

# Familiar strangers, juvenile panic and the British press: the decline of social trust.

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## Strangers No More

Familiar Strangers, Juvenile Panic and the British Press

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### Strangers No More: Towards Reconstructing Trust

Though we have long regarded our children as subjects of moral scrutiny and concern, rarely have they been treated with such heightened anxiety – or profound ambivalence – as they are in today’s Britain. Late-modern childhood, as this book demonstrates, is perceived and portrayed as a state of both innocence and savagery, with juveniles besieged by a barrage of menaces while also presenting potential threats *themselves*. This ambivalence can be traced back through cultural deposits accumulated down the centuries – from political speeches and pedagogic tracts to folk-tales, children’s fiction and visual art. Taken together, they present a continuum of oppositions in portrayals of the young that, in many respects, has remained remarkably consistent through time. As Chapter 2 showed, wide-eyed infants have *repeatedly* been distinguished from wild-eyed youths, girls from boys, middle-class from working-class (and underclass) kids and one’s own from other people’s. Moreover, a recurring undercurrent of all these antinomies has been an implicit moral distinction between ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ children – and (more often than not) parents and families, too.

Yet, while these overlapping, at times mutually reinforcing, ambivalences may have been bubbling beneath the surface for generations, in late-modern Britain they have become sharpened and more deeply embedded, with contradictions between positive and negative perceptions of children glossed over and apparently unquestioned (even unnoticed). And key to helping us understand these conflicted conceptualizations of juveniles is our late-modern bogeyman, the familiar stranger: a near-phantasmagoric figure personifying the deep distrust and suspicion with which we increasingly regard our fellow man, woman and (crucially) child. Just as (s)he symbolizes the ‘serpent in paradise’<sup>1</sup> who stalks our children, so, too, is (s)he made manifest in the guise of the hooded yob, the feral teenager, the ‘bored, lazy youth’<sup>2</sup> – folk-devils that repeatedly resurface in political

discourse, editorial judgments, published media narratives, the processing of news by both audience members and journalists, and everyday conversation. All are manifestations of the same societal malaise that is fuelling our neuroses about the malevolent spectres juveniles *face*. This is the insidious, slow-burn erosion – among individuals, families, neighbours and communities alike – of social trust.

The discourse of distrust explored by this book – the paradoxical positioning of children as both victims and threats – is routinely reproduced through news values applied in the selection and construction of stories on the page, with alarmist narratives involving juveniles seen by editors as a major driver of audience ‘traffic’.<sup>3</sup> As the interviews carried out for Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate, newsmakers are continually looking out for dramatic narratives about the young – with tales of child abduction and abuse, on the one hand, and outbreaks of lawlessness by feral teenagers, on the other, considered inherently more newsworthy than positive stories about young achievers. The high level of newsworthiness ascribed to such cases, and the disproportionate allocation of scarce resources to cover them, is, as journalists themselves concede, principally ‘market-driven’ (McManus, 1994). At a time when newspapers are under more pressure than ever to attract and retain audiences, in the face of falling advertising revenue, intense online competition and the escalating cost of investing in digital publishing, their solution is to minimize the *cost* of producing stories while maximizing their *saleability* – by using readily available, tried-and-tested sources to generate vivid narratives that both arouse the public’s interest and persuade it to ‘participate’.<sup>4</sup> Fuelled by these on-tap primary definers with vested institutional interests in dramatizing the risks faced (and threats posed) by children, notably government, police and the courts, the outcome of this hard-nosed commercial approach to journalism is a grossly distorted newspaper discourse which mobilizes the literary tropes of the Brothers Grimm, horror movies and murder-mystery novels to exploit deep-seated insecurities about juveniles for financial gain. As Chapter 4 shows, a clear majority of press articles about children published in any given month – nearly two-thirds in July 2011 alone – position them as ‘victims’ or ‘survivors’, with by far the next biggest category portraying them as ‘threats’.

The relish with which audiences lap up and, crucially, *buy into* these baleful narratives is testament to the ‘salience’ they clearly hold for us (Crichton, 2003). In the present context, this salience – a key feature of successful earlier panics – rests on the symbolism of recurrent tropes, notably recognizable settings and familiar strangers, as projections of wider concerns about personal insecurity and dwindling social trust. Parents, grandparents and even children interviewed for our focus groups displayed an intense fascination with dramatic stories about juveniles – notably those awakening lay anxieties about child abduction, youth disorder and, especially, the possibility of hidden terrors lurking in familiar surroundings or behind the deceptive smiles of benign-seeming acquaintances. And newspaper discussion-threads analysed in Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated not only high degrees of public engagement in (and concern about) such stories, but posters’ overwhelming affirmation of the underlying message that most such narratives project: namely that Britain is becoming an ever-more menacing place in which to live. Indeed, many contributors acted as little more than echo chambers for this dominant discourse, posting sweeping statements about everything from the perceived pervasiveness of stranger-danger and youth antisocial behaviour to the generally decadent state of contemporary Britain – a perception of a society ‘gone to the dogs’<sup>5</sup> so wilfully exploited by papers. Moreover, the morbid curiosity that encouraged focus group mothers to debate incidents experienced vicariously through the media – and the unease they expressed about the possibility of such misfortunes befalling them – appeared to have the effect of *reinforcing* protective behaviours towards their own children. Asked about the degree of freedom they habitually allowed their kids, they enumerated various restrictions – justifying these by listing a montage of generalized risk anxieties, ranging from predatory paedophiles, hit-and-run drivers and cyber-bullies to TV violence, aggressive advertising and inanimate household objects like razors and breadknives. Discussion about the *sources* of these concerns invariably identified two key culprits – news coverage and peer-to-peer gossip, particularly ‘Chinese whispers’ spread via social media – with the narratives generating the greatest distress those involving aspects of threatening familiarity. These ranged from a widely reported (but later discredited) local story about schoolchildren being stalked by a would-be abductor in a black car to numerous national press stories

about the abuse of minors by trusted adults like teachers, nursery workers or more loosely known familiar strangers.

The sensitization displayed by focus group participants to the nightmarish prospect of predatory adults lurking on the margins of *their own* social circles – and the possibility of abduction, abuse or even murder occurring in oft-visited, safe-seeming surroundings – is highly symbolic. Beyond reviving generations-old fairy-tale tropes about wicked uncles and witchy stepmothers, its salience at this moment in history lies in the fact that it represents a *displacement* for wider social anxieties situated in the conflicted, uneasy position of parents in contemporary Britain. In airing concerns about familiar strangers, and displaying an appetite for news stories exploring this theme, focus groups voiced a generalized suspicion of other people's motives indicative of the erosion of social trust and mounting economic insecurity that numerous other studies have attributed to increased individualization arising from the marketization of UK society since the 1970s (e.g. Hall, 1999; OECD, 2001; Harper, 2001; Li et al., 2005; European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association, 2006; Llaques, 2011). It can be no coincidence that research also shows this *same period* to have coincided with a steep decline in the levels of independence that British children have been allowed outside the home, as a result of growing fears about both stranger-danger and road safety that have arisen, in part, from an increasingly hectic and competitive social environment (e.g. Hillman et al., 1990; Shaw et al., 2013).

In the end, then, if this book is about anything it is not children, nor even panic, but trust. This priceless commodity appears to be in conspicuously short supply in today's socially fractured, economically atomized neoliberal societies – societies in which there is no shortage of other, more *material*, commodities. Britons' preoccupation with menacing narratives about the young, and those who would harm them, is arguably as much a distraction from deeper social problems as previous panic discourses that were even more cynically exploited by the press and powers-that-be, such as Hall et al.'s 'mugging' scare or Fishman's 'crime-wave' (both 1978). And, while the drivers of juvenile panic narratives in the media might be principally commercial, an undeniable *effect* of journalists' over-reliance on police, politicians and bureaucrats when 'manufacturing the news' (Fishman,

1980) is to consolidate dominant elite ideologies in the public sphere – if only because the ‘raw materials’ these official sources supply them with are ‘already ideological’ (ibid.). Moreover, even if the *media’s* primary motive is opportunism (rather than conscious complicity), one can’t help wondering how happily our politicians and law enforcers manipulate our suspicions and uncertainties in order to distract us with ‘the wrong things’ (Hall et al., 1978, p. vii) – as they simultaneously justify ever more authoritarian judicial crackdowns, and ever greater liberalization and erosion of our public services and social security system. If this book had not been concerned with exploring the growth of distrust towards people in *general*, through the prism of juvenile panic, it might well have focused on any number of other present-day (panic) discourses that elites and the media mobilize to divide us from deviant/unworthy groups of our fellow ‘citizens’, in so doing exploiting and further undermining our dwindling social trust – from the demonization of benefit claimants to successive waves of hysteria about asylum seekers and economic migrants.

As it is, the discourse studied here concerns a disproportionate preoccupation with juvenile risk that has become hardwired into every level of today’s news-making process: in newspaper narratives themselves; the professional (and personal) values of journalists producing them; and their dialogue with audience members, including those who publicly respond to stories (and largely affirm their agendas) on discussion threads. This clear consensus between news-makers, sources and public – and the distorted discourse resulting from it – bears all the hallmarks of an endemic juvenile panic. But, while similar in many respects to classic ‘moral’ panics (e.g. Cohen, 1972; Hall et al., 1978), the ongoing and (at times) nebulous nature of this *particular* discourse makes it harder to classify. In tapping into fears about familiar strangers and other predatory figures, from prowling paedophiles to hooded hooligans – a malevolent rogues’ gallery one might readily describe as folk-devils – it clearly resembles the panics of old. But by embracing a melange of disparate menaces (some personified, others not) it bears closer resemblance to the generalized, less tangible anxieties that have emerged from the post-1980s ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1990) and the ensuing age of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000), in tandem with the wider social, economic and technological changes described above. What it shares in common with *both* more situated panics and ongoing risk anxieties, however, is

a tendency to manifest itself at times when a collision of factors conspires to crystallize it in the public sphere. These *crystallizing moments* – pinch-points at which the simmering juvenile panic bubbles to the boil – can be provoked by alarming individual incidents, eye-catching policy announcements, campaigns/initiatives or (most often) combinations of any two or more of these. As the April Jones case study demonstrates, coincidences of timing – in that case, with the Jimmy Savile revelations and various piggybacking ‘pseudo-events’ (Boorstin, 1971) flowing from them – help establish and consolidate panic narratives in the media, with the news values of ‘continuity’ (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) or ‘follow-up’ (Harcup & O’Neill, 2001) locking us, with sad inevitability, into vicious cycles of more (and more febrile) coverage and debate. In his 2002 introduction to the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen distinguished between ‘noisy constructions’, in which explosions of public opprobrium and panicky behaviour stem from ‘a single sensational case’, and ‘quiet constructions’, when social problems are ‘identified’ by professionals, experts or bureaucrats ‘with no public or mass media exposure’ (Cohen, 2002, p. xxiii). And to these he added a third category alluded to in his original (1972) thesis: that of the periodic, or rolling, panic that resurfaces repeatedly, as creeping narratives about particular risks and/or forms of deviancy become slowly more socially embedded. It is this kind of *simmering* panic, bubbling back to the boil at moments of singular drama, which forms the locus for this book, as it most clearly describes the particular nature of the collective mind-set which best characterizes late-modern Britain.

Of course, simmering panics require their ignition points, or crystallizing moments, like any other – and (as in this particular instance) ‘quiet’ constructions can piggyback on ‘noisy’ ones or ‘noisy’ constructions on ‘quiet’ ones. But whatever sequence of events lights the match, the key to the ignition process, today as ever, is the news media – which, eager to ensnare and engage audiences, knowingly tap into (and play up) these latent societal sensitivities in explosive, highly symbolic, ways. Moreover, whereas one-off panics of the past, like those over Mods and Rockers or the MMR vaccine, might only have reached boiling-point once before slowly fading away, today’s juvenile panic appears to linger *continuously*, ready to bubble back to the boil at any time. The upshot is that, once any short-term hysteria has subsided, the longer-term effect of these recurrent

crystallizing moments is to *keep the panic simmering*. As Cohen observed, a panic sometimes ‘passes over and is forgotten’, whereas on other occasions ‘it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions’ – even producing ‘changes’ in the way ‘society conceives itself’ (Cohen, 1972, p. 1). This book argues that it is precisely this quality which defines the nature of today’s juvenile panic: the ‘changes’, in this case, being a deepening and acceleration of our already growing distrust towards one another.

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### Positioning this study in the literature

In identifying the *existence* of an endemic panic surrounding the positioning of children in contemporary Britain, this book does little more, on the face of it, than follow the well-trodden paths of previous studies. Like Cohen (1972), Fishman (1978) or Hall et al. (1978), it justifies using the term ‘panic’ by contrasting the blanket news coverage of dramatic stories involving juveniles not only with the lesser media emphasis on other newsworthy subjects, but the *rarity* of such extreme incidents in real life. The process of distortion at work in these representations of reality is exposed by a combination of textual analysis of newspaper articles and citation of prior academic research and official statistics debunking popular myths about the prevalence of stranger-danger, domestic child abuse and youth antisocial behaviour (Hillman et al., 1990; La Fontaine, 1994; Grubin, 1998; Corby, 2000; Pritchard & Bagley, 2001; Furedi, 2001; Shaw et al., 2013). In highlighting both these disjunctions, though, the book follows long-established convention, by honing in on the ‘exaggeration’ and ‘disproportion’ seen as fundamental features of (moral) panic discourse (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). However, while drawing on all-too-familiar precedents to define the *parameters* of a juvenile panic, it offers a fresh take on the phenomenon itself. Rather than looking at young people primarily as the *cause* of panics – as in classic studies of media-stoked flaps about drug-taking hippies (Young, 1971), Mods and Rockers (Cohen, 1972) and black teenage muggers (Hall et al., 1978) – it conceives of them, primarily, as their *subject(s)*. Specifically, it fuses the running theme common to many seminal works – the idea that youth *itself* is deviant – with the more recent trend towards focusing on panics over the young’s vulnerability to the deviancy of *others* (e.g. McNeish & Roberts, 1995; Valentine, 1996a, 1996b, and 1997; Kitzinger, 1999;



Gallagher et al., 2002; Meyer, 2007). Few scholars, bar Valentine, have recognized this paradoxical positioning of juveniles as ‘angels and devils’ (Valentine, 1996a, pp. 581–2), and, as a geographer, her study was primarily an exploration of parental controls on children’s public spaces, rather than panics *per se* – let alone the media’s role in fuelling them. In alighting on this ambivalence about the conceptualization of children in the *present*, the thesis also opens up the question of how this state of affairs arose – and whether it is peculiar to *late-modern* Britain or is rooted in conflicted ideas about childhood that can be traced historically. Where other studies of discrete panics stop short of addressing this question, this is among a small number – notably *Images of Welfare* (Golding & Middleton, 1982) – to locate its subject in a wider socio-historical context. And, barring certain sections of Pearson’s insightful (1983) critique of the periodic panics about hooliganism, it is perhaps the first substantive piece of media research to do so in relation to the problematization of *children*. More significantly, in setting out to explore changes (and continuities) in how juveniles have been conceptualized through time, it arguably goes further than even Golding and Middleton: far from relying solely on a survey of secondary literature on the historical positioning of the young, it uses *intergenerational* focus groups to illuminate the ways in which parenting attitudes/behaviours and risk perceptions have shifted in recent decades. In so doing, it provides a test-bed of data that both reflects and illuminates the escalating seats of parental anxieties that have informed ever more stringent controls imposed on children’s independent activities outside the home, as previously identified (but only partially explained) by Hillman et al. (1990) and Shaw et al. (2013).

The original take that this book brings to the study of panics about the young also has another aspect: by focusing on the way children *themselves* are problematized (both as victims and threats), it adopts a subtly different emphasis to earlier studies. Other than the aforementioned works on 1970s youth panics, most research examining panicky discourses about children has dwelt less on the problematization of *juveniles* than that of multifarious *deviants* (and other risks) threatening them. The foci of Meyer’s study of media-stoked neuroses about predatory paedophiles and Boyce’s of the ‘health panic’ surrounding the MMR vaccine (both 2007) are distorted news representations and

parental perceptions of paedophiles and a government-backed inoculation campaign respectively – *not* the accompanying portrayals/perceptions of children. A further dimension this book adds to the study of juvenile panic is its attempt to pinpoint its precise *nature* – by plugging into academic debates about the spectrum of different social phenomena that have (accurately or erroneously) been tagged with this label. Far from merely describing the ‘victim or threat’ positioning of children as a ‘moral’ panic and leaving it at that, it draws on the corpus of theoretical literature published since Cohen popularized this term to cast its *particular* panic in the nebulous mould of the continuous/all-embracing panics that Hier (2003) and others see as symptomatic of atomized late-modern societies – and Beck (1986), Giddens (1990, 1991) and Bauman (2000) attribute to rapid and disquieting technological and environmental change. Moreover, in considering the possible *causes* of this climate of ‘permanent’ panic (Waiton, 2008), it casts the net beyond conventional academic literature – to examine the growing evidence gathered by NGOs showing a clear correlation between the embedding of neoliberal ideologies, financial insecurity and declining social trust.

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### **Processing panics: from news-making to meaning-making**

As well as being more intellectually *situated* than previous panic studies – by relating its purview to unfolding debates in the theoretical literature – this book strives to be more empirically comprehensive, by adopting a ‘three-dimensional’ approach to investigating the news-making and reception process. In particular, it draws on ground-breaking focus group work by the Glasgow University Media Group illuminating the interplay between personal experience, social processing and news narratives, and the triangulated methodologies of the most effective studies (notably Golding & Middleton, 1982) to interrogate *all* levels of the communication process: from journalist/source to text to audience. Taking the latter point first, as Chapter 1 argued, most empirical research adopts either an *outside-in* or *inside-out* approach to gathering and analysing data. In the same year as Hall et al. (1978) published a classic deconstruction of the media-fuelled panic about an all-but non-existent mugging epidemic by contrasting hyperbolic news coverage and public pronouncements by judges and politicians with official statistics disputing their

basis, Fishman exposed a similarly fictitious ‘crime-wave’ constructed by the American media (again in collusion with officials) *from inside*, by demonstrating how journalists became unwitting propagandists for elite ideological bias by allowing commercial pressures to render them over-reliant on official sources. Both studies, though important, failed to examine more than one or two tiers of the communication process. Hall et al. inferred journalists’ (ideological) intentions by analysing their published words, but without interviewing them, and relied on a smattering of readers’ letters to newspapers to illuminate their impact on audiences, rather than interviews or focus groups. Conversely, Fishman studied a newsroom ethnographically, but failed to analyse the texts that emerged from the news process – or, empirically, how audience members responded to them. Even the most three-dimensional studies of panics to date – those one might justifiably describe as ‘anatomies’ – have limitations in their *volume* of primary research. While Golding and Middleton’s study of popular discourse around benefit claimants saw them both analysing news texts and interviewing journalists and audience members, the amount of textual analysis conducted for this book (almost all national newspapers analysed at five-day intervals over a month) and the number of people interviewed (30 journalists and six intergenerational focus groups spread over 10 meetings) was greater. That the scope of this research also embraces the new dimension of web-based discussion threads lends it further weight, by recognizing that analysis of the dynamics of today’s multimedia communication circuit would be incomplete without examining the online interchange between audiences and news texts/journalists. Moreover, in testing the findings of its earlier chapters against a live, unfolding case study – again involving focus groups, interviews and analysis of news texts/discussion-threads – this study presents a rare example of a ‘natural history of a news item’ (Deacon et al., 1999).

One of the biggest debts owed by this book, though, is the inspiration it draws methodologically from ground-breaking focus group studies by Glasgow’s Kitzinger (1993 and 2004), Philo (1990, 1993) and Reilly (1999) on risk perceptions – all of which recreated the naturalistic dynamics of interpersonal mediation that have long preoccupied researchers into the complexities of news reception (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Roper et al., 1955). In so doing, they not only illuminated how audience members process news,

individually and collectively: they persuasively demonstrated that, while peer-to-peer exchanges of gossip and personal/vicarious experience may be key to the process of sense-making about social reality, the agenda-setting power of the media to stimulate debate about underlying societal concerns cannot be underestimated. By drawing together peer groups of mothers, grandmothers and children to discuss their families' parenting practices and reflect on the perceived risks (and rights) that shape them, this study, like Glasgow's before it, goes some way towards replicating the watercooler/school-gate exchanges that inform our day-to-day processing of stories accessed either directly through the news or, perhaps more often, via friends (or friends of friends). Moreover, in reconvening the same groups of mothers to discuss April's story months after they were initially assembled for exploratory discussions, it draws on the longitudinal approach to focus group work used so effectively by Reilly (1999) to investigate changing public perceptions of particular risks (in her case, BSE). While conscious of the debt it owes to such qualitative Glasgow studies, however, this book adds a further dimension: the ever-escalating power of social mediation in the virtual (as well as physical) public sphere. It does so both by exploring the increasingly viral nature of meaning-making (and rumour-mongering) on discussion threads and, more vicariously, through focus group participants' frequent references to social media (especially Facebook) as a *primary* source of news – and the site of panicky discourse informing their ideas and behaviours.

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### **Limitations of this study – and pointers for future research**

For all these strengths, however, there are limitations to how far any one level of the communication circuit can be analysed in a single study that attempts to address all three. Specifically, the *breadth* of empirical research undertaken here – embracing news-makers, texts and audiences – has necessitated some compromises in *depth*. There is clear potential for each of these crucial actors, and the interplay between them, to be explored in a more textured, meaningful way through ethnography. While there is an undoubted ethnographic dimension to observing and interpreting the interactions between focus group participants, this is a tool for analysing news reception *after the event* – once people have had time to mull over stories they have read/heard about – rather than *during* it, as

in other studies (e.g. Morley, 1980). Similarly, while qualitative interviews with newspaper journalists provide a richer seam of anecdote and information than questionnaire responses, they forced the researcher to rely on the fallible memories (and honesty) of interviewees. As Fishman (1978, 1980), Gans (1979), and Ericson et al. (1987) demonstrate, study of the news-making process yields most when its rhythms and routines are experienced at first hand – and the opportunity to shadow journalists in the field, watch them interact with contacts, and attend editorial conferences in the context of the breaking April story would undoubtedly have contributed a layer of understanding beyond that which interviews alone could recreate. Moreover, there has been little in the way of ethnographic fieldwork, thus far, to bring the findings of seminal newsroom studies of the analogue era up to date by factoring in the digital dimension of modern-day newspaper production. A research project building on this study to illuminate the mechanics of news-making in today's online newsrooms would have much to add to the corpus of knowledge about 21st century journalism in *general* – not just in the context of an unfolding panic narrative. Similarly, a more inductive approach to analysing discussion threads – involving direct participation in these forums, akin to 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000), rather than textual analysis – would potentially provide a deeper, more holistic, insight into the *nature* of the meaning-making process in which those contributing to conversations around stories engage. In addition to the empathetic advantages of experiencing this interaction first hand (another argument in favour of participant-observation), particular strands of audience opinion could be more fully explored by directing the traffic like a focus group facilitator. While care would need to be taken to ensure such research was conducted ethically – by announcing one's presence on forums and outlining the nature of one's work – raising particular issues and pressing other posters to explain/support/contextualize views they express might facilitate a deeper understanding of the reasons why individuals interpret and respond to narratives as they do. Moreover, just as first-hand observation of today's newsrooms would allow comparisons and contrasts to be drawn with how papers operated in the past, so too would participation in online discussions about published stories illuminate the similarities and differences between social mediation in the virtual and physical public spheres.

Further research could also greatly enhance the findings here in relation to news *sources*. While the question of which ‘claims-makers’ (Cohen, 1972) and ‘primary definers’ (Hall et al., 1978) are most frequently used to inform today’s news narratives was addressed in Chapters 3–5, resource limitations prevented the researcher from interrogating sources *directly*. Analysis of news texts and interviews with journalists offer us rudimentary insights into how sources are selected and prioritized, but are inherently limited in their ability to illuminate the motivations/agendas/ideologies of those informers themselves. A less outside-in approach to considering the role of sources in the process of news (and meaning) making would add a valuable layer of understanding to our overall picture of the dynamics of panic discourse.

Finally, this study makes only a limited contribution to our appreciation of the impact of moral panic narratives on *deviants*. In focusing on the problematic positioning of *children* in panic discourse – both as victims and threats – it does little to illuminate our understanding of the nature(s) of the folk-devils by which children are (supposedly) threatened, or indeed deviant juveniles, let alone whether popular debate about them has the effect of amplifying their deviancy (Young, 1971; Cohen, 1972). Meanwhile, the testimony of child focus group participants is principally of interest for the insight it offers us into restrictions imposed by their parents, and the rationales behind these. Further focus group work, with a different emphasis, would be needed to tease out any evidence that negative positioning of (some) children in popular discourse contributes to deviancy amplification on the part of juveniles *themselves*. As it is, this book’s primary contribution to addressing the issue of amplification relates to that of the voices of panicking definers/claims-makers and, by extension, of the panic itself.

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### **Defusing panic: towards a more rational view of children – and trust**

In demonstrating the existence of a simmering, media-stoked panic about the vulnerability and unruliness of children in contemporary Britain, this book presents a quandary: what can (or should) be done to counter the hysteria and, specifically, how can journalists (professional and citizen) play their part? To address this question meaningfully we must first acknowledge some uncomfortable truths. Panics about juveniles (or anything

else) are seldom without foundation. If there were no basis at all for a flurry of publicity about a particular panic discourse, stories attempting to whip them up would quickly wither on the vine – especially in this frantic 24/7 age, in which ever more would-be stories compete for our ever more finite attention-spans. It would be folly to argue that when genuine cases of child abuse or youth disorder occur they should not be reported and debated. Moreover, the most sudden and unambiguous incidents (April's abduction) and those of significant scale (the crimes of Savile) arguably merit *more and bigger* press coverage/discussion than other matters, at least immediately after news of them breaks – just as one would expect the sudden death or surprise resignation of a political leader or a train crash involving multiple casualties to briefly eclipse other (less serious/dramatic) events. In relation to juvenile panics specifically, there is also considerable justification for the argument that, were it *not* for journalists – and informed claims-makers who use them to raise awareness of social ills that we would rather not confront – many genuine, wide-scale abuse scandals of recent decades would never have been exposed. Systematic sexual exploitation of children in institutional care; the prevalence of paedophilia in some parts of the Roman Catholic Church; and, indeed, the fact that most abuse of minors takes place inside the family home, rather than at the hands of prowling strangers, are just three (previously suppressed) realities that, in their more enlightened and enlightening moments, the media has exposed to public scrutiny. As the broadsheet feature writer interviewed here remarked, defending his oft-castigated profession, the reason we know abused children are 'almost always' the victims of someone they know' is precisely *because* of '20 years of reporting of these kinds of cases'. In lifting the lid on these dark truths about previously trusted institutions – children's homes, organized religion and even families themselves – the best and/or earliest of such stories arguably served the vital social function of not so much panicking people as provoking necessary periods of self-reflection and reform. This is exactly the form of 'anti-denial' approach that Habermas (1996) and Cohen himself (2010) have advocated as a way to harness 'panics' for socially progressive ends.

But, for every example of news-makers performing a genuine public service by exposing a previously denied social evil, many more testify to an irrational obsession with

the problematic positioning of children out of all proportion to the levels of jeopardy they *actually* face (or pose). The main problem with this mode of reporting, as argued extensively elsewhere, is lack of *contextualization*: individual events (or pseudo-events) are inflated out of all proportion to their significance in relation to everything else, and very rarely do the acres of coverage they generate make a serious attempt to address anything more meaningful than the *details* of isolated cases, such as any underlying social, cultural or economic factors that contribute to the circumstances in which they occur. Dramatic cases of child abuse, abduction or misbehaviour are invariably subject to the worst kind of ‘episodic framing’ (Iyengar, 1991) – with newspapers blowing up ‘concrete events’ to ‘illustrate issues’ (in this case, the pervasiveness of criminal activity affecting or involving juveniles), rather than using the ‘collective or general evidence’ of a ‘thematic’ frame to present a more balanced, rational picture (ibid., p. 14). When a single incident plugging into the continuum established by previous dramatic cases (however isolated and small-scale) knocks almost everything else down the running-order – or, with classic scenarios like April’s abduction, *obliterates* competing events entirely – media coverage warps into a distorted impression of reality that deserves to be challenged. Not only does this saturation of the news agenda have the side-effect of downgrading other equally (or more) important stories, so that they become scarcely noticeable – but it achieves its dominance for no more noble reason than to line the pockets of media proprietors, by cynically packaging up forbidding tales about the worst of human conduct as eye-catching commercial entertainments.

Given the manifest profitability of this approach, it is unlikely that newspapers reliant on maximizing sales and online hit-rates for their income will ever voluntarily abandon it. Part of the task, then, is to find ways of cajoling them into rethinking their news values – and adopting more measured, proportionate approaches to *applying* these. Replacing the flaccid Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) with a proactive, transparent and independent regulator would be a start: as long as editors are allowed to police themselves, purely reactively, and only in relation to individual cases formally brought to their attention by third parties, it is hard to imagine the industry’s underlying culture, practices and norms ever being reformed. By contrast, a truly independent regulator,



empowered to *actively* challenge the balance and tone of newspaper coverage *in the round* – rather than waiting for complaints to roll in and reprimanding papers for individual articles, after the event – could make a tangible difference. This is not an argument for press *censorship* – but, rather, a regulatory regime that makes no apology for engineering a cultural transformation in its agendas (and newsgathering practices), in the service of values like balance, objectivity and impartiality still ostensibly held sacrosanct by many practitioners. One way a new regulator might do this is to regularly commission independent research into the evolving nature, purpose and practices of journalism to create a space for ongoing discussion and self-reflection. Against this backdrop, it can try to avert future crises of news-making practice, primarily by appealing to the better natures of editors, proprietors – and audiences. However, it *should* also do so by issuing stricter guidelines on the handling of news topics (sensitive ones in particular) and not being afraid to publicly admonish those who transgress them. Beyond this, our best hope lies in the power of education. Instead of concentrating so fixedly on preparing trainees for the world of journalism *as it is* – by schooling them in its existing conventions and the utilitarian necessity for papers, above all, to make money – trainers should be *questioning* these as *givens*, and mapping out a future course for the profession as it might hope to be. Somewhere amid the sea of distortion and panic that characterizes much of today’s news output, the *purpose* of journalism – its responsibility for ‘finding out what is really going on’ and ‘uncovering things’ that vested interests ‘would prefer to leave undiscovered’ (Cole, 2005, p. 22), rather than concocting and exaggerating stories with which they would happily distract us – is being sidelined. It falls to the educators of today, and the practitioners of tomorrow, to put this right.

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<sup>1</sup> Broadsheet feature-writer (see p.167).

<sup>2</sup> Mid-market assistant news editor (see p.164).

<sup>3</sup> South-east news group editorial director (p.165).

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<sup>4</sup> National broadsheet feature-writer (see p.195).

<sup>5</sup> Mid-market assistant news editor (see p.168).