

Chapter 40

Between Moral and Climate Crisis: Interpreting Climate Change Through the Lens of Moral Panic

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ABSTRACT

This chapter identifies four main themes in the literature on media communication of climate change, which represent an interesting object of analysis for scholars who focus on moral panics' application. The combination of both the processual model and the attributional model to interpret the results of this literature review shows that during its emergence, climate change was polarised between “advocates” and “deniers” of both its existence and anthropogenic causes. This division has progressively shifted towards the consequences of climate change and need for action against it. Two distinct moral panics are identified. One is rooted in sceptical arguments and seems to work “in reverse” by emphasising the “uncertainty” around the phenomenon and its impacts. A second one is triggered by climate change supporters, who emphasise that climate change threatens life on the planet and that the current social practices need regulation and control.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores if and how the moral panic framework can be applied to the analysis of some contemporary social issues, such as the construction of the meaning of climate change. The originality of this work relies on applying the moral panic framework to the interpretation of a polarisation in the climate change debate. The literature shows that both political advances and the public understanding of climate change are “paralysed” due to the “confusion” promoted by media narratives. This mainly

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depends on the representation of opposite interpretations of the phenomenon. On the one hand, sceptical narratives support a “status quo”, meaning “no-intervention” in terms of implementing restrictive measures that might cause damage to both global and local economies. On the other hand, advocate narratives represent climate change as real and “catastrophic” in its consequences if current social practices are not “corrected”.

This work contributes towards providing an analytical tool that can help identify the elements that encourage climate change scepticism by trying to direct policy-making and public opinion on climate change towards a “no-intervention” approach. This review expands the debate around the adoption of the moral panic framework to investigate climate change discourse. In fact, only a limited and controversial discussion exists on both the theoretical and empirical application of moral panics to the phenomenon. This chapter will show that the apparent conflict between those scholars who claim that climate scientists are the folk devils, and those who identify the villains as the deniers, can be solved if two different moral panics are explored separately.

The chapter is structured as follows: the first section critically revises the existing debate around the use of moral panics to explore climate change; the second describes the method adopted to revise the literature on media communication of climate change. The third section and the related sub-sections explore the main contents/themes identified in the literature. The fourth explores the points of overlap of these themes with moral panics. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn on the application of the moral panic theoretical framework to climate change narratives.

MORAL PANICS TO INTERPRET CLIMATE CHANGE

The current debate around the application of moral panics to climate change narratives is limited and controversial. Two main criticisms result from this discussion related to the theoretical applicability of moral panics to climate change and contrasting empirical findings.

At a theoretical level, some studies describe climate change as a new “uncertain” risk (Lorenzoni and Pidgeon, 2006; O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009; Retchless, 2014; Weingart, Engels and Pansegrau, 2000) suggesting that, given its incalculability and invisibility, climate change cannot generate a moral panic due to the lack of both tangible effects and “folk devils” (Ungar, 1995, 2001). By contrast, Critcher (2003) argues that “folk devils”, “volatility” and the “public support” are no longer essential to generate moral panics. Ungar (1992, 1995) suggests the adoption of “social scare” rather than “moral panic” to interpret this “unpredictable” threat. According to this approach the impossibility of connecting real events to climate change (abstract and distant in time), makes it difficult to generate panic (see also Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Marsh and Melville, 2011). However, these considerations could be valid during the emergence of climate change in the media landscape, as that is when it was presented as an uncertain possibility and unpredictable in terms of its severity, location and period. Nowadays, the representation of scientific consensus around the existence of climate change has increased, and sceptical arguments have mainly shifted towards questioning the type of actions to be implemented (Boykoff, 2007). This is particularly evident in Europe, in which, since 2010, the public awareness of climate change has progressively increased (Stokes, Wike and Poushter, 2016). Moreover, the media are generally recognised to contribute towards “amplifying” or “de-amplifying” the public perception of a phenomenon (Murphy, Dunning and Williams, 1988), in particular when there is not a direct experience of it (Hall et al., 1978). At the same time, Ungar (1992, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003) has repeatedly

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