Safe Schools: Challenges to Moral Panic and Risk Society Theories: The Politics of National School Educational Policy

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Abstract

With the advent of the Australian National Curriculum and risk society, moral panics associated with school education moved to a higher level. The 2016 Safe Schools moral panic well illustrated this, it also showing the extent the Christian Right has followed these developments, through its traditional leverage on school education policy, to now reaching into the Prime Minister's office. With the Safe Schools moral panic, the Australian school curriculum reached new levels of politicisation, at the same time providing fresh insights into the interplay of school education curriculum, moral panic theory and risk society theory.

Keywords: Safe Schools, moral panic theory, homophobia, anti-bullying curriculum, national curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

In what may be the first instance of a national moral panic in school education, for several months early in 2016 the moral panic of the Safe Schools ‘superstorm’ swept Australian schools and school communities, through to Prime Minister Turnbull’s office. Its significance lies in that it was one of the first moral panics connected to the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA). For this reason, it deserves the descriptive metaphor of ‘superstorm’.

In what was one of many national news bites, ABC News on 22 March 2016 reported a controversy on its Q and A program:

A student who identifies himself as queer has made an impassioned plea for politicians to stop using ‘in-pain children as political bullets’ and stand up for the Safe Schools anti-bullying program, sparking a heated debate on the QandA panel. The program, designed to teach students about sexual and gender diversity and combat homophobia, will undergo content changes and only be used in high schools after a Government review sparked by concerns from conservative MPs and senators. Victoria has vowed to go it alone and implement the program without changes, a move praised by student Carter Smith, who said the notion it is ‘radical gender theory’ was ‘absolutely ridiculous’.

‘What [was] said earlier about young queer people having a high rate of suicide, trust me, I see it, it is very true,’ he said.

Energy and Resources Minister Josh Frydenberg said while he was ‘moved’ by Carter’s comments and understood the mental health issues facing young people, he stood by the Government’s stance on Safe Schools.

He said the program contained the ‘controversial concept’ that gender is fluid and can be self-selected. …

He also raised concerns about children in years seven and eight being asked ‘to pretend that they are aliens from another planet who come here and they are genderless, and they are asked questions about what would they do without any genitals’ (‘Safe Schools…’, 2016, n.p.)

There is, however, much of critical concern in this media piece. It seeks to demonstrate how the controversy with the Safe Schools component of the National Curriculum brings together and challenges moral panic theory, at the same time demonstrating a close connection with risk society theory and national curriculum politics. While the form of moral entrepreneurs underpinning the Safe Schools moral panic have existed for decades in Australian school education—
and, indeed, elsewhere—with the onset of the Australian National Curriculum, moral panics in school education now have the potential to reach national proportions, even a moral panic ‘superstorm’, and provoke severe questions of the connection of these moral panics with risk society theory.

The Safe Schools program, the Coalition Government’s revision and the media

On 13 June 2014, the former Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education, Liberal Party Senator the Hon Scott Ryan from Victoria, announced the Safe Schools Symposium where the Safe Schools Coalition Australia was launched. The coalition ‘is the first national programme funded by the Australian Government with the aim of creating safe and supportive school environments for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse people’ (‘Safe Schools Coalition Australia launched’, 2014, n.p.). The Safe Schools Coalition Australia is managed by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA). Founded in 1977, the FYA is an Australian non-profit organisation ‘committed to creating generational transformation by improving the learning outcomes and life opportunities of young Australians’ (FYA, n.d., n.p.).

With the Safe Schools program developed, incorporated into ACARA, and operational in some Australian schools and colleges, some Coalition Government Members and senators took exception to its content and methods, and the Government ordered a review. Indeed, during the first six months of the Turnbull term of the Coalition Government, a furore erupted in federal parliament and in the wider national community concerning its non-compulsory component of the Australian Curriculum.

In March 2016 in the House, George Christensen, a LNP (Liberal National Party) Member for the seat of Dawson in Queensland took gross exception to what was being done in some Australian schools under the program, linking the program to a ‘paedophilia advocate’ (Keany, 2016, n.p.). He informed the House, Professor Gary Dowsett from La Trobe University helped establish the anti-bullying campaign. For Christensen, Dowsett ‘was a ‘longtime advocate of intergenerational sex, otherwise known as paedophilia’ (Keany, 2016, n.p.). Moreover, Christensen went on to state: ‘I think it would shock many parents to know that a paedophilia advocate was overseeing the organisation that came up with the Safe Schools program’ and ‘given the shocking information, it’s imperative all federal funding for Safe Schools be suspended immediately, pending a full Parliament inquiry’ (Keany, 2016, n.p.).

There was considerable support in the House gathering behind Christensen. Indeed, when Members were briefed on the findings of the review ordered by newly installed Prime Minister Turnbull, there was uproar in Parliament, with some MPs calling for a full-blown parliamentary review (‘Safe Schools findings angers MPs … ‘, 2016). Consequently, ‘conservative coalition MPs [were] gathering signatures for the axing of the Safe Schools anti-bullying program, rejecting the independent review being considered by Education Minister Simon Birmingham. … Christensen claimed yesterday he had already collected “a few pages” of signatures and expected most backbench colleagues would sign’ (Wearne, 2016, n.p.). Former Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s was amongst the ‘forty or so’ signatures on the petition (‘Abbott signs letter …’, 2016, n.p.). Safe Schools had been approved and developed during his years as prime minister. To be fair, however, as the Safe Schools moral panic unfolded, it was clear there were deep divisions within the Coalition Government concerning the program, for example, one ABC News blog announced ‘Government backbencher Warren Entsch calls for “voice of reason” on Safe Schools gender diversity program’ (Anderson, 2016, n.p.).

During the early months of 2016, there had been media revelations feeding into the moral outrage associated with Safe Schools. For example, a 9 News TV report revealed one of Safe Schools leading parliamentary opponents had been successful in pushing for a review of Safe Schools, in the inner Sydney Newtown High School, and had ‘won the right to wear whatever uniform they like irrespective of gender’ (Alexander 2016, n.p.). The Australian Christian Lobby, however, was ‘less than impressed with the decision, saying that a boy who wears a dress makes himself a target for bullies’ (Alexander 2016, n.p.). Indeed, in exploring their gender and sexual preferences according to Safe Schools principles, the Newtown High School students ‘won the right to wear whatever uniform they like irrespective of gender, but the Australian Christian Lobby is less than impressed with the decision, saying that a boy who wears a dress makes himself a target for bullies’ (Alexander 2016, n.p.).

First, for Jones (2016), it is necessary to recognise the ‘internationally acclaimed merits’ of Safe Schools—a ‘world-leading, evidence-based program to make schools safe environments for same-sex-attracted, intersex and gender-diverse students, staff and families’ (n.p.). Moreover, ‘sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and intersex status are protected grounds in international human rights legislation on education. They are also protected in Australian national legislation. Australia’s work opposing homophobia and transphobia in schools is internationally celebrated, and featured in UNESCO best-practice documentation’ (Jones, 2016, n.p.).

Jones (2016) stresses the need to recognise the role of the Christian Right in this moral panic: ‘The political circumstances that brought this investigation about are clear. It’s well documented that conservative Christian voices—such as Senator Cory Bernardi’s—are vastly over-represented in Australia’s political system. So the sexual politics within the parliament do not represent the views of the Australian population. Conservative voices are disproportionately amplified’ (Jones, 2016, n.p.).

Feelings ran high in some quarters. For example, on the eve of the Government tabling its review of Safe Schools, protesting militant students trashed Bernadi’s Adelaide office. ‘The students, who stormed his office chanting and scrawling slogans on both the exterior and interior walls of the office, also overthrew furniture and threw papers onto the floor’ (‘Safe Schools protesters trash …’, 2016, n.p.).
During the week the review was tabled in Parliament, Turnbull warned Members of excessive rage, and telling them to ‘choose their words carefully’ (Anderson, 2016). Following the review, Christensen welcomed the changes. The Christian Lobby, however, was far from happy, arguing the review was a political setup, and that funding for the program should be cut immediately (‘Interview: Lyle Shelton ...’ 2016). Professor Triggs from the Human Rights Commission welcomed the findings (‘Commission responds ...’ 2016). The Victorian Labor Government under Premier Daniel Andrews and Education Minister James Merlino refused to accept the review and determined to ‘go it alone’ through its own funding (‘Safe Schools: Victoria to defy Federal Government ...’ 2016, n.p.). Illustrating the continuing strength of federalism in Australia’s national school education, clearly, the Andrews Government sought to distance itself from Canberra politics.

Headed by Professor Bill Louden, Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Western Australia, the review ‘into the appropriateness and efficacy of the resources generated by this programme has identified shortcomings that need to be addressed. Further, public concern has been expressed about the actions, including the political advocacy, of some of the participant organisations’ (‘Safe Schools Coalition ...’ 2014, n.p.). The review issued some ‘motherhood’ statements, such as ‘every student has a right to feel safe at school. Tolerance should be taught in our schools and homophobia should be no more accepted than racism’ (‘Safe Schools Coalition ...’ 2014, n.p.). But, critically, it stated further: ‘The government will seek to address these findings and reasonable concerns via a number of immediate actions’ (‘Safe Schools Coalition ...’ 2014, n.p.). This entailed fixing ‘the content of the programme resources’ (‘Safe Schools Coalition ...’ 2014, n.p.). Henceforth, some lesson plans and content would be controlled—effectively, by the Turnbull Government—and ‘those activities identified by the review as potentially unsuitable for some students’ (‘Safe Schools Coalition ...’ 2014, n.p.). Moreover, public discourse by program managers would be tightly controlled, ‘requiring that national and local programme managers not bring the programme into disrepute, or engage in political advocacy in a way that represents their views as being endorsed by the programme’ (‘Safe Schools Coalition ...’ 2014, n.p.). Remove the program from the nation’s primary schools, and generally ‘ensure parents are appropriately empowered and engaged’ (‘Safe Schools Coalition ...’ 2014, n.p.).

Australian schools are not alone in the plight of homophobic bullying in schools and colleges. Indeed, ‘issues related to gender and sexual diversity in schools can generate a lot of controversy, with many educators and youth advocates are under-prepared to address these topics in their school communities’ (Meyer, 2010, Preface). Over a decade ago, Walton, (2004) showed the extent of the problem in Canadian schools, and the way in which that country responded with its own safe schools programs. However, the issue of homophobia tends to be absent from public discourse, as if the country was ashamed to bring the issue to surface. This provoked Marshall (2016) to ask ‘does Australia need a Queer History month?’ He added the Safe Schools moral outrage ‘in some ways ... reminded me of the 1970s moral panic that occurred after the publication of Young, Gay and Proud (written by the Melbourne-based Gay Teachers and Students Group). That was almost 40 years ago’ (n.p.). Of critical importance is the question exactly what are the socio-political forces behind the forty Members and senators who signed the petition in the Australian Parliament?

**Safe Schools and the Christian Right tradition as moral entrepreneurs**

The advent of the National Curriculum had moved the epicentre of school education centred moral panics from state and territory parliaments to Canberra. Now, interest groups such as the Christian Right sought out federal politicians. One of the first such politicians to put his hand up was Bernardi, from a state where the Christian Right prior to the advent of the National Curriculum had spearheaded a moral panic on that state’s sex education curriculum.

Exactly what were the objections of the Christian Right and others to Safe Schools? Again, before looking to this question as with the South Australian sex education moral panic ten or so years previously, it is difficult to find students, parents or teachers who were objecting to Safe Schools. According to Jones (2016), when Turnbull requested an investigation into the Safe Schools at the behest of Bernardi, Turnbull gave ‘voice to, and legitimised, discredited and prejudiced views that inclusive sexuality education will turn kids gay’ (n.p.). That move, however, may have been the result of political compromises made in securing political support for the Turnbull coup in gaining the prime ministerial office.

Jones (2016) contends ‘the Christian Right is a small minority within the broader Christian population of Australia. Yet, through political lobbying over the past 45 years, they have become the loudest religious voice in Australian politics’ (n.p.). This follows on from how in ‘Australia, as in many places in the Western world, conservative Christian politics was transformed in the 1970s. Through the 19th and mid-20th centuries, conservative Christians maintained a broad-based social agenda. ... poverty, opposed slavery, and were involved in first wave feminist campaigns. Through the cold war, they opposed Communism’ (Jones, 2016, n.p.). We should add the role of the Christian churches in supporting the enormously successful twentieth-century temperance campaigns and other eugenic-inspired campaigns. Significantly, for Jones (2016), ‘after the sexual revolution, Christian political organisation became almost exclusively structured around sexual politics. You could say the sexual revolution created the New Christian Right’ (n.p.).

The moral panic surrounding the US-based *Man, a Course of Study* (MACOS) and Australian-based Social Education Materials Project (SEMP) of the 1970s and early 1980s was an early example of the Christian Right as moral entrepreneurs leveraging a moral panic. Dow (1976) reported how in 1976 the Atlanta Journal carried a front page
photograph of a Southern Baptist minister ‘being wrestled to the ground by police and [Federal Bureau of Investigation] FBI agents outside the Internal Revenue Services Tax Information Centre in downtown Atlanta. The minister claimed to have a bomb in his attaché case, but when authorities led him away, he said he did not have “a literal bomb, but a literary bomb” ’ (n.p.). Later, when the police opened the case, they found material labelled ‘Luciferian, Satanic, and Devil-filled, series of textbooks entitled Man, a Course of Study’ (Dow, 1976, n.p.). The moral panic surrounding MACOS well and truly was underway, spreading quickly to other countries such as New Zealand (Openshaw, 2001) and Australia. Under Premier Joe Bjelke Petersen in Queensland, the Christian Right soon had its way, and MACOS was withdrawn from schools and colleges.

During the early 2000s, similar moral panic was associated with the South Australian Department of Education’s Sexual Health Network and Education (SHine) program responsible for the development of a sex education curriculum. Sally Gibson, a South Australian Department of Education curriculum planner, explained to SA Stateline most of the program deals with relationships, communication, basic puberty, body changes, and a small proportion of the program deals more with the sexual issues, like contraception, diseases, safer sex. So it’s been blown up out of all proportion’ (Henschke, 2003, n.p.). On the night of 24 October 2003, in the ABC Adelaide SA Stateline studio she was being pressed heavily by some members of the Christian Right, including a parent, who complained: ‘Inserting fingers into partner’s vagina, oral sex using your tongue to stimulate a partner’s genital area, and look over here, 11-plus years of age. I don’t think that’s appropriate’ (Henschke, 2003, n.p.). Unlike the earlier Queensland experience with MACOS, the South Australian Labor Government under Mike Rann weathered the moral panic.

Only three or four years after this South Australian school education moral panic, there was another. This time in Tasmania, concerning the Tasmanian Essential Learnings Curriculum, and again the Christian Right featured in the associated moral panic, although it was not a major moral entrepreneur (Rodwell, 2009; 2011). The label ‘Christian Right’ requires definition. Berlet (1994) defines it as a social movement using ‘a pious and traditionalist constituency as its mass base to pursue the political goal of imposing a narrow theological agenda on a secular society’ (p. 22).

The South Australian, Queensland and Tasmanian moral panics were localised, indicating the reach the Christian Right had into state governments. With the Australian school education coming under the control of ACARA, and given the appropriate politico-social circumstance, many observers could have expected a truly national moral panic, such as that provided by Safe Schools and spearheaded by the Christian Right. Yet, there is some detail about the Safe Schools moral panic witch does not conform to traditional moral panic theory.

**Moral panics as social constructs**

Moral panics do not exist in the material world, in society. A moral panic is ‘not a thing but an abstract concept, a model of a process … Any moral panic model became not an end but a means. Its usefulness lay as much in what it did not reveal about a given example as what it did’ (Critcher, 2003, p. 2). Consequently, moral panics assume a role in this paper to explain events or school education policy developments.

‘In sociological parlance, [a social construct, and in this case, a moral panic] is called an heuristic device, more specifically an ideal type, providing a yardstick against which to measure actual examples, so we can measure how and why they deviate physical from the ideal type: this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality’ (Weber [1904] 1949, p 90, cited in Critcher, 2003, p. 2). Further using Weberian examples, Critcher (2003) shows ‘ an ideal type ‘has the significance research of a purely ideal limiting concept with which the real situation or action is compared and surveyed for the explication of its significant components’ ‘ (Weber, 1949, p. 93, original emphasis, cited in Critcher, 2003, p. 2). The ideal type is ‘ ‘not an end but a means” ‘ (Weber, 1949, 92, cited in Critcher, 2003, p. 2), most useful ‘ ‘as an heuristic device for the comparison reasons of the ideal type and the facts” ‘(Weber, 1949, p. 102, cited in Critcher, 2003, p. 2).

According to Critcher (2003), we need to recognise ‘ideal types have not had a good sociological press … All this may well be true but unhelpful. Just as I do not know what else to call reaction to paedophilia, except as a moral panic, so I do not know what else to call my use of moral panic except an ideal type. Others can debate its epistemological status. I am interested only been used to in whether it works’ (p. 2). The same motive underpin this present paper.

Critcher (2003) postulates two basic types of models for moral panics. First, he refers to Stan Cohen (1972/2002) as what he terms ‘a processual model’. The second, derived from the more recent work of Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), he refers to ‘as an attributional model’ (p. 3). Moreover, for Critcher (2003) ‘these two models generate clusters of questions around their processes or attributes. These are designed to be applied to any case study of a possible moral panic. The question for me is not, ‘does this example prove that moral panics exist?’ but ‘how useful is it to apply moral panic analysis to this case?’ (p. 3).

**Briefly, Cohen’s (1972/2002) processual model entailed moral panics proceeding through a number of stages:**

1. Something or someone is defined as a threat to values or interests
2. This threat is depicted in an easily recognisable form by the media
3. There is a rapid build-up of public concern
4. There is a response from authorities or opinion makers
5. The panic recedes or results in social changes

Safe Schools possessed all of these stages.

On the other hand, according to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), moral panic consists of the following characteristics or attributes:

- **Concern**: There must be belief that the behaviour of the group or category in question is likely to have a negative effect on society;
- **Hostility**: Hostility towards the group in question increases, and they become ‘folk devils’. A clear division forms between ‘them’ and ‘us’;
- **Consensus**: Though concern does not have to be nationwide, there must be widespread acceptance that the group in question poses a very real threat to society. It’s important at this stage that the ‘moral entrepreneurs’ are vocal and the ‘folk devils’ appear weak and disorganized;
- **Disproportionality**: The action taken is disproportionate to the actual threat posed by the accused group;
- **Volatility**: Moral panics are highly volatile and tend to disappear as quickly as they appeared due to a wane in public interest or news reports changing to another narrative.

Except for the role of the folk devil, Safe Schools also fits these attributes, where the actual folk devils are difficult to discern, unless it is represented by the broad alliance of progressive educators and curriculum planners who developed Safe Schools.

**Exploring the ‘panic’ in moral panics**

Moral panics are generally short-lived, such as that described by Cohen (1972/2002) and his moral panic concerning rockers, sharpies, and indeed, as was with the Safe Schools moral panic. Moreover, Petley, et al (2013, p. 10) invokes the disproportionality of moral panics: ‘The term “panic” neatly invokes a sense of knee-jerk response that is not carefully measured or balanced, and is prone to exaggeration and distortion’. ‘Panic’, like ‘moral’ is employed as a pejorative term; used individually to refer to those who lack restraint, need to exercise self-control, or who otherwise need to get a grip’ (Petley, et al (2013, p. 10). Labelling a socio-political-cultural phenomena as being a moral panic almost invites the moral entrepreneurs to take another and closer look at the event. Finally, Petley, et al (2013, p. 11) argue, often there are conspiratorial notions surrounding moral panics. They may be strategically manipulated or refocussed, so as to draw away from the contentious issues that present a threat to the moral order. For example, if any, what were the real issues surrounding the Safe Schools moral panic: Moral issues associated with the program; the perceived politics of a left-oriented curriculum; issues associated with a national curriculum, and so on?

**Over-stretching the notion of moral panic?**

We need to remind ourselves of the central role in original moral panic theory of the ‘folk devil’. The folk devil is a person, or group of people, who are portrayed in folklore or the media as outsiders and deviants, and who are blamed for crimes or other sorts of socio-political-cultural problems. Petley, et al (2013, pp. 18-19) state ‘one of the core disagreements in moral panic studies is whether or not a particular case needs to have a folk devil for a moral panic to occur’ (p. 18).

Clearly, in Safe Schools, moral panic departs from traditional moral panic theory because of the difficulty in discerning clearly identifiable folk devils. This suggests that a moral panic without clearly identifiable folk devils is not a moral panic?

**Critcher (2008) asks ‘what, if anything, are moral panics extreme examples of’?**

Answers in the originals were: the process of labelling and deviancy amplification (Cohen, 1973); the struggle over hegemony (Hall, et al., 1978); collective behaviour prompted by social movements (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994); and the rhetorical and allied strategies employed by claims makers (Best, 1990). New answers may come from recent theoretical developments within sociology, especially two highly influential perspectives, risk society and discourse analysis. Separately, they impinge on moral panic analysis. Together, they could move it to a new level (p. 1139).

This paper will refer to the impact of risk society on moral panics generally, and specifically to Safe Schools. But how far can the notion of moral panic be stretched before it loses its meaning? Garland (2008) notes:
Moral panic theory at work: challenges to cultural and social norms

Often moral panic involves issues related to sexuality or challenges to cultural norms. For example, in the US the civil rights and women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s dramatically altered society’s rules about sex, race, and gender. Any large-scale shift towards social liberalism tends to create a fearful moral panic among social conservatives, who believe these trends could lead to the unravelling of Western civilization and the pillars of stability. Witness the moral outrages associated with the suffragette demonstrations—women seeking the right to vote, a century or so ago (Jorgensen-Earp, 2008). Or again, witness the perceived excesses of the legislative program of the Whitlam years in Australia.

In the UK, Cohen’s (1972/2002) pioneering research into the state, government policy and youth culture was set during a time of moral panics associated with challenges to social norms. The manner in which mods and rockers were portrayed by the media in the 1960s was the starting point for Cohen’s theory. His research was based on the media storm over a violent clash between the two youth subcultures on the 1964 bank holiday on an English beach. Though the incident only resulted in some property damage without any serious physical injury to any of the individuals involved, several newspapers published sensationalist articles surrounding the event. Cohen examined articles written about the topic and noted a pattern of distorted facts and misrepresentation, as well as a distinct, simplistic depiction of the respective images of both groups involved in the disturbance, contributing to what has been labelled as his processual model. The role of the media is central in the projection of a moral panic.

Moral panics and young people

Krinsky (2008) writes ‘scholars working in fields as disparate as media studies, sociology, cultural geography, history, area studies, and criminology have used the notion of moral panic to cast light on a variety of controversies and crusades, not least those involving young people’ (p. 2). Krinsky’s (2008) own collection of contributions includes topics on public panic and the condemnation of children and youth. Why the fascination by researchers on moral panics with childhood and youth?

Thompson (1998) considers possible reasons research on moral panics so often engages with youth issues: ‘The subsequent development of the sociological analysis of moral panics in Britain continued to focus, like Cohen’s initial study, on youth cultures, and for good reasons. No age group is more associated with risk in the public imagination than that of ‘Youth’ (p. 44). However, ‘imagined risks to children also lie behind many moral panics, especially those concerning the alleged breakdown of the family, but apart from the relatively rare cases of children who commit murder … children are not usually regarded as a source of risk’ (Thompson, 1998, p. 44). Youth are in an invidious position. They ‘may be regarded as both at risk and a source of risk in many moral panics. This is not surprising in view of the transitional status of this age group, occupying a position between childhood and adulthood’ (Thompson, 1998, p. 44.).

In Thompson’s view, researchers in Britain tend to investigate moral panics involving youth because youth are extraordinarily prone to controversy, and equally likely to be seen as threatened by a rising social problem, or as the problem itself—even in the course of a single moral panic. Almost by definition, adolescents are problematic. Australian studies endorse the findings by such researchers as Thompson (1998), further illustrating features of the Safe Schools moral panic. One such Australian study is Bessant and Hil (1997), which especially links moral outrage and youth with the media, showing, inter alia, the historical role of the Australian media in moral panics associated with youth (Bessant and Hil, 1997).

The media and construction of crises and the discourse of fear

Crime and fear dominate media news reports. This is despite how ‘objective indicators of risk and danger in American life suggest that most US citizens are healthier, safer, and live more predictable lives than at any time in history’ (Altheide, 2003, pp. 9-10). One reason crime is so popular is that it’s almost always linked to ‘fear’, ‘the most basic feature of entertainment in popular culture’ (Altheide, 2003, p. 10). Consequently, ‘this emphasis has produced a discourse of fear: the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central
feature of everyday life’ (Altheide, 2003, p. 10). Hence, ‘the discourse of fear has important consequences for social policy, public perceptions of social issues, the demise of public space’ (Altheide, 2003, p. 10). Thus, ‘citizens … are becoming more ‘armed’ and ‘armored,’ and the promotion of a new social identity—the victim—exploited by numerous claims-makers, including politicians, who promote their own propaganda about national and international politics’ (Altheide, 2003, p. 10). This paper argues the same connection between fear and public policy exists with the construction of fear by the Christian Right and politicians linking it to Safe Schools.

In an investigation of the ways in which newspapers responded to the politics of fear in constructing a particular culture subservient to political ends, Altheide (2006) examined how news reports about terrorism in five nationally prominent US newspapers. This investigation looked at how news reports reflected the terms and discourse associated with the politics of fear, or decision-makers' promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear, to achieve certain goals sympathetic with the politics of ruling parties. Qualitative data analysis of the prevalence and meaning of words such as 'fear', 'victim', 'terrorism', and 'crime' eighteen months before and after the attacks of 11 September 2001 provided the means for Altheide (2006, p. 12) to show terrorism and crime are now linked very closely with the expanding use of fear.

Indeed, as Furedi (2007) puts it: 'Fear plays a key role in twenty-first century consciousness' (n.p.). For Furedi (2007), 'increasingly, we seem to engage with various issues through a narrative of fear' (n.p.). This was a 'trend emerging and taking hold in the last century, which was frequently described as an 'Age of Anxiety'. But in recent decades, it has become more and better defined, as specific fears have been cultivated (Furedi, 2007, n.p.). And these recent, more specific fears are often associated with catchphrases such as the 'politics of fear', 'fear of crime' and 'fear of the future' typically concern. Furedi (2007) concludes 'the rise of is testimony to the cultural significance of fear today. Many of us seem to make sense of our experiences through the narrative of fear' (n.p.). Fear is not simply associated with high-profile catastrophic threats such as terrorist attacks, global warming, AIDS or a potential flu pandemic; rather, through the 'quiet fears' of everyday life, such as the fall in teaching standards and standards of teacher education, or perceived inappropriate content of a gender awareness, anti-bullying program such as Safe Schools.

### Media chimes in, aided by advertising imperatives

Over twenty years ago, researchers recognised the rising influence of the media on the politics of fear and panic. McRobbie and Thornton (1995) observed moral panic is now a term regularly used by journalists to describe a process which politicians, commercial promoters and media habitually attempt to incite' (p. 559). Indeed, for these UK researchers 'it has become a standard interview question to put to Conservative MPs: are they not whipping up a moral panic as a foil to deflect attention away from more pressing economic issues?' (p. 559). Moral panics seem to guarantee the kind of emotional involvement sustaining the interest of media generally, as well as the ratings of news and true crime television. McRobbie and Thornton (1995) even assert the media themselves are willing to take some of the blame, noting a newspaper discussing ‘“new juvenile crime” on BBC2’s Newsnight ask[ing], “Is it not the media itself which has helped to create this phenomenon?”‘ (p. 559).

‘Once the unintended outcome of journalistic practice’, moral panics, seem now to have become a goal in itself (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995, p. 559). Rather than periods to which societies are subject, ‘every now and then’, moral panics now have become a means by ‘which daily events are brought to the attention of the public’ (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995, p. 559). Indeed, ‘they are a standard response, a familiar, sometimes weary, even ridiculous rhetoric rather than an exceptional emergency intervention used by politicians to orchestrate consent by business to promote sales in certain niche markets, and by media to make home and social affairs newsworthy, moral panics are constructed on a daily basis’ (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995, p. 559).

The media has assumed a special role in the construction of a moral panic, as it embarks upon a ‘moral crusade’ against the identified ‘folk devils’. For instance, the media, if it chooses, can target negatively and demonise groups or the educational products of groups, as was the case with Safe Schools. In Australia, the UK and the US, right-wing nationalist groups are provided with point and purpose when a mosque is proposed for a regional centre. With a pointer to what might happen in school education, Miller and Reilly (1994) argue moral panics can be used to change public opinion and thus act as a form of ‘ideological social control’.

### Moral panics and the social media

The moral panic paradigm underwent massive changes with the advent of social or participatory media, such as Facebook and Twitter during the early 21st century, so much so that national academic conferences were given over to interrogating these influences (Participatory Media and Moral Panic, 2015). Indeed, the transformation of the media landscape invited researchers to ‘rethink the dialectic between “media” and “moral panic”, by focusing on the ways in which participatory media enables the public’s participation in moral panic’ (Participatory Media and Moral Panic, 2015, n.p.). According to the Social Media and Society Conference held in Toronto, Canada in July 2015, ‘the co-production of moral panic, via media participation, can be analyzed to document how individuals, through their relational links, trigger, maintain and propagate moral panic or how these forms of moral regulation affect sociability, notably those stigmatized
by the controversial subject' (n.p.). This cast new light on 'how mediatization of social relations, stemming from participatory media, leads to renegotiating a number of democratic balances. These include the relationship between private and public spheres as well as the role of publics in constituting collective dynamics, such as the formation of public problems' (Participatory Media and Moral Panic, 2015, n.p.). Of course, the exact role of social media in the moral panics surrounding Safe Schools waits upon empirical research.

One aspect at the participatory media and moral panic conference in July 2015 deserving enquiry for the role of social media in moral panics was the ‘rethinking the publics’ role and types of participation’ (Participatory Media and Moral Panic, 2015, n.p.). This question has particular relevance to this present study. The conference stressed how 20th century pioneers of moral panic theory invoked the public as an entity of ‘a partly irrational faceless and nameless crowd, empowered by collective strength. They insisted upon the fact relational dynamics between individuals fundamentally changes when agglomerated into a huge crowd’ (Participatory Media and Moral Panic, 2015, n.p.). Here, while ‘publics were then at the center of analysis in an attempt to characterize the clustering of individuals, nowadays, they are often relegated to secondary roles’ (Participatory Media and Moral Panic, 2015, n.p.). Often, the role of these 20th century moral entrepreneurs, claim-makers, social movements, political parties role in moral panics were household names. With this new role of the social media, ‘it is precisely this anonymous mass, the agglomeration of individuals, the crowd of people, that makes the fabric of moral panics and embodies the strength of this collective entity, and in turn the potency of the concept of moral panic’ (Participatory Media and Moral Panic, 2015, n.p.). How does the increasing, often anonymous, leverage of social media affect the development of moral panics?

Risk society theory: challenges to the moral panic paradigm

A question arises whether it is possible to isolate particular moral panics because, as Thompson (1998, cited in Poynting and Morgan, 2007, p. 2) observes, the ‘increasing rapidity in the succession of moral panics’ makes it impossible to distinguish the boundaries between each. Moreover, as Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1990) suggest, ‘modern societies have become so engulfed by a sense of risk and uncertainty that it’s impossible to distinguish particular moral panics from the background radiation of popular anxiety’ (Poynting and Morgan, 2007, p. 2) Critcher sees this aspect as a higher ‘level’ of moral panic (2003, p. 175, cited in Poynting and Morgan, 2007, p. 2). He posits three perspectives of moral panic, a progression from the identification of a problem to seeing that problem as a threat to the moral order, then to a third level: ‘The discourse becomes less specified and more generalised. The threat is no longer localised; we are all at risk; we confront not people mostly like us but the Other embodying evil’ (Critcher 2003, p. 175, cited in Poynting and Morgan, 2007, p. 2). There is an obvious application of this reasoning to Safe Schools. With shock jocks drumming out a common message on the nations’ radio, in addition to the plethora of social media activity, for some Australians the whole nation was going down the drain.

By the second decade of the 21st century, the notion of moral panics was coming under severe criticism by researchers. Particularly, the researchers argue the foundations of the moral panic myth, its politics, and the hidden world of progressive panics are a part of sectional interests by certain socio-political groups—political elites, and more recently, the Christian Right. The role of a compliant media and the almost unknown role of social media were vital in generating the moral panic in a society beset with anxieties surrounding risk. Often, as was the case with the sex education, where the only people panicking were some Christian Right people, and not one instant of a member of a school community directly involved with the program—student, teacher or parent.

In commenting on the connection between the Australian National Curriculum and risk society theory, Kostogriz (2011) argues just as Australia’s draconian border security legislation is a product of the risk society, so, too, is the National Curriculum. Both essentially are the means to control national risk. In the case of the National Curriculum, it is a perceived risk concerning the teaching of certain knowledge and the development of certain values in the nation’s youth. Witness Safe Schools!

Conclusions

Moral panic theory and risk society theory provide new insights into the politicisation of the Australian National Curriculum. Now the tools of national governments, the National Curriculum responded to perceived political needs. The Australian National Curriculum, moral panics theory and risk society theory have brought new levels of understanding to the political imperatives underpinning the curriculum.

While requiring some tweaking, because of the absence of clearly identifiable folk devils, moral panic theory fits squarely with the Safe Schools moral panic. It shows how moral panics can result in the altering of school education policy at a national level.

With a long history as moral panic entrepreneurs in Australian school education, the Christian Right emerged as a powerful moral entrepreneur in the Safe Schools moral panic, perhaps as an object lesson for future would-be moral entrepreneurs and future national governments. In a sense the Safe Schools moral panic was simply another chapter in a series of events dating back to at least the MACOS and SEMP imbroglio of the 1970s. But now the Safe Schools moral panic came face-to-face with risk society imperatives. While in the need of much further study, the confluence of
risk society theory and moral panic theory provide new insights into the politics of the Australian National Curriculum. Moral panics concerning the nation’s youth often have showy-youth-based moral panics are problematic, no less so than coupled with sex- or gender-based moral panics. These provide an informative means to understanding school education policy development or revision, and associated with Safe Schools.

References


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