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**Commentary on:**

**A Hybrid Model of Moral Panics:  
Synthesizing the Theory and Practice of Moral Panic Research**

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This is a very constructive and useful attempt to take forward research on moral panics. The outline of the use of the concept and its history is comprehensive and fair. I am in favour of the attempt to synthesize the processual model and the attribution model, as suggested by the authors. For all the criticisms of the concept, it is still the case that it is one of the most successful sociological concepts in public use, including its use by the media. It would be foolish for social researchers to ignore it, as has sometimes been the case. Nor has it been superseded by new concepts, despite the efforts of some writers to suggest otherwise. The authors are right in suggesting that what is needed is more rigor.

My main focus will begin from the section of the article headed 'Strengthening Moral Panics Research', as I think this brings us to the core of the matter for the purpose of moving forward. Critcher was right to conclude that it is unfortunate that many studies of MPs have focused too much on determining whether some past episode of social drama was a MP. It can only be a starting point, a 'means of beginning an analysis' of larger social

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conditions' of a particular type, 'not the entire analysis in itself' (Critcher, 2008, p. 1138, as cited by Klocke and Muschert). This would respond to Watney's criticism that sometimes the use of the concept of moral panic seems to oblige the user to contrast 'representation' to the arbitration of the 'real' and is therefore unable to develop a full theory concerning the operations of ideology within systems of representation (Watney, 1987: 42). As I have pointed out (Thompson, 1998: 77), Watney was not so much denying that certain episodes constitute moral panics, but rather that he wished to broaden the discussion to place the particular panic over AIDS in Britain within the broader framework of ideological contestation about how certain groups are represented by the mass media as threats to the cohesion of a unified general public with shared values and characteristics.

The authors put forward three suggestions for the purpose of building more rigor in the analysis of MPs:

The first is that of triangulation, involving drawing on multiple sources of data. Here the call is for the usual analysis of mainstream media reports to be supplemented by other media and documentary sources, plus ethnographic work with relevant groups. This is sensible, but it should not distract researchers from the need to carry out much more rigorous investigations of the operations of the mainstream media, drawing on the work of media sociologists and others who can reveal the workings of the media complex - pressures and preferences e.g. competitive pressures that might affect the balance between journalistic standard and the temptations of sensationalism. With regard to media content, careful discourse analysis and the tracing of amplification spirals are perhaps the most demanding tasks.

The second suggestion is that the literature on MPs would benefit from more comparative studies of MPs between countries, cultures and time periods. In my own work I made explicit comparisons between the US and UK, particularly with regard to their different media complexes and political-ideological formations. It was also important to relate the episode of a moral panic, or rapid succession of panics, to the social, political, and media pressures, of the particular period.

The third suggestion is that MP researchers should situate their findings within substantive theoretical areas related to particular social problems. An example might be my re-evaluation of Watney's analysis of the British media's treatment of AIDS in the period of the 1980s. AIDS was at that time, and still is to a certain extent, a controversial social problem that needed to be situated within the context of related social problems and deviancy. The way that it was discursively represented, in the public sphere constituted by the

mass media, called out for rigorous discourse analysis that would reveal how the specific forms of representation depended for their effectiveness on their capacity to connect to wider ideological discourses and deeper anxieties. In my own case, I tried to map some of these connections using a combination of discourse analysis and ideas from risk society theory.

## References

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Thompson, Kenneth. (1998). *Moral Panics*, New York: Routledge.

Watney. S. (1987). *Policing Desire: Pornography, Aids and the Media*. London: Methuen.