

Electronic Journal of Sociology (2007)

ISSN: 1198 3655

Taxonomies of anxiety: risks, panics, paedophilia and the Internet

Allison Cavanagh

A.E.Cavanagh@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

Recently theorists of the risk society have argued that the time has come for a reassessment of the utility of the idea of moral panics. Moral panics, it is argued, have become superseded by new social dynamics and in particular the idea of an endangered social order has been replaced in popular and media fears by rational calculations of personal risk. This paper approaches this issue through a consideration of the methodological grounds which underpin these analyses. The paper applies a dominant scheme of differentiation in order to assess and illustrate the difficulties of applying taxonomies of anxiety to popular fears. The paper argues that such approaches are flawed insofar as they construct both risk and moral panics in too unitary a manner and fail to adequately account for the role of the media in promoting and framing anxieties. The paper concludes by arguing that risks and moral panics cannot, at a methodological level, be considered as separate entities which may supersede each other, but rather must be understood as selective framings of social anxieties. The paper uses a case study of popular fears concerning the Internet between 1995 and 2000 in order to illustrate these themes.

Introduction

In recent years a debate concerning the usefulness of models of moral panic

has emerged. Two main strands of this debate regarding the status of the traditional moral panic can be discerned. In one argument, associated with postmodern cultural theorists, the moral panic has been radically transformed through being compromised as a discourse in the media. This argument takes the form of an assertion that an increasingly media aware population relates less to moral panic discourses as occasions of anxiety and interprets them more as sensationalism and scandal-mongering. In this framework the media are hoist on their own petard by an increasingly anxiety 'fatigued' and world-weary population. Hunt (1997) has traced the development of the idea of a moral panic through the various forms it has assumed in the media, arguing that the term has become associated with scandal-mongering in the media through its presentation *by* the press *in* the press. As the term 'moral panic' is increasingly used as a term of abuse to refer to the activities of journalists that defy professional disciplinary norms (Cavanagh, 2002) so the idea of a moral panic is elaborated as an elaborate media scam, a deliberate attempt to 'spin' social problems. Moreover, just as the population is assumed to have become wiser to media shenanigans, so, McRobbie (1995) argues, the moral panic has become institutionalised as a journalistic 'norm of practice'. The dynamics of the moral panic have become aligned with professional norms of competence in such a way that the production of moral panics are a direct product of the mundane practices of journalists. The transformation of the dynamics of moral panic that emerges from these developments is therefore two fold and mutually reinforcing. It becomes more difficult to generate a moral panic at the same time that panic discourses become more prevalent. The increasing range and quantity of media panics creates the impression of a society under siege and the public response becomes ever more apathetic and disinterested. This emerging tendency in the way panics are developed, or more precisely not developed, has led some commentators to question the relevance of traditional models of moral panic. Since moral panics as a concept depends on the formation of a relationship between the powerful and the demonised, the inability of moral panics to affect the powerful, precisely that media savvy group most likely to reject the panics as scandal mongering, then indeed the explanatory power of the concept is in doubt.

However the relevance of moral panics has been disputed from another quarter. Theorists of the risk society have argued that the dynamics of risk communication have colonised those of moral panics. Ungar (2001) argues that risk dynamics are more characteristic in the presentation of social anxieties than those described by analysts of moral panics. In producing a typology of risks versus panics, Ungar describes the way that the traditional demonisation of certain problematic individuals and groups has given way to what he refers to as the "roulette dynamics" of blame and counter blame (2001). Moral panics are intimately tied up with the creation of recognisable folk-devils, stigmatised groups whose behaviour or characteristics epitomise the social problem that the moral panic describes. Thus in his classical study of moral panics Cohen (1972) describes the way in which the Mods came to act as both signifier and concrete instance of the sorts of social anxieties concerning youth then prevalent. The colonisation of dynamics of demonisation by the "foraging processes" of risk discourses, where blame is passed back and forth like a hot potato, then represents for Ungar a concrete break with moral panics as a practice and casts

doubt on analytical usefulness of the concept.

Moreover, Ungar argues risk discourses differ from moral panics in other important respects. Risks are more likely to be characterised by grass-roots development, as against moral panics that tend to feature a “top-down” approach where the problem is defined as a problem by powerful groups who then act as moral entrepreneurs in translating concern into response. Moral panics are also, and perhaps as a result Ungar argues, tied to the knowledge claims of experts and powerful social actors, whereas in the case of risk communications claims are ultimately contradictory, ambiguous and incapable of resolution. Thus risks, moreover, do not raise the question of proportion in the same way that moral panics do. For Ungar, risks do not raise the question of disproportion in the same way. Since risks are always a process of becoming true (author) then applying criteria of disproportionality would appear nonsense. Risks are always future orientated, they are brought about through the process of their communication and exist between trust and disaster. As a result they are, inevitably, not subject to empirical verification and therefore cannot be described in terms of exaggeration or distortion.

Ungar’s analysis is by no means unchallenged. Other theorists have argued that the colonisation of moral panics by risks that Ungar observes is in fact a convergence between the two. Hier (2003) argues that rather than contrasting the ‘rational’ bases of anxieties to the communal and interpretative basis of moral anxieties what in fact we see is an intermingling of hybrid knowledge formats which lead to a moralisation of risk (Hier, 2003: 4). This convergence between moral issues and risk issues is a symptom and a contributory factor in the proliferation of panics and public anxieties. As the dynamics of the risk society become increasingly promiscuous in their access to the lifeworld, so a heightened state of public anxiety ensues.

In this paper I will apply the different identification schemas of moral panic and risk to a set of concerns, in an attempt to place these debates on an empirical footing and illustrate some of the methodological and practical issues involved in this differentiation of the domains of public anxiety. This discussion will use a case study of media and popular anxieties expressed regarding the Internet. Fears around the Internet and its likely impact took on substance in Britain in the late 1990s. Between 1995 and 2000 the Internet was constructed in the British mainstream press and elsewhere either through utopian claims, namely that it would bring about new forms of political engagement, new forms of solidarity and community, provide the material basis for an expansion of a knowledge society, and a forum for extension of a multicultural sensibility. These hopes and ideals have been discussed in detail in Cairncross (2001). On the other hand the Internet was also seen as a threat in various respects. The primary forms which fears around the technology assumed were firstly fears of cultural and moral pollution through exposure to pornographic materials, and concerns that the Internet would be used to open a conduit between paedophiles and their prey. As press coverage of these issues increased, a number of other fears were foregrounded. The idea that the Internet could become addictive received a great deal of coverage between 1998 and 1999. Popular fears that the Internet could lead to a breakdown of communities were

also expressed, as were a number of variations on the theme of a link between Internet use and a decline in monogamous heterosexual relationships. Fears of cultural pollution also took on a criminal cast in assertions that the Internet would provide information on criminal methods – from hot-wiring to bomb-making, fears that were later absorbed into concerns over the Internet’s possible role as a key support for terrorism. In the discussion that follows I will use these issues as a basis for testing the applicability of schemes of identification of moral panics and risks using the schema advanced by Ungar. Although Ungar is not alone in positing distinctions between risks and moral panics, his account is the first to draw concrete and systematic differences between them.

Blame

The separation of risks and panics on the grounds of the process of blame allocation involved goes to the heart of the alleged differences between the approaches. The demonised individual, group or condition is central to the idea of a moral panic as it is the regulation of this group that provides the panic with its central rationale and dynamics. The regulation of a group of deviants acts to symbolically reaffirm communal boundaries through the scapegoating of the group in question (Cohen, 1972). In the case of cultural studies approaches this is tied to the re-establishment of a beleaguered hegemony (Hall, et al, 1978). In risk discourse the centrality of the folk-devil is displaced in favour of the risk itself. The roulette dynamics of blame are characterised by a foraging process (Ungar) in which blame gets passed from institution to institution and individual to individual finally coming to rest with the routine practices of faceless corporate bodies rather than the deviant actions of individuals (Ungar, 284). The process of blame allocation in both accounts reveals the central issues of both of the models. In moral panics, the high profile of the deviant refers the analyst back to the cultural norms that are in violation. In the risk model, the process of foraging for blame reveals the routine and institutional nature of the threat, which in turn allows it to be related back to the wider issue of social organisation and rationalisation.

In the case of the panic around Internet paedophilia which we have been witnessing in Britain, the dynamics of blame are complex. Whilst it is clear that there is a recognisable folk-devil- the shadowy paedophile lurking in the chatroom to seduce the unwary- the discussion of the problem in the press identifies a far wider range of candidates for blame than this one figure. Paedophilia on the Internet is tied in with the availability of paedophilic pornographic online to such an extent that leading policy makers have seen the latter as having a causal impact on the former (ref). In the debate over child pornography, for example, the role of Internet service providers (ISPs) has been one of the key issues to come to the fore, the central point of contention being as to whether there can be argued to be an “Internet company” and what the responsibilities of commercial parties might be in regulating electronic spaces. One UK newspaper in particular consistently emphasised the role of ISPs and Internet infrastructure owners and operatives in the fight against smut. This reached its most extreme point in a “Campaign to Clean Up the Internet” published by the paper in August 1996, where two individuals were identified who in their professional capacities acted as:

...key links in the international paedophile chain. One is a director of a company that provides access to thousands of illegal photographs of young children being sexually assaulted, the other provides a service which allows those who abuse children for the pornography trade to supply the Internet without fear of detection. (*The Observer*, 25.8.96)

Other papers are more keen to place the emphasis on the state’s responsibility

to enforce laws and direct the efforts of commercial interests. Thus, for example, *The Telegraph*, in discussing child pornography, argues:

While countries such as Holland and Sweden continue to permit such material to circulate, there is little hope of it being effectively stamped out anywhere in Europe ... [I]t is difficult to believe that the peculiarly horrific crimes of sexual violence against children that have come to light in Britain and Belgium are unrelated to the sadistic culture that has been bred by the pornographic video and film industry. To achieve any realistic solution, political leaders will have to accept that their moral responsibilities extend beyond their own borders (29.8.96)

Thus although there is a clear folk-devil in the account, this figure is not the only, or even the main, blameworthy actor. This role is taken by Internet service providers or pornographers or the state for failing to regulate the behaviour of corporations. Whilst there is a distinction here between the dynamics of blame and the dynamics of demonisation it seems that both can be operational at any given time within the same panic. On the other hand neither are they separable within this panic. The disassociation between folk-devil and blameworthy party underpins the construction of the paedophile as ill rather than evil, as a force of misbegotten nature whose insanity imperils a community as a result of failures of prevention, rather than as an malevolent individual or an evil genius, alternative constructions which could be equally plausible in context. The division of blame into demons and failures then acts to construct a different dynamic of blame than either moral panic or risk models would allow for if the two are analysed as belonging to different dynamics of social anxiety. Whereas advocates of risk exceptionalism see the operation of blame and demonisation as confined to different types of anxiety in this example they are articulated together and mutually reinforcing.

Of course such an approach to allocating blame is not unique to the Internet paedophile problem. Jenkins (2001) has observed the close relationship between demonisation of sex-offenders and a cycle of outrage directed at institutions whose failure to police the problem is implicated in high profile cases. It is a common pattern in cases of criminal deviance that the initial public outrage directed at offenders is resuscitated and channelled into new areas after a prosecution by public inquiries. The high profile of Britain's 'Soham' murder trial, for example, was maintained in the press as a result of public enquiries into how the killer obtained his job as a caretaker in the school of the children he went on to murder. This inquiry in turn fed back into and drew on cultural fears around the ineptitude of police surveillance methods for protecting the public from known criminals, fears that were magnified by the *News of the World's* (2000) campaign to 'out' paedophiles.

Forms of anxiety

This brings us to the second issue, namely the sources of social anxiety. Moral panics are seen as characterised by a 'top down' claims making activity, where

the sources of news about the problem, and primary doom-sayers, tend to be highly placed or official sources. For Hall and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies these official sources acted as 'primary definers'. The structured relationship between the press and officials acts to ensure the over-representation of the opinions of the powerful. These sources then establish the initial definition of the question and provide an interpretation of its salient features that commands subsequent treatments of the issue in the media (Hall et al, 1978). Thus for Hall et al the structured preference of journalists for bureaucratic news is the mechanism for the transmission of a dominant ideology. Other writers have emphasised the imbalance in panics in terms of forms of representation. Welch et al (2002) argue that panics over the threat posed by the practice of 'wilding,' a term referring to sexual violence by teenagers which arose in the late 1980s in New York, was represented in terms of class conflict in the US press. "Underlying the hysteria over a putative social threat exists class conflict in which the source of the problem is believed to be rooted in the lower, so-called dangerous class and in a predatory manner creeps up the social ladder" (2002: 20). These kinds of narratives of class conflict, argue the authors, flag up the link between moral panics and class status "moral panic (is) often driven by institutions influenced by the upper classes, including the media, legislatures and the criminal justice apparatus" (2002: 20). The authors cite the higher buying power of the wealthy and the greater attention that is paid to meeting their needs as a result as reasons for the greater power of the wealthy to drive social concerns and control their forms of representation. Clearly there are core differences between the forms of operation of power the two sets of authors are drawing on here. For Hall et al the power of the powerful derives from the fit between their cultural status and bureaucratic routines and those of the press as the point of emergence of concerns into a public sphere. For Welch and his colleagues power derives from the cultural authority and literal buying power of the wealthy. However both models see moral panics as produced by and out of differential power relations; panics are a means of furthering and a index of the state of class conflict in society.

For writers on risk no such model is implied in the formation of social anxieties. Risk is by its nature democratically distributed, although new class formations are possible around the avoidance of risk (Beck, 1992). As a result claims are more widely distributed through the social spectrum, a factor exacerbated by the differential knowledge claims implied between moral panics and risks (see below). Risk discourse, according to Ungar, tends to emanate more from the 'grassroots'. Characteristically we see diverse interest groups debating claims, claims are closely tied to social movement formation, are most frequently concerned with relatively intractable scientific concerns, and characteristically powerful groups will find themselves on the receiving end of attempts at demonisation by those lower down the social echelons. Thus in the case of the nuclear power fears discussed by Ungar (2001) public opinion took a characteristically hostile approach towards those that authors such as Hall et al and Welch would regard as primary definers and their ability to influence the content of panics and steer social anxieties was as a result compromised.

However, it is clear in the case of the Internet panics that this paper examines

that, again, these two models co-exist within the narrative of anxiety to some extent. Claims makers in respect of the Internet are characterised by their diversity. In the early stages of reportage of the 'problem' initial claims-makers were often the journalists themselves. Thus the earliest panic story from the Telegraph was a feature item entitled "An electronic sink of depravity" which drew its news salience from the then recent high profile given to the Internet by the utopian claims-making of US congressman Newt Gingrich concerning the brave new world of the Internet (The Guardian, (23.6.95)). Later reportage through 1995 and 1996 to the early part of 1997 was characterised by a high prevalence of official sources, particularly government spokespersons and, importantly, police sources, as arrests for new 'Internet crimes' formed the basis for social concern. Thus far then the reportage testifies to the close alignment between the Internet panics and traditional moral panic development. In his work on the amplification of deviancy, Jock Young, described the process by which marijuana smokers, as "visible and vulnerable targets" of media demonisation find themselves caught up in an amplification spiral which leaves them as an isolated, yet coherent group. One of primary effects of such amplification is the increase in arrests and prosecutions for these types of offences. Thus:

As the media fan public indignation ... pressure on the police increases ... the police act with greater vigilance and arrest more marijuana smokers. All that happens is that they dig deeper into the undetected part of the iceberg; the statistics for marijuana offenders soar; the public, the press and the magistrates view the new figures with even greater alarm ... We have entered what I term a fantasy crime wave. (Young, 1971: 50)

Likewise in Cohen's model, following the events at Clacton in the summer of 1964 police responses led to greater numbers of arrests, whilst the response of the courts was also punitive, leading to greater numbers of convictions for civil order offences. (Cohen, 1973: 91-107). In the case of Internet crime, the mechanisms in operation were very similar, with the novel twist that new methods and new powers were called for and implemented in the search for offenders. Jenkins (2001) has shown that public concerns over the Internet have led to the development of new policing techniques for apprehending purveyors and distributors of child pornography on the Internet, including wire-tapping and entrapment, which are regarded as legitimate extensions of police power in the face of the "crisis". "One wonders", he is led to muse, "if judicial logic might have operated differently had the case at issue been less emotive, if sexual threats to children were not involved" (Jenkins, 2001: 211). However later reportage is characterised by a rather different logic. As the issue of Internet paedophilia and paedophilia generally escalates in significance in the British press over the period, there is an increasing development of pressure groups (such as Internet Watch) and, more recently, a convergence between more established media pressure groups (such as Mary Whitehouse's Media Watch) and the new groups advocating Internet regulation. In part this occurs as a result of media action. The News of the World's campaign in the UK to 'out' paedophiles in the summer of 2000 drew upon and channelled public support

for a new law to force police reveal the names of convicted paedophiles living in the community. Public pressure groups were formed to push this issue, in collaboration with the tabloid press, and this raised the stake of grassroots claims-makers in debates around Internet regulation. Moreover the issues involved in these debates increasingly take on the technical / scientific character which Ungar attributes to risk discourses, with debate largely characterised by detailed expositions of the technical properties of the Internet prior to elaborations on the problems / opportunities of policing.

Thus again we see the operation of both dynamics. In this initial phase, claims-making is taken up the public, fitting closely with the generation of consensus which is regarded as a key feature of moral panics. However, later on these claims are disputed and turned against the initial claims-makers, who often appear in later media accounts as deluded or incompetent, precisely the role usually assumed by officials in risk discourse.

Knowledge Claims

The third indicator of difference between risks and moral panics is the forms of knowledge claims that are developed by the different anxieties. In risk discourse anxieties characteristically take the form of attempts to ascertain the nature or scale of the problem. An issue is advocated as a concern and subsequent debate focuses on establishing or disputing the reality of that claim, forwarding proposals and counter proposals for dealing with the problem, and establishing the likelihood of particular groups becoming affected. In moral panics, on the other hand, such types of discourse are uncharacteristic. Moral panics are the use of social anxieties to impose a moral order and as a result are constituted from a small range of familiar moral threats (Ungar, 2001, 276). Thus concerns take the form of exaggeration of scale or frequency of a threat, symbolisation of the threat in terms of challenges to traditional values, the emergence of interest groups who claim ownership of the problem (moral entrepreneurs), reframing of the problem in terms of these solutions advocated by these groups followed by a slow fade of the issue from the public eye (Cricher, 2003).

These two different types of knowledge claims are profoundly problematic when used as an indicator of difference between forms of social anxiety. In the first case it should be noted that they not dichotomous or oppositional categories. The use of one frame does not preclude the use of the other. Scale of the problem in risk discourse and exaggeration of the scale of the problem in moral panics could appear very similar in the forms of emergence of the concern. I will return to this point later. The second problem is in application. In terms of the Internet panics studied here both types of concern frame are used simultaneously. In the early stages of the panic we see the characteristic symbolisation of the Internet paedophile and pornographer, here constructed as a threat through narratives of anonymity, mental illness and instability, and particularly through persistent references in the press to Internet paedophiles as a international criminal network (Cavanagh, 2002, Jenkins, 2001). The initial reaction is followed by the emergence of moral entrepreneurs, in this case media specific pressure groups such as Internet watch, child welfare

organisations such as the National Children's Home, and general moral commentators, for example the Church of England. However these moral experts emerge alongside technical experts as spokespersons for the new threat. Thus computer programmers, spokespersons for Internet service providers, social scientists, representatives of government technology and crime think tanks, and educationalists as well as academics themselves all feature as core claims-makers and the substance of their claims very often overlaps, with 'moral' spokespersons called upon to address technical issues and vice-versa.

This also maps onto a greater diversity of representational forms used to describe and symbolise the problem. Thus the characteristic over inflated claims, exaggeration, distortion and rhetorical devices associated with moral panics are combined with the referential apparatus of risk assessment. Thus articles give prominence to research findings that "one in five children aged nine to 16 had used a chatroom, and one in 10 had met somebody in real life following an online encounter. Three-quarters of those had gone without an adult (Independent, 28. 9. 03) or that "one in four primary-school children who regularly chat over computer software admit that they have had face-to-face meetings with people they met online" (The Times, 15.2.04). This calculation of odds appears as a risk assessment but is itself a rhetorical strategy. The use of emotive terms "Access to paedophilia was very limited in the past ... restricted to a small group of people operating in the darkness. Now the Internet is pumping this stuff straight into your home, anyone can see it. The danger is that the Internet is going to convert people to things that have traditionally been suppressed."(The Telegraph, 18.2.02)

Disproportion

Finally we turn to the question of the division of the two domains on the basis of the issue of disproportion. In both bodies of theory the observation of disproportionality is used as an index of academic relevance. For risk theorists risk threats appear in the guise of intractable scientific claims and tend to be characteristically future orientated, describing a state of affairs that is 'becoming-real' (Van Loon, 2002) but is not currently so. For moral panic theorists there is assumed to be a kernel of truth at the heart of the mythology, a set of events from which the claims spring and the work of analysis is focused on the observation of distortion and exaggeration in presentation of this factual problem. Thus the identification of a moral panic as a moral panic is dependent on the adoption of a realist stance on the threat, seeing it as a real (but less worrying) phenomena independent of its presentation in the public sphere. In risks, by contrast, the presentation and the risk itself are one and the same, since, as Beck points out, a risk is a state of transition between trust (or ignorance) and disaster or genuine manifestation of a problem. As a result a realist perspective on risk, Beck contends, is inappropriate since risk exists only in and through its public mediation, not as an artefact independent of it. Risk discourse, therefore, far from representing a threat in the external world, acts to constitute itself. Thus the question of proportion, as Ungar contends, is simply not applicable in the case of risk, as, in addition to claims being essentially unknowable (the epistemological question in risk discourse) there is

no 'real world' correlate for it to be applicable to (the ontological premise).

The Internet as an, at this period, emergent technology is subject, as with many emergent technologies to hyperbolic and futuristically orientated claims. News items commonly deploy a narrative of futurism in order to characterise the technology. Thus the Internet is described as "cyberspace", a characterisation that has become so naturalised that it is difficult to remember that the term was originally nothing to do with the now high tech commercial world of the Internet. The term "cyberspace" was coined by the science fiction writer William Gibson to refer to the "matrix", a virtual reality environment in which many of his futuristic fantasy novels are set. A fictional construct then, cyberspace is now understood as a synonym for the modern day Internet. This has the effect of conflating the imaginary with the real, thus acting to occlude the disparity between the claims being made concerning the Internet and the lived experience of its use. Representations of the Internet are absorbed into representations of the future in order to make the existing technology newsworthy. Thus the papers consistently discuss the Internet in terms of its promise as a technology rather than in terms of the uses to which it is currently being put. The reported Internet phenomena is always as understood as imminent, on the verge of happening or in process. The headline "Internet 'creating computer junkies'" (*The Guardian*, 7.8.97), for example, draws its impact from the suggestion that this is an event that is happening in the present, as yet undetected. It is the futuristic nightmare of a nation of computer-addicted freaks that is the vision being peddled by this headline. Hence the projection of the Internet's effects into the future is a key support in the manufacture of a panic mythology around the Internet in the early years of public interest in the technology. Although the Internet can be experienced by users and found to have certain characteristics that do not conform to these fervid visions, this is not, such representations suggest, the "real" Internet. The "real" Internet is the one to come, and is contained within the potential of the technology.

The understanding of the Internet's effects as something occurring in the future draws on an already established lore of futurism and scientific prediction as well as more community specific discourses of science fiction that attend discussions of a technological future. However, it is also tied to the predictive element of panic adaptations, an element which Cohen regards as central to the management of concern. Prediction, in Cohen's account features as a rhetorical gesture which offers a potential way out of the dilemma posed by moral entrepreneurs need to assert that the problem is worsening, in order to solicit public support, whilst fending off censure of their own handling of the problem (Cohen, 1972: 53). However, the predictive element of moral panics is virtually indistinguishable on the ground from the equally common futuristically orientated claims of risk discourse. Again the clear typographies of risk versus moral panic are blurred when viewed in relation to these data.

Conclusions

The above discussion has highlighted the difficulties in applying logical criteria to the differentiation of taxonomies of anxiety. Two themes emerge in

considering why this is and these focus on, firstly, the way in which simplification of the models for the purposes of identification risks producing an account that is insensitive to differences *within* the approaches. The second issue concerns the role posited in these approaches for the joint forum of emergence of these concerns, namely the mass media. I will deal with each of these in turn.

Over-simplification

Comparisons of models of risk and moral panic tend to occlude the differences between different strands of thought within the approaches. Thus for example the use of disproportion as an indicator of a difference between the approaches overlooks the fact that disproportion is and always has been a thorny question in moral panic studies. For some theorists the idea of a moral panic is functionally tied to a disproportion between the level of anxiety expressed and the scale of the problem. “The concept of moral panic *rests* on disproportionality”, argue Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994: 38), “If we cannot determine disproportionality, we cannot conclude that a given episode of fear or concern represents a case of moral panic”. Others contest the central status of disproportion, arguing that in any case such criteria are impossible to operationalise in practice. As Richard Sparks has noted, the assumption that a given fear is excessive, or is generated by something other than its ostensible object, implies the existence of a “hypothetically appropriate level of fear from which notional expectation real fears deviate” (Sparks, 1992: 8). This hypothetically appropriate level is, as Waddington (1986) points out, entirely absent from cultural studies theories of moral panic, although it is present in attributional models (Cricher, 2003 : 151). Other differences within moral panics are also apparent. In the American constructionist tradition the processes of construction of the objects of anxiety, the work of claims makers, and public arenas as a core base for the proliferation of discourse are all emphasised, in contrast to the British cultural studies approach which emphasises social consequences of constructions, the political arena as a core site for the proliferation of discourse and the work of key elites in the development of public anxieties. Thus whereas the British cultural studies tradition more closely maps onto the taxonomy suggested by Ungar, the American constructionist tradition does not. Thus the differences between moral panics and the risk society appear to be less differences between two social dynamics and more differences between two methodological and philosophical approaches to the same issue.

Secondly, and more importantly, the problems of applying these schemas of identification to social anxieties are compounded by the two forms shared occupation of a single forum of emergence. Whether a realist or constructionist ontology is adopted the fact remains that the way in which these anxieties are expressed and enter the public domain is through the mass media and this refers us as analysts back to the practices and procedures of making these concerns public as this occurs with reference to media.

One way to theorise the role of the media in relation to social anxieties is to

consider the eventual forms assumed by social anxieties with reference to the idea of enframing. A frame is a form of meta-communication, a way of signalling the nature of the content of a particular form of communication. Framing has been more explored in the context of social movements than social anxieties. Indeed leading theorists have explicitly disavowed the usefulness of framing as an approach to understanding social problems arguing that whilst “the notion of a master frame implies that claims about different social problems will share some fairly elaborate underlying theory of political and social relationships, social problems can share little more than similar names” (Best and Furedi, 2001: 118). This may be true in terms of social problems, however in relation to the distinction between risks and panics, it is precisely the underlying theories of political and social relationships that is at stake. I would here argue that the observed differences between risk discourse and moral panic discourse as this is produced in their joint forum of emergence may be less a product of fundamental ontological differences and more related to the frames used to represent them. I will illustrate this point with reference to the idea of technocratic versus moralistic frames in the representation of the Internet.

Many of the fears expressed concerning the technology as I have illustrated these above draw their power from a form of technologically determinist discourse. The relationship between the Internet and paedophiles as it was represented in the panic stories that circulated in the late 1990s was far from simple. Fears around the Internet as providing a forum for dissemination of illegal materials and fears of the Internet as an invasive and addictive media were quickly enjoined and articulated together. In 2000 The Telegraph carried news that “Ministers believe the anonymity afforded by computers to users is tempting ordinary people, who would never buy illegal magazines, to look at child pornography out of curiosity. This then leads to them becoming hooked on more extreme material and to come into contact with paedophile rings (The Telegraph 18.6.00). More recently The Guardian, discussing a new police initiative setting up a website to ensnare paedophiles saw its chief merit in that it would make it more difficult for “would-be paedophiles to post or download abusive images” (The Guardian, 19.12.03). Likewise, in reporting a recent murder trial, the Daily Mail went to press with the front-page headline “Killed by the Internet”. The case concerned a man who was convicted for strangling a woman to death during a sex/rape act (the particulars of the case were impossible for the court to determine). The man was found to be in possession of a large library of images of necrophiliac and fetishist pornography and was a frequent visitor to sites devoted to this theme. The Daily Mail’s choice to key the case to another a pre-existing discourse of the undesirability and likely effects of pornography, with the implicit suggestion that the crime was provoked by the murderer’s consumption of these materials is only comprehensible within the context that these media technologies are seen as having definite effects. This contention in turn is dependent on the notion that these effects are linear, that they derive directly from the consumption of these materials, and that moreover these materials are a sufficient cause in themselves of the acts they provoke.

This frame is highly technocratic in nature, drawing its support from the ideas of linear development and monocausality that are common in panics around technologies. Thus fears around a range of concerns, from health risks to oil

spills to Internet addiction are based on the perception of a fragile social, ecological or natural balance which is disrupted by the introduction or transformation of one small overlooked factor. Risk narratives, as these are promoted through the media, are dependent on the identification of a single determining variable that has changed its character in some respect. Since changes in our society are most often associated with technological developments in some respect, this transformation is most often technical in character.

Technocratic frames, however, tend to have own logic and are, as others have observed, more penetrating than moral frames. There are three reasons why this is the case. In the first instance, technical panics tend to be more geographically widespread in character. In discussing the way claims spread beyond national borders and the internationalisation of particular panics, Best and his co-authors identify amongst other factors non-relational networks as core to the transmission of social problems. Modern mass media epitomise non-relational networks since they at no point depend on personal or institutional ties. As the ostensible object of a panic, a mass media acts not only as an object of concern but as the media of that concern. The mere fact one is able to become aware of the concern acts as a warrant for its credibility.

Secondly technical panics tend to be more temporally stable than other concerns. As others have observed variants on the media effects panics have been exhibited throughout media history, back as far as the introduction of the printing press. One possible explanation for the temporal durability of such fears is the cyclical nature of these problems. As Feenberg has pointed out technological questions require technological answers, answers which themselves are likely to raise further technological questions. Thus fears around the availability of Internet porn for example, provoke the use of nanny or net censorship software by parents and companies. These in turn 'reveal' previously undisclosed levels of social ills attending the technology, by making their observation easier, which feeds back into the cycle of concern, warranting both the original concern and the validity of the action taken in respect of it. In this sense technological solutions provide a *deus ex machina* for the troubled moral entrepreneur (see above) whose continued control of the concern depends on establishing its continued threat whilst at the same time not invalidating the usefulness of his methods. Finally, technical solutions themselves expand upon the original concern by becoming problematic themselves. Hence the use of nanny software to protect children and/or to prevent employees misusing company facilities raises the joint problems of the ethics of surveillance – feeding back into conspiratorial narratives- and the impossibility of technically illiterate parents circumventing the hormonally driven impulses of their technologically savvy offspring.

Whether risks and moral panics are understood as converging or becoming colonised or as different types of knowledge claim forwarded by the media, it is clear that there is an urgent need to rethink and adequately account for the dynamics of the media in the production of these fears. Public anxieties can only take on public form through the media. As a number of studies have confirmed, the media act for policy makers as the visible form of public opinion

and to all intents and purposes is public opinion (Golding and Middleton, 1982). Yet the field of journalism itself is, as the discussion of moral panics as a journalistic practice makes clear, far from static, and thus if we are to understand the ways in which anxieties and social order are related we need to begin with an understanding of the factors which affect the phenomenal forms of emergence of public fears.

References

- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* London Sage
- Beck, U., *Risk Society Revisited : Theory, Politics and Research Programmes* pp 211-229 in *The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory* Barbara Adams, Ulrich Beck and Joost Van Loon (eds) London Sage
- Best, J. and Furedi, F. (2001) *How Claims Spread: Cross-National Diffusion of Social Problems* New York Aldine
- Cairncross, F. (2001) *The Death of Distance 2.0: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives* London Texere
- Cavanagh, A.E. (2002) *Journalists' Representations of the Internet: The Limits of Moral Panic Theories* Unpublished PhD thesis University of Manchester, Manchester, England
- Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. London: McGibbon and Kee.
- Critcher, C. (2003) *Moral Panics and the Media* Buckingham, Open University Press
- Golding, P. and Middleton, S. (1982) *Images of Welfare: Press and public attitudes to poverty*, Martin Robertson, Oxford.
- Goode, E., and Ben-Yehuda, N. (1994). *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., and Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. London: Macmillan.
- Jenkins, P. (2001). *Beyond Tolerance: Child Pornography on the Internet*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Hier, S. (2003) Risk and panic in late modernity: implications of the converging sites of social anxiety *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 3-20
- Hunt, A. (1997). "Moral Panic' and Moral Language in the Media". *British Journal of Sociology*, **48**(4): 629-648.

- McRobbie, A. and Thornton, S. (1995). "Rethinking 'Moral Panic' for Multi-mediated Social Worlds". *British Journal of Sociology*, **46**(4): 559–73.
- McRobbie, A. (1992). *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. London, Routledge.
- Sparks, R. (1992) *Television and the Drama of Crime: Moral Tales and the Place of Crime in Everyday Life* Buckingham, Open University Press
- Ungar, S (2001) Moral panic versus the risk society: the implications of the changing sites of social anxiety *British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 52 no. 2 p. 271-292
- Van Loon, J. (2002) Virtual Risks in an Age of Cybernetic Reproduction pp165-82 in *The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory* Barbara Adams, Ulrich Beck and Joost Van Loon (eds) London Sage
- Waddington, P.A.J. (1986). "Mugging as a Moral Panic: A Question of Proportion". *British Journal of Sociology*, **37**(2): 245–259.
- Welch, M., Price, E., and Yankey, N (2002) "Moral Panic Over Youth Violence: *Wilding* and the Manufacture of Menace in the Media." *Youth & Society*, Vol. 34, No. 1: 3-30.
- Young, J (1971). "The Role of the Police as Amplifiers of Deviancy, Negotiators of Reality and Translators of Fantasy: Some Consequences of Our Present System of Drug Control as Seen in Notting Hill", in Stanley Cohen (ed.), *Images of Deviance*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 27–61.