FAILURE TO LAUNCH

Why Do Some Social Issues Fail to Detonate Moral Panics?

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A ‘moral panic’ is characterized by such themes as the novelty of a particular menace, its sudden explosive growth, and the menace it poses both to accepted moral standards and to vulnerable groups and individuals. Some problems, however, apparently have all the features that would generate a self-feeding media frenzy, and, yet, they do not do so. I will explain this absence of panic by examining the issue of internet child pornography. The failure to construct the problem in ‘panic’ terms reflects the technological shortcomings of law-enforcement agencies, which force them to interpret available data according to familiar forms of knowledge, rather than comprehending or publicizing new forms of deviant organization. This lack of awareness then conditions the nature of political investigation and media coverage.

If only through frequent repetition, certain passages from sociological works acquire something like canonical status. One example would be Stan Cohen’s famous declaration in 1972 that:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel, and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. (Cohen 2002: 1)

Later studies have described such common themes as the novelty of a particular menace (real or imagined); its association with emerging social or scientific trends; its sudden explosive growth; and the menace it poses both to accepted moral standards, and to vulnerable groups and individuals. In the words of Stuart Hall et al.:

When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when ‘experts’, in the form of police chiefs the judiciary, politicians and editors perceive the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk ‘with one voice’ of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress ‘sudden and dramatic’ increases (in numbers involved or events) and ‘novelty’, above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a moral panic. (Hall et al. 1978, all emphases in the original)

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After 35 years, we have become quite adept at tracing the emergence of panics, their later metastasis and their eventual fate. We spend far less time, though, on the non-construction of problems, of understanding why issues fail to generate panics, when they appear to fulfil all the classic criteria. Of course, we can understand how problems might be prioritized: society cannot panic about everything at once, and some issues must therefore take a subordinate role to others. But some issues just seem just so naturally tempting that it is difficult to understand their absence from centre-stage. By understanding why some issues do not generate panics, we are better able to predict which problems might or might not achieve prominence.

Throughout this process, too, we see some limitations of the original moral panic model, which was so exceptionally useful in its day in sparking novel approaches to social issues. Yet, for all its virtues, moral panic theory was always founded on a set of implicit value judgments, which assumed that the subject of analysis must, by definition, be somehow bogus or exaggerated—the result of hysterical exaggeration and ill-placed fears. Whoever heard of a legitimate panic, or of well founded hysteria? There is something suspect about any form of analysis that begins by applying such a pejorative label. Moreover, case studies of moral panics tend to explore topics to which the researcher and his/her presumed audience often have an ideological vested interest in debunking or exposing. Given the left-liberal leanings prevailing in the academic world, whether in Europe or North America, one is not likely to see concern over “progressive” issues analysed in terms of moral panic. “It seems virtually inconceivable that concern expressed about racial attacks, rape or police misconduct would be described as a moral panic” (Waddington 1986).

This inherent ideological bias explains why so much of the effort once devoted to moral panic theory has subsequently evolved into what aspires to be the more objective realm of social constructionism. Using this approach, scholars examining a given social problem may or may not accept that the phenomenon exists, or, if it does, whether it is indeed harmful. The central question is how the condition comes to be viewed as a problem in the first place. For a constructionist, “our sense of what is or what is not a social problem is a product, something that has been produced or constructed through social activities” (Best 1995: 6). A constructionist approach thus makes no initial assumptions about the legitimacy of the subject matter such as are implied by the word ‘panic’. And, from a constructionist perspective, we can ideally understand the means by which problems are built and marketed, without assuming that their success or failure depends on irrational public terror. The understanding of social problems must rely primarily on analysing the rhetorical work of claims-makers and their ability (or lack of it) to appeal to public tastes and prejudices, which may or may not be well founded.¹

The issue of internet child pornography offers one puzzling instance of the surprising lack of panic response. In 2001, I published the book Beyond Tolerance, which was based on an unusual kind of first-hand evidence, growing as it did out of several months’ observation of the bulletin board traffic of sites used by major manufacturers and dealers. It thus involved a snapshot of major criminal activity as it was occurring, rather than as it might be reconstructed through the retroactive interpretations of incarcerated offenders. My book argued that the popular construction of child pornography was factually incorrect in more or less every detail. My scepticism applied to the conclusions

¹I should say at the outset that most of my comments about the media reflect US conditions.
presented by police agencies, whose evidence mainly derived from profiles of individuals arrested, but I also rejected the critical analysis of social theorists, who suggested that police and media had exaggerated the child-porn menace (Jenkins 2001).

Briefly, I argued that the online child-pornography trade was (and is) vastly larger in volume than claimed by either law enforcement, media or critics, and that its scale swelled enormously during the 1990s. The material traded is also more current, in the sense of recent manufacture, and is not just recycled images from decades past. Also, a remarkable amount of the traffic is very hard-core in its nature, and does not just constitute harmless photos from nudist beaches. The process of manufacture involves actual abusive behaviour in the present, not in the distant past.

We can illustrate this fact from the so-called KG and KX series—the ‘kindergarten’ photos—which, as of 2000, represented perhaps the most prized collections available on the internet. KG is a series of hundreds (maybe thousands) of nude images of very young girls, mainly aged between three and six years old, with each item including the girl’s name, like Helga, Inga, and so on. The photographs date from the mid-nineties, and they likely derive from either Germany or Scandinavia. In the words of one fan of the series, ‘Once upon a time. There was a chemist that had earned his Ph.D. Well, he got married and along with his wife opened up a day care center. Well, as the story goes, he managed to take pictures of lots and lots of things. Eventually he got busted’. The KG collection exists in parallel with a still more sought-after version—KX—which depicts the same children in hard-core sexual situations with one or more men. Put simply, most are pictures of four and five-year-old girls performing oral sex and masturbation on adult men. The immense popularity of the KG images ensured an enthusiastic market for KX. Although such materials would now be very dated, presumably, their present-day successors still enjoy a comparably fanatical following. True aficionados own collections of images running into the hundreds of thousands, and the largest collection reported by police included 1.5 million.

Although the size of the trade is very difficult to estimate, we can make some plausible guesses. Putting the different trafficker/dealer bulletin boards together, I suggested that the core population as of 2000 should be counted somewhere in the range of perhaps 50,000 to 100,000 individuals, though that is a very loose figure. Within this number, we can find some figures who fit the folk-demon stereotype quite well, including serial molesters and powerful international dealers.

Matters have changed a little since I undertook my work, but not, I think, in any substantial way. Rather, the sub-culture has retreated from the absolutely open character it enjoyed in around 2000 and has now retreated behind quite tight security walls. Like every other aspect of the internet, the sub-culture has also become much more technically sophisticated. The biggest single change has been in the growth of real-time action, where sexually explicit behaviour involving minors can be witnessed live via webcams.

In many ways, then, I would suggest that internet child porn has every qualification to become the basis of a moral panic. The underlying situation is large-scale, and can easily be portrayed as threatening, particularly as it affects children. It is also undergoing rapid expansion, as the internet further extends its hegemony over global commerce and communication. Several other potent elements come to mind: the issue brings in the harmful effects of globalization, the undermining of national laws and sovereignty, while it offers all kinds of bonuses in terms of popular fears of technology. The issue also has obvious political implications, in exposing the exploitation of vulnerable children.
by sinister men—a theme that could appeal equally to feminists or to conservative law and order adherents. And the demon figures are ready and waiting.

Yet, the social response has been virtually nil. No bishops occupy the barricades and we have not heard much recently from any socially accredited experts. In the United States, congressional and legislative hearings come and go, but generate little media attention. Beyond the obvious point that internet child porn is a bad thing, the US media in particular pay little attention to the topic. Arrests are reported from time to time, sometimes involving hundreds of suspects, but rarely with any contextualization (Koch 2006; Markon 2007; Townsend 2007). The subject only attracts headlines when suspects are either celebrities or highly placed individuals. Although they are reported in duly horrifying terms, these potentially sensational cases provide no springboard for wider rhetoric. Most available books on the topic—and there are not many—tend to be sober works of academic criminology or psychology, usually from scholarly and professional-oriented presses (Taylor and Quayle 2003; Calder 2004; Ferraro and Casey 2004; Quayle and Taylor 2005; O’Donnell and Milner 2007; Kuhnen 2007; Akdeniz 2008). No genre of true crime accounts exists, and I can think of just a couple of passing fictional references in the past decade. No genre of films depicts heroic investigators hunting down child-porn rings or criminal overlords while rescuing pathetic victims. While I hesitate to suggest that nobody cares, at least we see nothing constituting moral panic.

Why? One major reason is technological. Most law-enforcement agencies work at a technological level that is simply too low to comprehend the trade as it actually existed a decade ago, and still less today. They have little idea of the nature of the trade, its complex world of concealment and deception through proxies and anonymizers, to say nothing of the more recent shift into P2P networks.

In making this assertion, I would note important differences between US agencies and some of their European counterparts. Generally speaking, European and particularly British agencies are much more competent at electronic law enforcement, which might be a surprising comment, given the vast resources available to Americans. A number of reasons can be suggested for the disparity, notably the dominance of the FBI within federal law enforcement, and its strong resistance to technological innovation and experiment. As late as 2002, a critic noted that ‘the FBI’s computers today are so primitive that they are 386 and 486 machines that no one would take even as a donation to a church’ (‘The FBI: Ronald Kessler’ 2002). Given the international nature of law enforcement, this American weakness should make little difference: mass arrests commonly begin with European initiatives, and then proceed in the United States. But, from the point of view of constructing and publicizing a social problem, this means that the usual American sources to whom journalists turn contribute little fresh.

Popular accounts of child-porn arrests tend to give the impression that sophisticated law-enforcement agencies have somehow observed a person or group involved in child-porn activity, presumably by tracing or intercepting internet traffic. That is wholly inaccurate, and such electronic interception is very rare indeed. Although police have broken some significant networks, most arrests in this area—especially in the United States—involve a person who has committed acts of molestation or abuse, leading to a

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2 One apparent recent exception is the controversial New York Times exposé by Kurt Eichenwald, although I question whether this involved child pornography rather than sexually explicit commercial activity by adolescent males (Eichenwald 2006a; 2006b).
search of his computer and the discovery of child-porn images. It is, in other words, quite difficult to be arrested for child-porn activity except insofar as this represents collateral activity arising from other crime (compare Sher and Carey 2007). By far the largest breakthroughs in the campaign against child-porn networks have resulted from offenders committing flagrantly stupid acts, notably using their own credit cards to subscribe to online child-porn sites. When police do break such a major public operation, they thus have access to tens of thousands of suspects. This is what happened in the celebrated Operation Ore, when the investigation of a Texas-based business produced the names of thousands of customers around the world who had used their cards to access child-porn sites (though see Campbell 2007 for some major problems with this investigation).

Within the core sub-culture, police efforts receive little respect. In 2000, one of the largest dealers observed that:

In fact, extremely few persons actually get arrested and sent to jail, that is a myth really. There are thousands of vhs's [videos] out there, many from 1999, thousands of people present at this bbs [bulletin board] and millions of lol-li-lovers [paedophiles] in various countries, yet you only see a couple of persons getting arrested, and the media writes about it like they have been busting Al Capone .... Those that actually do get arrested, do not get arrested for downloading or uploading to abpep-t or visiting sites. Most people that get arrested do so for the following reasons: 1. they had to repair their PC when those repairing the PC discovered pics on the hard-drive. 2. they have been trading thru e-mail. 3. they have been using ICQ /IRC [chat-lines] for lolita business (Jenkins 2001: 1, 13–14; Abpep-t refers to alt. binaries.pictures.erotica.pre-teen).

Both trading and chat-lines are so deadly because one is dealing with faceless individuals who often prove to be police officers masquerading either as fellow enthusiasts or as underage girls: avoiding such chat facilities is a primary rule offered to novices in this underworld. Another participant on a child-porn bulletin board claimed that recent arrests in the United States could be categorized as follows: ‘It was basically 75% caught e-mail trading with an LEA [law-enforcement agency], 20% by computer repair shops, and 1% caught by either association with known traders or by do-gooders reporting them.’ It is very rare for individuals to be arrested for posting child porn, and virtually unheard of to be caught ‘just looking’ (Jenkins 2001: 14).

Since it is chiefly novices who get caught, experienced members of the sub-culture have little but contempt for the capacities of law-enforcement agencies (LEA). In one exchange on the boards, a poster suggested an ingenious tactic that might in theory serve to entrap many child-porn fans and asked whether police were likely to deploy it. Responses were sarcastically dismissive. One authority wrote that ‘I don’t really think the LEA work that way as I’m sure they have better things to do which they know are more efficient. For instance, trying to catch newbies trading per e-mail or newbies visiting IRC etc.’. Another concurred: ‘LEA is not smart enough or have time to do such things’ (Jenkins 2001: 15). By definition, studies of arrests or convictions only reveal the failures within the electronic child-porn world. The cases that do come to light fulfil a Darwinian function, since they remove from the sub-culture those least fit to adapt and survive, and thus ensure the efficiency of those who remain.

The technological gulf between law enforcement and traffickers has a number of consequences, but primarily that bureaucracies are in no position to sketch a vast international conspiracy, because they genuinely do not understand what exists. And, if it seems that if this statement exaggerates the situation, let me offer a case study. In
2001, US agencies announced the breaking of a child-porn ring that had been operating through a Yahoo group called Candyman. Incidentally, this illicit operation demonstrates the amazingly open behaviour of offenders, who had no compunction about subscribing to a site offering flagrantly illicit content, thus allowing authorities to trace their real IP addresses. Thousands were reportedly implicated; hundreds of Candyman members were arrested or were subject to search warrants. As the warrants explained, everyone who joined a Yahoo group agreed to receive daily mailings, which, in the context of that group, involved illegal images, and so every member of the group, of necessity, was in possession of incriminating material.

At the time, the agents drawing up the warrant may or may not have known that the grounds stated in the warrant were false. In fact, joining any Yahoo group gives the participant an option of either receiving daily emails or a periodic digest or (the commonest option) members refuse daily mailings and prefer to consult images at the website. The warrant, however, based itself upon the daily-email theory. Presumably, federal authorities reasoned that very few people knew enough about computers and the internet to detect this little white lie. In reality, some tens of millions of Yahoo users were able to recognize the egregious fiction which, when it surfaced in court, led to the collapse of what could have been a vast and successful prosecution (Silberman 2002).

To take another example, the widespread use of proxies is rarely noted in law-enforcement sources and, when it is, it is almost with a sense of astonishment. In 2000, for instance, FBI director Louis Freeh testified to a Senate panel on recent hacker attacks against federal websites, and he noted that perpetrators in many cases falsified the internet addresses of the computers involved in launching attacks, ‘meaning that the address that appeared on the target’s log was not the true address of the system that sent the messages’ (Jenkins 2001: 160). Though using proxies is second nature to many computer users, the practice needed spelling out for the bemused legislators.

Equally damaging to official understanding is the traditional law-enforcement approach to major crimes, and the sense that these are organized by some kind of hierarchical syndicate, such as an organized crime family, a drug gang or a terrorist movement. In these circumstances, police and prosecutors can wage a fairly literal war on crime, arresting leaders and their henchmen, while disrupting lines of command, control and communication. But such convenient structures are simply lacking in the child-porn world. To extend the war analogy, child porn and other computer crimes should rather be seen in terms of a war of the flea—a guerrilla war undertaken by a vast and decentralized phantom enemy totally lacking a command structure. To take one illustration, terrorists dream of creating perfect cell systems, in which no activist knows the identity of more than a handful of comrades. In practice, though, terrorists very rarely succeed in achieving such a degree of insulation, and this failure permits police moles and infiltrators to unravel whole networks. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of child-porn enthusiasts have the means of identifying literally none of their co-users, even individuals with whom they have been in electronic contact for a decade: the exceptions to this rule account for the major law-enforcement successes.

So bad is the situation, in the United States at least, that agencies really do not know how far behind they have fallen. They operate at a level at which they can continue to generate easy low-level child-porn arrests, but virtually everyone they find will be so low on the food chain that they will be merged easily into the broader and more comprehensible category of molesters. Not knowing better, they have no incentive to
generate a public panic that might bring them additional resources for equipment or training.

With this experience in mind, we may suggest some reasons that might cause an apparent social problem to abort before becoming a moral panic—a failure to launch. In this particular instance, reasons include:

1. **Lack of technological understanding.** The underlying problem involves a kind of technological activity that is beyond the capacity of law enforcement, legislators or media. The technological shortcomings of law enforcement agencies force them to interpret available data according to familiar forms of knowledge, rather than comprehending or publicizing new forms of deviant organization. Instead of representing a new form of deviant activity and organization, child pornography thus becomes an annex to the already known problem of child abuse, which has its own stereotypical features. Agencies thus fail to represent the distinctively new features of the nascent problem, and can provide no enlightenment or guidance to media or legislators.

2. **Comprehensive official control of an issue.** Within the US especially, the child-porn issue is strictly within the hands of federal law enforcement agencies who face no pressures, external or internal, to deliver a response more effective than what they are already offering. In fact, the institutional culture of these agencies actively discourages any effort at greater technological sophistication, as that would reveal the shortcomings of existing programmes. Agents active in this field operate according to traditional paradigms of hierarchical criminal organizations, and place the highest value on their ability to unravel such networks through intelligence gathering and skillful interrogation. None of these abilities has any particular relevance to the child-porn sub-culture.

This chasm between official expectations and the actual problem faced survives in consequence of:

1. **Lack of media access.** Child porn represents an unusual legal area, in which journalistic access to original material is entirely forbidden: within the United States, no journalistic exemption applies to very stringent federal laws, and ‘just looking’ is not possible. Other countries enforced somewhat less strict rules, granting researchers some access under police supervision, but such licensing is granted very sparingly. It is therefore not possible for media to check independently on the nature or scale of illegal material, access to which is entirely controlled through law enforcement gate-keepers. The kind of study that I was able to do in 1999–2000 is now impossible, as the bulletin boards are now strictly password protected. The media exert no pressure to change this situation because of

2. **The invisibility of the problem.** Child-porn material exists within a relatively self-contained universe that the ordinary user cannot simply ‘stumble across’. While accidental contact may occur, it does not suggest the real scale of the issue.

3. **Pre-emption by Other Causes and Interest Groups.** Given the lack of appreciation of the child-porn world, the topic can be appropriated in symbolic forms by various pressure groups. Anti-pornography activists, for instance, use generalized concerns about children and the internet to focus on the issue of children being exposed to pornographic materials online. Particularly given the lack of possible media activism in this
area, no pressure can be generated to expose or combat the actual trade. Federal agencies speak mainly in terms of online seduction or paedophiles stalking victims via computers—an area in which police can hope to achieve results. In consequence, the larger problem is merged with other issues, including cyberstalking, or predatory individuals who seek to contact and seduce children online; cyberporn, or children gaining electronic access to adult pornographic materials; and child pornography, or the distribution of obscene or indecent images of under-aged subjects. Serious child-pornography trafficking is thus ignored and the problem left unconstructed.

If, then, we are seeking the reasons why the child-porn panic never occurred, we would need primarily to understand the legal and bureaucratic environment, and the means by which news is gathered, processed and interpreted. If claims-makers are absent or few in number, if their understanding of the issue is flawed or limited, then even such a tempting topic will largely escape public gaze.

At first encounter, it might appear that the conditions surrounding the child-porn issue are unique to it, and particularly to the odd legal environment that enforces such strict prohibitions against seeking to verify or challenge official claims. In fact, similar factors also apply to several other issues that, by analogy, one might expect to generate perpetual panic conditions. Particularly important is the factor I identified earlier, namely the comprehensive official control of an issue.

Overwhelmingly, media accounts of crime and social problems depend on access to law-enforcement sources. Such reliance is not difficult to understand, since, for all their flaws, agencies like the FBI should in fact be the best-informed group in the country on matters of crime and violence, with access to abundant evidence from moles, infiltrators and surveillance materials. In addition, official agencies can deploy carrot-and-stick tactics to maintain the friendship of the media. Outlets that are considered friendly can reap rich rewards. They can be granted access to defectors from criminal or terrorist organizations, who can be the subject of interviews and major news stories. Friendly journalists can also be given the kind of extensive background materials on incidents that allow journalists to make their investigative reports look like official dossiers. If investigations culminate in arrests, friendly journalists are on the scene to cover the dramatic moments that make headlines in newspapers or television news. At every stage, conversely, journalists considered hostile can be denied these same perks and privileges.

Official agencies are most valued for what they can provide in terms of leaks and off-the-record briefings—information that is supplied to the media without direct attribution. These are the sort of statements that appear in news stories under vague introductions like ‘Law enforcement sources say X’ or ‘Intelligence sources say Y’. For most readers, these items carry a great deal of weight, since they seem to reflect what government or law-enforcement really thinks about a given issue—information that has been obtained through the skilful investigation of a well connected journalist. Such leaks are considered to be much more authoritative than the official statements put out by agencies, which are more carefully tailored for public consumption. Such access gives journalistic writing the appearance of special access and credibility.

The reasons for media reliance on law enforcement are obvious, but the consequences are significant, as journalists are forced to report matters through the eyes of police agencies, and are limited by their willingness and ability to identify and explain issues.
Among these limitations, we have already seen that growing technological sophistication means that serious deviant activity escapes public attention and, thus, agencies can expect few bureaucratic rewards for confronting it. Equally, agencies operate under political constraints, which might make them unwilling to identify particular problems, still less to present them to the media.

The question of comprehension applies, for instance, to issues of financing. US law-enforcement agencies have never had a good grasp on issue of illicit finance and money-laundering, which are critical to structuring organized crime as well as terrorism. In the 1980s, money-launderer Michele Sindona gave US authorities a very detailed account of the techniques used by European and US organized crime, only to be horrified when virtually none of his insights found their way into subsequent US government reports and analyses. Literally, law-enforcement agencies did not understand the highly technical picture they were given, and were unable to process it. Nor, perforce, were they able to explain it to Congressional committees or to journalists (Tosches 1986). This is an ancient problem. In the 1920s and 1930s, American organized crime developed sophisticated forms of syndication and illicit finance, which made no impact whatever in popular media, which was, however, endlessly fascinated by the activities of lower-level bank robbers and kidnappers. These easily comprehensible individuals formed popular stereotypes of the ‘crime problem’ (Reynolds 1995).

Unconstructed Terror

The official encounter with terrorism offers other examples of self-censorship and the consequent non-construction of seemingly obvious problems. Of course, terrorism remains a lively source of public fears throughout the Western world, but particular kinds of behaviour often remain far removed from the public gaze. Through the 1980s, for instance, there were several hundred violent attacks on abortion-related facilities in the United States, in what some observers viewed as an extremely serious wave of terrorism. In the media and in political discourse, however, the word ‘terrorism’ was virtually never used in this context until a change of national administration in 1993. Hitherto, the incidents were generally viewed as discrete events, not part of a single problem or crisis, so that they lacked a label like ‘abortion-related terrorism’ (Jenkins 1999).

The fact that this problem remained unconstructed says much about how the mass media report social issues. All too often, news is defined as reporting what bureaucracies say and do, and, in matters of crime and justice, the media at their worst define issues in terms of the latest press releases from federal agencies. If agencies refuse to define an issue as grave or threatening, then the media follow suit. The FBI denied for years that abortion-related violence was terrorism, and so it was not classified thus, whether in newspapers, television reports or in the works of academic experts. Definitions of ‘terrorism’ are highly partisan. Concern about left-wing or international terrorism flourishes best under conservative regimes, while liberal administration focus on far right activism. Exposés of rightist militias (or anti-abortion vigilantes) will generate little traction under conservative administrations.

In the present day, similarly, popular constructions of terrorism err by the over-emphasis on traditional and familiar forms of organization, which pay little heed to newer forms of communication and control. As in the child-porn instance, neither law
enforcement nor mass media understand current means of deviant organization, especially through the internet, and can make few useful comments about them.

We may also take another historical example, from the mid-1970s. In light of the recent post-9/11 fascination with terrorism, it is remarkable to look back at earlier eras of endemic terrorist violence, which, however, remained thoroughly unconstructed. Between 1973 and 1977, the United States suffered a remarkably intense wave of terrorist violence—bombings, hijackings and assassinations—which one would think certainly merited construction as a major and pressing social problem, if not a fully fledged panic. If anyone had wished to argue for a generalized American terrorist crisis, they could easily have done so by citing the violent activities of Cuban, Puerto Rican, Jewish, Croatian, Palestinian and African-American extremists, together with far-leftists like the Symbionese Liberation Army. If circumstances had been different, a terrorist menace might have found a focus in spectacular events like the twin assassination attempts on President Ford and the spectacular political murder of a Chilean exile in Washington, DC. Of course, terrorist actions drew media attention, especially sensational events like the kidnapping of heiress Patricia Hearst and her subsequent conversion to that movement. But militant movements were always treated as discrete phenomena rather than components of a looming terrorist threat (Jenkins 2003).

The lack of a ‘terror panic’ in 1975–76 requires explanation. Perhaps public attention at this time was so focused on wrongdoing by police and intelligence agencies themselves—acts often undertaken with the nominal goal of defeating subversion. Between 1975 and 1977, the news media were regularly reporting the findings of the Church and Rockefeller Commissions concerning alleged intelligence atrocities at home and abroad. At the same time, the House’s Select Committee on Assassinations was exploring whether government agencies might have participated in killing President Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Popular American films about political violence and terror in this period were far more likely to feature as villains ‘rogue CIA agents’ rather than actual terrorists, foreign or domestic. Since agencies like the FBI were in disarray, their opinions commanded nothing like the respect they would have done only a few years previously. Given their record during the civil rights movement, law-enforcement claims carried especially little weight in matters concerning African Americans. This made it difficult to explore possible political motivations in racial murders of the era, like the ‘Zebra killings’ (blacks randomly killing whites) carried out by the Death Angel sect. In different circumstances, federal authorities might well have postulated a formidable network of militant black extremists but, in the mid-1970s, this was politically impossible. No claims-makers, no panic.

The lack of construction also ensures that problems do not remain in public memory and thus cannot serve as building blocks for later scares. Because the 1970s’ terrorist threat remained largely unconstructed, even the largest attacks of this era have faded from national memory. This includes the savage 1975 bombing at New York’s LaGuardia airport that killed 11—more even than the first World Trade Center attack in 1993.

The Ideal Panic

A particular sensational episode might make the headlines for a few days but, in order to achieve the status of fully fledged moral panic, it must gain the kind of traction that is only possible when mass media collaborate with agencies or political interests. And,
even then, the panic can only move forward if it meets certain criteria. Several factors are conducive to the creation of panic conditions:

- A diversity of agencies and interest groups must exist, from which the media can draw and which can make rival claims. Ideally, each should have some degree of public prestige and media access. Panics are most likely to flourish and escalate when their subject matter is contested between competing forces.
- The story must be comprehensible to agencies and journalists themselves before it can be repackaged for the general public.
- The issue must be sufficiently overt and accessible that ordinary consumers will have some chance of encountering what they believe to be its manifestations.
- The panic should offer a narrative, with characters who are easily understood: heroes and villains must have identifiable faces.
- The story should lend itself to visual portrayal. There should be some standard faces or settings that can be used as stereotypical points of reference. Examples might include the scene of gang fights, drug supermarkets and the faces of serial killers.
- The narrative must also have an outcome, in that solutions, plausible or otherwise, must be identified.
- For consumers, the narrative will have maximum impact if it meshes with previous expectations and knowledge, often because earlier movements and controversies have laid the foundations for later explosions.

But, as we have seen, certain limitations constrain the free development of panic conditions: these limitations might involve either the supply of official information and interpretation designed to promote concern or an absence of demand from the likely consumers:

- If the problem is the preserve of one particular agency, the ensuing lack of competition restricts the opportunities for a panic response.
- Agencies might be unable themselves to understand the issue, to fit it into their intellectual framework. This might involve gaps in technological understanding or the inability to understand forms of deviant organization.
- If agency experts do not themselves understand the issue, they are unable to put it in terms that lend themselves to discussion in briefing papers or executive summaries. Over-complex narratives do not lend themselves to successful panic-building.
- The likely trajectory of an issue might be politically embarrassing, either for an agency or powerful interest groups that could bring pressure to bear upon it.
- In the absence of official stimulus to concern, a panic is unlikely to result over issues that ordinary consumers have little chance of encountering directly or that they do not perceive as an immediate threat.
- If some or all of these limiting factors are present, then such public responses as do occur fall short of a full-scale panic. Media responses will commonly ignore the meaty core issues, while exploiting fringe or marginal aspects of the problem.

In summary, small villains are much more fertile sources of moral panics than large or well connected ones.

I have stressed the capacity to understand and summarize social issues as a limiting factor in shaping panics. If that is correct, we should over the coming years see an ever-greater disconnect between the most significant social issues and those that
attract the most public attention. As social issues focus more on scientific areas that demand substantial background—in information technology and biotechnology, to name just two—it will be interesting to see how interest groups create problems that touch on public fears but, in the most tangential ways, rarely touch on the substantive issues. The gap between scientific reality and panic image seems destined to grow dramatically.

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