MORAL PANICS ABOUT LITERACY

by

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Abstract

Stories about aspects of reading and writing are a regular feature of contemporary British media. They take many forms, with fears about: the standards of reading and writing in schools; the number of adults with literacy difficulties; the effects of television on book reading; the decline of literary culture; Britain’s decline compared with other countries; parents’ failure to support their children’s reading; the effects of literacy difficulties on the economy; the effects of literacy on crime; boys’ failure compared with girls. By examining a corpus of newspaper articles covering more than ten years, and concentrating on stories about adult literacy, I show: these stories are recurrent; they are part of a continuing media story; over time there have been developing themes; there are international patterns in these stories; and many British stories are continuations of themes started in the United States; they are often enactive, meaning that they are consciously promoted in order to effect changes in perceptions and policies, reflecting government initiatives. I then discuss whether such stories constitute a moral panic, rather than simply public concern.
Like others, I often illustrate talks about literacy with newspaper headlines such as “Illiterate Britain” or “Illiteracy spells misery for 2 million”. The media’s way of portraying literacy seems an easy target for those of us interested in the various discourses of literacy. In this paper I look more closely at these headlines, at the stories behind these headlines, and at the research behind these stories. I examine this media coverage within the broader framework of research on moral panics.

The idea of moral panics developed in sociology and there is now a sizeable literature on the topic (as reviewed by Thompson, 1998). An early example is of fights between so-called mods and rockers in south coast sea-side resorts in the 1960’s. The characteristics which make these stories moral panics are that: The stories were taken up by the media for a specific period of time; the events were exaggerated; the participants were demonised, creating ‘folk devils’; and links were made with more fundamental moral issues. Several examples of moral panics in the media have been examined and sociologists have noted that usually these moral panics are symptomatic of broader social and cultural changes and frictions in society. Alongside the research there has been criticism that the term moral panic is a relative one: one person’s moral panic is someone else’s justifiable fear; what right does the researcher have to name a newspaper report as a moral panic? To overcome this, Thompson draws attention to suggestions that to call something a moral panic it is necessary to show: that disproportionate attention has been paid to the story compared to other times or conditions; that the evidence has been fabricated or exaggerated; and that the broader moral link is unproven. This issue of criteria for evaluating our claims is important across other areas of applied linguistics. Finally, as
researchers we might be interested in the phenomenon of moral panics as a particular social discourse; this has been pursued in a constructivist sense to see how it is constructed; this has been combined with attempts to examine what reality lies behind the media images which are projected. The idea of moral panics has sometimes been applied to media portrayal of language issues, notably by Cameron 1995, Johnson, 1999. In this paper I examine the extent to which newspaper stories about literacy constitute a moral panic and the light which work on moral panics can throw upon discussions of the significance of literacy crises (as in Freebody 1999; Street 1999; Kell 1999).

The first point to make is that there are currently many stories concerned with literacy in the media. They cover a range of topics, including: the standards of reading and writing in schools; the number of adults with literacy difficulties; the effects of television on book reading; the decline of literary culture; Britain’s decline compared with other countries; the effects of new technologies; parents’ failure to support their children’s reading; the effects of literacy difficulties on the economy; the effects of literacy on crime; boys’ failure compared with girls.

With colleagues I have been collecting such stories from newspapers for some time. We have individual stories going back to 1966, supplemented with collections of cuttings pursuing particular stories since 1987, including some from North America, and broader coverage primarily from The Guardian, The Independent, The Daily Telegraph and The Times assisted by CD roms and web archives since about 1994. (The focus on broadsheets was dictated by the availability of these archives; it is noteworthy that such stories exist in these papers and are not restricted to tabloid
journalism.) In this paper I want to concentrate on the stories about adult literacy. The general points to make are that stories about adult literacy in Britain have been recurrent throughout the period, stimulated in 1974 by the British Association of Settlements’ report *The right to read*. They are in a range of newspapers; they have a similar pattern; they link literacy to other social concerns; and there have been developments over the time period.

Looking at various newspapers, examples in the national press follow a similar pattern, as in “Illiteracy spells misery for 2 million” (Guardian 1.7.97). This is a report of a government sponsored piece of research. The research is reported, a spokes-person deplores the situation, proposals are made for remedying it through the provision of adult education classes, and links may be made with other aspects of society. Underlying the news items over the years is a basically similar story and a great deal of repetition over the time period. As an example, linking the 1974 report with the most recent, the first report called for targets to reduce the number of adults with problems reading and writing: the government should set “a target date, say 1985, by which time incidence could be reduced to a fraction of its present level. At the end of this period there could be a fresh plan geared to eradicating the remainder” (BAS 1974, p22). Similarly in 1999 there is a call for targets a decade away: “In setting targets... we propose that by 2010 the aim should be to reduce by half the number of adults of working age with low literacy... The ultimate target should be the virtual elimination of poor basic skills (Department for Education and Employment 1999, p35-6). This is an example of the way in which much of the argumentation and the proposed remedy have remained the same over this time period.
The language of the reports has remained consistent. For more than a decade literacy researchers and practitioners have been critical of the word “illiteracy” with reference to British adults but it is still a staple term for headline writers in today’s papers. Those who have discussed different ways of talking about literacy (from Levine 1985 onwards) will also observe a consistent discourse of moral outrage, along with a strong certainty of what literacy is, and that it can be measured in a straight forward way. Further examples of the language are discussed below. Researchers in the field of assessment will observe that no qualms about the validity of the tests are entertained: the idea that the results of these tests relate directly to everyday practices is also accepted without question, as in “One in four Britons baffled by the change from their shopping” (Daily Telegraph 26.3.99).

In Britain the stories have in fact become more complex over time in the links made with other areas of life. Comparing British newspapers with US and Canadian ones in the mid-1980’s there are noticeable differences. The British ones are simpler and are primarily linked to adult literacy provision - the need for more literacy classes (as in “Illiteracy is up to seven million, team finds,” Guardian 3.2.87). The US and Canadian stories encompass a broader set of social concerns, including the effects on the economy and links with learning difficulties and criminality (as in “U.S. business is stuck with illiterate workers,” Toronto Start 8.10.86; “Illiteracy threatens U.S. fabric,” Calgary Herald 9.12.84; “Economic costs of illiteracy emerging,” Globe & Mail 6.12.86). These broader concerns did not reach British stories for another five years. Today, as demonstrated below, the British stories are located within a complex web of social concerns about global competitiveness, the structure of the family, public order and criminality.
National newspapers have had a similar story for the past twenty years which re-emerges at regular intervals and which is adapted to address particular themes of prisons, family or gender. The Guardian, Times, Independent, Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph have similar stories, with more moral outrage in the Telegraph and the Mail. This approach can be distinguished from the broader coverage in some weekly magazines; general magazines may have personal stories of people overcoming their terrible difficulty with reading and writing. Specialist weeklies such as the Times Educational Supplement have broader coverage. Local newspapers sometimes deal with threats to provision, as in “Literacy classes under threat, volunteers fear” and “Courageous Colin makes plea for literacy service” (The Journal, Newcastle, 28.9.91).

The question of whether this all constitutes a moral panic in the sociological sense is a complex one. The range of characteristics, mentioned above, which Thompson identifies are: disproportionate attention to this phenomenon at certain times; exaggeration and fabrication of data; demonisation of participants with argumentation about the moral basis of society. In terms of the first characteristic it is very difficult to argue about the relative importance of literacy compared with other social issues but the timing of the newspaper reports is very clear: they usually coincide with the publication of official research or government reports. Although moral panics typically recede in importance after a time, there is no evidence of this happening with adult literacy stories; these stories have been recurring for twenty five years. In the rest of this paper I want to concentrate on the other two issues which identify
something as a moral panic rather than as simple public concern. These are issues of exaggeration and fabrication of data and demonisation with moral argumentation.

**Exaggeration and fabrication of data**

To give an example from recent stories, figures about Britain’s standing relative to other countries are often given. Elsewhere (Hamilton & Barton 1999), we have traced these figures back to the government report they were taken from, the Moser Report, and back then to the original research, the International Adult Literacy Survey. In brief, our own analysis suggested that there is little validity in comparing the different language versions; even differences between the North American and British versions bring up many problems to make one uncertain of the link between figures from the two versions and we raise questions about what they were really measuring. In addition, the original report acknowledged the lack of statistical significance and their own evaluations concluded that “...all comparative analyses across countries should be interpreted with due caution. In particular we recommend against the publication of comparisons of overall national literacy levels. We consider any rankings of countries based on such comparisons to be of dubious value given the methodological weaknesses....” (Kalton, Lyberg & Rempp, 1998, p4; see also Goldstein 1998). Nevertheless, these figures have been taken up with enthusiasm in newspaper reports, where the comparative figures have been widely reported and have formed the basis of newspaper reports such as “Bottom of the class” (Times 26.3.99); “Britain near bottom of European league...” (Guardian 24.3.99); “Literacy worse than third world” (Daily Mail 13.7.99); also Guardian 12.9.97, Independent 12.9.97). The data has been systematically misused; as far as I know the originators
of the data have not complained about this and effectively collude in this portrayal of
their work. Similarly, figures have been given purporting to show literacy rates in
individual wards of towns and cities in England, again without any notion of
statistical significance nor understanding of the source of these figures (as in
Guardian 11.3.97).

A second point about the data is that the headline numbers appear to be meaningless;
one can with impunity claim illiteracy for two million people (BAS 1974; Guardian
1.7.97), five million people, seven million (Guardian 3.3.87), more than eight million
(Guardian 12.9.97) or half the adult population “Study shows half of adults illiterate”
(Guardian 9.1.97). To argue with the claims by proposing a different figure as one
might, for example, with unemployment figures or economic growth figures would be
to misunderstand the basis of these numbers. With measures such as poverty or
unemployment there are criteria for the figures, there can be debate about different
measures and different interested groups propose different ways of measurement.
With these literacy figures, however, there is not enough validity to even begin a
serious discussion. It is not clear what is being measured and whether it is in fact
something which can be measured in a straightforward way (see Hamilton & Barton
1999). The issue for literacy researchers is whether what is essentially a social
practice can be represented on a linear dimension. While OECD and other
intergovernmental agencies demand a simple measure and some testers are willing to
provide them with what they want, the real world stubbornly refuses to fit into this
straight-jacket.

**Moral argumentation and demonisation**
A moral dimension is strongly identifiable in the adult literacy stories. It has taken time to develop in Britain but issues of literacy now go far beyond education and are seen as related to the general moral condition (as in Daily Mail 13.7.99, discussed below). Blaming schooling, and in particular 1960’s schooling goes back more than a decade (e.g. Daily Mail 24.11.87 “skool for scandal”). When the figures do not fit the “blame-the-sixties” argument, other explanations “‘ageing effects’ and lack of interest in the questions” are used to explain away the poor performance of adults schooled in different decades (Daily Telegraph 20.1.95). Demonisation, a characteristic of moral panics, takes place and the folk devils of this moral panic become teachers who were trained in the 1960’s. There is an ambivalence between blaming or sympathising with the so-called ‘illiterates’ themselves and teachers are the strongest focus of the blame.

Links with other social areas such as criminality have been made by government ministers since the early 1990’s. Adult literacy has been brought explicitly into the rhetoric of the government’s education crusade since 1998, with direct links made to childhood education (“Blunkett takes basic skills crusade to adults” DfEE press release 3.6.98) and broad issues of social exclusion. The recent Daily Mail article (13.7.99) epitomises the moral links being made. The adult literacy article “Literacy worse than third world” is boxed together on a page with “Status zero: Blair pledges to break the cycle of unemployment, crime and drugs gripping a generation of ‘lost boys’”. Most government themes of social exclusion are included in this news item. The ways in which correlations become treated as causalities can be regarded as another aspect of the misuse of data in moral panics. Similarly, the unspoken
juxtaposition of stories is used here and elsewhere to imply connections between phenomena. (Another example of such juxtapositions can be found in the “Bottom of the class” story (Times 26.3.99) on adult literacy which ends with an unconnected paragraph on the need for synthetic phonics in primary classrooms, as used in Scotland.)

It is worth returning to the 1974 report about literacy and examine how the story has developed. The Right To Read report was organised by the British Association of Settlements, a grass-roots campaigning group lobbying the government for greater resources. The flurries of national media interest in adult literacy since then all originate in official research which is government sponsored. Whether the story is about family literacy, prisons, youths, gender differences, economic effects, unemployment, there is a piece of official research hovering in the background and there is a possible government initiative ready in response to it. We refer to this research as ‘enactive research’, research where the outcome is known ahead of doing the research and where the aim is to enact a change and implement a governmental initiative (Hamilton & Barton, 1999). One of the points of the research is to stimulate media interest and to affect public perceptions.

There has been a shift then from a grass-roots pressure group initiating the social concern over adult literacy to a government inspired moral panic. With this there has been a shift from liberal grass-roots purposes, philosophies, methods of teaching and assessment to a pedagogy which is centrally controlled and evaluated. (See also Hamilton, 1996) The field of adult literacy along with the rest of education has been enlisted into a broader project of governments and international organisations (such
as OECD) concerned with global competitiveness and a belief in a technical solution to social exclusion. (Examples of this explicit linkage can be found in The Guardian 9.1.97 and in DfEE press release 3.6.98.) Enactive research publicised in an atmosphere of moral panic is used by government agencies to get public support for the shift from liberal education to ‘economic rationalist’ education; simplistic definitions of literacy, crude forms of measurement and unreliable statistics on illiteracy rates appear to be essential components of this ‘performativity’ approach (Lyotard 1984; Sanguinetti 1999).

Much of this pattern of change can also be seen in the other language and literacy issues in the papers. It relates to arguments Deborah Cameron (1995) and others have made about English Grammar and the moral panics which surround it, and to Janet Maybin’s observations (1999) about the canon of English literature. Cameron’s notion of verbal hygiene represents a valuable way of understanding concern about literacy. The adult literacy issue illustrates how concern by a pressure group has been taken over and transformed by a government agenda; similar shifts can be identified in these other language stories. However, unlike fears about standards of grammar and spelling, which have a strong vernacular basis and which can be found recurrently in the letters pages of newspapers, there is little evidence that ordinary people worry about issues of adult literacy. Similarly there is no evidence that millions of people see themselves as illiterate, or that ordinary people are missing buses, taking the wrong medicines, or are baffled by their shopping as a result of literacy difficulties. To pursue its policies the government has to persuade people to care about this and to worry that there are millions of illiterates in their midst.
The fears which the government plays upon are uncertainties about dealing with technological change and concerns about unemployment in the future. In general these moral panics about language reflect deeper unease about societal changes in the same way as Thompson has outlined for other moral panics. He shows some of the ways in which they are “symptomatic of developments that are of wider significance” and how they relate to broader social, technological and cultural changes in contemporary society (1998, 140-2). Certainly moral panics about adult literacy fit into this and government initiatives concerned with family literacy, prison education, and links with the unemployed and disaffected youth can all be seen essentially as forms of moral regulation. Contributing to global competitiveness is not just an economic imperative, it has now become a moral imperative; and adult literacy has been enlisted into this government project.

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References


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