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# Structuring Knowledge of Subcultural Folk Devils through News Coverage: Social Cognition, Semiotics, and Political Economy

J. Patrick Williams\*

## Abstract

The folk devil concept has been well used in subcultural studies, yet its importance might be better served by distinguishing among multiple conceptual frames through which it is articulated. In this article, I clarify how folk devils are made possible through the interaction of three concepts used by sociologists to study everyday life. The first is the process of social cognition, where producers and consumers of news construct and propagate a shared definition of who subcultural youths are and why they should be the object of fear. The second are the semiotic structures of genre and narrative, which narrow the interpretive process of producers and receivers alike and sustain discourses that limit how subcultural youths can be understood in the news. The third has to do with political economy, where the ideological features of mass mediated news-making keep the news industry in relative control of meaning making. Social cognition, semiotics, and the political economy dialectically produce the phenomenon of the subcultural folk devil and support its objective effects. I review several studies of market and state-controlled media societies and note that, in both types, the objective effects on youths are similar and significant. In studying how subcultural youths are framed in the media output of transitional states and societies, the conceptual value of social cognition, semiotics, and political economy should be recognised.

**Keywords:** folk devil, media, moral panic, news, social cognition, subculture, youth.

## Introduction

Regardless of media type—print, radio, public or cable television, internet or otherwise—the purpose of news within society is questionable. Understood by many as a reliable source of factual information about the world around us, media scholars have identified various factors that make news appear anything but reliable and unbiased. Marshal McLuhan (1965) argued that ‘the medium is the message,’ which was to say that media type is fundamental in shaping how people deal with the content of news. He divided media into ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ categories and suggested that hot media more directly influence viewers or listeners, while cool media allowed for more leeway in how people interpret media content. The hot and cool metaphor has since been criticised for oversimplifying the relationship between media and those who consume it, not least because various social and cultural groups have been shown to have remarkably different media literacy skills (Certeau 1984, Jenkins 1992, Radway 1991). Nevertheless, McLuhan’s focus on media form rather than content continues to resonate in some important ways.

Anticipating the significance of future electronic media in particular, McLuhan presaged the shift toward globalized media mechanisms wherein people have instant access to the lives of those who are different:

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*Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness or responsibility to an intense degree. It is this implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups. They can no longer be contained, in the political sense of limited association. They are now involved in our lives, as we in theirs.... (1965: 5)*

Involvement in others' lives has become a major portion of the diet fed to us by news media producers. The news thrives on reporting difference and, more importantly, instilling a sense of fear regarding that difference. Fear of difference, fear of the Other, has become part of public discourse thanks in large measure to news media (Altheide 2002, Cohen 2002). Regarding youth subcultures in particular, news media categorise, label, and either marginalize or spectacularise difference, thereby legitimating mainstream dismissal of or intervention into the lives of those outside normal society (Hebdige 1979). The dismissal and/or incorporation of subcultures' spectacular aspects have been the topics of many studies over the years; indeed studies of subcultural style seem to overwhelm the field. What has been given less attention is the continued demonisation of subcultural youths and the subjective and objective effects those young people must deal with (see Williams 2011). In a very real sense, the news media create moral panics that have dire consequences for young people (Muzzatti 2004). When it comes to theorising the relative role of news media in shaping public knowledge and stirring moral panic, some scholars have suggested differences between market- and state-controlled societies, while others have highlighted similar trends in the concentration of control over meaning-making (e.g., Burton 2010). In this article, I use youth-subcultural examples to present some ways in which market- and state-controlled media societies similarly construct non-normative people and practices as folk devils through news casting in order to establish or maintain cultural orthodoxy.

Societies' cultural orthodoxies are structured through social cognition, genre and narrative, and political economy. For scholars of transitional societies, it is worth considering the nature of these structures in shaping people's interactions with news media. Cultural sociologists have argued for some time that during periods of social transformation, "when people are learning new ways of organizing individual and collective action...ideologies...establish new styles or strategies of action" (Swindler 1986:278). Strategies of action accrete over time and become doxa (Bourdieu 1977), implicitly understood and articulated through each of the three highlighted structures. The examples drawn from youth subcultural life are sensitising rather than causal in orientation and the point of this article is conceptual rather than empirical. In other words, the focus is not so much on the subcultural folk devil as an empirical phenomenon, but about how social cognition, semiotics, and political economy dialectically sustain moral panics about subcultural and other 'problem' youths. To this end, I present a selection of historical and contemporary examples from media societies with market- and state-controlled news media industries to demonstrate the similarity in demonisation processes as well as similarities in objective effects on youths. My intent is to make clearer the need to consider these conceptual frames together when theorising how youth subcultures are framed in and around news discourse.

## **Structuring knowledge about youth subcultures**

In a very real sense, subcultures are characterised by and through the media objects that present them to the public eye. Take for example the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in the United States, where two teenagers used an array of weapons to kill twelve students and a teacher at their high school, as well as wounding twenty-three others, before committing suicide. Columbine was not the first such scene of brutality in American schools, yet the shootings were unique because the news media quickly linked the teenagers to the 'goth' youth subculture and established their affiliation with a local group of kids who called themselves 'The Trench Coat Mafia.' Consider these headlines from newspapers around the US in the wake of shootings.

- Loners, misfits, 'Trench Coat Mafia' talked openly of blowing up school (Seattle Times News Service 1999)
- Classmates describe shooters as obsessed with goth world; 'Trench Coat Mafia' members treated as social outcasts (San Francisco Chronicle 1999)
- Black trench coats hid two black hearts: Inside the twisted world of Hitler fans (Alvarez & Kuntzman 1999)
- Officials to students: "Lose the trench coats" (Noz 1999)

Correlations among social status, style, violence, and intent are clearly indexed in these headlines, although news media claims about the teenagers' subcultural affiliations—participation in goth culture; members of the 'Trench Coat Mafia'; love of Marilyn Manson's music—turned out to be false. Yet those claims left a more lasting impression on the minds of news consumers than did concerns about how easily the boys had obtained the weapons they used in the attack. In the years since Columbine, there has been a sustained backlash against the goth subculture, as well as against other groups of youths who dress, think, or behave unconventionally.

How are subcultural folk devils brought to life in different types of societies and what role specifically do the news media play in mediating the symbolic value of subcultures? The process of stereotyping the cultural Other has a long history in the journalistic study of youth. In Britain in the 1840s, Henry Mayhew (1968) was primarily a journalist with a liberal and reformist bent, interested in documenting the lives of London's urban underclass (Tolson 1990). His proto-ethnographic approach—rich textual descriptions of naturally occurring behaviors and interviews with subjects—began paving the way for politicians and others to establish methods for controlling the life outcomes of youths whom the state defined as 'at risk'. The processes of documenting, classifying, and then reacting toward marginal groups is a rather standard strategy through which 'moral entrepreneurs' (Becker 1963) construct subcultures as both deserving of fear and in need of intervention from the outside. The effects of moral entrepreneurship include the institutionalisation of a series of dichotomies between people and behaviors that are deemed 'respectable' versus 'criminal', their status 'deserving' versus 'undeserving' of social reform (Hebdige 1983: 73).

Stanley Cohen's (1972) study of the moral panics surrounding British mods and rockers in the 1960s suggests a more general process through which youth's non-normative behaviors elevates them to folk devil status. This happens when some aspect of youth culture is defined as a threat to 'mainstream' social values and interests and the mass media provide stylized and stereotypical information that serves as a call to arms for moral conservatives and other 'right-thinking people'. Experts in various guises arrive at their own conclusions about cause and effect, while methods of dealing with the problem are developed. Eventually, the threat disappears or becomes less salient as people are normalized to it (Cohen 1972). The role of the news media in facilitating widespread public (mis)information about mods and rockers was of particular interest to Cohen, who noted that the news media regularly sacrificed accuracy and/or specificity of information in exchange for higher sales or ratings. His examples of headlines describing mod and rocker clashes are remarkably similar to those from the Columbine tragedy.<sup>1</sup> Cohen identified several rhetorical stances that news writers took vis-à-vis mods and rockers, encapsulating both groups in an ideological bubble that stripped them of social value. Today, news in media societies continues to frame youth troubles through narrowly defined images that often provide spurious attributions to the people involved. Such images facilitate a dominant definition of the situation within which subcultural participants are reduced en masse below their lowest common denominator. The extreme actions of the few are cast broadly and inclusively to capture everyone who could be associated. Meanwhile, other events that occur in the day-to-day life of a community or society are ignored and overlooked as subcultural trouble is given centre stage.

1 Examples Cohen provided include 'Day of terror by scooter groups', 'Youngsters beat up town—97 leather jacket arrests', and 'Wild ones invade seaside—97 arrests'.

The content of news reports, however, is insufficient for understanding the creation of youths as subcultural folk devils. The social cognition of those who read the news, the structure of news texts, and the political economy in which producer, reader and text are embedded represent broader, more generic social processes that structure that creation.

## Social cognition

In a documentary film on Russian skinheads, a young male interviewee talks plainly about the need for skinhead subculture in Russia: “We have to have order. We can’t let the world go into anarchy” (Omel’chenko 2007, see also Pilkington, Omel’chenko & Garifzianova 2010). The significance of his statement is not so much in the validity of its content, but rather in the social-cognitive structures that it implicitly manifests. Why must a society have order? One answer is that social life is predicated upon it. The world within which humans exist is a maddening din of physical reality that, if not filtered, would overwhelm us. From early in life, the human mind learns to manage physical reality by filtering our irrelevant sensory information and then categorising what it defines as potentially useful (Zerubavel 1991). The cognitive process of categorisation allows for orderly distinctions to be made in everyday life. Thus, one can quickly differentiate between male and female, edible and inedible, and valuable and worthless, for example. People do not, however, construct such order in similar ways. Culture shapes the ways in which we create such categories and the distinctions between them, so that what appears as valuable in one society may be seen as worthless in another. Young people are unfortunately categorised in such terms.

Producers and readers alike rely on social cognition to construct the meaning of news events and their representations. In a well-circulated example, journalists covering the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans in 2005 attached similar descriptions of individuals visible in two different photographs wading through floodwaters carrying foodstuffs. In order to make sense of the event and its photographic representation, one had to draw on knowledge about floods and about what counts as newsworthy. The photographers themselves decided that what they could see was worth recording, and the photos were subsequently used by journalists as narrative devices in relating the disaster to those reading the news. In one picture, ‘a young male walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store,’ while in a similar picture ‘two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store....’ The only significant physical difference between the photographed individuals was that the ‘young male’ was black, while the ‘two residents’ were white. The reporters’ descriptions draw upon common American cultural assumptions about race and its relationship to delinquency (i.e., that blacks are more likely to steal than whites). It is an ironic example because people with sufficient subcultural knowledge can recognise the white couple as ‘crust punks.’ But the dominance of water in the image, along with the meta-narrative of the natural disaster, made such attention to detail insignificant and the images stand as useful examples of the power of stereotyping as a social-cognitive process.<sup>2</sup> The image of a young black male with food he did not buy activates the stereotype of ‘criminal’ in the journalist’s mind. Subsequently, along with key words like ‘young male,’ ‘flood’ and ‘looting’ as descriptors, readers use similar stereotypes to fill in the details of what was ‘really going on’ in the Katrina aftermath.

One of the reasons that we stereotype is because we are cognitive misers who use as little cognitive energy as it takes to accomplish social action. Yet in an essay on media stereotyping of subcultural youths, Sheila Allison (2006) has argued that stereotyping is not just efficient, but also instrumental. People stereotype because it serves specific needs or goals in certain moments. In cases dealing with folk devils such as young black males or crust punks, stereotyping allows individuals and groups to create symbolic scapegoats that become the source of problems that mainstream society has standard methods of dealing with.

2 It would be interesting to know how the journalist might have described the white couple had it been clearer that they were also members of a stigmatised social group.

## Genre and narrative

Whose interests are served through the cognitive processes of stereotyping and scapegoating? To answer that question, let us first consider a news story describing a 14-year-old who died of diabetic shock after spending four days at a party in which he and his friends ingested alcohol, marijuana and LSD (Hunt 1997). At some point during the party, the boy became unconscious and his friends placed him in the back seat of a car that was parked in the garage, where he later died. His death was allegedly not reported until the following day. In the news story, there is no explicit questioning of why a 14-year-old might spend four days at a party without his parents' intervention, nor does it question the role of parents or adults at all. Instead, the reader is told in no uncertain terms that goth subculture was to blame for this death. The news story begins with a local police captain's explanation that while most goths are harmless, "a few can become a danger to themselves and others, 'The goths are fascinated with the darker side of life—with the grotesque, the mysterious, the desolate. There is a fascination with graveyards, death and moody music'" (Hunt 1997: B1). The story then switches to the details of the party and the youth's death with little to no reference to the role that goth culture may have played in the tragedy. Nevertheless, the stereotypical imagery of the goth subculture, which is set up through the story's headline and introductory paragraph, instils in the reader's mind the idea that goth is the cultural stage on which this tragedy played out. Implicitly linking descriptions of goth with 'the darker side of life' and 'death' with information about a drug party, the reader is cognitively primed to interpret goth as the problem. Absent from the narrative is a discussion of the extent to which illicit drug use is a problem among 'normal' American teens, the role of parents, or the other more immediate, local factors for the people involved.

News media producers (i.e., editors, journalists, and columnists) are human beings and are, therefore, prone to constructing the world in ways similar to most other people in a given society. They are not particularly exempt from the belief that the genre of news "appears to be an open conduit to a world of events [representing] an apparently agreed general truth about what matters and what must be told" (Burton 2010:228). The difference between news creators and the average citizen is the structural role that the former inhabit, as well as the media objects they create. They are able to shape, directly and/or indirectly, the cognition of millions of people simultaneously through storytelling, program scripting, and opinion/editorial pieces, just to name a few. Their voices are heard by many and are imbued with a level of cultural value not given to the voices of the average citizen.

The significance of genre and narrative is represented by the story's place in the pages of a respectable daily newspaper. The cultural meaning of the genre is based upon notions of objectivity, accuracy, and value neutrality. "News is the most well established and recognizable factual genre" (Hill 2007:4). Because news is understood to routinely present facts in a fair and professional manner—in contrast to other media forms such as fiction or comedy—creators and receivers tend to approach news items uncritically, accepting the 'naturalness' of the genre. Within the genre of news and like other 'factual' genres such as textbooks (see Weninger & Williams 2005), information is further structured through compact, bite-sized, and/or closed narratives. Stories about subcultures are typically narrow and formulaic in terms of both image and text. In 1995, a small group of individuals who self-identified as members of the straightedge subculture cut an 'X' (a straightedge symbol) into the back of a man who was smoking marijuana at a music concert. Despite this being a single, isolated incident perpetrated by a few out of thousands of straightedge youths worldwide, well into the 2000s almost every news story in the US and UK that carried any information about straightedge regularly included a retelling of this event. The result is 'common knowledge' that straightedge youths are violent and intolerant, despite a wealth of academic data that demonstrates otherwise (see e.g., Haenfeler 2006). Cohen (1980) and Hebdige (1979) argued long ago that subcultures are continually framed as the Other, either as a type of spectacle for voyeurism or as an object of fear, as these examples further reveal. News media objects are for the most part closed to alternative narratives (and, thus, interpretations), suggesting a

natural order to the spectacular and dangerous nature of subcultural life. The genre and narratives of news organise our horizon of expectations by offering bounded ways of seeing the world. This affects the social cognition of producers and readers, creating a perpetual feedback loop between socio-cognitive and semiotic structures.

### Political economy

Are genre and narrative themselves part of the natural order of things, the consequence of habitual forms of social cognition, or are they manipulated to increase sales, to further specific moral agendas, or both? The semiotic structures of media, built upon convention and routine, are important in and of themselves, but it does seem that there are deliberately ideological meanings coded into news texts. Therefore, we need to consider political-economic structures that may support such ideological action. We might start by questioning the news media's role in terms of some dichotomies previously alluded to, for example, the news as an open channel to events versus as a closed factory system of production; the news being about what is important versus being about entertaining people; and the news as objective (i.e., commonsensical, truthful) versus ideological.

In market-controlled media societies, newsmakers compete for market shares. The market dictates that news must be economically viable, i.e., it must earn a profit. This market-based premise doubtlessly affects how news is created and distributed as well as the content one is likely to find in the news.<sup>3</sup> In state-controlled media societies, the economic pressures of competition are either less important or non-existent and, therefore, one would expect the news to have different semiotic characteristics. The major (if not all) news sources are controlled by a ruling elite whose interests may or may not align with the interests of a majority of the population. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) have argued, however, that news media in market-controlled societies are so tightly controlled by corporations that there is as little chance of critique of the dominant social order as one would expect to find in state-controlled media.

Political-economic structures in both types of societies, then, seem to have the same effect as semiotic structures, each contributing to the closure of narrative and, thus, to a narrowing in how people experience the news. Since the Frankfurt School of media analysis in the 1930s and 1940s, many media scholars have been explicitly interested in critiquing or otherwise illuminating the hegemonic role that news media play in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of average citizens in ways that support the dominant political, economic and social order. There is such a wealth of ideological scholarship on news media that it hardly needs repeating here. Some of the examples I have provided can be read ideologically, from maintaining racial hierarchies in the example of Hurricane Katrina, to the flattening of stories about straightedge youths, whose anti-consumerist and critical social agendas make them poor candidates to stand in as role models for global youth today. Nevertheless, it is worth discussing some examples of the objective effects suffered by subcultural youths who run afoul of dominant cultural regimes and their news media.

### Objective effects in market- and state-controlled media societies

Contrary to the British cultural studies tradition's belief that youth subcultures were a working-class, post-World War II phenomenon (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 1976), the creation of subcultural folk devils occurred even before the war. As one example, we can consider the case of the swing

<sup>3</sup> In this article, I avoid the distinction between so-called 'hard' (important or political) news represented in broadsheet and 'soft' (entertaining) news represented in tabloids. Separating the two creates a problematic dichotomy since news stories from either genre can be found to have elements of the other present.

music subculture in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Swing music was originally a form of American big band jazz that was very popular not only in the US, but in the UK and elsewhere in Europe as well. In Germany, swing culture was most evident among students from middle and upper class German families. In other words, unlike British subcultures that were assumed to be subcultural because of class relations, swing subculture was comprised mainly of Germany's cultural elite. Many swing kids had parents who were members of the Nazi Party and had expectations placed upon them for service in Nazi Party youth organisations. Yet the sons and daughters of the respectable German citizenry who loved swing music came to pose a threat to the Third Reich's nationalist ideologies simply by their style of dress and their affinity with the enemies' cultural products. Swing kids dressed in imported English fashions and often had English-language newspapers nonchalantly sticking out of their pockets. From the perspective of German swing kids, their actions were not necessarily antagonistic toward the dominant cultural order of the day. Yet by 1939, swing was seen as a direct provocation to the National Socialist's ideology of racial purity and superiority. Listening to the BBC or to Jewish or 'Negro' music became illegal. As the war went on, repression of swing identity and cultural events became increasingly severe. In 1940, swing parties were officially banned, and editorials and cartoons began appearing in newspapers that ridiculed the subculture. Parties were raided and attendees arrested and interrogated, some eventually sent to penal camps or to the front lines (Wallace & Alt 2001). Drastic measures against subcultures have been repeated in other state-controlled media societies during the twentieth century. In countries such as Hungary, for example, the state imprisoned 'csöves' punks during the 1980s for 'public incitement to disaffection,' based on their music and clothing styles (Krokovay 1985), which were reported in the news as frightening to the collective sensibilities of normal citizens. At the same time, Russia and other socialist bloc countries were dealing with their own Western-influenced subculture problems (Pilkington 1994, Kovatcheva & Wallace 1996).

In the US, UK, and other market-controlled media societies, youthful fans of punk and heavy metal have also been set up as scapegoats for any number of social ills. In the case of the West Memphis Three—three fans of heavy metal music in the US who were charged with the murder of three young boys—the news media played an instrumental role in mobilising public sentiment that extolled an image of the affected community as a cohesive, devout community under attack. They did this through an unrelenting narrative emphasising the idea that heavy metal music was linked with Satanism, and that the murders were satanic in nature. One of the alleged perpetrators was linked with both heavy metal and occultism through ownership of music recordings and books on the Wiccan religion. Worse, it became clear that many local and regional news reports were focusing on the style of the youths' clothing and music as 'proof' of their guilt and the threat they posed to others in the community if let free. Consider the following TV news interview with the mother of one of the murdered boys, as one example:

**Reporter:** *Do you feel like the people who did this were worshipping, uh//*

**Hobbs:** *//Satan? Yes I do.*

**Reporter:** *Why?*

**Hobbs:** *Just look at the freaks. I mean just look at 'em. They look like punks. (Sinofsky 1996)*

First, note that the mother was able to finish the reporter's question for him, suggesting that a moral panic linking satanic activity to the unsolved crime was cognitively salient among community members soon after the murders. Second, notice how quickly Hobbs reduced the alleged killers' guilt to their style, a fact of which the youths themselves were well aware. Speaking about his alleged involvement during an interview while in jail, one sixteen-year-old said, "I can see where they might really think I was in a cult 'cause I wear Metallica t-shirts and stuff like that" (ibid.).



Prior moral panics about heavy metal and Satanism provided the cultural backdrop against which the West Memphis Three were labelled and then handled by the news media and law enforcement alike, as stereotypical images of satanic values and behaviours floated freely within the media sphere. In their research on how the US media reported satanic activity in the 1980s, Rowe and Cavender (1991) found that more than 80 per cent of their sample depicted youths as participants, but less than 15 per cent of stories actually relied on participants as sources of information. Stories typically utilised 'expert' sources of information such as the police, therapists, or religious specialists, and most often emphasised the alleged victimisation of children via sexual rituals, kidnapping, and human sacrifice. Satanism appeared to be a "catch-all category for unacceptable behavior of youth...[while] newspapers portrayed heavy metal music as a catalyst for satanism" (Rowe and Cavender 1991: 271).

### Case study: gang problems in Singapore

As conservatives in both market- and state-controlled media societies struggle to solidify or maintain ideological control of the hearts and minds of the citizenry, youth subcultures are routinely identified as a threat to the very foundations of civilization. This is particularly visible in a recent case of alleged gang violence in the nation-state of Singapore in Southeast Asia. Singapore is an interesting example because of its mixture of state- and market-controlled social policies, making it similar to some transition societies in other parts of the world. Although a young nation, the island of Singapore has a long history of Chinese triads, secret societies, and other criminally-related gangs dating back several hundred years. Since the founding of the current state in 1965, the Singaporean government has maintained in its citizenry a fear of the threat of youth violence. Secret societies, populated by young males, had allegedly played a part in race riots in 1964 and 1969 between Malay and Chinese, and fearing future threats from a discontented citizenry, the government passed a law requiring permission for "any assembly or procession of five or more persons in any public road, public place or place of public resort intended (a) to demonstrate support for or opposition to the views or actions of any person; (b) to publicize a cause or campaign; or (c) to mark or commemorate any event" (Rule 5 of the Miscellaneous Offences Rules, Section 511 of the Penal Code (1985 Rev Ed)). This law has been used to keep alternative youth cultures from gathering in public space, among other reasons. Singapore regulates many other aspects of the day-to-day lives of its citizens as well, from maintaining strict control over all local television, print, radio, and internet providers, to imprisoning and/or deporting individuals who criticise government policy (Gomez 2005, see also controversy surrounding Shadrake 2010).

Despite the overtly conservative attitude toward criticism, however, Singapore has relatively progressive economic and tax policies and welcomes the influx of Western products (including media products) into the local culture. This has resulted in the growth of style-based youth subcultures over the last decade especially. Combined with the persistence of economic inequalities that keep many young people excluded from well-paying and emotionally satisfying careers, the consumption of western media has resulted in the growth of youth subcultural groups that are simultaneously concerned with being cool and chic and are modelled on delinquent secret societies, where overt displays of machismo and courage are expected. In late 2010, Singapore witnessed two incidents of shocking violence that threatened, rhetorically at least, its global status as one of the safest countries in which to live. One was the Downtown East slashing, a staring match between members of rival youth groups in a shopping centre that went wrong when members of one group pulled out parangs (30cm-long metal knives used for cutting back vegetation) and attacked the other group, resulting in the death of one teenager. The second incident came a week later in Bukit Panjang, where a group of seven or eight males crying the name of the Chinese secret society '369' used parangs and metal bars to attack a group of about twenty young people standing outside a housing block one evening after school.

My interest here is not in the attacks per se, but in the narrow range of coverage provided to Singaporean residents in the wake of the two events. Channel News Asia, a key government news channel, did not provide television coverage of the incidents or their consequences, yet in a society that is saturated with 3G coverage and smartphone ownership, what happened could not be swept under the rug entirely. Therefore, several print sources were allowed to provide brief coverage. In reports of both incidents, 'gangs' were identified as the single cause for the violence by news outlets, which subsequently framed the gang experience for Singaporean residents by republishing stories of past criminal activities that had been officially labelled as gang-related. One news website even created an interactive webpage where readers could click on a map of the island to learn about many 'gang' incidents over the previous half-century by geographical area. Most links to specific occurrences took the viewer to an image of dead bodies, bloodied sidewalks, or young men lined up and handcuffed by police, with little or no textual description. Instead, readers were to use their already-developed stereotypes about youth, gangs, and violence to fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle. Journalists provided an almost entirely damning perspective on the events, leaving little room for questioning the perspectives of the youths involved.

Certainly there is little room for positive coverage of the death of a young person or violent attacks on others. Regardless, the state media utilised info-bytes and images of blood, wounds, and tattooed youths to close off narratives surrounding the killing. A search of news reports related to the incidents revealed only interviews with 'socially accredited experts' (Cohen 1972:1) in the aftermath. The closest thing to an 'insider' voice found was that of a self-identifying ex-gang member who now mentors local youths to keep them out of trouble. Otherwise, no local voices/opinions were presented except those of the families of the victims and social workers. The meanings of these acts from the perspectives of the youths themselves were not available, therefore, news readers were only able to learn what little the government censors allowed to be disclosed, and in a form that the government defined as acceptable. Even when 'experts' like myself were called to present information on criminal thinking, delinquency, and youth subcultures by a government ministry, our comments were classified as being for the ears of civil servants only and, thus, not made publically available. Neither critical nor encouraging debate in the wake of these incidents was reported in the news. Perhaps this was because of a fear that specialist knowledge and informed opinions, when it contrasted official governmental policy, could destabilise confidence in current youth-oriented programs.

## Summary

Youth subcultures have routinely been cast as the cultural Other in news reports in both market- and state-driven media societies. For cultural scholars like Muzzatti (2004), the 'real' threat lies not in non-normative youth, but rather in the growth of neo-liberal discourses that privilege the voices of the social elite as well as in the emergence of a citizenry so distracted or paralysed by fears delivered through news media that they are unable to think or act responsibly. In a similar fashion, I have focused on a set of examples that highlight some negative correlations between news media and the demonisation of youth subcultures. In societies where autonomous youth cultures have emerged, young people are regularly represented as 'symbols of trouble' (Cohen 1980). In this article, I looked at three interconnected dimensions of social life that structure how youths are understood within the context of the news media, as well as at how negative representations of subcultural participation are related to negative objective effects for young people. Using Cohen's concept of the folk devil to frame my conceptual argument, I paid additional attention to the role that the traditional news media have played in the process of deviance amplification through the dialectically related perspectives of social cognition, semiotics, and political economy.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, media societies are increasingly impacted by new media technologies that change the relationships among news stories, their producers, and audiences. Despite these changes, moral panics about youth (sub)cultures continue to exist across media formats, including in traditional news media, with young people typically constructed either as innocent victims in need of salvation or as folk devils to be feared. However, local politics, economies, languages and cultures are no longer the impenetrable boundaries to these processes that they once were thanks to globalising networks of information and communication channels. Because youth subcultures are everywhere these days, we need to think more broadly about how to better understand young people's interests, styles and actions vis-à-vis their representations in news media. Such understanding can improve the nature of interventions, which so regularly accompany reports of 'problematic' youth behaviours.

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