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How to cite:

Redman, Peter (2021). Too much, too young? Social media, moral panics and young people's mental health. In: Perriam, Jessamy and Carter, Simon eds. Understanding Digital Societies. London: Sage/The Open University, pp. 387–422.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/understanding-digital-societies/book271468>

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Too much, too young? Social media, moral panics and young people's mental health

Peter Redman

1. Introduction

In 2018 the UK's Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH), in association with the Young Health Movement, published *#StatusofMind: Social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing* (RSPH, 2018). Although *#StatusofMind* drew attention to some of the positive benefits of social media it was mainly concerned with apparently worrying evidence suggesting they cause young people harm. For example, readers were told, 'The evidence is clear that increased use of social media can be detrimental to some aspects of the health and wellbeing of young people' (p. 24); that '[s]ocial media addiction is thought to affect around 5% of young people' (p.6); that 'young people who ... spend[] more than two hours per day on social networking sites ... are more likely to report poor mental health, including psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression)' (p.8); and that '[i]ncreasingly ... young people are reporting that FoMO [fear of missing out from what's happening on social media] is causing them distress in the form of anxiety and feelings of inadequacy' (p. 12). Given that evidence it was small wonder the report's Forward warned that social media pose risks that 'if not addressed and countered ... [will] open[] the door ... to cause significant problems for young people's mental health and wellbeing' (p. 5).

The RSPH was not alone in raising the alarm about social media and digital screen-use. Although concern about their impact on mental health and wellbeing had been rising and falling for some time, the years 2017-19 saw an upsurge of anxiety in the UK and elsewhere. Inevitably, some of that concern could be found in inflated news stories with headlines such 'Ban your toddler from TV and iPads' (Allen, 2019). However, as *#StatusofMind* indicated, it was not only journalists who expressed worries about social media and digital screen-engagement. Researchers, psychiatrists, politicians, youth organisations, and others drew attention to their perceived harmful effects, often calling for them to be more tightly regulated. Such was the pressure for action, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care in England called on the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to 'draw up guidance to help parents ensure children don't use social media in a way that harms their mental health' (Department of Health and Social Care, 2018). Equally, an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing was established at the Westminster parliament with the aim of 'driv[ing] policy change that mitigates the bad and maximises the good of social media for young people' (APPG, 2019, p. 6).

But how justified were those concerns and, if the level of anxiety exceeded the evidence available, what was causing it? It is precisely those questions the chapter will seek to answer. In the following pages, you will consider the relevant research literature and explore a sociological explanation ('moral panic theory') of how and why new media technologies frequently generate social anxiety. In light of those investigations you will also reflect on the questions: what does anxiety about social media and digital screen-use tell us

about social harm?; what does it tell us about the relationship between **individuals** and **society** ?; and, how do the **social** and **technical** shape each other?

Throughout the chapter, the term ‘social media’ will be used to refer to online applications – at the time of writing Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter were popular examples – that allow users to create and share content and engage in social networking. Terms such as ‘digital screen-use’ will be used to refer to activities (such as internet surfing) involving digital screens more generally.

1.1 Teaching aims

- To assess the evidence available in the years 2017-19 about the possible harmful effects of social media and digital screen-use on young people’s mental health and wellbeing
- To investigate the extent to which anxiety about social media and digital screen engagement in those years can be understood as a ‘moral panic’
- To reflect on what that social anxiety tells us about social harm
- To consider what it indicates about the relationship between **individuals** and **society**
- To revisit the question ‘how do the **social** and **technical** shape each other?’

2. Evaluating the research on social media and young people’s mental health and wellbeing

Concern about the possible harmful effects of social media and digital screens was not without foundation. For instance, a study by Jean Twenge and colleagues, which drew on two nationally representative surveys of over 500 000 U.S. adolescents, found that:

Adolescents who spent more time on screen activities were significantly more likely to have high depressive symptoms or have at least one suicide-related outcome [e.g. suicidal thoughts, plans, or attempts], and those who spent more time on nonscreen activities were less likely. ... [A]dolescents using electronic devices 3 or more hours a day were 34% more likely to have at least one suicide-related outcome than those using devices 2 or fewer hours a day, and adolescents using social media sites every day were 13% more likely to report high levels of depressive symptoms than those using social media less often. (Twenge et al., 2018, p. 9)

Findings from other studies had suggested links between young people’s screen-based digital activities, including use of social media, with among other things: anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, sleep-loss, negative body-image, and poor psychological wellbeing (see, for example, Hoare, et al., 2016; Kelly et al., 2018; Kalpidou, et al., 2011; McRae, et al., 2017; Meier and Gray, 2014; Woods and Scott, 2016).

Taken on its own, that evidence would seem to justify the concerns raised in *#StatusofMind*, the report mentioned in the chapter's Introduction. Yet, the UK's CMOs, who had commissioned a review of the evidence, concluded:

Scientific research is currently insufficiently conclusive to support UK CMO evidence-based guidelines on optimal amounts of screen use or online activities (such as social media use). (Davies et al., 2019, p. 2)

Equally, a House of Commons Science and Technology Committee report noted 'the limited quantity and quality of academic evidence available' on the effects social media and screen-time have on children and young people and went on to say 'there is not yet a well-established body of research in this area' (Science and Technology Committee, 2019, p. 3). Why did the CMOs and the Science and Technology Committee express caution about research findings on the impact of social media and digital screen-engagement on young people's mental health and wellbeing?

A number of reasons stand out. Most obviously, the findings were contradictory. True, numerous studies had identified potentially negative effects from digital screen- and social media-use but, in many other cases, the findings were mixed or neutral, or the effects identified were actually positive (Erfani and Abedin, 2018). For instance, Amy Orben and Andrew Przybylski's (2019a) rigorous research on digital screen-engagement and adolescent wellbeing, often seen as the gold-standard in the field, found 'little substantive statistically significant and negative associations between digital screen engagement and well-being in adolescents' and concluded that any negative effect present was 'miniscule ... when compared with other activities in an adolescent's life' (p. 693).

There were also concerns about the quality of much of the research on young people's social media- and digital screen-use. The Science and Technology Committee's report discussed this matter in detail and, in the following reading, you will explore three things it identified as being particularly noteworthy:

- the lack of attention paid to social context in much of the existing research;
- its over-reliance on cross-sectional studies; and,
- the fact that, where negative effects were found, they were often relatively trivial.

Now read Reading 12.1 House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 'Research on social media and screen-use'. Don't worry if some of the points made are unclear to you. They will be discussed in more detail in the paragraphs following the reading.

Reading 12.1, 'Research on social media and screen-use', House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2019)

The evidence we received during our inquiry detailed a wide range of possible effects, both positive and negative, that social media and screen-use may have on the physical and

mental wellbeing of young people. A note of caution, however, was sounded by some witnesses about the reliability and validity of the evidence base ...

...

The need for research to focus more on the *context* in which social media use occurred was ... emphasised by Dr Vicky Goodyear from the University of Birmingham. Dr Goodyear told us that her research showed that “school physical education, parents and other family members and peers played a key role in how much time [young people] spent on social media, but also what they were looking at and why”. She added that “evidence from broader samples of young people in different contexts and different demographics” was needed “to be able to understand what the influence is and define an effective response”.

...

An additional limitation, linked to research design, concerned the reliance on studies that were “almost always correlational in nature” when examining the effects of social media. Professor Peter Fonagy, National Clinical Adviser on children and young people’s mental health at NHS England, explained that these studies encounter the “chicken and egg problem”; namely that it is difficult to “untangle causation” since it is not possible to determine whether a health effect is the cause or consequence of using social media. As Dr Mark Griffiths, Professor of Behavioural Addiction, from Nottingham Trent University told us:

What we have is a lot of what we call cross-sectional snapshot research, which is not longitudinal [...] There is no good causal evidence. We have lots of correlational evidence. I would add that there have now been over 100 studies of Facebook addiction. Most of them have very poor-quality data. There are very few nationally representative samples. There is almost nothing in terms of longitudinal research.

...

Where associations between social media and mental health had been found, some witnesses emphasised that the effects were “small”. According to Amy Orben, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Oxford:

Oftentimes, we do not find any effects. When we do find effects, they are extremely small. When we take the whole picture into account, they become vanishingly small. From the perspective that there has not been any really good quality evidence, I do not see that that link can be said to be present.

House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2019) ‘Impact of social media and screen-use on young people’s health: Fourteenth Report of Session 2017-19’. London: House of Commons, pp. 9-12. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/science-and-technology-committee/publications/>. (Accessed on: 30 October 2019)

As Vicky Goodyear explained to the committee, much of the research on young people's social media- and digital screen-engagement had not explored the extent to which their possible effects are filtered through the social context in which they are used. For instance, a 13-year-old girl who receives a sexually explicit message on social media is likely to experience that event differently if she is alone from when in the company of her mother or a group of friends. Goodyear also alluded to the question of 'demographics'. Her point was that research had often failed to explore how digital screens are used differently by different social groups and with what consequences. Perhaps some groups' use of social media is unproblematic while others' (for instance, those with a pre-existing mental health problem) is more worrying? Reliant on 'tick-box' answers to quite generalised survey questions (for example, 'How often do you use social media?' Never; once a week; up to 1 hour a day; 1-2 hours a day; more than 2 hours a day'), much of the research on social media and digital screen-engagement had not been good at capturing the kind of nuance to which Goodyear drew attention.

What of the second limitation discussed by the report, its over-reliance on cross-sectional studies? As its name implies, cross-sectional research gathers information from a cross-section of people at a single point in time. As Peter Fonagy explained in the reading, because cross-sectional research provides a snapshot of a particular moment, it can usually only establish associations (or 'correlations') between the things being studied, not whether and how they are causally related. For instance, even when it has been established an apparent association between social media-use and depression has not occurred through random chance, the association might indicate that:

- using social media *causes* depression;
- being depressed *causes* the young people concerned to use social media (perhaps because they are more isolated or because social media help their depression); or,
- each reinforces the other.

Alternatively, the association might be the result of a third, unknown factor.

In order to establish causality, it is usually necessary to conduct 'longitudinal' research, that is research following a population over a period of time. To explain that point, imagine a study in which participants are assessed at points A and B, with each point separated by 12 months. Now imagine that at point A some participants' social media-use is dramatically higher compared to others in the study and, at point B, their level of depression has dramatically increased compared to others in the study. That finding would allow researchers to say with more certainty that higher levels of social media-use *caused* the observed increase in the level of depression rather than depression causing increased use of social media.

As Mark Griffiths noted in the reading, evidence from longitudinal studies on the effects of young people's social media and digital screen-use was limited. Moreover, findings from the studies that were available were inconsistent. For instance, a study by Cara Booker and colleagues (2018) found that high social media-use at a young age caused problems with girls' well-being later in adolescence; Taylor Heffer and colleagues (2017) found that pre-existing mental health problems caused younger female adolescents to use social media more than their peers; and Orben and colleagues (2019) found very little effect from digital screen-engagement at all.

The final limitation discussed in the reading – concerning ‘effect sizes’ – is perhaps the most important of all. As its name suggests, effect size is a statistical measure of the size of the effect being studied. Imagine cross-sectional research shows a relationship between time spent using digital screens (say, more than two hours in one sitting) and reduced wellbeing. Imagine also it has ruled out the possibility that relationship occurred by random chance. Even though you would be unsure which way that relationship works (does more screen-time lead to reduced wellbeing or reduced wellbeing lead to more screen-time?) you would still have preliminary grounds for worrying too much screen-time might be harmful. But before doing further research to establish the direction of the relationship you would obviously want to know its strength – was using a digital screen for more than two hours in one go associated with a large reduction in wellbeing or only a very small reduction? If the reduction were very small, you might well decide that worrying about screen-time is unnecessary.

Here is where effect size as a statistical measurement comes in. A large effect size would indicate that using screens for more than two hours was associated with a large reduction in wellbeing; a small effect size would indicate it was associated with a small reduction. As the reading indicates, a frequent criticism made of research on young people’s use of social media and digital screens was that, where associations were found between these and mental health problems, the effect sizes identified were often only moderate or small. In reality, then, although it was relatively common for research to find above chance associations between using social media or digital screens and reduced psychological health or wellbeing, the extent of the harm identified was often limited.

With that problem in mind, Orben and Przybylski (2019b) looked at data from three large-scale surveys. They sought to investigate, first, whether the data revealed an association between young people’s digital screen-use and wellbeing and, second, what the effect size was for that association. To compare the potential importance of the effect size found, they also compared it to the effect sizes of associations between wellbeing and other activities in the young people’s lives. Their findings were surprising. Although they found a small but above chance relationship between screen-use and reduced wellbeing, they also found that ‘the association of well-being with regularly eating potatoes was nearly as negative as the association with technology use ... and wearing glasses was more negatively associated with well-being’ (p. 178). Another way to put that would be to say that any possible risk to adolescent wellbeing posed by digital screen-use was similar in size to that from eating potatoes and actually smaller than the risk posed by wearing glasses. In other words, according to Orben and Przybylski’s study, the effect of digital screen-use on young people’s wellbeing was very small indeed. It should be noted that Orben and Przybylski’s interpretation of their data has been criticised (Twenge, 2020, pp. 92-93). Nevertheless, it is evident that claims about the harmful consequences of screen-engagement were, at the very least, open to doubt.

In light of those problems, it will be apparent why the CMOs and the Science and Technology Committee expressed caution about research into the effects of social media and digital screen-engagement on young people’s mental health and wellbeing. To summarise, at the time the report was written:

- findings from the research literature were contradictory, with some showing negative associations, some positive associations and some no discernible associations at all;
- there was a growing recognition of the need for a more nuanced understanding of how social media and digital screens are actually used;
- causality had not been established; and,
- concerns had been raised about the small effect sizes observed in many studies and the conclusions drawn from these.

Those points inevitably put in question claims made about social media and digital screen-use of the kind outlined in the chapter's Introduction. For example, the Forward to *#StatusofMind's* unequivocal assertion that social media pose risks that 'if not addressed and countered ... [will] open[] the door ... to cause significant problems for young people's mental health and wellbeing' (RSPH, 2018, p. 5) seems premature and based on a curiously partial reading of the research. A more sober reading of the evidence was provided by Orben et al. (2019) when they wrote: 'the unknowns of social media effects still substantially outnumber[] the knowns' (p. 10227).

How had the RSPH and many others come to conclusions that were so out of step with the actual evidence available at the time? An obvious sociological response to that question would be to wonder if their conclusions were fuelled by a 'moral panic'.

3. Moral Panics

The concept of moral panic was developed by Stanley Cohen in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, first published in 1972. Cohen's point of departure was a clash between groups of youths that occurred over a wet Easter weekend in 1964 in Clacton, a small English seaside town. Although disagreeable, the events in Clacton were not unprecedented. As Cohen (1972/2011) noted, 'Disturbances of various sorts, variously called "hooliganism", "rowdiness" or "gang fights", had occurred frequently throughout the late fifties and early sixties' (p. 43). What was unprecedented was the *reaction* to the disturbances in Clacton and, subsequently, in a number of other seaside towns. A chain-reaction of public anxiety, excitement and outrage was set in motion. Newspapers ran sensationalised stories about the events; people started clamouring for changes in the law; speeches were made in parliament; and a bill was introduced to amend legislation on 'malicious damage' (Cohen, 1972/2011, pp. 153-155). It was that chain-reaction Cohen identified as a 'moral panic'. But what exactly did he mean by the term?

Here is Cohen's (1972/2011) much quoted definition from the opening paragraph of the book's first chapter:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. (1) A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; (2) its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass [news] media; (3) the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; (4)

socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; (5) ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; (6) the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates ... (p. 1, numbers added)

Over the years, Cohen's definition has been subject to various criticisms, not least the possibility that, in the digital age, the priority given to conventional news media (television, radio and newspapers) is outdated (Hier, 2019; McRobbie and Thornton, 1995). However, the concept remains widely used in sociology and many of the features Cohen described continue to be viewed as core to it (see, Cohen, 1972/2011, pp. xxvi-xxvii; Critcher, 2008; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994/2009; Thompson, 1998). These features can be summarised in the following terms:

Threat: As the title of Cohen's book indicated, moral panics involve the creation of 'folk devils' – something or someone perceived to pose a threat to the moral order of those sections of society among which the panic spreads. In the Mods and Rockers panic, the threat was considered to come from youth subcultures but numerous other groups or things have been the subject of panics over the years: people with HIV and AIDS, drugs, immigrants, comic books, and many others.

Overreaction: Cohen did not seek to trivialise the events in Clacton and elsewhere. However, he saw the media's coverage of these disturbances, the scale of public outrage that followed, and the fact they led to changes to the criminal law as an overreaction. Consequently, as the term 'panic' itself implies, moral panics can be said to be characterised by responses that are disproportionate to the imagined threat that starts them off.

Agents: As already noted, Cohen saw the news media as playing a crucial role in generating moral panics. However, he also argued that 'moral entrepreneurs' ('editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people') fanned the flames of the panic, and knee-jerk responses from the 'control culture' (the police, courts, government officials, and parliament) made things worse still (these knee-jerk responses occur in stage 5 of Cohen's model). As that implies, panics do not just happen but are actively created by social actors or agents.

Escalation and spread: Escalation refers to the chain-reaction by which, in Cohen's definition, one stage in a panic sparks the next. As Cohen (1972/2011) himself warned, stage-by-stage models should not be applied over-rigidly (p. 227). Nevertheless, the idea that, in some form, moral panics escalate is central to the concept. As they grow, they also spread, pulling in an increasing range of people and groups. Moral panics may not permeate society as a whole but neither are they purely localised.

Volatility: As stage 6 of Cohen's definition implies, moral panics sometimes blow over leaving little trace of their existence. Alternatively, they can lead to more profound regulatory or legal changes. In either case, they are relatively short-lived. Even if they persist for a number of years – perhaps flaring up and dying down a number of times – they are clearly distinct from more stable and permanent features of the social world.

Underlying social anxieties: Cohen (1972/2011) argued that it was not youth misbehaviour itself that sparked the Clacton panic but what images and reports of that misbehaviour stirred up in the minds of the newspaper reading public. Pictures of youth behaving badly, Cohen suggested, roused fears about the pace of post-war social change. The young people seemed to symbolise a society in which old certainties were crumbling in the face of consumer affluence, sexual permissiveness, and a hedonistic youth culture that appeared to flout traditional ideas about the work-ethic (p. 218).

Armed with that understanding of moral panics, it is now possible to answer the question posed earlier: were concerns such as those expressed in *#StatusofMind* evidence that, in the UK, sometime between 2017 and 2019, young people's social media- and digital screen-use was the subject of a moral panic?

4. Was there a moral panic about young people's social media and digital screen-use?

If you look back at earlier sections of this chapter you will see that not everything about the anxiety surrounding young people's social media- and digital screen-use fits exactly with Cohen's definition of moral panics. In particular, in contrast to the Mods and Rockers panic, concern about social media and digital screen-engagement was generated less by the media than by 'socially accredited experts' – in this case, psychological researchers. In Cohen's definition 'socially accredited experts' do not appear until stage 4. Similarly, anxiety was not amplified by the kind of 'moral entrepreneurs' Cohen identified in stage 3 of his model. Politicians certainly played a role in this process but it was not 'editors, bishops ... and other right thinking people' who were involved but, instead, professional bodies (such as the RSPH) and interest groups advocating for young people (such as the Young Health Movement, co-publishers of *#StatusofMind*). As such, the panic about young people's digital screen-use was closer to the model of moral panics described by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994/2009) in their influential book *Moral Panic: The Social Construction of Deviance*. For Goode and Ben-Yehuda, it is interest groups who start panics with the media and others then fanning the flames (pp. 142-143).

That said, evidence explored earlier in the chapter certainly bears many of the hallmarks of a moral panic understood in broad terms. Looking at the key features of moral panics outlined a moment ago, we can say:

- Young people's use of social media and digital screens was identified as a *threat* to society's interests
- Anxiety about social media and digital screen-use was arguably an *overreaction* given the evidence available
- That overreaction was generated by key *agents*, most obviously academics and bodies such as the RSPH
- Anxiety *escalated* from initial concern in academic papers to the point where the UK government felt impelled to respond (for example, by commissioning guidelines on screen-use)
- That escalation implied anxiety had *spread* from the academic community, to professional bodies such as the RSPH, and out into the media, organs of government and parts of the general public.

Those points provide clear evidence a moral panic had occurred. However, it is questionable whether the panic ever developed into one that was full-blown, at least in the years under discussion here. Concern about young people's social media- and digital screen-use had certainly escalated and spread but did not result in comprehensive and well-established public consensus. Moreover, by moral panic standards, the responses it generated were comparatively limited. For example, the CMOs' guidance requested by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and a UK government White Paper on 'Online Harms' were relatively muted in their response to calls for regulation. The CMOs' guidelines were restricted to commonplaces such as 'Keep moving! Everyone should take a break after a couple of hours sitting or lying down using a screen' (Davies et al., 2019, p. 10). Meanwhile the white paper focused mainly on specific risks such as those posed to young people from cyberbullying, underage sharing of sexual imagery, and coming across advice on how to commit suicide. To the extent the white paper addressed social media-use and digital screen-time as things that might have a detrimental impact in themselves, it merely noted the need for further research and repeated the CMOs' guidance to parents (Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, 2019, pp. 19- 21, 84). In short, both handled social media-use and screen-time in ways far removed from *#StatusofMind's* (RSPH, 2018, pp. 24-25) calls for mandatory 'heavy usage' pop-ups and compulsory school lessons on the risks of 'social media addiction' – a term widely used but whose existence was not clearly established (Kardefelt-Winther, 2017).

The main reason anxiety did not develop into a full-blown panic seems to lie in the active resistance it faced. For example, in 2017, *The Guardian* newspaper published an open letter signed by 81 academics and researchers in the field, questioning the idea that digital screen-engagement is inherently harmful to young people and calling for policy to be based on sound evidence (Etchells, et al., 2017). Similarly, researchers such as Amy Orben and Andrew Przybylski made frequent media appearances questioning the evidence for the negative impact of social media and digital screen-use (see, for instance, Orben and Przybylski, 2019c). Additionally, academics and researchers went out of their way to give evidence to inquiries likely to inform legislation. For instance, a report produced by the APPG (a body mentioned in the Introduction) noted the group 'was repeatedly made aware [by researchers] of the lack of robust scientific research evidencing whether social media actually causes mental health problems' (APPG, 2019, p. 12). This did not stop the APPG recommending that 'the Government publishes evidence based guidance for those aged 24 and younger to avoid excessive social media use' (p. 5) but it seems likely it would have gone much further had researchers not challenged the evidence on such things as 'social media addiction' and the supposedly harmful effects of intensive screen-use.

As those examples suggest, for every academic and professional caught up in the moral panic, another seems to have remained profoundly sceptical. Moreover, among the sceptics, many seem to have been willing to go public and question claims such as those made in *#StatusofMind*. That point brings us to the question of volatility, another of the features of moral panics discussed in the previous section. The fact that sceptical academics and professionals seem to have succeeded in deflating the 2017-19 panic underlines how volatile anxiety about young people's social media- and digital screen-use was. Faced with concerted resistance, it went into retreat.

5. Moral panic as an expression of underlying social anxiety

As you saw in Section 3, Cohen argued that moral panics tap into and express underlying social anxieties. Media reports of the disturbances in Clacton and elsewhere, Cohen argued, stirred up underlying anxieties about the pace of post-war social change. Were similar anxieties being stirred up by young people's social media- and digital screen-use?

To answer that question, we should begin by noting the long history of social anxiety about new media technologies and types, many of which focused on their supposed effects on young people. For example, the 1950s saw anxieties about the risks television and comic books were thought to pose to the young while, in the UK, the 1980s saw parallel anxieties about the availability of a genre of violent movies on VHS video cassettes – so-called 'video nasties' (Gilbert, 1986; Mahendran, 2012; Thompson, 1998). In fact, as you are about to read, anxieties of that kind go back at least as far as the 18th century.

Now read Reading 12.2, 'The media's first moral panic' by Frank Furedi. The extract examines anxieties aroused in the 18th century by the novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. As you will see, reactions to the novel had surprising similarities with the moral panics discussed in this chapter.

Reading 12.2, 'The media's first moral panic', Frank Furedi (2015)

When cultural commentators lament the decline of the habit of reading books, it is difficult to imagine that back in the 18th century many prominent voices were concerned about the threat posed by people reading too much. ...

The emergence of commercial publishing in the 18th century and the growth of an ever-widening constituency of readers was not welcomed by everyone. Many cultural commentators were apprehensive about the impact of this new medium on individual behaviour and on society's moral order.

...

The consensus that emerged was that unrestrained exposure to fiction led readers to lose touch with reality and identify with the novel's romantic characters to the point of adopting their behaviour. The passionate enthusiasm with which European youth responded to the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) appeared to confirm this consensus.

The Sorrows of Young Werther is an epistolary novel, which recounts the tortured love of a young man, Werther. His letters reveal an intense passion for Lotte, who is already betrothed to another man. Werther cannot reconcile himself to his predicament and concludes that he has no choice but to take his life. ... The publication of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* turned into an almost instant media event. It became the first documented literary sensation of modern Europe. The novel was translated into French (1775), English (1779), Italian (1781) and Russian (1788) and was repeatedly republished in different

editions. There were more than 20 pirated editions published within 12 years of its appearance in Germany. It also enjoyed remarkable success in the United States.

...

The scale of the reaction to *Werther* perturbed authorities throughout Europe. Many officials and critics perceived the vivid and sympathetic manner with which Goethe described Werther's descent into self-destruction as legitimating the act of suicide. They condemned the novel as a danger to the public, particularly to impressionable young readers. The novel was blamed for the unleashing of an epidemic of copycat suicides throughout Europe among young, emotionally disturbed and broken-hearted readers. The numerous initiatives to ban the novel indicated that the authorities took these claims very seriously. In 1775 the theological faculty of the University of Leipzig petitioned officials to ban *Werther* on the grounds that its circulation would lead to the promotion of suicide. ... The novel was also banned in Italy and Denmark.

...

While there is no evidence that *Werther* was responsible for the promotion of a wave of copycat suicides, it evidently succeeded in inspiring a generation of young readers. ...

The association of the novel with the disorganisation of the moral order represented an early example of a media panic. The formidable, sensational and often improbable effects attributed to the consequences of reading in the 18th century provided the cultural resources on which subsequent reactions to the cinema, television or the Internet would draw []. In that sense Werther fever anticipated the media panics of the future.

Furedi, F. (2015) The media's first moral panic. *History Today*, 65(11), Available at: <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/media's-first-moral-panic>. Accessed 3 Feb, 2020.

It is unclear why new media technologies (such as television) and types (such as the novel), frequently arouse social anxiety. One possibility is they are highly visible and therefore appear emblematic of wider changes in society. The furore surrounding *The Sorrows of Young Werther* certainly seems to fit that likelihood. The novel was published as the industrial revolution was gathering pace and political revolution was in the air (the American Revolutionary War began in 1785, only a year after the book's publication). At another time, its apparent endorsement of romantic suicide might have caused a minor scandal. In the heightened state of nervousness then pervading Europe, it seems to have provoked something akin to a continent-wide moral panic.

That panic was doubtless made worse by the book's popularity with younger people. As Kenneth Thompson (1998) has argued, young people occupy an ambiguous or liminal position in the social order (p. 43). Not quite adults – and therefore not 'full' members of society – they are simultaneously inside and outside society's boundaries. As such, they are unsettling and difficult to place: liable to be seen as a threat to the social order (as in the case of the Mods and Rockers panic); as under threat (as in the 2017-19 moral panic

surrounding young people's social media- and digital screen-use); or an uneasy combination of the two (as was perhaps the case in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* panic).

Applied to the 2017-19 panic surrounding young people's social media- and digital screen-use, those arguments suggest a number of points. First, the 2017-19 panic was clearly a recent twist in a very long tale, one in which new media technologies and types have repeatedly been seen as threatening to young people's sanity, wellbeing and general standards of behaviour. Second, it is arguable that the novelty of the technology, its enthusiastic adoption by young people and the possibility of reading it as something with the potential to cause individual, social and moral harm made social media and digital screens ideal vessels through which to channel anxieties about wider social transformation.

Although the first decades of the 21st century may seem far removed from the period in which *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was written, we too are living through a time of rapid social change. During the 1990s, sociologists such as Ulrich Beck (1992) and Zygmunt Baumann (2000) began to identify a new phase of development in advanced industrialised societies. Economic globalisation, neo-liberal reform of labour markets and public services, and the forces unleashed in earlier stages of modernisation were, they argued, reshaping social life in ways that meant it was increasingly characterised by uncertainty, instability, and risk. In the intervening period, little has changed to modify that view. If anything, the financial crisis of 2008, the rise of right-wing populism, the gathering climate emergency, and the ongoing digital revolution have intensified the processes they described. For moral panic theory, these are precisely the conditions in which panics are liable to thrive. Perhaps we should not be surprised that, as the internet and social media spread in the first decades of the 21st century, their use by young people became the object of so much concern.

6. Social harm, individuals and society and the social and the technological

What do the preceding arguments tell us about social harm, the relationship between **individuals** and **society**, and the ways in which the **social** influences **technology** and **technology** influences the **social**? First, anxiety about social media and digital screen-use was clearly motivated by genuine concern about their possible harmful consequences. In effect, interest groups such as the RSPH, co-authors of *#StatusofMind*, were identifying social media and digital-screens as causes of social harm – things that, although not criminalised, might nevertheless result in real damage and distress. However, the exaggerated nature of their anxiety meant it risked causing harmful consequences of its own. Most obviously, it risked elevating public concern about social media and digital screen-use to an extent that was unnecessary. More importantly, calls for tighter regulation of social media and attempts to limit time spent on digital screens also risked undermining social media's widely recognised potential as a source of useful help and information. (See, for example, Harper et al. (2015) on the internet as a positive resource in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) young people's identity development and mental health).

An interesting example of that problem has been highlighted by Anna Lavis and Rachel Winter (2019). They noted that, under pressure from the UK government and the CMO for England, 'Instagram ... altered its search engine so that it [was] no longer possible to search for hashtags relating to self-harm.' As they went on to say, this meant that 'searching for

#selfharm support also return[ed] no results.’ Lavis and Winter did not deny the disturbing and potentially dangerous nature of some of the material related to self-harm available on the internet. Their point was that, unless great care is taken, attempts to regulate such material can have consequences that cause harm in other ways. In this instance, an intervention undertaken with the best intentions also blocked access to sources of support for people at risk of harming themselves.

The second question, concerning the relationship between **individuals** and **society**, can be addressed via a further question: if the authors of *#StatusofMind*, and others like them, were caught up in a moral panic, should they have known better? For example, should they have taken a more balanced view of the research literature on social media and digital screen-use? There is certainly a case to be made that *#StatusofMind* should have been more rigorous in reviewing the evidence. However, we should not ignore how easy it is to be swept up in a moral panic. Even the most seasoned and critical observers – even sociologists of moral panics – can retrospectively find that, what they had assumed to be genuine concern about an objective problem, was exaggerated and ill-founded. Moral panics are powerful things and, as such, they illustrate something important about the relationship between **individuals** and **society**. How we see and experience the world is profoundly shaped by social forces, often in ways of which we are not wholly aware. None of us can stand outside the **society** of which we are a part and our ability to see it objectively will always be partial.

That point brings us to the third and final question, how does the **social** influence **technology** and **technology** influence the **social**? The moral panic surrounding young people’s social media- and digital screen seems to have involved what was referred to earlier in the book as a ‘technologically determinist’ point of view. In other words, something in the design or functionality of social media and digital screens was assumed to be inherently harmful to young people, as if using social media and digital screens would, on its own, cause depression or anxiety. In another version, that assumption was modified such that behaviours associated with social media- and digital screen-use (such as poor sleep quality or comparing yourself to others apparently more successful than you) were thought to cause harm. In either case, the technology or a behaviour it promoted was positioned as ‘determining’ or the direct cause of the harmful consequence. Technological determinism is, in fact, a common theme in many of the techno-panics that have occurred over the years. For example, responses to *The Sorrows of Young Werther* appeared to assume that the mere act of reading the novel drove young people to suicide. Parallel fears were expressed in response to the comic craze of the 1950s and ‘video nasties’ in the 1980s.

It was precisely technological determinism that Vicky Goodyear, someone you met in Reading 12.1, was seeking to counter. From her more sociological point of view, in order to understand technology’s meanings and consequences, it is always necessary to investigate the social context in which it is used. As is explored elsewhere in this volume, this point does not mean the technology plays no part in those meanings and consequences. To take a simple example, social media allow us to be in contact with far larger numbers of people than earlier technologies did. That capacity is built into the technology itself. Goodyear’s point is that different young people do very different things with that capacity, some of which are positive (for example, sustaining and enhancing friendship networks; providing

help and support); some of which are negative (for example, cyberbullying or circulating potentially harmful information). As a result, what young people do with social media, what this means to them, and the consequences it has cannot be assumed in advance or simply 'read-off' from the technology. Each must be established context by context, social group by social group. Consequently, as with other examples explored in this book, we can say the technical and the social influence each other: they are 'co-constructed'.

7. Conclusion

As you have seen, the main argument advanced in this chapter was that, roughly in the years 2017-2019, the UK saw a moral panic over young people's social media- and digital screen-use. That moral panic never became full-blown in the sense that the agents promoting the panic (academics, public health experts, youth advocacy groups, elements of the news media and government) did not succeed in establishing a comprehensive public consensus on the nature and severity of the threat posed by social media and digital screen-use. Neither did they succeed in enacting their preferred regulatory responses (such as official guidance on limiting screen-time). Nevertheless, many of the criteria for judging the existence of a moral panic were met. Most important, fears about the threat social media and digital screen-use were said to pose can be shown to have been exaggerated. Although not without foundation, they were clearly in excess of the evidence available at the time.

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