
Cyberporn and moral panic: an evaluation of press reactions to pornography on the internet

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Abstract

A summary of the MA Dissertation which won the 2002 Library and Information Research Group Student Prize. The aim of the Dissertation was to find out if there had been a moral panic in the British press over Internet content. The paper briefly looks at the background to the Study. The term “moral panic” is defined in terms of Stanley Cohen’s (1972) model and put into context. The Literature Review looks at whether there has been a moral panic over Internet content in the USA, and at the situation in Britain. The legal and regulatory context is explored. The methodology of the Study is then discussed, considering which media were chosen and why, the timescale of the Study and how the data was collected and analysed. The limitations of the methodology are reviewed. The results are then presented, with an explanation of how they coincide with Cohen’s model. The Study concludes that there has been a moral panic over Internet content, which began in the latter half of 1995. Options for future study into this area are then offered.

Introduction

“When distant and unfamiliar and complex things are communicated to great masses of people,” wrote Walter Lippman in 1955, “the truth suffers a considerable and often radical distortion. The complex is made over into the simple, the hypothetical into the dogmatic, and the relative into an absolute.”

The above quote summarises the reasoning behind the MA Dissertation that won the 2002 Library and Information Research Group Prize. The growth of the Internet in the 1990s brought significant and radical change to the availability, volume and delivery of information. The Study investigated the way that the press have reported on this change, in particular whether there had been a moral panic over Internet content. The term ‘moral panic’ was popularised by Stanley Cohen (1972) in his classic study of the media and crime. Cohen looked at the media coverage of the behaviour of Mods and Rockers in 1960s seaside towns. He demonstrated that exaggerated and distorted reporting of their actions led them to be labelled ‘deviant’ and thus a panic was created by amplifying the threat that they posed to the social order. The mass media has an important role to play in

the development of such a panic as it has the power to give such beliefs about moral dangers a much wider audience. These dangers can appear more threatening through the use of hyperbole and overstatement.

For the purposes of the Study, Internet pornography took the place of Mods and Rockers as the supposed threat to society. The media amplification of the deviancy of these two groups of teenagers led to tighter controls on their movements and tougher sentences for those found guilty of juvenile delinquency (Cohen, 1972, p.121). The main aim of the Dissertation was to find out if newspapers were lobbying for more restraints on Internet content. A change in the law which resulted in the Internet being censored could fundamentally damage the democratic right to freedom of expression in the United Kingdom.

Stanley Cohen's model of the stages in a moral panic was applied to the reportage of the Internet to find out if the 'problem' of Internet pornography had been distorted and overblown in order to demonize this new medium and bring it under some kind of control. The Study took place in the summer of 2001, and is summarised here.

Background and Context: Literature Review

The first aspect of the Study that must be dealt with is the concept of the "moral panic". The "moral panic" has now become a staple concept in sociological studies of crime and the media. They have been attributed to crises in capitalism (Hall et al, 1978, p.391), a backlash against feminism (Thompson, 1998, p.117) and to pressure groups competing for power by concentrating the attention of the media on extreme issues, such as paedophilia (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, pp.31-41). They have been associated with young black muggers (Hall et al, 1978, p.391), girl gangs (Thompson, 1998, p.117) and video "nasties" (Barker, 1984).

Stanley Cohen (1972, p.9) has identified the following stages as characteristic of a moral panic:-

- 1) A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values or interests.
- 2) Its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media.
- 3) The moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops or politicians; experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions.
- 4) Ways of coping are evolved, and the condition disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

The above four criterion were used in the Study to judge whether there had been a moral panic over Internet content.

Internet Pornography and Moral Panic in the USA

The Literature Review uncovered some evidence that a moral panic over Internet content had occurred in the USA. After the publication of an article in *Time* magazine in July 1995, 'On a screen near you: cyberporn' (Elmer-De Witt, 1995, pp.1-8), a "raft" of media reports on the issue appeared (Wilkins, 1996, p.4). These backed up the author's claims that 83.5% of images on newsgroups were pornographic and that pornography was available to anyone who was computer literate, including children. However, the original *Time* article was based on a now-discredited undergraduate research project, and neglected to inform readers of some telling contextual details. In 1995, pornography accounted for less than 1% of Internet traffic (Belfield, 1996, p.102), and only 1% of newsgroups were devoted to sex (Chidley, 1995, p.58). Holderness (1995) has estimated that the chances of coming across a random pornographic image were somewhat worse than 70,000 to 1. In addition, most Internet pornography was scanned in from freely available and legal magazines. It was the medium, not the message, that was coming under attack (Wallace and Mangan, 1996, pp.18-19).

Internet Pornography and Moral Panic in the United Kingdom

The Internet grew in popularity in the UK over the timescale of the Study, from 11% with Internet access in 1996 (E-MORI, 1997) to 26% by 1999 (E-MORI, 1999). In a 1999 poll, 81% of those connected said they had concerns over children viewing explicit material (ICM Research, 1999). 72% felt that the Internet should be regulated (E-MORI, 2000). Had these opinions been influenced by negative reportage?

Riddell's (1995) previous, limited, study found that 40% of newspaper articles contained misleading statistics, and 60% were calling for a change in the law over Internet regulation. As a result of the Literature Review, the main question appeared to be: were British newspapers exaggerating the "dangers" of the Internet, as Riddell's study indicated, in order to portray it as a medium that was "out of control"?

The Legal and Regulatory Context

When the Study was undertaken in 1999, the main legal test for the Internet was still the 1959 Obscene Publications Act (Carey, 1999, p.117). The question for the jury is whether the publication would deprave (make morally bad) or corrupt (destroy the moral purity of) a significant number of persons (Hamilton, 1999, p.172). This Act was amended by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which extended the definition of "publication" to include electronic publishing (Hamilton, 1999, p.172). The definition of "possession" of child pornography was extended to include possession on a computer's hard drive in the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Hamilton, 1999, p.172). There are a number of legal experts in the UK who believe that these laws are adequate for Internet regulation (Arkdeniz, 1999) and this has also been noted by the European Commission (Arkdeniz, 1997).

Along with the law, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) regulates Internet content. This is not an independent or accountable body, it was formed in 1996 by the Internet Service Providers Association (ISPA) because the police had essentially assigned them the

responsibility of policing the Internet. This organisation now has government approval as the chief body in charge of Internet regulation. There are serious questions about whether the IWF is necessary. Only 4% of the cases of child pornography the IWF passed to the police in 1999 originated in the UK, and the police are powerless to prosecute crimes that occur overseas. There is also no evidence that the police are incapable of dealing with such crimes. David Davies, head of the Vice Squad, commented in 1995: “we don’t see a problem with [the Internet]. People communicate and they leave electronic trails which we follow... It’s easy. We only wish that other criminals gave us as much information.” (Vadon, 1995, p.6).

For the IWF to be set up when there was no evidence that current laws were inadequate to deal with illegal content implies that there was concern over the issue in the mid 1990s. Were the media in part responsible for this concern? The concentration of the media on illegal aspects of Internet content may suggest that the media were attempting to portray the Internet as a medium that was so “out of control” that it needed fresh legislation.

Methodology

The Chosen Media

A moral panic could be perpetuated by all types of media. The Study concentrated on newspaper articles which tend to be indexed and more widely available than television, radio or Internet reports. The newspapers chosen for the Study were the broadsheets *The Times*, *The Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*, and the tabloids the *Daily Mail* and *The Mirror*. It was particularly important to include the *Daily Mail*, since this was at the centre of a moral panic over video “nasties” in the 1980s (Barker, 1984, p.18). The chosen newspapers have differing circulations and differing places in the political spectrum (Manasian, 1997). *The Guardian* is generally the more liberal of the broadsheets. Of the two tabloids, the *Daily Mail* is decidedly right-wing, while *The Mirror* generally supported the Labour Party. For this reason, it was important to include *The Mirror*, despite the problems it posed for data collection, which will be discussed below.

Timescale

The Study concentrated on the period 1995 to 1999. This was to allow the study of reportage over time and to see how it may have developed. 1995 was an important year for the Internet, in it occurred the first prosecution for possession of Internet child pornography, it was the year leading up to the formation of the IWF and it saw the beginning of the development of the Internet as a popular medium. Worldwide usage stood at 4.5 million in 1994, by the end of 1995 this figure had almost doubled to 8 million (*Encarta Encyclopedia*, 1999). The increasing popularity of the Internet gave it a higher profile, there were no articles about the Internet in the *Daily Mail* in 1994, but there were 281 in 1995. The year 1999 was chosen as the end point because it was the last calendar year before the Study began.

The “Snapshot Approach”

The importance of investigating the issue over a period of time should not be underestimated. However, it would have been too time consuming to analyse all the articles on Internet pornography for the whole of the five year period. Instead, a ‘snapshot approach’ was taken, in which all the articles about Internet pornography from the years 1995 and 1999 were examined. These years marked the beginning and end of the period under investigation. However, the intervening years were also checked for any emerging pattern that could indicate that the results of the analysis were being replicated in the years 1996, 1997 and 1998; although the articles from these years were not subjected to thorough investigation. The ‘snapshot approach’, looking at just two years out of the five, was more appropriate to the scale of the Study. The newspaper articles used in the analysis were therefore exclusively drawn from the years 1995 and 1999.

Data Collection

The data analysed in the Study was collected from three sources: the Proquest online database, the Microfilm newspaper collection and a CD-ROM, the latter two both at Manchester Central Library. The CD-ROM and Proquest database allow full-text searching of newspaper articles. Unfortunately, *The Mirror* was not included on either of these electronic databases and had to be treated differently. But for the other four newspapers, two searches were performed. Firstly, any article from the period 1995 to 1999 which contained the word “Internet” was retrieved. Secondly, any article from the period with both “Internet” and “pornography” in the text was retrieved. This allowed the Study to determine what proportion of articles about the Internet mentioned pornography. The articles retrieved in the second search that were published in either 1995 or 1999 were then analysed using a questionnaire. Letters from readers were the only texts excluded, as these are the products rather than the instigators of a possible moral panic.

As *The Mirror* was not electronically indexed at the time of the Study, the approach to data collection had to be different. Using the other four newspapers, a list of relevant stories was drawn up along with a calendar of when they occurred. This was then used to find related articles in the microfilmed copies of *The Mirror*. This was by no means an ideal method, but it was important to include another tabloid with a differing viewpoint from the *Daily Mail*.

Data Analysis

The usual method for approaching research which examines information that is embodied in a text is content analysis, a research method which measures the frequency of a word in a text and then draws inferences from that measurement. However, this method was adapted for the purposes of this Study, as traditional content analysis can lack subtlety. For example, using the current Study as a case in point, the occurrence of the terms ‘child’ and ‘pornography’ in an article about Internet pornography could be interpreted in different ways depending on the context. The article could be discussing illegal child pornography, or it could be about a child having access to ‘harmful’ adult pornography. This is an important difference.

Instead of merely counting words and phrases, a questionnaire was developed and questions were “asked of” the articles. This is not without precedent. Bell (1993, p. 112) suggests that this method of internal criticism is more applicable to this type of research, and Carney (1972, p. 27) states that the method is relevant provided that the questions are carefully directed and systematic.

Designing the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was constructed to retain a focus on the research question. There were eight questions. The first looked at whether the story was an “opinion” piece or a news story. A high number of columns or editorials highlighting the problems caused by the Internet may reflect a more negative attitude than a news story simply reporting an Internet crime. The questionnaire then put articles into one of four categories depending on their broad theme:

1. Internet pornography: if the article was wholly about Internet pornography
2. Internet: if the article was about the Internet and only mentioned pornography briefly, as one aspect of the Internet.
3. Pornography: if the article was about pornography and only mentioned the Internet briefly.
4. Other: if the article was about another subject and only mentioned Internet pornography briefly.

These categories were designed to demonstrate if newspapers were treating Internet pornography as a special topic in its own right.

The questionnaire then sought to examine the article in more detail. The occurrence of the following themes in an article was noted: child pornography, censorship, government control of the Internet, freedom of speech issues, the need to protect children, the need for new legislation, the difficulty of enforcing compliance with legislation, Internet filtering, the difficulty of regulating the Internet and crime. The terms used to describe Internet content were listed, as were the statistics quoted and the people interviewed in the articles. The final question put the article into one of four categories: favourable to the Internet, unfavourable, neutral, unclear, depending on the overall attitude demonstrated in the article.

This questionnaire was applied to all the selected articles from 1995 and 1999 from the five newspapers.

The Limitations of the Methodology

The most obvious limitation of the methodology is bias. Some of the questions, most notably the final question about the overall attitude displayed in an article, required the judgement of the researcher. Such judgements are almost inevitably subjective, but an attempt to limit the amount of bias was made by applying the question in a consistent manner. This consistency was achieved by looking at the overall evaluative stance of the author of the article, thus:-

1. Favourable: if the article concentrated on the benefits of the Internet.
2. Unfavourable: if the article concentrated on the negative aspects of the Internet
3. Neutral: if the article was balanced and presented both sides.
4. Unclear: if there was no discernable positive or negative attitude to the Internet.

The “unclear” category was introduced to avoid the temptation of coding any article as unfavourable simply because it mentioned pornography. This “evaluative stance” method was utilised to good effect by O Maolchatha (1990) in her study of press reportage of Northern Ireland hunger strikers.

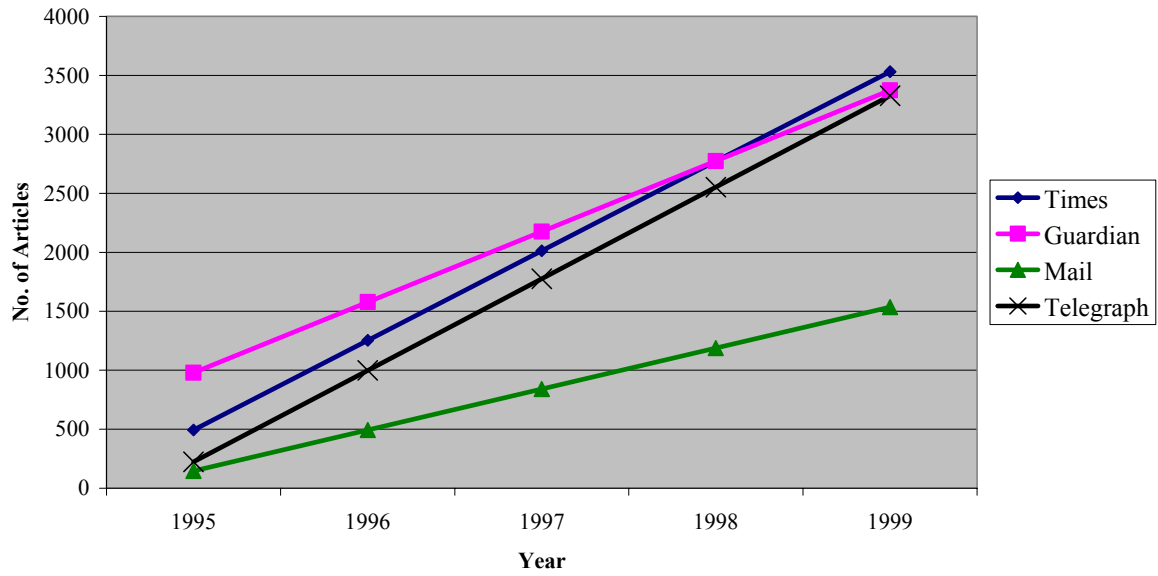
The method of sampling may also be open to accusations of bias. The articles chosen for analysis were self-selecting as only reports which mentioned the Internet and pornography were analysed. It could be argued that such articles will inevitably give a negative picture of the Internet because of their subject matter. Therefore, to attempt to achieve a more balanced picture, the Study also looked at the proportion of articles about the Internet which also mentioned pornography

Results

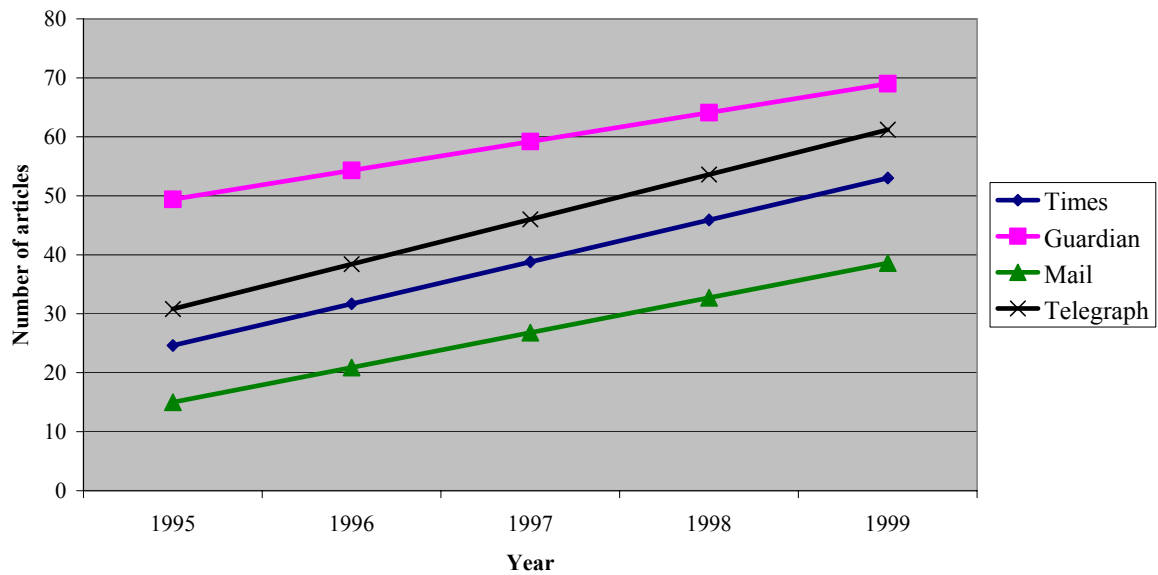
Overall Results

The Study calculated the number of articles which contained the term ‘Internet’, and the number of stories which contained the terms ‘Internet’ and ‘pornography’ over the five year period from 1995 to 1999. Figures for *The Mirror* could not be calculated as there was no total available for the number of stories about the Internet in the period from 1995 to 1999. The results from the other four newspapers, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, are shown below in Graphs 1, 2 and 3. The graphs were prepared using Quattro Pro software, the co-ordinates being calculated by the TREND function, which uses the Least Squares Method of fitting. Graph 1 shows that the number of articles about the Internet rose consistently throughout the period; Graph 2 shows a similar trend for articles which mentioned Internet pornography. Graph 3 shows the number of articles about Internet pornography as a proportion of articles about the Internet. This figure consistently declined over the five years. While the number of articles about Internet pornography undoubtedly rose, Graph 3 confirms that as coverage of the Internet increased, pornography became a less newsworthy aspect of it. This trend indicates that the results found in the analysis of articles from 1995 and 1999 were replicated in the intervening years.

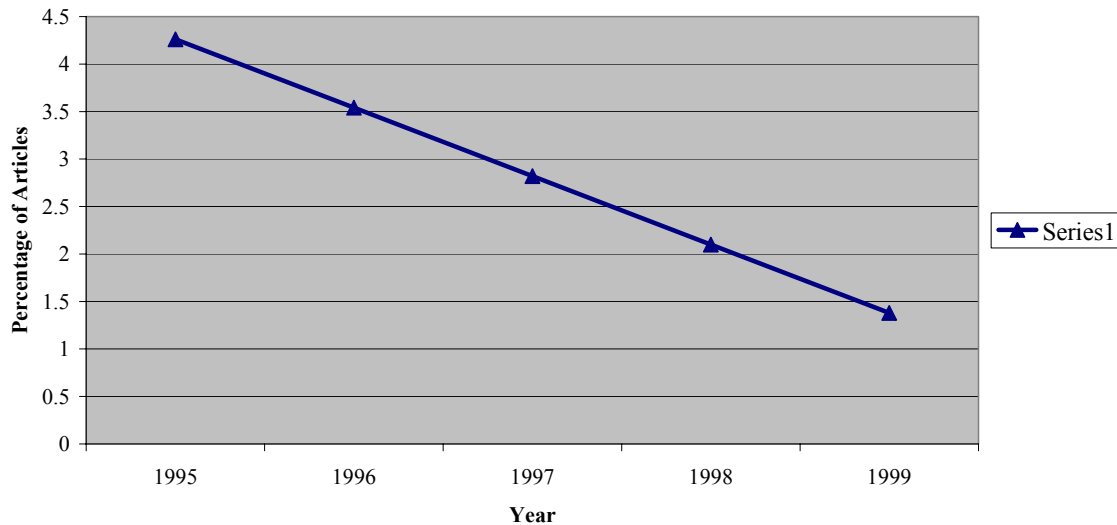
Graph 1: The number of articles which included the term Internet in four newspapers over the period 1995 to 1999



Graph 2: The number of articles including the terms Internet and pornography in four newspapers over the period 1995 to 1999



Graph 3: The number of articles which mentioned the terms 'Internet' and 'pornography' as a percentage of the articles which mentioned the term 'Internet' in four newspapers over the period 1995 to 1999



Stanley Cohen's four point model was used to determine if there had indeed been a moral panic over Internet content.

1. A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values or interests.

The Study found that during 1995 there was a marked rise in press interest in the subject of pornography on the Internet. Although only 4.2% of articles about the Internet were also about pornography, overall this equates to eleven stories per month across all of the newspapers studied. Most of these stories were concentrated in the second half of the year. Over the last seven months of 1995 there was almost one story per week per newspaper. This amount of coverage does indicate an increasing concern over pornography on the Internet. Over half the articles had the topic of Internet pornography as their broad theme, this means that the press were treating Internet pornography as a newsworthy story in its own right.

63% of the articles were unfavourable in their attitude to Internet content. The issue of Internet pornography was not being put into context as a small, undesirable part of a vast resource. If pornography was present in the newspaper coverage, any positive aspects of the Internet were absent. This was true of almost three quarters of the articles. Of the remainder, only 13% were favourable and only 12% were neutral in that they presented both the "good" and "bad" sides to the Internet.

Despite this general disapproval of Internet content, in only 16% of articles was there a demand for new legislation, and only 12% wanted government control of the Internet.

However, one fifth of the stories that appeared in the tabloids wanted more government control of the Internet. The view that the Internet is difficult to regulate was far more common, almost one-third of the stories overall put forward this view, and one quarter expressed the view that existing laws were difficult to enforce. There was significant negative publicity of the Internet in the latter half of 1995 and little balanced coverage of the content. 44% of articles expressed the viewpoint that children needed to be protected from “harmful” content. Thus it seems clear that the Internet was being identified as a threat to society, and children were seen as particularly vulnerable.

2. Its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media.

The articles analysed in 1995 did display a tendency to adopt a particular language and approach to Internet content. Illegal content was emphasised and almost half the articles raised the issue of child pornography, even though this is a tiny proportion of the Internet. The language most associated with the Internet also painted an extremely negative picture of cyberspace. “Hardcore”, “obscene” and “illegal” were the most commonly used words. Terms like “filth”, “perversion” and “smut” were also often employed and imply moral judgements on behalf of the press, although there was little evidence that the journalists had any experience of the Internet.

The newspapers did display a tendency to manipulate statistics. As with the over-emphasis on illegal content, statistics were rarely put into context. For example, *The Times* quoted the statistic that 5,600 messages about child sex had appeared in four newsgroups. However, the article did not point out that these could conceivably have been left by a handful of individuals. This neglect of telling contextual information was almost inevitably the case when statistics were quoted in the articles.

3. The moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops and politicians; experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions.

The various people interviewed or quoted in the articles were put into categories. In 1995, politicians were the most common group of people to be interviewed or quoted. Surprisingly, academics were also commonly interviewed. Perhaps this was because the Internet was perceived as a “technical” subject, which only the intelligentsia could be expected to fully understand. Representatives of religious bodies were in the top ten of groups interviewed, maybe because they are still seen as the guardians of the nation’s morals. Internet users were also likely to be quoted. This may reflect the fact that journalists had little experience of the medium themselves and did not expect that their readership would have this experience either. Almost one-third of the articles were “opinion” pieces or editorials, which may indicate that columnists and editors were willing to give their opinions of Internet content despite their limited experience with the medium.

The people most likely to be commenting on Internet content did fit into Cohen’s categories of politicians, “bishops” and “editors”. People who were described as “Internet experts” were the third most common group to be interviewed. Although these experts aired their views on Internet pornography fairly regularly, it was not common for

“solutions” to the problem to be posed; only 16% of articles mentioned filtering as a viable solution.

4. Ways of coping are evolved and the condition disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible

All the indications are that by 1999, although the amount of coverage of Internet pornography had actually increased, it became less noticeable due to the fact that coverage of the Internet itself had grown to four times the level that it was at in 1995. The nature of the coverage had subtly changed as the Internet became a more popular medium. Internet pornography was less likely to be treated as a newsworthy story in its own right and more likely to be mentioned in a story about the Internet generally or in a story about another subject entirely.

There was however still a tendency to dwell on illegal content such as child pornography, and 41% of articles were still demonstrating concern over this in 1999. Statistics were still being used uncritically and were lacking in context. But there was even less demand overall for government control of the Internet, this had fallen from 12% overall in 1995 to 5% in 1999. There was also less demand for new legislation, this had fallen to 8% overall from 16% in 1995. The view that the Internet is difficult to regulate had much less support in 1999 than it did in 1995. Overall the average number of articles to state this fell by 20%. The Internet was also less likely to be linked with crime, and the articles were less likely to demand the protection of children from harmful content. The words used to describe Internet content changed little between 1995 and 1999, but they were used less frequently over a larger number of articles, indicating a greater diversity of language used.

Perhaps the most significant change was in the groups of people quoted or interviewed. Although politicians or ‘experts’ were still just as likely to be interviewed, Internet users had completely disappeared from the top ten group, perhaps because the general public were more likely to have used the technology for themselves. Religious groups had also less of a presence in the articles surveyed in 1999. But the biggest change was in the number of representatives of the legal profession who were quoted or interviewed. An average of one in four articles had a quote from a member of the legal profession, and they were twice as likely to be quoted as politicians, the next most common group.

This statistic is very interesting. Coupled with the lessening demand for new legislation, it may suggest that the legal process became, in Cohen’s words, “a way of coping” with the problem of Internet pornography. Instead of being seen as a moral concern, demanding the attention of the Church, Internet pornography was becoming seen as an issue that, while problematic, could be dealt with through the courts.

Conclusions

The Study has found that there was a moral panic over Internet content, beginning in the latter half of 1995. The nature and extent of pornographic content on the Internet has been distorted and misrepresented in the press coverage. The newspapers were not giving a neutral and balanced picture of Internet content.

Newspapers were not directly lobbying for changes in the law or for more restraints on Internet content. However, the hostile coverage which sustained the moral panic may have put pressure on both the law makers and the law enforcers, and may have forced them to act over Internet pornography. There have been two significant changes to the law since the moral panic happened. The police now have access to encrypted information through the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, and the sentence for possession of paedophilic images has been increased from a maximum of three years imprisonment to a maximum of twelve. This pressure may also have led to the formation of the IWF in 1996. The IWF is now the main body in charge of Internet regulation in the United Kingdom, and this is a cause for concern. It is by no means independent or accountable as it has its roots in the ISPA, a group which obviously has a vested interest in the type of content regulation that is developed. This causes major concern over freedom of expression. How far the newspaper coverage was responsible for the formation of the IWF is difficult to determine. However, the pressure put on the Internet Service Providers and the police to 'clean up' the Internet began, and became intense, in the latter half of 1995, the period just before the formation of the IWF. The subtlety of the approach of the newspapers in highlighting the negative aspects of the Internet, and not overtly demanding censorship, may also be a cause for concern. This may allow the public to accept a piecemeal approach to the passing of legislation to regulate the Internet; legislation that could have the effect of eroding the fundamental human right to freedom of expression.

Options for Further Study

There is some scope for expanding this Study. One option for researchers in this area is to examine other types of media as well as newspapers. For example, television news reports could be studied to see if these contributed to the moral panic.

The results yielded information on the differences between the five newspapers in their coverage of the issues. The Study could be developed by analysing these differences, thus determining whether one or more of the newspapers was more involved in creating the moral panic than the others.

Two of the original intentions of the Study were to look at the location of the articles within the newspapers, and to analyse the images used to illustrate them. This was not practically possible as the electronic databases used did not archive the images from the newspapers, nor did they give any indication of where the articles were located. Given more time, this could be rectified by also looking at the print archives of the newspaper once the existence of an article had been established by full-text searching of the electronic database.

An interesting dimension, which was wholly lacking in the Study except through secondary sources, would be a parallel survey of the attitudes of the general public towards Internet content. This could allow the question of how much the moral panic influenced people's opinions of the Internet to be addressed. The Annenberg Public Policy Center's study of Internet pornography in the USA did the two surveys in parallel,

and found an interesting correlation between negative coverage and the opinions of parents, and concluded that the coverage may shape these opinions (Turow, 1999). It would be intriguing to see whether such a correlation also applies to newspaper coverage in Britain, although this is not directly relevant to this Study.

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