Moral Panics

- Moral panics – what are they
- Stages in moral panics
- Who are the folk devils?
- Examples
  - Binge drinking, terrorism, hoodies
- Moral panics and the media
- Other ways of thinking about moral panics and alternatives
- Essay question – relationship between the media and moral panics
- Learning outcome 1: Identify principal issues in Media and Cultural Studies
What are moral panics?

- British Sociologist Jock Young – first published reference to moral panic (1971)

- Cohen analysed Mods and Rockers in 1970s

- Cohen (1972 cited in Thompson 1998, pp.7-8) ‘A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerge to become defined as a threat to society values and interests’

- Troubling behaviour
Stages of Moral Panics

Stage 1
- An event attracts media coverage
- Intensive media surveillance

Stage 2
- Wider social implications of the event fuelled by media concern and debate
- Primary definers interviewed (expert and professional opinions)
- Folk devils identified (things/people that threaten society)

Stage 3
- Response from authorities
- Social control
- Legislation implemented
Morals, Folk Devils and Panics

- Morals – threat to values/beliefs/ways of live/society as a whole
- Folk devils – things/people that threaten society and are perceived as evil
- Panic – exaggerated/irrational responses
- Groups who can instigate moral panics
  - Press, pressure groups, politicians, police, public opinion
- If the above all agree on a moral panic it is powerful
- But there are potential conflicts of interest
Example 1: Binge Drinking

- Young people 16-25 year olds getting drunk fast
- Causing nuisance in city centres and threat to public order
- Contradictions (government receives tax on alcohol and more liberal licensing hours)
- Police – alcohol causes disorder
- Law creators conflict with law enforces
- Therefore not a fully fledged moral panic
Percentage of Adults in UK who never drink alcohol

Source: Telegraph Online
Example 2: Terrorism

- Fear of terrorism
- News persuades opinion
- Exaggeration of number of evildoers
- Threatened by an internal enemy
- Acts which enable authorities to scrutinise electronic communications
- Power of indefinite detention without trial (breach of Human Rights Act)
Example 3: Hoodies

- Banned from Bluewater shopping centre
- Hoodies associated with moral decline among youth in UK
- Excluded people from gathering in the centre
- Three stages
  - Event (youth wearing hoodies perceived as criminal)
  - Media coverage – news reports, programmes like *Little Britain* fuelled this perception
  - Control – banning of hoodies
Moral panics and the Media

- Effects ideas about the media
- Children who commit violent acts
- Video games and horror films highlighted in such instances
- Effects model outdated
- ‘For some children under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children under most conditions television is probably neither harmful nor particularly beneficial’ (Schramm et al. 1961 in Briggs and Cobley 1998: pp. 260-261)

- No direct effect/cause relationship between media and behaviour.
Other ways of thinking about moral panics

- Face awkward questions about social problems
- Defining, labelling, punishing unacceptable behaviour confirms who we are, what we believe and stand for
- Highlights boundaries around communities
- Moral panics challenges central values in mainstream society
- Trying to control social changes
- And reconfirm moral values
Not a moral panic

- To what degree something has or has not become a moral panic
- Or deviates from a typical moral panic
- Often occurs where there is agreement about the seriousness/implications of the issue
- And where different interested groups agree on this (e.g. police, politicians, press, public)
- Resistance to moral panics may occur
- Moral panics may be derailed.
What you do/don’t believe

I'm looking for copies of The New York Times. That would be in the fiction section.
Alternative models

- Elite engineered model
  - Moral panic is manufactured to divert attention
- Grassroots model
  - Provides release for social insecurity
- All models – the threat is exaggerated
- Justifies legislation
Essay Question

- Explore the relationship between the media and moral panics
- 1500 words, 50%
- You could choose one moral panic or more than one to focus on
- You could explore the media reporting of a moral panic in press, television etc.
- Think about whether the moral panic fits the criteria of a moral panic or not?
- You can use Box of Broadcasts for television
- Blog contribution – 2 parts: Skills gained and how you have used the feedback from assignment 1
Summary

- Moral panics are about changes that occur
- Which threaten something about societal morals/values/behaviour
- Stages of moral panics
- Not everything reaches stage 3
- Some moral panics fade away, some reoccur
- Moral panics may be useful for governments wanting to pass legislation
References