

Examining the roles of moral entrepreneurs media essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



There are certain powerful tools such as 'moral entrepreneurs' and/or 'social control agents' that are said to contribute to the development of moral panics in a society (Becker, 1963: 147; Cohen, 1980: 85). This essay will argue that 'amplitude' as a news value appears to be the major tool through which moral panics are developed in a society (Cohen, 1980: 31). The essay will commence with a brief background and definition of key terms such as 'news values', 'amplitude' and 'moral panics', not necessarily in the same sequence. Then using relevant research sources, this essay will analyse the role that the news value of 'amplitude' plays in the development of moral panics. Furthermore, the reasons for this kind of journalism will be considered by carefully analysing the issues of 'interest' and 'morality'. Finally, the essay will consider the effects of moral panics on society by looking into instances in different societies.

Ben-Yehuda (2009: 1) describes the concept of moral panic as creating a state of 'exaggerated fear' from topics that are claimed to have a moral element. He states that "moral panics have to create, focus on and sustain powerfully persuasive images of folk devils that can serve as the heart of moral fears." According to Ben-Yehuda and Goode (1994: 12), the idea of 'moral panics' developed from the earlier concept of 'moral crusades' where a person or a group of persons were stigmatised as deviants and isolated from what was regarded as 'normal' society. It was first revealed by Jock Young in 1971 as opposed to the thought that Stanley Cohen was the originator of the concept. Critcher (2006: ix) also concurs that Cohen borrowed the term from Young. However, though Young introduced the term, it was "Cohen's research on the Mods and Rockers that launched it to its

present state as a still central tool of sociological and media analysis, as well as a common phrase in popular discourse” (Ben-Yehuda, 2009: 1). Cohen defines moral panic in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers* (1980: 9), as when a “ condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media...” This shows that every society has particular moral values and interests that define it as a society. Hence, it will not be normal for a person or group of persons to go against those moral values and interests. Becker (1963: 1) states that social rules are made to be enforced and they determine what is right or wrong in a social group. Therefore the person or group of persons who breaks those rules is regarded as an outsider because such cannot be trusted to live by the rules. The outsider is then labelled by that society as a deviant or a folk devil as Cohen calls it. The outsider is isolated from ‘ normal’ society and this leads to more deviance (Cohen, 1980: 12; 18). Goode (1993: 93) also defines moral panic as a “ widespread feeling on the part of the public that something is terribly wrong in the society because of the moral failure of a specific group of individuals, subpopulation is defined as the enemy. In short, a category of people has been deviantized.” Deviance refers to behaviour that breaks social values or upsets the expectations of society thereby attracting social penalty or punishment (O’Sullivan, et al., 1994: 83; Aggleton, 1987: 4). Some examples of deviant behaviours that lead to moral panics are related to drug usage, homosexuality, gang activities, pornography, prostitution, and so on (Ben-Yehuda, 2009: 2; Cohen, 1980: 18). Cohen (1980: 9; 59) observes that a type

of moral panic which has kept occurring in Britain since the war has been tied to the coming up of a variety of youth culture who are either working class, middle class or students and are seen as deviants associated with violence. The Teddy Boys, the Mods and Rockers, the Skinheads, are some examples he gives of those labelled deviants or folk devils that represented youths at the time. This is also reflected in Ben-Yehuda's study of the 1982 drug panic in Israel where youths were identified with the deviant behaviour of illicit drug-taking.

Those who create and enforce the rules in society respectively referred to as 'moral entrepreneurs' by Becker (1963: 147) and 'social control agents' by Cohen (1980: 85). These are powerful concepts that are said to contribute to the development of moral panics in a society. They comprise the Police, the Courts and Civil Society or Action Groups who take appropriate action at the Federal and Local levels. Here the media also plays a vital positive role in checking the excesses of these so-called deviants. As we all know, the media is a tool through which information is dispensed to the public. The way and manner information is dispensed determines how the public reacts to such information. There are certain criteria that determine what 'news' is and it varies from one culture to the other (Galtung and Ruge, 1965: 65). The criteria or guidelines by which events are regarded as newsworthy are referred to as 'news values' (Brighton and Foy, 2007: 1). Galtung and Ruge (1965: 70) provide a list of a number of factors that qualify for news values. An event must possess at least one of these to qualify as news. One of such news values is 'amplitude' on which this essay will focus. Amplitude refers

to how big the event is; “ The bigger, the better, the more dramatic, the more likely the event is to achieve...threshold value” (Watson, 1998: 118). It is argued here that ‘ amplitude’ as a news value appears to be the major tool through which moral panics are developed in a society (Cohen, 1980: 31).

It was stated earlier that moral entrepreneurs or social control agents are powerful tools that are said to contribute to the development of moral panics. Cohen (1980: 166) and Becker (1963: 147) have argued that these tools create and enforce rules in order to control deviant behaviours. They intervene whenever they feel a particular value in society is being threatened by behaviours that are out of the norm. This shows that a deviant behaviour can be powerful enough as to instigate creation and the enactment of laws in a society (Ben-Yehuda, 1990: 124). However, it is important to note that these agents cannot function alone to create moral panics in the society, they need the mass media to be able to pass across what they deem as morally wrong or evil so, they take advantage of the media to be able to create a moral panic (Ben-Yehuda, 1990: 116). It thus seems that without the media, moral panics may never occur and ‘ amplitude’ plays a major role in such a development. Cohen (1980: 16) describes the media as an “ especially important carrier and producer of moral panics”. He states that information that gets to the public have already been processed by the media, that is to say that they have been subject to classifications of newsworthiness and how they are to be relayed to the audience. He argues that what is usually called news focuses on reports on deviance and its consequences and such reports create ‘

concerns, anxiety, indignation or panic.’ When these feelings have been created, the need to protect certain moral values arises and this leads to the definition of the problem and the creation of rules to protect societal values. All that has been said boils down to the fact that for the media to cover an event successfully as news, amplitude (as a news value) plays a very important role. As earlier defined, amplitude refers to how big and dramatic the event is (Watson, 1998: 118; Galtung and Ruge, 1965: 66) so the need for amplitude leads the media to amplify deviance whereby exaggerating the event so it becomes a very big issue through the reaction of the audience. O’Sullivan, et al. (1994: 10-11) define amplification as the “ process whereby initial activity, labelled as deviant is increased or ‘ amplified’ as a result of social reaction which is largely co-ordinated and articulated by the mass media.”

Furthermore, Galtung and Ruge (1965: 71) state that there are three things the media does to manufacture news and one of them is ‘ accentuation’ or distortion and that is to make the event even more noticeable. Cohen (1980: 31) gives examples of this kind of distortion or exaggeration. In describing the Mods and Rockers event at Clacton, he states that a journalist from the Daily Mirror admitted that the event had been over reported. Cohen describes how the media ‘ grossly exaggerated’ its seriousness;

Over-reporting...the number taking part, the number involved in violence and the amount and effects of any damage or violence. Such distortion took place primarily in terms of the mode and style of presentation characteristic of most crime reporting: the sensational headlines, melodramatic vocabulary

and heightening of those elements in the story considered as news. The regular use of phrases such as 'riot', 'orgy of destruction', 'battle', 'attack', 'beat up town' and 'screaming mob' left an image of a besieged town from which innocent holidaymakers were fleeing to escape a marauding mob.

This event was so exaggerated that the police began making preparations for the next anticipated 'Bank Holiday hooliganism.' On the next Bank Holiday at Brighton, so many suspicious youths, though not guilty of all that they were accused of, were arrested on the beach escalating the matter and confirming the doubts and fears of the public who acted and took their 'local' problem to the legislature (Cohen, 1980: 91-113). Another instance of such exaggeration is found in the 1982 drug scare event in Israel. Ben-Yehuda (1990: 103) argues that the media played a 'crucial role' by providing information that stimulated the panic. He states that youths in high schools in Israel were accused by the police and a member of legislature of the misuse of psychoactive drugs. It appeared in the media that over a hundred thousand students used 'hashish'. A particular school was labelled 'Hashish High School' because it was accused of a high rate of unlawful drug use. The principal revealed statistics showing only one pupil in the school was found using drugs but the release of the statistics did not help because the panic had already been created. The Ministry of Education sought for proof from the police for the outrageous statistics they released to the media but none was given. 'Anxious parents' parents demanded that the Ministry of Education 'do something about the terrible drug problem'. Most parents

eventually withdrew their children from schools as a result of such exaggerations, turning the event into a huge story. The media used such headlines as 'youth drug abuse plague', 'How to Behave with a Drug Abusing Adolescent', 'The Dangers of Hashish'. This event shows how active the social control agents and the media were in the development of moral panic but the media seemed to be the major tool through which moral panic began.

The connection between personal and group interests to moral panics has been espoused by (Ben-Yehuda, 1990: 114; Becker, 1963: 148; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 159). Ben-Yehuda (1990: 114) suggests that on one hand, moral panics reflect the moral struggle in a society and on the other hand, the issue of interests show that moral panics use moral topics to cover up clash of interests between different parties. He argues that the moral panic in Israel in 1982 "was based on distorted information, clearly aimed at sharply marking the boundaries between moral right and moral wrong. However, behind the public display about morality, there were other strong interests at work as well." This shows that just as there are moral entrepreneurs who seek to truly uphold moral values for the good of the society, there are also those entrepreneurs who seek to fulfil their own interests. Young (2009: 10) states that there are three reasons for moral intervention. The first is the 'conflict of interest' where he explains that interests of a powerful group are directly threatened or the group sees that the intervention would be to its advantage. The second reason for intervention is 'moral indignation'. He explains that the deviant threatens

the moral values of a more powerful group therefore an intervention is required. Finally, the third reason is 'humanitarianism' where the more powerful group intervenes for the good of the deviant(s). This goes further to reveal a powerful economic and political relationship between those in power and those regarded as outsiders because laws, wealth and status could be created as a result of moral panics (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 159). For instance, the legislator could create laws and have his political status established as a result of a moral panic through the media and the police could gain more funds to aid in 'fighting deviance'. Furthermore, the media is responsible to protect the public interest through the proper dissemination of information. The public should be aware of events that affect them through the news. News that stirs up moral panics does not seem to be in the public interest because the end result is fear and anxiety (Ben-Yehuda, 2009: 1). It then seems that the media may only be interested in its business competition through the selling of a breaking story to attract more viewership and not minding how the news is presented thereby fulfilling its own interest. It could also be that the media in creating a moral panic is not aware that it is doing so and may publish or broadcast news in the public interest since its duty is to create awareness of issues prevalent in the society.

Moral panics have certain effects on the society. They create stereotypes, for instance, (Young, 2009: 6) thereby segregating a particular class or group of people within society. A stereotype is a social classification of a group based on a particular set of values, judgments and assumptions toward the group's

behaviour, characteristics or history (O'Sullivan, et al., 1994: 299). The Mods and Rockers were stereotyped because they behaved and did things differently from the rest of the society at the time. They dressed differently, rode scooters and motor-bikes and they were two confrontational groups. As a result they were seen as a threat to 'traditional, decent values of law and order' (Critcher, 2006: xii). According to Cohen (1980: 62) the Mods and Rockers were seen as a disease that needed to be cured or completely removed from society therefore they experienced indignation. A survey revealed that the media's reaction to the Mods and Rockers were more intense and stereotypical than the opinion of the public (Cohen, 1980: 66). In addition, moral panics create fear, anxiety and panic among members of society. Statistics show that fear is created especially among older people (Cohen 1980: 70). For instance, as mentioned earlier, during the 1982 drug scare in Israel, parents out of fear and anxiety about the 'terrible drug problem' that had invaded high schools, withdrew their children from school. The sort of presentation and language used by the media may cause its audience to think they are living in a very unsafe environment while that may not be entirely true. Also, moral panics could help establish new laws claimed to guard the moral values and interests of the society and even if it does not do so, it leaves memories that usher in the next panic (Ben-Yehuda, 2009: 3). For instance, early 1970 in America, President Nixon successfully carried out a war on drugs that later paved the way for subsequent drug panic that led to the creation of laws against illicit drug taking in America in 1986 and 1989 (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 169). All these prove that moral panics could either have a lasting or a short term effect on a society.

The effect could be felt at the time of the panic and eventually fade away with the panic as it was with the Mods and Rockers or the effect could be a long lasting one as in the case of laws made to prohibit illicit drug use.

In conclusion, although other strong tools such as the moral entrepreneurs or the social control agents contribute in creating moral panics, it is clear that amplification as a news value is a major tool used by the media to create moral panics in the society. This essay has also shown that there are certain reasons why moral panics occur and those reasons could either be moral or for personal interests. Furthermore, there is a preponderance of the unhealthy effects of moral panics in the society including the creation of stereotypes, the instigation of fear among people and possibly the creation of new unnecessary laws.

Practitioners in journalism and media must be careful in the reporting and dissemination of information to the general public to avoid impressing their personal or group interests on society that they may have detrimental effects in the peaceful order of society.

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