Culture e Studi del Sociale - CuSSoc
ISSN: 2531-3975
Editors-in-Chief
Felice Addeo, Giuseppe Masullo, Giovanna Truda

The Last Moral Panic: Conceptual Clarifications and the Possible Complications of Artificial Intelligence

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Come citare / How to cite

Greco, C., & Brown, G. (2025). The Last Moral Panic: Conceptual Clarifications and the Possible Complications of Artificial Intelligence. *Culture e Studi del Sociale*, *10*(2), 9-22.

Disponibile / Retrieved https://www.cussoc.it/journal/article/view/383

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Articolo pubblicato online / Article first published online: Dicembre/December 2025

- Peer Reviewed Journal

INDEXED IN DOAJ

The Last Moral Panic: Conceptual Clarifications and the Possible Complications of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

Moral panic is rarely defined in ways that move us beyond an unwillingness to accept alternative viewpoints or hierarchies of credibility. This paper outlines a definition of moral panic that maintains the analytical framework of studied groups and reads as "collective, corrective-intended behaviour based on an irrational belief that exaggerates the threat posed by a social problem". After describing that which constitutes a social problem and differentiating concepts from theories, we continue to deconstruct the definition in reverse order before presenting moral panic as a two-stage process and providing a discursive illustration. The paper ends with a discussion of how advancements in artificial intelligence may limit the concept's use.

Keywords: moral panic, social problems, artificial intelligence

1. Introduction

Despite 60+ years of use (see McLuhan, 1964) and adaptation, moral panic is rarely defined in ways that move us beyond an unwillingness to accept alternative viewpoints or "hierarchies of credibility" (Becker, 1967, p. 242). Most writings on the concept lead with a quote from Cohen (1972, 2002), or Young (1971/1982), or Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994a, 1994b, 2009) and guide readers through an accounting of how those with 'real' information should understand the collective behaviour of persons responding to a perceived threat.

To help move moral panic beyond this perceived risk/real risk dichotomy, which Clarke and Chess (2008, p. 997) argue "has been abandoned by scholars (but not consultants)," it is possible to construct an understanding of the concept around the analytical framework of populations under study. We can identify the existence of an inaccurately perceived threat without exchanging one moral viewpoint or hierarchy of credibility for another. The expanding use of artificial intelligence (AI) – computer technology developed to simulate and extend human intelligence (Deng, 2018) – and its ability to identify points and narratives of connectivity from big data samples may, however, complicate the wider context in which the term is used.

The purpose of this paper is to outline a definition of moral panic that maintains the analytical framework (hierarchy of credibility, moral viewpoint) of the studied group by summarising arguments presented in an unpublished work on the concept's

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use (Brown, 2016). Here moral panic is defined as *collective, corrective-intended behaviour based on an irrational belief that exaggerates the threat posed by a social problem*. After outlining that which constitutes a social problem and differentiating concepts from theories, we continue to deconstruct the definition in reverse order before presenting moral panic as a two-stage process and providing a discursive illustration. The paper ends with a discussion of how advancements in AI may limit the concept's use.

2. Definition

2.1. The Threat Posed by a Social Problem

Moral panic is not consistently defined within the academic literature. Some authors focus on a process of events to delineate its contours (Cohen, 2002; Hall et al., 1978). Others prioritize categorical elements (Critcher, 2003; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994a; Wright, 2015), the type of concern (Klocke & Muschert, 2013, Thompson & Williams, 2014), or avoid an operational definition altogether (Falkof, 2020). The literature on social problems is similarly varied. Horton, Leslie, and Larson (1991, p. 2), for example, write of "a condition affecting a significant number of people in ways considered undesirable, about which it is felt something must be done through collective social action." Heiner (2002, p. 3) replaces the word considered with "regarded," adds "bad" to undesirable, and includes corrective action ("people who mobilize to eliminate" the negatively regarded phenomenon) as a definitional requirement. Instead of focusing on "people's subjective sense that something is or isn't a problem" (Best, 2021, p. 9), Alessio (2011, p. 3) presents a condition that "involves harm to one or more individuals and/or one or more social entities."

For Best (2021), the objectivist position – that injury is a measurable requirement for social problems to exists – is flawed and inflexible when confronted with changes in how evidence of harm is defined and prioritized within differing social contexts. The correction is understood to be a subjectivist approach, where social problems are defined via a collective sense of wrong (Best, 2021). Spector and Kitsuse (2001/2009, p. 74) take this orientation to a terminal point by equating social problems with "the activities of those who assert the existence of conditions and define them as problems." Because defining anything as the activities through which it is defined lacks clarity, and the objectivist alternative pliability, we here write of social problems as *conditions, phenomena, or behaviours defined by a substantial number of persons as problematic or a threat to something or someone of value*. A 'substantial number' is determined by the socio-political formation of the studied group and understood to be the number of persons needed to cause the implementation of (one or more) corrective-intended measures in the name of the potentially wider collective.

While the above descriptions can be tied to the work of Heiner (2002) and Horton et al. (1991), Alessio (2011, p. 7) would challenge our use of a substantial number on grounds that it forces one "to accept, as given, social problems proclaimed by those who have the power to do so." And it does. In line with all social relationships (Hobbes, 1651/1985), power dynamics are assumed to exist here. The approach, however, situates power – or the ability to identify harm, value, and that which constitutes a taken-as-shared orientation (Cobb et al., 2001) – within the identified collective and its governing structure or social contract. Simply put, it does not force

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 9-22
ISSN: 2531-3975

an external logic onto a studied group or system, but assumes its internal dynamics, reasoning, and power structure. This ability lies, in part, in constructing social problems as a concept that aims to describe, not a theory that aims to explain (Kinloch, 1977). The same will be said of moral panics.

2.1.1. The Concept of Moral Panic

Much of the noted variance across definitions of moral panic involves attempts to situate the concept as a theory (Falkof, 2020; Hunt, 2011; Jenkins, 1992, 1998, 2009; Jewkes & Wykes, 2012; Thompson & Williams, 2014; Waiton, 2008):

> Some . . . fabricate an imaginary orientation they refer to as moral panics "theory." In contrast to this fantasy, let's be clear about this: There is no moral panics "theory." The moral panic is a sociological *phenomenon*, an analytical concept much like stratification, interaction, deviance, and social movements. … And *all* sociological concepts are social constructs. (Goode, 2000, p. 551).

To claim moral panic is but a concept – albeit "a concept of great theoretical power and resonance" (Young, 2007, p. 53) – and thus a social construct, is to acknowledge its subjective state. That said, and like our discussion of social problems, acceptance of this claim does not limit our concerns to definitional processes or beliefs that initiate action. Moral panic requires more. Its use necessitates one position on the appropriateness of those processes and write about action that is imprecise or disproportionate. In practice, this positioning is often employed via logic external to the studied, potentially panicking, group. And, again, it need not be.

2.2. Behaviour Based on an Irrational Belief That Exaggerates

Writing on the *Theory of Collective Bahaviour*, Smelser (1962/1967, p. 131) defines panic as "flight based on a hysterical belief." For flight to occur, the space by which to flee must be "limited and possibly closing." (p. 139) Otherwise, Smelser (1962/1967, p. 136) continues, "reactions such as terror or infantile regression can occur . . . but not panic." Though this limiting of panic to the act of running away "is too restrictive" (Mawson, 2007, p. 156), Tester (2013, p. 7) – who, like us, sees irrationality as a condition of being hysterical – takes issue with Smelser's equating of "panic with a 'hysterical belief.'" Quarantelli (1954, p. 272) advances a similar position:

> Panic flight does not involve irrational thought if by that is meant anything in the way of faulty deductions from certain premises. From the position of an outside observer this may appear to be the case but, from a participant's viewpoint, given his limited perspective of only certain portions of the total situation, no such interpretation of irrationality can be made. For the fleeing person, his actions appear to him quite appropriate to the situation as he perceives it at that time.

Because we understand an irrational belief to be a belief that is not supported by evidence the panicking group identify as important, Quarantelli's (1954, p. 269) position is problematic and opposes his description of flight as goal oriented: "Panic flight is not random or helter-skelter; the participants do not run every which way but instead take their general orientation for flight from the threatening situation." The identification of a direction in which participants should run (i.e., away from what they identify as a threatening situation) returns us to associating panic with a

belief that breaks with a group's internal reasoning, is "irrational" (Brown, 1954/1959, p. 858; see also Fekete, 1994, p. 24; Thompson, 1998, p. viii), and allows one to claim "the response to some social problem is an over-reaction or exaggerated" (Hunt, 1999, p. 19; see also Freud,1922, p. 46; Jenkins, 1998, pp. 6-7).

To be clear, and in alignment with the above understanding of social problems, our means of assessing proportionality (i.e., of differentiating rational from irrational or exaggerated beliefs) does not elevate claims of moral panic beyond the realm of value judgements. It does, however, work to ensure assertions of moral panic's existence are not simply the result of differing analytical frameworks or persons stepping "outside our role as sociologist" (Garland, 2008, p. 22) to prioritize personal hierarchies of credibility or monopolize pathways to the truth (Becker, 1967). Rohloff (2011, p. 635) suggests a different approach: "Rather than assessing proportionality per se, we could instead assess how effective proposed measures will be, or have been, in addressing the problem."

Rohloff's (2011) proposal presents two problems. First, it is possible to stumble upon a solution while running with our eyes closed (to cure labyrinthitis by cutting out one's inner ear, etc.) and, thus, difficult to equate the soundness of decision-making logic with the consequences of a connected action. The suggestion does not get us around the need to adopt an analytical framework against which proportionality can be measured or effectiveness assessed. The second reason, tied to the first, is that the proposal works to circumvent the condition upon which the concept is "most commonly associated" (Rohloff et al., 2013, p. 21): an exaggerated and collectively defined threat.

2.3. Collective, Corrective-Intended

Moral panics are collective acts. They refer to the panicked reactions of "a substantial number of the members of a given society" (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 35). As with social problems, what constitutes a substantial number fluctuates within the literature. But if we borrow from our above writing on social problems, and abandon numerical consistency, a substantial number of persons can be understood as a number required to encourage, force, or motivate the implementation of (one or more) corrective-intended measures available to and in the name of the potentially wider collective. Beyond this requirement "it does not matter whether the 'public' do become concerned about the issue. … In moral panics support from the public is a bonus not a necessity" (Critcher, 2003, p. 137). It also does not matter whether persons external to the group view the employed measure as corrective-intended. Rather, it is the studied group that present and determine it as such. Should the belief used to justify the measure not be supported by evidence the studied group identify as indicative of the threat posed by a social problem, the same collective action signifies acceptance of an irrational belief and the completion of our definition of moral panic as collective, corrective-intended behaviour based on an irrational belief that exaggerates the threat posed by a social problem.

2.4. A Two-Stage Process

Though the above sections divide moral panic into three parts, only two events are required for moral panic to take place: 1) the exaggeration of a threat posed by a social problem; 2) the implementation of one or more collective, corrective-intended measures. A third stage can be added to signify the panic's end or submergence. Fig-

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 9-22
ISSN: 2531-3975

ure 1 shows how all three stages find support within some of the most sourced concept-related texts, Smelser's (1962/1967) work on panic, and Best's (2021) writing on social problems. Some clarifications are, however, required.

	1. The Exaggeration of the Threat Posed by a Social Problem		2. Implementation of (one or more) Collective, Corrective-Intended Measures		3. Disappearance/Submergence	
S. Cohen's (1972, 2002) moral panic	A defined threat emerges	Its/their nature is stylized and stereotyped by the mass media, evoking public concern	Right thinking persons man moral barricades	Experts diagnose the threat and suggest solutions	Coping mechanisms evolve and (similar to the stages above) an amplification spiral may begin	The threat disappears, submerges or deteriorates, possibly leaving behind long term effects
Young's (1971/1982) moral panic	Social segregation results in a dependence on second hand information	The media emphasize the atypical and confirm public prejudice and stereotypes	Inaccurate portrayals of an identified threat fan public indignation	Corrective action is demanded	Control culture responds and an amplification spiral may begin or (if in existence) continue	Anxiety and interest in the threat deteriorates, possibly leaving behind new social control mechanisms
Hall et al.'s (1978) post-1970 moral panic	Social-control apparatuses and the media are sensitized to the possibility of a threat	Control apparatuses respond to minor forms of dissent (invisible)	A dramatic event focuses 'public' attention/anxiety on inaccurate perceptions of the threat and (if not already present) a signification spiral is produced	Control apparatuses intensify their response (visible)	The problem deteriorates or appears to deteriorate	Sensitivity to the perceived threat increases
Goode & Ben-Yehuda's (1994b & 2009) moral panic	Organizational activists focus on an identified threat	Perceptions of the threat are exaggerated, disseminated to, and supported by wider ('public') audiences—a feedback loop or signification spiral typically develops	Strategies to address or be seen to address the threat are worked out	'Corrective' strategies are implemented	The threat deteriorates or appears to deteriorate	Concern/anxiety is reduced, possibly leaving behind new social control mechanisms (an institutional legacy)
Critcher's (2003) moral panic	An issue comes to be perceived as a symbolic threat	The media stylize, stereotype and exaggerate the threat	Claims makers (organized groups) *may* support media portrayals	Experts and elites are not seen to oppose the above portrayals or (to a significant degree) one another	Coping strategies are developed and implemented by the state	The threat deteriorates, fades away or loses impetus, possibly leaving behind long-term effects (a legacy)
Smelser's (1962/1967) panic	Some danger of unknown and uncontrollable proportion emerges	Anxiety is converted into hysteria by the appearance of a significant event	The threat is exaggerated and fixed on some destructive agent	A direction of flight is identified	Action is mobilized, usually under a primitive form of leadership	Collective flight occurs and the treat is believed to disappear
Best's (2021) Social Problems	Claims that a social problem exists are made	Media reporting extends the reach of those claims	The identified social problem becomes a focus of public opinion	Means of addressing the problem are developed	Corrective methods are implemented	New arrangements lead to new responses

Note: Klocke and Muschert (2010, 2013) and Drotner (1999) present comparable three-stage outlines.

Figure 1: Stages of Progression: Moral Panic

Apart from Best's (2021) description of social problems, none of the works presented in the above figure contain an identical progress model. Critcher (2003), for example, presents eight stages, and the amplification spirals or feedback loops relevant to Hall et al.'s (1978) work are here removed. Considerations of length and volatility are also excluded for the following reason: The academic literature does not provide a suggested means of calculating the speed and point at which a panic begins, dies, or dissolves into the more drawn-out process of moral regulation (Hunt, 2013). Our intent was to reformulate these conceptual writings to allow for a comparison of processes within a visual representation of moral panic's redefining. The below discursive illustration provides an additional clarifying example.

3. Illustration

The following subsections compress part of the Parliament of Canada's response to persons using a computer system to communicate with children for the purpose of abusing them sexually (Internet child luring or ICL) into the two-stage process noted above. Like our deconstruction of moral panic, the ordering of that process is reversed. A brief explanation of the employed analytical framework is presented first.

3.1 Approach

To facilitate our illustration, Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) and Fairclough's (1992, 2001a, 2001b, 2009) writings on critical discourse analysis were used to assess the ICL claims of members of the Parliament of Canada and expert witnesses concerning Bill C-15 (*An Act to amend the Criminal Code and to amend other Acts*, 2001) and Bill C-15A (*An Act to amend the Criminal Code and other Acts*, 2001). These claims, and the contexts in which they were made, were taken from transcripts of Senate and House of Commons chamber sittings, debates, and related committee meetings accessed via the Library of Parliament's online (LEGIS*info*) database. Because "all variants of discourse analysis reject the view that language is simply the vehicle for the expression of ideas" (Critcher, 2003, p. 167), its use here – when writing about irrational beliefs and publicised transcripts – may appear paradoxical and require additional explanation.

If not the pathway to a "discernible, retrievable historical 'reality'" (Canning, 1994, p. 369), the analysis of language and our use of transcripts to determine the presence of moral panic and its irrational belief component can read as out of place. The approach does not provide direct access to the mind of studied persons and, considering this limitation, one could argue further definitional amendments are needed. While the argument is theoretically reasonable, practical assessments of belief within the sociological literature on collective behaviour adjoin the term to secondary indicators or observable signs that one assumes or accepts a particular understanding of things to be true. At present, the most appropriate and available indicator of the belief upon which members of parliament substantiated their behaviour when acting in an official capacity and in view of the Canadian public are the above noted transcripts.

Once the data set was secured and merged with QSR International's NVivo software for manual analysis, focal claims (i.e., claims about the threat of ICL) were identified and categorized by author and modality (i.e., the tone or force with which the claim was made) to compare statements that, for example, described ICL's rate of occurrence as 'prevalent' against those that refer to the same as 'rare' or 'uncommon'. This identification and classification of claims allowed us to trace lines of argumentation and determine which, if any, focal claims made by members of parliament and following parliamentary procedures could appropriately be understood as a taken-as-shared belief. The process also allowed us to identify focal claims by persons parliamentarians recognized as expert witnesses or claims that could, while taking "seriously the moral viewpoint of those who are alarmed" (Garland, 2008, p. 22), be treated as truths against which to mark exaggerations. Because the marking of exaggerations and identification of a taken-as-shared belief are part of the analytical process, both are discussed below.

3.2 Implementation of (one or more) Collective, Corrective-Intended Measures

The content of Bill C-15A was initially included in omnibus Bill C-15. Before the latter's split into parts A (the "good stuff" [Lunney, 2001, p. 5385; see also Laframboise, 2001, p. 5367]) and B ("the rest" [Brien, 2001, p. 5390]), its introduction was in some measure presented as a means "to safeguard children from criminals on the Internet" (McLellan, 2001, p. 3581) and "address what has been reported as a growing phenomenon not only in our country but globally" (McLellan, 2001, p. 3581). The bill would accomplish these aims by adding section 172.1 (luring a child) to the Criminal Code of Canada and, in so doing, allow for the punishment

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 9-22
ISSN: 2531-3975

of persons convicted of the offence. Following the divide of Bill C-15, Bill C-15A was similarly presented as "another tool . . . to make sure that we will keep protecting our children" (Cauchon, 2002, p. 10562) or a means of addressing the threat posed by ICL. Bill C-15A was signed into law on the 4th day of June 2002 (see Figure 2).

Because Canada's democracy is representative in design and because, as part of that design, the Parliament of Canada makes decisions on behalf of Canadians, federal laws are collectively constructed. The process commences when proposed legislation is introduced in one of two branches of parliament (the Senate or House of Commons) and members vote to adopt or reject the suggested action. Adopted motions are sent to the other branch for review and, if supported, the Governor General for the symbolic act of royal assent (Laundy, 1977). Though the process does not ensure all Canadians, or even all members of parliament, favour the resulting decision, it stands as the country's official federal law-making framework. The fact these decisions are made by a number of persons large enough to encourage, force, or motivate the implementation of corrective measures available to and in the name of the collective ensures the problems they address are social problems, whether adjoined to threats that are exaggerated or not.

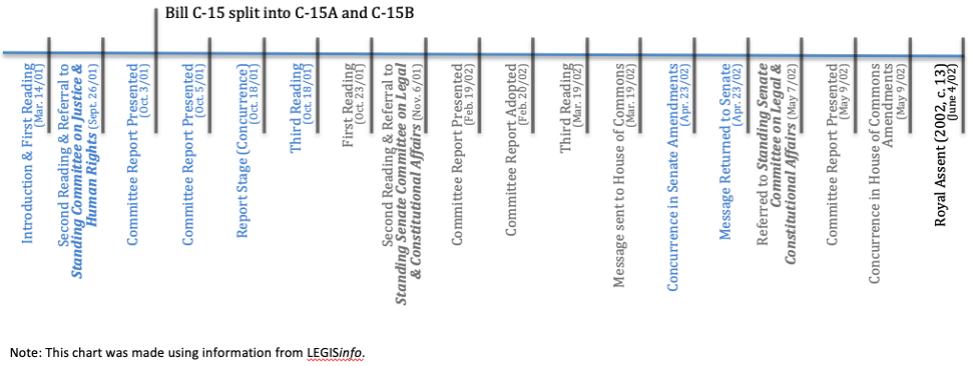


Figure 2: Introduction to Royal Assent: Bill C-15A

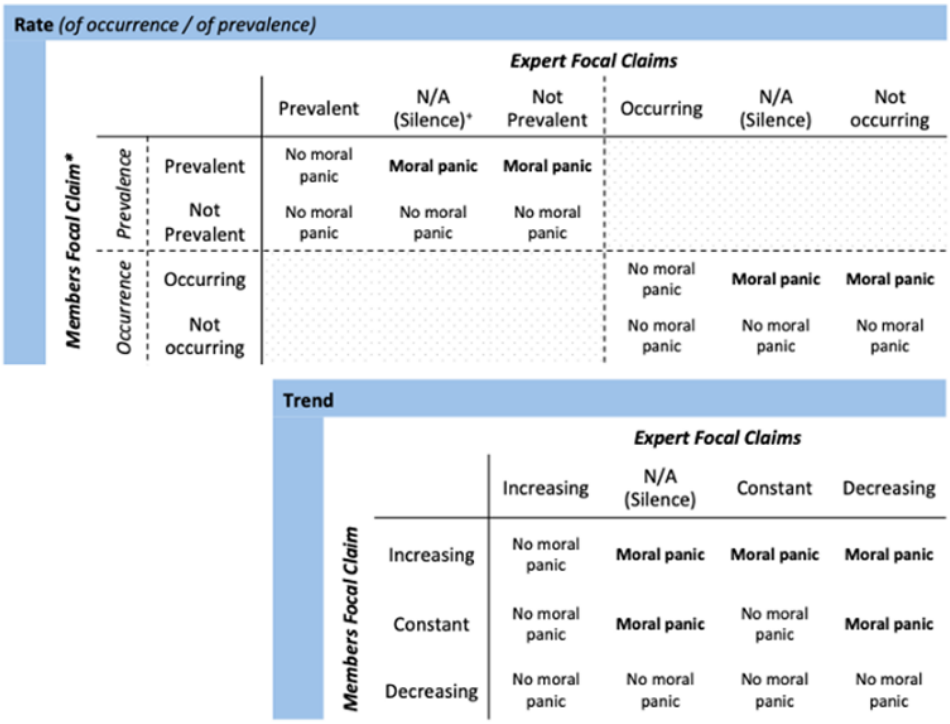
3.3 The Exaggeration of a Threat Posed by a Social Problem

As part of its parliamentary review, Bill C-15 and Bill C-15A were subject to a committee and report stage in which expert witnesses (persons understood to be in the know) were identified and invited by members of parliament to position and respond to questions on the proposed legislation, its supportive rationale or need (i.e., the extent of the threat it is said to address), and potential impact. As noted above, these responses and statements present a reality or realities against which the correctness of claims made by members of parliament can be appropriately judged or weighted via our proportionality scale: (1) the focal claims of expert witnesses | (2) the taken-as-shared belief of parliamentarians.

3.3.1 Focal Claims and Modality

When discussing the threat of ICL, parliamentarians described the phenomenon as occurring, prevalent, and increasing in frequency: "With the rapid rise of Internet use an awful lot of children have been inadvertently getting sucked into a trap by pedophiles" (Stoffer, 2001, p. 5353); "These situations are becoming more common and I am relieved to see that the government has finally recognized the great need to

amend the law" (Toews, 2001, p. 3644). Not one member of parliament positioned against this narrative which, following the royal assent of Bill C-15A, can be both taken-as-shared and understood as introducing two measures of assessing proportionality: a measure of rate (of occurrence/of prevalence) and a measure of trend (of frequency). Figure 3 shows the points at which the taken-as-shared focal claim or belief of members of parliament would exaggerate or exceed the focal claims of expert witnesses and lead to a state of moral panic. Unlike the claims of members of parliament, our data set does not allow for the identification of a hierarchy of credibility within the expert witness category. So as not to impose an externally refined strata, the taken-as-shared focal claim of members of parliament is understood as rational if supported by the focal claim of a single expert witness.



* Members Focal Claim refers to the taken-as-shared focal claim or belief of members of parliament.
+ N/A (Silence) refers to situations in which expert witnesses did not comment on the noted measure of threat.

Figure 3: Measures of Focal Claim

Members of parliament heard from seven expert witnesses (see Figure 4), all of whom supported the intent to "protect our children in an area where they have proven vulnerable" (Shard, 2001, para. 364). The phenomenon of ICL was, however, only described as increasing in frequency:

The Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada has noted a growth of the problem in Canada. We've seen a parallel growth around the world, particularly in the United States, which takes a much more proactive law enforcement approach to this, puts more resources into it. The growth there is phenomenal. (Sullivan, 2001, 0910h paras. 7-9)

Not one expert claimed occurrences were prevalent or widespread. Comments from the President and Executive Director of the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime came close:

Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 9-22
ISSN: 2531-3975

As you may know, the trade in distribution of child pornography prior to the Internet was pretty much under control by police, but with the Internet, it has grown to an unprecedented amount. It's being traded quite easily with the click of a button, not to mention the risks our children face by predators in chat rooms. (Sullivan, 2001, 0910h para. 10).

	Expert Witnesses*	Within the House of Commons	Within Senate
1	**GRIFFIN** David, Executive Officer (Canadian Police Association)	Yes	Yes
2	**LAFONTAINE** Lisette, Senior Counsel (Department of Justice Canada, Criminal Law Policy)	Yes	Yes
3	**SHARD** Michael, Member (Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police)	Yes	Yes
4	**SULLIVAN** Steve, President & Executive Director (Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime)	Yes	-
5	**THOMSON** Jay, President (Canadian Association of Internet Providers)	Yes	Yes
6	**BROSSEAU** Carole, Lawyer (Barreau du Québec, Research and Legislation)	-	Yes
7	**PERKINS-MCVEY** Heather, Chair (Canadian Bar Association, National Criminal Justice)	-	Yes

* Expert Witnesses are here defined as persons who were invited by members of parliament to and did speak about ICL. Note: This chart was made using information from LEGIS*info*. The titles, occupational or other, here attributed to witnesses are those found in the relating minutes of proceedings and/or the heading, as recorded in evidence, that precedes the first transcribed words of each witness.

Figure 4: Seven Expert Witnesses

Because members of parliament exaggerated one of the two self-identified measures of threat posed by ICL, it is appropriate to conclude that they were in a state of moral panic when passing the luring a child provision of Bill C-15A. Internet child luring was presented as a social problem against which collective, corrective-intended behaviour was directed and whose threat was, when working within the analytical framework of Canadian parliamentarians, exaggerated.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the above sections was to (1) outline a definition of moral panic that maintains the studied group's analytical framework and (2) provide a related discursive illustration. After defining moral panic as *collective, corrective-intended behaviour based on an irrational belief that exaggerates the threat posed by a social problem*, we deconstructed the definition in reverse order before presenting it as a two-stage process that was, in turn, clarified by way of an empirical description. The result is an understanding of moral panic that is sufficiently rigid (to ensure consistency in use), appropriately flexible (to differing socio-political and cultural contexts), and rooted within "the three original panic studies (Cohen, 2002[1972]; Hall et al., 1978; Young, 1971)" (Dandoy, 2015, p. 417). The expanded use of AI may, however, limit the definition's use.

While work has been done to connect discourses on moral panic with advances in technology, these initiatives focus on the effect of changing communication

formats and the causes of panic's occurrence (Hier, 2019; Johnen et al., 2018; Walsh, 2020). We are not aware of any research that explores the effect of AI on the definition of moral panic itself. To help advance this discussion, two related decision-making complications associated with the technology are worth noting here: the possibility of infinite correlations and the consequence of analytical 'black' boxes.

Writing on *Why Theory Matters More than Ever in the Age of Big Data*, Wise and Shaffer (2015, p. 5) point to the "danger … in thinking that with enough data, the numbers speak for themselves." Part of their cautioning is presented as a question: "What counts as a meaningful finding when the number of data points is so large that something will always be significant?" (Wise & Shaffer, 2015, p. 6). The answer is contextual and guided by the necessity of an operating theoretical framework:

The mathematics of statistical analysis means that macro-data will consistently produce micro-results [statistically significant results with small or tiny effects]. … Without a theoretical framework, in other words, it is hard to know what variables to include in a model, how they might interact, which micro-results to pay attention to. (Wise & Shaffer, 2015, p. 6)

Put differently, and within the context of our wider discussion, the ability of AI to manage exceedingly large data sets facilitates the production of different, competing, and possibly contradictory arguments on that which requires correction and constitutes an appropriate response. Without a clear structure to guide and continually assess the analytical process, we are lost in justifiable possibilities. The solution is, therefore, straightforward: AI requires ongoing theoretical engagement to direct the operation of its statistical technique. But, as noted by Kaas (2024, p. 3), advanced forms of the technology (i.e., those that couple deep neural networks with large data sets) tend to produce unintended, unanticipated results and create computational

black boxes whose internal operations remain inscrutable. While the inputs and outputs of these machines are generally easy to identify and understand, the same cannot be said about what goes on inside the machine. Such machines are opaque or, synonymously, not transparent.

Similar transparency problems occur with artificial intelligent systems that rely on decision trees and linear or logistic regression to sort through extremely large and complex "sets of data. Even if one had access to every line of code in such a system, all of the training data used and expert knowledge, there would simply be too much information for a human to intelligibly analyze" (Kaas, 2024, p. 3). A managed theoretical framework may already be beyond our reach.

Though it is beyond our scope to here test the influence of AI on our conceptual redefining of moral panic, the complications attributed to advanced forms of technology do not appear to render our definition ineffective or inoperable. Artificial intelligence can assume the role of an expert witness without causing a theoretical break in the employed chain of reasoning. Nevertheless, difficulty may arise for those who want to do more than position on panic's existence, those who seek to use the concept as a step to explore why a specific behaviour occurred. For these individuals, and persons who problematically write of moral panic theory, algocracy (i.e., "a situation in which algorithm-based systems structure and constrain the opportunities for human participation in, and comprehension of, public decision-making" [Danaher, 2016, p. 246]) and its impact on collective configurations of identity seems likely to limit interest in the concept's use. Without the ability to move sufficiently beyond moral panic's definitional contours, we may be moving closer to the last study of its potential existence and increased interest in collective forms of

moral resistance (i.e., of persons not taking corrective-intended action when 'speaking' numbers, expert witnesses, or the group's stated analytical framework suggest they should). Future research will need to explore how use of the moral panic concept evolves in the age of big data and expand on the little that is known of how "technology-driven biases translate into decisions and behaviours" (Kordzadeh & Ghasemaghaei, 2022, p. 388; see also Kidd & Birhane, 2023).

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Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc, 2025, *10*(2), pp. 9-22
ISSN: 2531-3975