5 Moral panics and health-related misinformation

When the audience becomes co-producer

Anita Lavorgna and Ester Massa

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, being a time of pervasive crisis and insecurity, has raised important societal reactions, which could be interpreted through the moral panic lens. Indeed, this approach has the merit of allowing us to see collective responses and people's perceptions, which – beyond 'science' – are pivotal in public health decisions, whose socio-political and emotional dimensions can lead to major medical consequences (Gilman 2010). The moral panic approach has been already applied to show, for instance, how the media coverage of the pandemic had a role in promoting stigma and blaming, at the point of hindering effective interventions (Silva 2020), or to analyse the use of political and cultural prisms by journalists in media framing, leading to the harmful 'othering' of certain social groups (DeVore et al. 2021), similarly to what was observed in previous health crises (e.g., Muzzatti 2005) and to what was found in ideology-driven political communication (Prasad 2020; Lucchesi 2021). Some 'others', in other words, were made into recognisable symbols and defined as threats to social norms, raising public concerns and garnering hostile and volatile public support against such threats (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Cohen 2011). After all, to borrow Gilman (2010)'s words, 'it is easier to generate panic than to disseminate real information' (p. 1866).

In the context of the pandemic there have been contested narratives, often depending on different political views or social sensitivities, and opposing for instance those not complying with preventive measures or opposing public health interventions (generally depicted as the 'folk devils' in traditional media) to those promoting them (Lavorgna 2021; Capurro et al. 2022; Skog and Lundström 2022). Especially is cyberspace, however, previous research has noted how a number of social media groups and networks have been actively creating, propagating, and supporting health-related misinformation (here broadly defined as information created or distributed as true, but that is in fact in disregard of scientific standards of modern medicine, or of scientific consensus) by relying on oppositive narrative frames accusing a range of different, reverse 'folk devils' (in this case, e.g., researchers, doctors, politicians) of criminal and deviant acts (Lavorgna 2021; Lavorgna and Myles 2021). This turnabout has important implications for the hold of the concept of moral panic, as it questions the societal consensus that is

DOI: 10.4324/9781003453222-6
This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license.

(yet implicitly) at its basis, and evidences the emergence of new moral entrepreneurs, whose voice is enabled and amplified online.

This contribution furthers this line of inquiry, discussing how the notion of moral panic is challenged in the digital context, where the relationships between the moral entrepreneurs and the folk devils can become much more complex and fluid as digital affordances create shifts in the distribution of mediatic power. By relying on a digital passive ethnography carried out on Italian-speaking digital fields, we discuss how the notion of moral panic can still be useful as a critical tool and organising framework, confirming its continuing practical and heuristic value once we widen and tighten the focus of analysis, redefining moral panics' traditional parameters in light of the increasingly complex and contradictory nature of powers in society.

Moral panics and shifting dynamics in the digital field

As explained eloquently by Young (2009), moral panic is a product of its time, the late 1960s, and of the huge social and cultural changes that characterised those years, both in the community and in the evolution of the sociology of deviance. Socially, the various events characterising the late 1960s and the start of the 1970s – e.g., the birth of the hippy culture and the development of countercultures, the free speech and equality movement, the anti-war movement and the second wave of feminism, together with the rising of a properly developed concept of youth and youth culture – originated a proper rise of indignation and outrage from that part of society that was strongly opposed to changing the status quo, led and inspired by those influential figures (the 'moral entrepreneurs', see Becker 1963). This indignation, as famously described by Cohen (1973), could be easily picked up, transformed, and amplified by the work of media outlets.

These elements concur to define the classic definition of moral panic, based on the assumption of a common moral background characterising the whole of society, an element that almost immediately has been pointed out as a limitation of this approach. Many scholars, in fact, were highlighting how the modern world is more and more diversified, allowing for a pluralist society where different groups follow their own values and moral codes, making the traditional definition of moral panic not up to date (e.g., Drotner 1992; Ungar 2001; Jewkes 2015; Horsley 2017). This diversification is reflected also in the increasing diversification of media outlets in many western societies (e.g., Nerone and Barnhurst 2001; Rössler 2007). The once (relatively) unique and united voice of the powerful elites became more and more fragmented due to the multiplications of channels targeted and dedicated to specific sectors of the population (McRobbie and Thornton 1995).

While the effects on moral panics of the diversification of conventional media space were at the core of earlier sociological analyses, only in recent years academic scholarship started to pay more attention to how sociotechnical transformation, and, first and foremost, the use of social media platforms, has had a transformative impact on moral panics (Hier 2019; Falkof 2020; Walsh 2020). This is relatively surprising, as media – all types of media – are at the very basis of moral

panics (e.g., Critcher 2003). The advent and popularisation of social media has revolutionised the media landscape in many aspects, ranging from how information is sought after (Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage 2018; Pearson 2021) to the transformation of (some of) the audience into a co-producer, 'prosumer' (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) or 'produser' (Bruns 2008) of content, decoding and encoding information.

In this digital arena, through new and enhanced sociotechnical possibilities, different voices are now heard (Critcher 2017; Walsh 2020; Ugwudike and Fleming 2021), operating in a space where they can (try to) create a different type of power, dislocated from its traditional sites, and linked to a new type of mediatic and digital capital, enabling them to become moral entrepreneurs. As already discussed in Lavorgna and colleagues (2022), these digitally enabled developments transcend Foucauldian accounts of the power dynamics of knowledge production, such as the ability of the powerful to produce or shape the prevailing 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980). Online, the power to do so no longer resides solely in traditionally powerful elites and institutions. As such, it is important to recognise how the relationship between social media platforms and moral panic is multi-layered and complex, as these platforms can respectively be targets, facilitators, and even instruments of moral panics (Walsh 2020), for instance promoting communications and at times deliberately sensationalised contents in light of their predicted popularity, or otherwise informing manufactured uncertainty (e.g., Yardi and boyd 2010; Prasad 2020; Walsh 2020). These sociotechnical possibilities derive from the 'architecture of amplification' of social media's networked and digital configuration as discussed by Walsh (2020), but – as we will see – are also linked to the actions and reactions of ordinary citizens utilising social media sites to influence the representation of important social issues, often developing counter-narratives and oppositional discourses (e.g., Dahlberg 2011; Gallagher et al. 2018; Lavorgna 2021). A major consequence of these dynamics is that moral panics are now more blurred and can be part of competing narratives (le Grand 2016; Walsh 2020).

Our study

In digital spaces, competing narratives are very common in a broad range of polarised debates, many of which are somehow linked to the general themes of health and wellbeing (e.g., Johnson et al. 2020; Lavorgna and Carr 2021; Righetti 2021). As such, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not surprising to observe, in the digital field as in the physical one, heated debates on issues including health risks related to the virus, the use of masks, or vaccinations.

As part of a wider research agenda on the social harms linked to medical misinformation, data informing some preliminary reflections developed in this contribution were initially gathered in digital Italian-speaking fields trough an interpretative, qualitative approach based on a digital ethnography (Androutsopoulos 2008; Blevins and Holt 2009) throughout 2020, in the unfolding of the 'first' and 'second' waves of COVID-19 in Italy (and in many other countries), the lockdowns, and the attempts to return to 'normal' pushed mainly by economic

considerations, while witnessing the resurgence of several new hotspots, and new closures (for a detailed discussion, see Lavorgna 2021: 17ff). Also in Italy, the first European country hit by the virus and where several restrictive measures were put in place starting from March 2020, there have been harsh debates in the offline political, mediatic, and even scientific arenas (Pattuglia 2020; Merzagora 2021), which reverberated online, making digital networks a very fertile source of social data. This 2020 ethnography was then complemented, by both the authors of the study here presented, with new digital ethnographic data collected in the first half of 2022, a time where new waves, led by emerging COVID-19 variants, drove large spikes across the world, but many restrictions were eased in Italy as a consequence of the overall relatively improved public health situation.

In brief, we started by observing 10 (in total) predetermined open pages and groups on Facebook (ranging from about 2,000 to almost 200,000 members or followers, with a good level of group interaction), pivoting around alternative health, alternative lifestyle, or more broadly counterinformation. In all these digital fields, people could easily post and comment news and opinions, thus becoming co-producers of relevant content (Fuchs et al. 2010).

Although the above-mentioned fields were our starting point, we also analysed the content of textual material (e.g., blogs, newspaper articles) and visual material (e.g., pictures, videos) referred to in our initial pages up to one additional click (which often led us, for instance, to other open Facebook pages, YouTube pages, or other websites). Consistently with the previous ethnographic work (Lavorgna 2021; Lavorgna and Myles 2021), our practical strategy was guided by the need to safeguard the privacy and anonymity of the participants in the online communities observed in our study, while ensuring respect for existing guidelines for online research on social media and the policies of the platform accessed (e.g., Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda 2017; Social Data Science Lab 2019). For instance, as regards concerns related to users' anonymity, the reader will not find personal identifiers, or the full name of the groups and pages observed. When using quotes, we slightly changed them in the translation to make them not directly identifiable (in line with Williams et al. 2017). Also, to minimise the ethical risks (e.g., storage of identifying or sensitive information that is not needed for the scope of this research), we collected our data (here defined as all material publicly available, such as words, images/memes, and videos) manually and/or through research notes. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Southampton (ERGO2 55870 and 55870.A1).

While the focus of the earlier studies was respectively to observe the unfolding of online narratives and behavioural intentions of criminological and psychological interest as linked to potentially harmful science denial (Lavorgna and Myles 2021), and to investigate social learning and sociocultural processes enabling and sustaining the propagation of potentially harmful (mis)information (Lavorgna 2021), in this new contribution the aim is to evidence how traditionally less-powerful actors can become moral entrepreneurs in the digital field, creating '*moral panics in reverse*' (i.e., disproportionally underreacting to objective threats, see Hier 2021) or even '*inverse moral panics*' through the identification of different folk devils. Of

course, actions stemming from power shifts can be, or be interpreted, as acts of empowerment and resistance, and lead to positive outcomes. By using the example of health-related misinformation, however, we are focusing on a case in which, on the contrary, a new class of digital moral entrepreneurs is creating, yet involuntarily, serious social harms by providing misinformation that may cause financial, physical, and psychological/emotional harms to the primary victims, as well as public health problems, and loss of confidence in the professional scientific and medical norms (Lavorgna 2021). These new digital moral entrepreneurs, as we will see, are the initiators and active participants of (self-identifying) alternative lifestyle and counterinformation online communities that, in the context of the pandemic, have proactively used social media to promote non-science-based health-related misinformation and conspiratorial ideas.

Moral panic in reverse: COVID-19 denialism and minimisation

If we look at the groups observed from a moral panic perspective, in line with Hier's (2021) notion of moral panics in reverse, we could observe a number of posts and discussions disproportionally underreacting to what were indeed objective (health) threats, leading to practical implications ranging from severe vaccine hesitancy to ignoring public health indications (regarding, for instance, encouragement to attend large gatherings without masks during some risky stages of the pandemic).

In this context, the themes observed all refer to different forms of COVID-19 denialism or gross minimisation. Some were linked to fully fledged conspiracy theories (e.g., the pandemic would be linked to a '*big reset project*' meant to change our social habits; a '*criminal project by the New World Order*'; '*a fake pandemic, with a fake war [Ukraine], led by our complicit governments*'). Some too dangerous 'alternative medicine' schools of thought (e.g., the posts and comments denying any existence of COVID-19, but also of other diseases discussed in the groups, such as monkeypox or even cancer, which would only be a manifestation of '*a special physiology*'; viruses would be nothing else than *a superstition*', and virology '*a fraud*'; '*Hamerians are right!*').

Other less extreme views were rather linked to a general disbelief towards institutionalised forms of knowledge and governance (hence, the formal statistics are '*false*'; '*it is all a lie*', '*it's just a flu*'), or to the belief that public health rules to contrast the effects and the diffusion of the virus were ineffective and pointless. From this perspective, there was a common belief that if the general medical practitioners (in Italy named 'family doctors') were left free to do their job as usual, they would have faced the pandemic easily and with better results (*If they had left the family doctors treating the sick with the existing low-cost medicines, we wouldn't have had all those deaths, but they wanted to sell the vaccines*). There were also reported fears related to the potential suspension of the right to self-determination, with the rules applied to prevent the contagion (e.g., vaccinations, the use of masks, curfews, COVID-19 certificates) becoming a way to impose public health over the individual right to decide over one's own body, and to move freely. The supporters

of this thesis are also particularly scared of the side-effects of the vaccines, which they cannot escape because the government indirectly imposed their inoculation (*It is true that all drugs have side-effects, but no one takes away my job, my dignity and my freedom in order to make me swallow an Aspirin*).

In this context, moral entrepreneurs are those who have been categorised as providers (those actively involved in offering misinformation, e.g., non-science-based health approaches) or supporters/propagators (those who proactively support one or more providers, becoming an important source of misinformation) in the typology offered in Lavorgna (2021). More specifically, if we look at their social status, moral entrepreneurs mostly are professionals ('independent' doctors or researchers, lawyers, or judges), ordinary citizens whose role/expertise is not linked to a professional identity, or promoters with a political ambition or willing to be part of the political debate.

Information is constantly reinforced within the group through social learning mechanisms (Akers 2009; Lavorgna 2021) among the moral entrepreneurs themselves and towards the receivers/utilisers present in the social media community (i.e., those who belong to a certain online group but mainly as bystanders or participate in a very limited role – see Lavorgna 2021). However, rather than the 'filter bubbles' (e.g., Pariser 2011) and 'information silos' (e.g., Jowore and Turpin 2022) referred to also by Walsh (2020), it is worth noting that the groups observed were relatively porous and permeable, with users bringing (mis)information in (especially information on different topics but with narratives compatible with those prevalent in the group) and out (hence further spreading misinformation) (in line with Jones-Jang and Chung 2022).

Through denialism and minimisation, the moral entrepreneurs offer a safe venue ('*an ark to escape disinformation flooding*' – the reader can note how the signifier is used with a reverse signified if compared with science-based approaches). While other means of information are accused of pursuing a '*strategy of terror*', creating COVID-19 waves by instigating panic and fear, the new moral entrepreneurs claim to divulge '*healthy information*', even when they negate the role that the diffusion of COVID-19 vaccines had on managing and deflating the danger of the pandemic, instead reversing the logic by affirming that non vaccinated people are the healthy ones that are passing through the pandemic without infecting others (while vaccinated people are those getting ill and spreading the virus around). Consider, for instance, the following snippet:

> *My friends, you need to wake up […] The ones not vaccinated are feeling very well and they got though the virus easily, while the vaccinated ones are continuously getting ill, and they feel awful!!! Side effects…in thousands […]!!! Wake up!!!*

In their narratives, symbolism is pivotal and has a core role in supporting the formation of both individual and in-group identities (see also Lavorgna 2021). For instance, we found references to the symbology of the 'white rabbit' – a symbol of the quest for knowledge, the spark of curiosity that activates spiritual awakening.

Also, moral entrepreneurs consider themselves '*rebels*', '*heretics*' (for the parallelism they draw with heresy in history and their perception of being the 'new Galileos', see Lavorgna 2021), or '*gladiators*' fighting a just war (for instance, parallels with Spartacus, the former gladiator leading a major slave uprising against the Roman Republic, were drawn).

The relationship with Science, as suggested also from the Galileo's symbolism, is twofold. If from the one side science-based information is rejected, on the other side the 'good science' is sought after. For instance, in the search for credibility, some moral entrepreneurs emphasise the prizes and honours they received from institutions whose names sound academic or 'sciency', even if, from a quick search, it is clear they have no formal accreditation or are predatory institutions, with no scientific or academic credibility ('*Physicians of life*'; '*Global Organisation for Life*'). Also, they refer to a limited number of doctors or 'independent researchers' they trust and admire, and with whom some even collaborate. Some moral entrepreneurs define the approaches they follow as '*evidence-based medicine*', again using a signifier with a reverse signified. The evidence they propose is, in fact, not science-based, but rooted in few personal anecdotes, rigidly interpreted with an anti-vaxxer logic, and perceived as genuine against the corrupted and fake information and statistics provided by the official institutions (e.g., *The honest physicians have said that most of the patients in Intensive Care were those with three vaccinations*'; '*Information received from medical staff and vaccinated patients. Directly, without any filter, pure and normal truth!*). In their reverse, alternative view of science-based evidence, the production of dedicated books, blogs, and videos is noteworthy. There is also a whole parallel circuit of conferences, seminars, and other events, organised and participated by like-minded people.

To give weight to their claims, moral entrepreneurs also rely on mis-quotes of famous people from the arts, the cinema, the literature, or sports. An indicative example is provided by the online discussions about the world known tennis player Novak Djokovic, whose stellar career has been suspended in the second half of 2022 because of his impossibility to enter some international competitions due to not having provided evidence, at the time of writing, of having been vaccinated against COVID-19. Djokovic, for many years the number one tennis player at world level, has released statements and interviews declaring his willingness to sacrifice some of the most coveted titles to keep consistent with his life philosophy of not permitting his body to be contaminated by any kind of 'poisons' – a directive he follows strictly also for what regards his diet and general lifestyle. The champion's fans had split over this position, but in turn he gained a consistent group of new followers among those resisting the vaccine inoculation. They are now considering him as a sort of famous representative of their movement, whose exemplary conduct should be followed by everyone opposing the '*sanitary dictatorship'* (e.g., *It is precisely because he's not bending that he's a champion even in his life. We are more numerous that what you think'; 'I didn't like him […], but now I admire him and I will always follow him'; 'You did right, don't give up. Soon divine justice will come and who needs to pay… will pay. Justice and truth are a bit slow… but they will arrive sooner or later. Good will triumph over evil*).

Inverse moral panics: the rise of the alternative folk devils

Beside creating moral panic in reverse, the moral entrepreneurs in the digital field can also create and propagate inverse moral panics through the identification of different folk devils, hence further redefining the classic concept of moral panic. This can occur in different ways.

First, conspiratorial thinking can be used to suggest the existence of malicious schemes behind the pandemic run by sinister and powerful groups (e.g., the '*Zionist-Freemasonry*') and operating in the shadows to experiment dangerous substances on unaware guinea pigs ('*The [by Italian Government] response to the pandemic makes them [the ruling politicians] responsible for a massacre, they forced on us experimental, ineffective, and even lethal pharmaceuticals [i.e., vaccines]*', or even to further extreme dimensions of societal control on both people's body and mind (e.g., '*Vaccines modify human DNA*'), comparing these impositions to crimes against the humanity ('*This is a form of Nazi eugenics, […] a new Nuremberg Trial is needed'*). Even the idea of a hideous plan of extermination aimed at diminishing the number of humans living on the planet was present, as evidenced in the following quote:

> The Wuhan lab in China has created the Sars-cov2 virus […]. They used to do experiments with biological weapons funded by the US government with Antony Fauci as its chief. Obviously, the reason was to kill the elderly population with the wrong therapies suggested by the OMS, funded by Bill Gates. there is a whole conspiracy with the agenda of depopulate the world by 50% within 2030.

Second, also in the case of inverse moral panics, we can find less extreme views, which are generally linked to a wide-ranging culture of suspicion permeating a certain worldview with regards to sensitive social themes. We can find discussions of distinct themes that somehow converge into narratives allowing a certain socio-political identification (e.g., they oppose the '*ultra-liberal*' and '*globalist*' stances, many are anti-immigration, pro-Republicans with reference to the United States when discussing international politics, pro-Putinism when discussing the 2022 Ukrainian conflict). Among the many examples, of particular interest was a website whose information was continuously reported on one of the communities observed; the website, who looked like a traditional news outlet, had webpages organised around hot topics (ranging from euthanasia and in-vitro fertilisation to international and national politics), linked in the editorial design by a religious (conservative Catholic) afflatus. In discussing national politics, populist parties are explicitly preferred, and even considered as political allies (in line with recent political research, see e.g. Eberl et al. 2021). In turn, these parties capitalise on this situation adapting their communicative strategies accordingly (Giardiello 2021; Marzi and Sessa 2021). Here, we could find explicit support towards three of the main right-wing parties – League for Salvini Premier, Brothers of Italy, and Forza Nuova (New Force) – and towards a series of 14 minor political groups (from both

the far-left and the far-right) that were trying to participate to the latest Italian 2022 political election and were identified as '*against the system*'.

In inverse moral panics, individual and in-group identities are mostly constructed and fostered using oppositional (us vs them) narratives (Lavorgna 2021). Those aligned with in-group views and with a public role are considered allies. Some notable examples are a well-known judge who published a book imbued with COVID-19 denialism, or a former (because disbarred) doctor with pseudo-scientific views that notoriously extended beyond the pandemic, and that included attacks towards the Islamic and the LGBTQA communities. On the contrary, anything considered outgroup is harshly judged. In this context, folk devils are those considered to be part of the traditional elites, the mainstream media, and institutionalised Science, who are considered to '*abusively occupy the palaces of power*'. They are framed as incompetents, and enabling, with their work, a '*model of total preventive medicalizatio*n' derived from '*political and financial hallucination*'.

In particular, institutionalised scientists and doctors (especially those who gained media visibility during the pandemic, and those with expertise in virology), seen as '*protectors of financial interests*, are generally considered '*unworthy technicians*' rather than proper scientists or experts ('*This is not Science!*'), and described with derogative terms (e.g., '*inoculated jerks*'; '*presumptuous*'; '*know-it-all*'; '*overestimated idiots*', '*corrupt parasites*', and '*sold-outs*' with '*expertise is in fake news*'). Similarly, journalists from the mainstream ('*aligned*') media outlets are seen as '*suffering from infodemia*'; they are considered '*serial liars*' that are '*fomenting hate and discrimination*'.

The reasonable citizen is urged to avoid the passive following of the advice of the so-called experts ('*more stupid than normal people*'), in favour of a self-made scientific knowledge cultivated online and, at times, through a series of alternative publications and conferences proposing new interpretations for the natural world that are obviously not accepted by the scientific communities of reference. The following snippets are particularly indicative in this respect:

> The assertion 'the opinion of the expert needs to be taken as a fact: the expert knows what he says, and you don't' is false and misleading. It is instead important, especially regarding health, that, once the expert has been consulted, everyone collects sufficient information to form an opinion.

> Now more than ever it is important not to believe experts. Everyone should have their opinion, formed by gathering information in a way that is honest towards yourself. Nowadays, 'believing in science' is a dangerous belief.

Conclusions

Digital spaces and particularly social media platforms – as non-traditional media with the potential to subvert some of the features characterising moral panics – offer a new challenge to the concept of moral panic as traditionally intended. On the one hand, they might reinforce the longstanding criticism that this concept would

be an academic cliché based on the idea of a consensus society (Thompston and Williams 2013), too limited to capture the threats and conditions associated with the complexity of our societies (Waddington 1986; McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Horsley 2017), and hence of scarce practical use in our modern and pluralistic societies. On the other hand, however, even the notion itself of consensus might have to be reconceptualised: online, because of algorithmic and psychological dynamics, the pluralistic view of our societies we should be exposed to becomes limited, as the information and the networks we can access (or we decide to access) are inherently selected according to pre-existing connections, attitudes, and preferences. Consequently, even if we move beyond the filter bubble metaphor as discussed above, most social media users remain bounded to relatively homogeneous and like-minded communities – entangled in an artificial perception of consensus.

In our opinion, as already stressed by Walsh (2020), in this complex scenario the conceptual adeptness and flexibility of the moral panic concept should be seen as an asset rather than as a liability (in line with, e.g. Critcher 2008; Jewkes 2015; Lavorgna 2019; Falkof 2020). As such, the moral panic framework, once we recognise the major shifts in power and capital dynamics occurring in new media spaces, is still useful to help us understand 'how fear and transgression are mobilized for various purposes' (Walsh 2020: 582).

For instance, both in the case of moral panic in reverse and of inverse moral panic, adapting the traditional version of the moral panic approach to meet the features and challenges of the digital field proved useful to shed light on socially relevant dynamics.

We could observe the identification of moral entrepreneurs with sectors of the general public that have increased their mediatic and digital power through the presence of new and emerging sociotechnical affordances (boyd 2010) able to redesign the relationships between actors, hence enabling the spread of harmful courses of action. In most cases, these new moral entrepreneurs are not representative of the traditionally powerful political, economic and intellectual elites, as imagined by the original approach, but, on the contrary, they belong to a public opinion demonstrating limited understanding of the scientific world. Many social media users – contrary to most recipients of traditional media – have an increased ability to choose which contents to share (or not) with their personal networks, hence co-defining what is a newsworthy story, and might even become co-producers of information (e.g., Bruns 2008; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Thalmann 2019), creating a 'viral reality' (Postill 2014) in a way that provokes both their engagement and agency (Stano 2020). When users have the capacity and willingness to create and propagate content, traditional power relationships can change, and members of the general populations that have been traditionally considered the 'victims' of moral panics are now themselves in the position to construct claims that frame deviance in a distorted manner, shaping events and attitudes, and hence becoming moral entrepreneurs.

Interestingly, these new moral entrepreneurs become opinion-setters for parts of the traditional elites, which tend to follow, and to take advantage of, the new moral panics to define their agendas (and, in the case of political elites, to further their

consensus). This partial reversal of the definition of who is the moral entrepreneur in the context of polarised social debates, especially online, is evidenced also by the fact that some members of the traditional elites seeking the popular consensus (especially right-wing populist politicians) gave a nod to forms of misinformation throughout the pandemic, and relied on anti-elite rhetorics (Bertero and Seddone 2021; Marzi and Sessa 2021).

Also, new folk devils were identified in categories of people that are not 'deviants', outsiders, people at the margin threatening to overturn the moral and cultural *status quo*, but they are rather, on the very opposite, members of that intellectual or economic elite accused of imposing the 'old rules' to a group of '*awaken*' citizens.

To sum up, we agree with the view that moral panic should be seen as a start, not an end point (Critcher 2008; Falkof 2020): regardless of whether we prove that an event is a moral panic or not, the concept itself of moral panic retains its heuristic and analytical power to help us increase our understanding of certain social events, once we consider – to borrow Falkof's words (2020: 234–235) – whether the event of interest 'includes the element of morality (the thing that is feared poses a threat to an established order or a group identity that is seen as 'good') and panic (the thing that is feared is amplified via an affect-driven collective responses that increases in intensity as it spreads)'. In our contribution, we evidenced how this is true both in cases of moral panic in reverse (e.g., the downplayed risks to public health) and in cases of inverse moral panic (with the identification of new folk devils and the rely on conspiratorial thinking).

References

Akers, R. (2009). *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance*. New Brunswick: Transaction.

Androutsopoulos, J. (2008). Potential and limitations of discourse-centred online ethnography. *Language@Internet* 5. https://www.languageatinternet.org/articles/2008/1610.

Becker, HS. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press.

Bergström, A and M Jervelycke Belfrage. (2018). News in social media: Incidental consumption and the role of opinion leaders. *Digital Journalism*, 6(5): 583–598.

Bertero, A and A Seddone. (2021). Italy: Populist in the Mirror, (De)politicizing the Covid-19 from Government and Opposition. In: G Bobba and N Hubé, eds. *Populism and the Politicization of the Covid-19 Crisis in Europe* (2nd ed.). Cham: Palgrave.

Blevins, KR and TJ Holt. (2009). Examining the virtual subculture of johns. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38(5): 619–648.

boyd, D. (2010). Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications. In Papacharissi Z, ed. *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 39–58.

Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, WikiPedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. New York: Peter Lang.

Capurro, G, CG Jardine, J Tustin and M Driedger. (2022). Moral panic about 'covidiots' in Canadian newspaper coverage of covid-19. *PLoS ONE*, 17(1): e0261942.

Cohen, S. (1973). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. St. Albans: Paladin.

Cohen, S. (2011). Whose side were we on? The undeclared politics of moral panic theory. *Crime, media, Culture*, 7(3): 237–243.

Critcher, C. (2003). *Moral Panics and the Media*. London: Open University Press.
Critcher, C. (2008). Moral panic analysis: Past, present and future. *Sociology Compass*, 2(4): 1127–1144.
Critcher, C. (2017). Moral Panics. *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Dahlberg, L. (2011). Re-constructing digital democracy: An outline of four 'positions'. *New Media and Society*, 13(6): 855–872.
DeVore, D, S Choi, Y Li and H Lu. (2021). Media framing, moral panic and covid-19: A comparative analysis of China, South Korea, and the U.S. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 10(1): 19–38.
Drotner, K. (1992). Modernity and Media Panics. In Skovmand M and Schrøder KC (ed.) *Media Cultures*, London: Routledge, pp. 42–62.
Eberl, JM, RA Huber and E Greussing. (2021). From populism to the 'plandemic': Why populists believe in covid-19 conspiracies. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(1): 272–284.
Falkof, N. (2020). On moral panic: Some directions for further development. *Critical Sociology*, 46(2): 225–239.
Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Gordon C, eds. New York: Pantheon Books.
Fuchs, C, W Hofkirchner, M Schafranek, C Raffl, M Sandoval and R Bichler. (2010). Theoretical foundations of the web: Cognition, communication, and co-operation. *Future Internet*, 2: 41–59.
Gallagher, RJ, AJ Reagan, CM Danforth and PS Dodds. (2018). Divergent discourse between protests and counter-protests: #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. *PLoS ONE* 13(4).
Giardiello, M. (2021). Populismi digitali al tempo del covid-19. *Rivista Di Digital Politics*, 2: 341–362.
Gilman, SL. (2010). Moral panic and pandemics. *The Lancet*, 357(9729): P1866–1867.
Goode, E and N Ben-Yehuda. (1994). Moral panics: Culture, politics, and social construction. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 20(1): 149–171.
Hier, S. (2021). A moral panic in reverse? Implicatory denial and covid-19 pre-crisis risk communication in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 46(3): 505–521.
Hier, S. (2019). Moral panics and digital-media logic: Notes on a changing research agenda. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 15(2): 379–388.
Horsley, M. (2017). Forget moral panics. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology*, 9(2): 84–98.
Jewkes, Y. (2015). *Media and Crime*. London: Sage.
Johnson, NF, N Velásquez and NJ Restrepo. (2020). The online competition between pro- and anti-vaccination views. *Nature*, 582: 230–233.
Jones-Jang, SM and M Chung. (2022). Can we blame social media for polarization? Counter-evidence against filter bubble claims during the covid-19 pandemic. *New Media & Society*, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099591
Jowore, R and M Turpin. (2022). How to Identify Fake News on Social Media: A Systematic Literature Review. In Rocha A et al., eds. *World Conference on Information Systems and Technologies*. Springer, Cham, pp.102–111.
Lavorgna, A. (2019). Cyber-organised crime. A case of moral panic? *Trends in Organized Crime*, 22(4): 357–374.
Lavorgna, A. (2021). *Information Pollution as Social Harm: Investigating the Digital Drift of Medical Misinformation in a Time of Crisis*. London: Emerald Group Publishing.

Lavorgna, A and L Carr. (2021). Tweets and quacks: Network and content analyses of providers of non-science-based anti-cancer treatments and their supporters on Twitter. *Sage Open*.

Lavorgna, A and H Myles. (2021). Science denial and medical misinformation in pandemic times: A psycho-criminological analysis. *European Journal of Criminology*, 19(6). https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370820988

Lavorgna, A, P Ugwudike and Y Sanchez Benitez. (2022). Harms of digital capital: Social harm analysis of online public resistance and information pollution. *Justice, Power and Resistance*, 5(3): 249–269.

le Grand, E. (2016). Moralising Discourse and the Dialectical Formation of Class Identities. In: Cree V and Clapton G, eds. *Revisiting Moral Panics*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 159–168.

Lucchesi, D. (2021). La comunicazione di matteo salvini durante la pandemia: l'immigrazione e la delegittimazione dell'avversario politico. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 21(2): 309–328.

Marzi, P and M G Sessa. (2021). If you cannot rule them, misinform them! Communication strategies of Italian radical right-wing populist parties during the pandemic. *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*, 7(2): 167–196.

McRobbie, A and S Thornton. (1995). Rethinking 'moral panic' for multi-mediated social worlds. *British Journal of Sociology*, 46(4): 559–574.

Merzagora, I. (2021). Arrivano i Re Magi. Alcuni problemi (anche) criminologici ai tempi della pandemia. *Sistema Penale*, March.

Muzzatti, SL. (2005). Bits of falling sky and global pandemics: Moral panic and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 13(2): 117–128.

Nerone, J., & Barnhurst, K. G. (2001). Beyond modernism: Digital design, Americanization and the future of newspaper form. *New Media & Society*, 3(4), 467–482.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The Filter Bubble*. London: Penguin.

Pattuglia, S. (2020). Pandemia e comunicazione: l'analisi del caso dell'emergenza covid-19. *Mecosan*, 113: 89–98.

Pearson, G. (2021). Sources on social media: Information context collapse and volume of content as predictors of source blindness. *New Media & Society*, 23(5): 1181–1199.

Postill, J. (2014). A critical history of internet activism and social protest in Malaysia, 1998-2011. *Asiascape*, 1-2: 78–103.

Prasad, A. (2020). The organization of ideological discourse in times of unexpected crisis: Explaining how covid-19 is exploited by populist leaders. *Leadership*, 16(3): 294–302.

Righetti, N. (2021). The impact of the politicization of health on online misinformation and quality information on vaccines. *Italian Sociological Review*, 11(2): 443–466.

Ritzer, G and N Jurgenson. (2010). Production, consumption, presumption: The nature of capitalism in the age of the digital 'prosumer'. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 10(1): 13–36.

Rössler, P. (2007). Media content diversity: Conceptual issues and future directions for communication research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 31(1), 464–520.

Silva, KT. (2020). Stigma and moral panic about covid-19 in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 3(2).

Skog, F and R Lundström. (2022). Heroes, victims, and villains in news media narratives about covid-19. Analysing moralising discourse in Swedish newspaper reporting during the spring of 2020. *Social Science & Medicine*, 294: 114718.

Social Data Science Lab. (2019). *Lab online guide to social media research ethics*. http://socialdatalab.net/ethics-resources.

Stano, S. (2020). The Internet and the Spread of Conspiracy Content. In: M Butter and P Knight, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Thalmann, K. (2019). *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory Since the 1950s*. London: Routledge.

Thompston, B and A Williams. (2013). *The Myth of Moral Panics: Sex, Snuff and Satan*. London: Routledge.

Ugwudike, P and J Fleming. (2021). Artificial intelligence, digital capital, and epistemic domination on twitter: A study of families affected by imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745211014391

Ungar, S. (2001). Moral panic vs. The risk society: The implications of The changing sites of social anxiety. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 52(2): 271–291.

Waddington, PAJ. (1986). Mugging as A moral panic: A question of proportion. *British Journal of Sociology*, 37(2): 245–259.

Walsh, JP. (2020). Social media and moral panics: Assessing the effects of technological change on societal reaction. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(6): 840–859.

Williams, ML, P Burnap and L Sloan. (2017). Towards an ethical framework for publishing twitter data in social research: Taking into account users' views, online context and algorithmic estimation. *Sociology*, 51(6): 1149–1168.

Yardi, S and d boyd. (2010). Dynamic debates: An analysis of group polarization over time on twitter. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(5): 316–327.

Young, J. (2009). Moral panic. Its origins in resistance, ressentiment and the translation of fantasy into reality. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 49(1): 4–16.

Zimmer, M and K Kinder-Kurlanda, eds. (2017). *Research Ethics for the Social Age. New Challenges, Cases, and Contexts*. New York: Peter Lang.