Crime, Deviance & The Mass Media

Moral Panics
1. Media’s role in social construction of Crime including moral panics and amplification

2. Crime and news values and agenda setting

3. Representation of Crime – fact and fiction - these will be dealt with later in a separate point
The Process of Labelling

Moral Crusade → Responses → Result

Moral entrepreneurs seek to outlaw certain behaviour

Public response can be to accept or reject the ‘crusade’.

Labelled group can respond in a number of ways. They can reject label or accept.

Labelled group can respond in a number of ways. They can reject label or accept.

Key Factors

- Moral crusade
- Moral panic

Key Factors for success/failure

- Sensitization
  - Are public already concerned?
- Power
  - Have crusaders access to power?
- Cultural values
  - Does crusade ‘fit’ with existing beliefs?

Key Factors

- Power
  - Has labelled group enough power to reject deviant label?

Key Factors

- Labelled Group
  - Sense of stigmatization (martyrdom?). Change behaviour to avert punishment / stigma. Possible amplification of deviance.

What results are possible?

- Wider society
  - Apply the label as ‘master status’.

N.B. The model above can also be applied to a labelled group who initiate a crusade to remove their deviant status, e.g. gays, cannabis smokers.
What is the role of the media in crime and deviance? Does it ...

Reflect
Create
Sensationalise
Stereotype
React
Label
’Deviancy amplification’ was coined by Leslie Wilkins (1964) to describe how agencies like the police and media can actually generate an increase in deviance. Minor and rare problems can look serious and common place. People become motivated to keep informed on events.

The resulting publicity has potential to increase deviant behaviour by glamourising it or making it seem common or acceptable.
Definitions

- **Moral Panic** – an exaggerated fear or outrage by the media and the audience, over an issue that has been blown out of proportion by the media in the first place. These become issues of public concern, about the behaviour of certain groups of people who are seen as a threat to the moral order and stability of society.

- **Folk Devils** – these are groups targeted by a moral panic, fictional or not. They are groups seen by the media as evil or deviant and a threat to the moral well being of society.

- **Self-fulfilling Prophecy** – a prediction that makes itself become true. An external view is internalized by a person or a group and taken on in their actions and behaviour.
S. Cohen: Folk Devils and Moral Panics 1972

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4Lw86RK8-c
The term moral panic was developed by Stan Cohen.

It is based on a false or exaggerated idea that some group’s behaviour is labelled as deviant and is a menace to society.

Cohen used the term ‘folk devil’ to refer to such groups.

‘Moral panics’ are generally fuelled by media coverage of social issues.
Stan Cohen studied mods and rockers in 1960s. In the absence of a major story one wet Easter weekend a minor affray in Clacton became front page news.

The media developed these groups into ‘folk devils’ and constructed a ‘moral panic’ about young people generally.
Cohen’s Study of Mods and Rockers (2)

Cohen noted how the media used ‘symbolic shorthands’ such as hair styles, items of clothing, modes of transport, etc as icons of troublemakers.
Activity 2 – Video

Watch the documentary on ‘Mods and rockers’. Think about how the groups are portrayed by the

– Media
– And the subsequent response by the public

http://www.youtube.com/watch#playnext=1&playnext_from=TL&videos=ovQUhlHtn6s&v=r61ks18Bd7I
How a Moral Panic Occurs: the Media Amplification Spiral

1. Group identified by media
2. Exaggeration and distortion stereotypes etc
3. Prediction
4. Symbolisation folk devil established
5. Self fulfilling prophecy
6. Moral panic!
7. Media Amplification spiral

*now create your own!*
Circular Nature of Moral Panics

1. An activity gains media attention
2. Agencies of control respond
3. Deviance becomes amplified
4. Exaggeration Symbolisation Prediction
5. Problem becomes redefined
Examples of Moral Panics

• Mods & Rockers (1960s) (Cohen)
• Mugging in the 1970s (Hall et al).
• HIV/AIDS (1980s).
• Satanic child abuse (1980s).
• Heroin and crack cocaine distribution (1980s/1990s).
• Video-nasties (1980/1990s).
• Guns (1990s and 2000s)
• Acid raves, Ecstasy, (1990s) (Thornton and Critcher).
• Male under-achievement in education (1990s).
• Asylum seekers (2000s).
• Islamic terrorism (2000s)
• Knife crime (2000s)
Media as ‘Moral Crusaders’

The media, having played a part in constructing a moral panic, may then embark upon a 'moral crusade' against the identified 'folk devils'.

The desired outcome is to swell public opinion and for the authorities to embark upon a moral clampdown on deviants. This can sometimes lead to scape-goating.
Moral Panics as Ideological Control

Miller and Reilly (1994) see some moral panics used to soften up public opinion and thus act as a form of 'ideological social control'.

For example, the media's coverage of Islamic terrorism is seen by many to promote 'Islamophobia'.

The resulting Government anti-terrorist legislation has received broad public support despite seriously reducing ordinary people's civil liberties.
Moral Panics

1. Are they of any benefit to society?
2. Are they inevitable? Do they definitely happen?
3. Criticisms – we are soooo over them!

McRobbie and Thornton
McRobbie and Thornton: Moral Panics are an Outmoded Concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>The frequency of moral panics has increased: they are no longer noteworthy.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>In the past moral panics would scapegoat a group and create ‘folk devils’. Today there are many viewpoints and values in society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
<td>Because the concept of moral panic is well-known, some groups actually try to create one for their own benefit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty</td>
<td>Because there is less certainty about what is unambiguously ‘bad’ today, moral panics are harder to start. ‘Moral’ is a relative concept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebound</td>
<td>People are wary about starting moral panics as there is the possibility of it rebounding on them, e.g. The shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes in the aftermath of London terrorism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The relationship between crime and the media is complex and may result in a number of different outcomes.

**Issues occur**
Media coverage dependant on:
- Newsworthiness
- Power of those seeking media coverage

**No interest**

**Moral panic?**
A moral panic may occur or may not occur, depending upon:
- Frequency
- Context
- Reflexivity
- Difficulty
- Rebound

**No moral panic**

**MORAL PANIC**
A process of sensitization may occur, depending upon how news is ‘processed’ by the public and whether it is reaffirmed by personal experience.

**Public response?**

**No response**

**Heightened awareness**

**Deviant responses?**
Those labelled as the problem group may respond to in a number of ways:
- Increase deviant activity
- Change to another (deviant) activity not yet the centre of media and public interest
- Decrease or cease (deviant) activity

**Policy responses?**
A range of possible responses by police, welfare agencies, etc., such as:
- Punitive ‘crackdown’
- Welfare measure to alleviate the ‘causes’
- Scapegoating
Revision:
Labelling and the Media:
1. Explain your concept
2. Where can the media link to it?