shows that the use of MP fits entertaining news formats quite well. As it became more familiar to audiences via scholarly writings, student exposure, and popular culture, MP emerged as a useful way of summarizing or providing the ‘opposition’, and therefore became more acceptable. However, MP is not used to reflect opposition on all fronts, but is more closely aligned with certain topics – sex and drugs – but not terrorism. Terrorism practices and beliefs are not treated as MP, despite many similarities in the process of societal action and reaction that was identified by Cohen (Cohen, 1980; Cohen and Young, 1973) and others. Paradoxically, it may be that even this powerful and potentially liberating (from social control) concept can become a resource to use in limiting discourse and communication. Hopefully, additional research can clarify this question.

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