

Claims-makers versus counter claims-makers: new sites of civic conflict in the construction and contestation of moral panic narratives through online newspapers and user-generated content

Abstract

The concept of the “claims-maker” has long been integral to academic discourse about moral panics – scares about threats (or imagined threats) from deviant ‘anti-citizens’ who refuse to play by the rules the rest of us supposedly respect (Cohen 1972). In Stanley Cohen’s seminal study of the scare stories generated by clashes between Mods and Rockers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the key claims-makers responsible for defining and sustaining the panic were identified as “moral entrepreneurs” (influential citizens and community leaders) and near-hysterical local newspapers.

Since then, through the works of Hall, Critcher and others, the notion of the moral panic as a social construct - the product of a broad (ideological) consensus arrived at through negotiated interaction between societal elites or “control-cultures” (Hall et al 1978), law-enforcers, news media and the public – has repeatedly resurfaced in academic discourse. And public discourse has dutifully continued generating examples of such caricatured constructions. In the aftermath of Britain’s 2011 urban riots, a febrile combination of zero-tolerance political invective and punitive judicial sentencing, fuelled by hyperactive 24-hour media coverage and polls indicating widespread public support for a fierce crackdown on the perpetrators, saw an explosion of deep-rooted and complex social problems dismissed as a simple case of “moral collapse” among “troubled” families (Cameron 15 August 2011).

Today’s sociologists and communications scholars still broadly concur on the importance of media claims-making in the construction, and reproduction, of narratives around social deviancy – whether the folk-devils vilified are alienated/delinquent youths (Cohen 1972), “welfare scroungers” (Golding and Middleton 1982) or predatory paedophiles (Critcher 2003). But there is less agreement on how hegemonic these narratives now are, in light of the increasing democratisation of today’s claims-making – through the transformative influence of the Internet, mobile digital platforms, citizen journalism, and social media. In an age when newspapers routinely invest more time and money in

online content than print – and firsthand accounts of news ‘events’, from the popular uprisings of the ‘Arab Spring’ to images of hooded looters fleeing flaming buildings during the riots, are as likely to be generated by audience-members as professional journalists – tools like Twitter and Facebook are empowering every one of us to become claims-makers. At the same time, ‘deviants’ themselves can harness this technology to challenge mainstream narratives - and norms. Whether by posting counter-claims on Daily Mail discussion-boards, convening their own sub-cultural forums or, indeed, using BlackBerry’s free encrypted messaging service to coordinate mass raids on shops and businesses, folk-devils are now able to “fight back” (McRobbie and Thornton 1995).

Adopting a broadly social constructionist perspective, this paper aims to assess how a combination of textual analysis and virtual ethnography might be used to decode the content of online newspapers and, in so doing, illuminate the new sites of claim and counter-claim at play in the production (and contestation) of contemporary moral panic narratives. The paper takes as its focus the subject of the author’s doctoral research: the dual panic in late-modern Britain that positions children/teenagers as, paradoxically, both potential prey and predator, through popular narratives about stranger-danger and other extra-familial threats on the one hand and the decrying of “antisocial behaviour” by “feral youth” on the other (Valentine 1996a; Scott et al 1978).

The author uses as his primary research material a combined textual analysis and virtual ethnography of selective content drawn from a cross-section of UK national (and one local) newspaper websites during summer 2011. By analysing how news stories and other articles about children and teenagers were framed by the interplay between journalists themselves and the ‘live responses’ they generated from readers contributing to discussion threads and other forms of user-generated content, he hopes to have illustrated how the construction of news narratives – and, through them, popular discourse – is/are increasingly the product of a multilateral dialogue between news sources, professional media (editors and reporters), amateur media (citizen journalists and other engaged ‘audience-members’), and, occasionally, deviants themselves. The textual analysis/virtual ethnography of online ‘reader responses’ also makes tentative moves towards inferring the presence of (limited) immediate audience effects - even if these are only visible, for the most part, in the form of reactive comments and/or expressions of changed or reinforced opinions. Content examined reflects the plethora of stories relating to the positioning of juveniles as prey and/or predator that ‘broke’ between the unusually eventful month of July 2011. It encompasses articles and

forums focusing on everything from the Republic of Ireland's public fallout with the Roman Catholic Church over the simmering scandal of paedophile priests and the jailing of trusted schoolteachers for child sexual abuse to equally familiar tales of 'antisocial behaviour' by school bullies and feral teenagers. Despite ending two weeks shy of Prime Minister David Cameron's pledge to target 120,000 "troubled" families for emergency parenting tuition following the August riots (Cameron 15 August 2011), it demonstrates a clear narrative preoccupation in Britain's public sphere with a dual narrative that positions juveniles in highly contradictory terms which might best be described as 'deserving' and 'undeserving' (and occasionally both at the same time).

The overarching aim of the paper is to offer an insight (if a necessarily limited one) into how today's online news environment can be understood as both a battleground and melting-pot for the negotiation of competing ideas and ideologies about social reality. In particular, it sets out to demonstrate how traditional models of news (and reality) construction, which positioned politicians, law-enforcers and, to some extent, journalists as "primary definers" (Hall et al 1978) of this social reality, are now being challenged by audience-members far more "active" than Hall himself could ever have envisaged while writing his seminal encoding/decoding paper (Hall 1973).

With these new sites of 'people power' in mind, the paper ends on an optimistic note. Cohen, who popularised the moral panic concept, has recently argued it is possible for panics to be progressive (Cohen 2002 and 2010) – a theme reflecting Habermas's observation that many great popular concerns of the late 20th century, including the risks of nuclear accidents and climate change, stemmed from the successful infiltration of the "public sphere" by grassroots campaigns emanating from the "civil-social periphery" (1996, p.381). Is it too fanciful, then, to imagine a future in which the new sites of contest visible on online newspaper forums and collaborative blogs see more liberal social constructions championed than today's knee-jerk demonization of working-class youth?

Introduction

Much has been made in the literature on moral panics – scares about "a threat or supposed threat from deviants or 'folk-devils'" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, p.2) – of the role elite and/or expert "claims-makers" play in fanning the flames of popular hysteria about these malign miscreants (Cohen 1972). In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Ibid), Stanley Cohen's study of the furore surrounding the

clashes between Mods and Rockers in early 1970s English seaside resorts, he popularised the idea that panics were generated and/or sustained not so much by the indisputable drama of authentic events but by the alarmist pronouncements of politicians, law enforcers, “moral entrepreneurs” such as residents’ groups and community campaigners, and the news media. Hall et al took the concept of claims-making further in *Policing the Crisis*, in which they analysed the claims leading to an explosion of public concern about a reputed spate of mugging by black youths, also in the early Seventies, and concluded this (largely bogus) phenomenon was socially constructed by an alliance of “primary” and “secondary definers” – chiefly government ministers, judges, the police and, naturally, journalists.

What these seminal texts share in common with numerous subsequent moral panic studies – from Fishman’s (1978) ethnographic account of the “ideological” invention of a late Seventies youth “crime-wave” in Los Angeles to Golding and Middleton’s classic (1982) deconstruction of broadly contemporaneous hyperbole surrounding a supposed epidemic of welfare-sponging in Britain – is their focus on how claims enter the public sphere and are framed and contested principally through media discourse. But the claims-makers they identified and the sites of discourse they analysed were all highly traditional – with the result that the narratives they untangled were (perhaps inevitably for the times) almost wholly ‘top-down’ and ‘unidirectional’ in nature. In other words, they confined themselves to examining the social constructions contained in print and/or broadcast (television and radio) journalism produced by professional reporters and commentators, with access to in-the-know “elite” (Hall et al 1978) and/or “expert” claims-makers. Moreover, these were constructions produced for public *consumption*. However “active” audiences themselves might be in “decoding”, and even questioning, media narratives (Hall 1973), they were still portrayed as being just that: *audiences*. It was for media practitioners and their fellow definers - or “knowers” - to set the terms of the discourse. Ultimately, all audiences could do if they rejected or disbelieved a particular narrative was change newspapers or switch channels. In the event of a (mainstream) media and/or “control culture” consensus (Hall et al 1978), there were few options open to dissenters but to holler from sidelines.

This is not to say that no effort was made in those earlier studies to test the claims of conventional claims-makers against the experiences of the general public. Cohen spent time mingling with tourists and locals in Brighton to observe (and elicit) their responses to the tales of Mod-versus-Rocker mayhem carried in the town’s evening paper, the *Argus*. Golding and Middleton analysed a wide range of ‘grassroots’ sources, including views generated by public opinion polls, to gauge actual

public perceptions of the nature and scale of benefit-scrounging. And Hall et al devoted a chapter to examining the reactions of news audiences to the early 1970s mugging “crisis” as mediated by correspondences on newspaper letters pages and death threats sent to convicted muggers and their families (Hall et al 1978, pp.-). More recent studies of media-fuelled panics – from Valentine’s extensive efforts to illuminate parental anxieties about ‘stranger-danger’ and other extra-familial threats to children (1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997a) to Kitzinger’s (1999a) unravelling of misconceptions about links between homosexuality and paedophilia and Boyce’s impressively triangulated (2007) exploration of the post-1990s scare about the mumps, measles, rubella (MMR) vaccine – have used focus-groups and one-to-one interviews to explore to great effect the complexities of how audiences interpret, process and respond to ‘panicky’ media narratives about juvenile vulnerability.

However, the fact remains that, since at least the mid-2000s, the oft-cited “multimedia” landscape has become progressively more multidimensional, multidirectional and, by extension, democratised in its inputs and outputs than would appear from much of the academic literature. While news narratives continue to be constructed and framed on a daily basis by a cabal of mainstream professional journalists and their elite/expert sources – drawing their story ideas and angles from a “news net” or “web of facticity” (Tuchman 1978) which rests on establishment ideas about newsworthiness – one only has to peruse the discussion-threads flowing from news items on the websites of mainstream national and local newspapers, let alone the wider “blogosphere” (Castells 2008), to be confronted with a plurality of informed (and uninformed) opinions and increasingly authoritative challenges to the factual basis of the articles themselves. Today, amid the semi-literate rants and contentious generalisations clogging up the message boards on www.dailymail.co.uk there are glimpses of something else: of the emergence from the shadows of a new breed of ‘citizen claims-maker’, or counter claims-maker, as informed, articulate and (potentially) equipped to shape the terms of media discourse as the ‘journalist-elite-expert’ triumvirate of old.

Though the best of the pre-Internet studies have much to tell us about the two-way nature of news discourse – lending ammunition to “active audience” theories on the one hand (Klapper 1960; Hall 1973), while also providing considerable circumstantial evidence for the present of media effects – they are each essentially rooted in an ‘old’ model, which positions the public as recipients/interrogators of claims made by other, more *informed*, individuals and organisations. To date, little has been done empirically to illuminate how the public can be (and, increasingly, are)

claims-makers themselves. In the multidimensional world of digital media, it is now possible for ordinary citizens and previously marginalised voices to gain an airing: for 'alternative' claims-makers, and counter claims-makers, to reject the narratives constructed by mainstream forces, and to construct their own. During the 2011 'Arab Spring', Twitter, Facebook and other social media outlets enabled suppressed citizenries across the Middle East to break through previously impregnable censorship barriers to find global audiences for their first-person testimonies (and footage). And it was a *Guardian* journalist's use of crowd-sourcing to obtain digital camera footage of a police assault on innocent passer-by Ian Tomlinson during the 2009 G20 protests that first called into serious doubt officers' own testimony, and ultimately led to an inquest verdict of unlawful killing (www.bbc.co.uk, May 4, 2011). Similarly, recent attempts to demonise 'deviant' groups and individuals ranging from the rioters who ransacked English town-centres in August 2011 to the anti-capitalist protestors who set up camp outside St Paul's Cathedral two months later have been met by powerful counter-claims by the deviants themselves (and evidence to support them, drawn from everything from mobile phone footage to the 'establishment's' own CCTV cameras). As McRobbie and Thornton remarked in relation to the successful counter claims-making campaign articulate AIDS sufferers used to debunk myths about the disease in the pre-digital era, "folk devils' can 'fight back'" (1995, p.270).

The power of the Internet, and social media, to offer a platform for mainstream news narratives to be challenged by audiences has begun to be recognised in general terms by academic researchers. In her influential methodological tract *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), Christine Hine demonstrated how the publicity surrounding the televised US trial of British nanny Louise Woodward for allegedly shaking to death a baby in her care fostered a multilateral online dialogue between citizens from a variety of countries with a wide range of perspectives, including those campaigning for her release. But what has so far been lacking is sufficient empirical research into the ways in which the digital realm is being used to not only contest news narratives through argument and opinion, but to directly reject - and even 'disprove' - them. In addition, while considerable attention has been paid to how "citizen journalists" use blogs and other social media tools – not to mention 'DIY' investigative sites like Wikileaks and helpmeininvestigate.com – to source material and frame narratives that contradict those of the media 'establishment', little effort has so far been made to analyse how subversive, even deviant, counter-narratives are now also being constructed on mainstream news websites themselves. This paper aims to start the process of exploring how discussion-boards and

collaborative blogs on professional British newspaper sites are increasingly being used not only to *comment* on news narratives contrived by journalists, but to construct alternative ones. Taking as its focus a selection of news stories drawing on moral panic narratives about children and teenagers, it aims to isolate the (counter) claims-makers from the merely opinionated – in so doing, positioning audience-members as the putative “opinion-leaders” (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) of tomorrow.

Methodology

The research for this paper stemmed from a content analysis of news stories about children published in the English print editions of all but three national newspapers during July 2011. Commencing on July 1 and ending on July 31, on every fifth day the author analysed every news story focusing on children or teenagers (up to the legal definition of adulthood, from age 18) by the following mainstream newspaper titles: the *Sun*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Star*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, and the *Independent*. The three newspapers omitted from the sample were the *Financial Times*, the *i*, and the *Metro*. The first of these was excluded on the basis that it is an essentially specialist title whose primary focus is economic news, and its breadth of coverage of other issues, including those concerning children, is unrepresentative of general mainstream news discourse. The latter was omitted because it is a simplified version of the *Independent* and most of its content appears simultaneously in that title. The *Metro* was rejected because it is only distributed in certain locations – primarily railway stations and bus routes in and around urban centres – making it an unreliable litmus-test of narratives available on ‘newsstands’ throughout England. On the single Sunday when newspapers were sampled (31 July), all nine national titles were analysed: namely the *Observer*, *Independent on Sunday*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Sunday Times*, *Mail on Sunday*, *Sunday Express*, *Sunday Mirror*, *Daily Star Sunday*, and the *People*.

The author’s initial aim in conducting the content analysis was to establish support for his hypothesis that the underlying narrative of news discourse about children and childhood in late modern Britain is one which positions them as (often simultaneously) potential prey and potential predator - or, to quote Valentine (1996a), “angels and devils”. After isolating every news story focusing on a child or children from the July 1 newspaper editions, the author divided them into the following six categories: children as victims (or potential victims); children as (potential) threats;

children as survivors; children as achievers/heroes; celebrity children; and all other stories about children. His expectation was that the large majority of stories drawn from the completed content analysis would fall into one or other of the first two categories: namely those positioning juveniles either as vulnerable to external dangers or as a danger in themselves. To address the question of whether, and to what extent, such narratives permeate to mainstream media at lower levels, the author also sampled editions of his local evening paper, the Brighton *Argus*, on the same dates.

His decision to analyse physical print copies of the newspapers concerned enabled the author to make additional qualitative observations about the framing of articles than had he carried out his analysis using software packages such as LexisNexis or ProQuest. For example, he was able to note how and where a given story was positioned on the printed page; whether it was accompanied by an image; and, if so, of what. In addition, although his primary focus was how news stories – newspapers' supposedly objective representation of newsworthy events and issues – were framed and constructed, he did not limit himself solely to analysing articles in news sections. Nonetheless, for clarity of recording, and ease of replication using either of the above programs, it was necessary to rationalise his final coding to the following six categories: type of article/section; page number, and whether an article appeared on a 'facing' (oddly numbered) or 'non-facing' (even) page; headline wording; angle/wording of opening sentence/paragraph (intro); use of subjective/value-laden language in article as a whole; and choice of sources (claims-makers).

The author's ultimate purpose, however, was not merely to analyse the newspaper narratives themselves, but to illuminate the ways in which their 'audience-members' *responded* to - and perhaps even sought to *correct* – those narratives while in the process of reading and digesting them. For this reason, he chose to study the 'live' responses generated by the articles on the newspapers' own comment boards and discussion threads. In doing so, it was necessary for him to focus on particular categories drawn from his content analysis to the exclusion of others: for example, while headline and intro wording, overall use of loaded language and journalists' choice of sources remained vital to analysing the ways in which articles were presented (and perceived) online, other aspects of framing that have a bearing on how prominently items appear in *print*, such as page numbers and positioning, became largely irrelevant. In focusing on intros and headlines, though, the author had to be careful to identify subtle differences in phrasing, not to mention presence and/or choice of images, between newspapers' print and online editions (particularly noticeable in red-top tabloids like the *Sun*).

Because of the author's interest in examining the construction and reception of moral panic narratives about juveniles, the virtual ethnography was focused on the twin categories of article most relevant to this discourse: children as threat and children as victim. Each one of the 297 articles falling under one or other of these headings was accessed online, but for obvious reasons it was only possible for audience input/responses to be analysed in relation to those for which comment boards/discussion threads were provided. Therefore, the final virtual ethnography encompassed some 23 articles – nearly 8% of the 297 bracketed in the above categories and just over 5% of the total number of juvenile-related pieces (430) identified on the seven dates over which the content analysis was carried out. The greater emphasis placed by some newspapers on soliciting comment and discussion-based user-generated content than others meant that the sample contained an unavoidable bias towards broadsheet/quality titles (notably the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Independent*) and one particular mid-market tabloid (the *Daily Mail*), with papers like the *Sun* – responsible for the biggest single 'news day' in relation to juvenile stories (July 6) – reserving their invitations to readers to post online reactions for only a handful of longer pieces. The only articles listed in the relevant categories in the content analysis but (purposely) excluded from the virtual ethnography were those concerning revelations about alleged hacking by reporters at the *News of the World* newspaper of the mobile phones of parents of the murdered schoolgirls Milly Dowler, Sarah Payne, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. Although these articles had referred to the suffering of their families – and reused 'iconic' photographs of the girls – their main emphasis was the 'abuse' of vulnerable relatives by mercenary journalists rather than that of the children themselves by their killers. As a result, it was felt that to have incorporated them into the analysis of online user responses to 'new' stories about children as victims and/or threats ran the risk of distorting the findings.

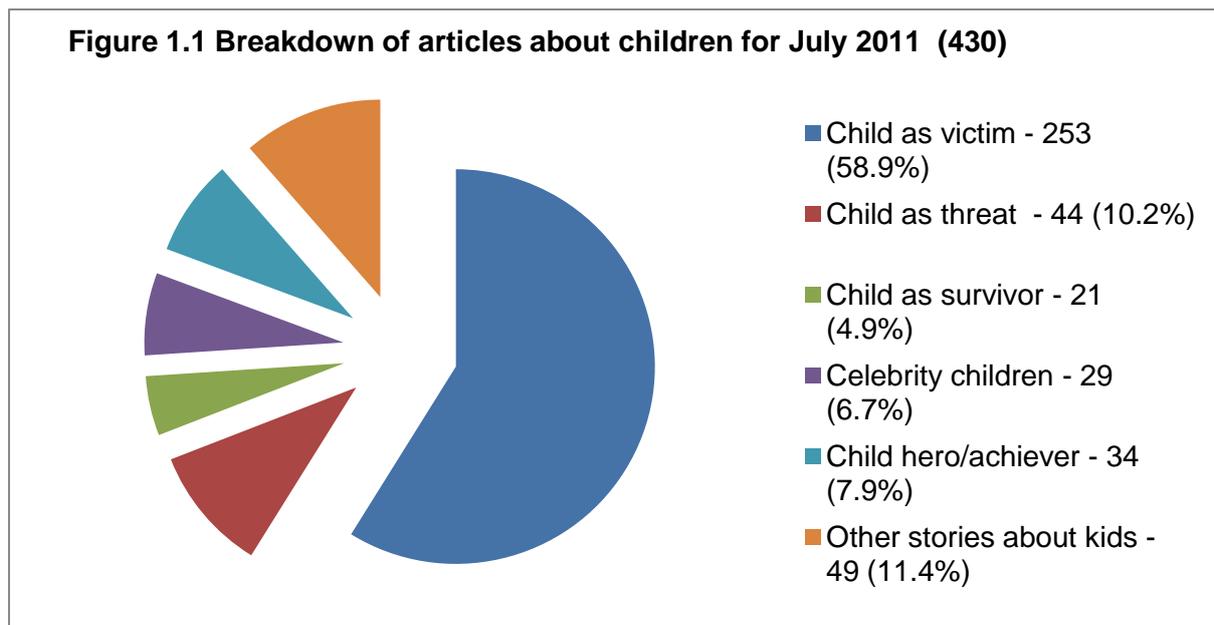
Given this paper's emphasis on identifying and analysing the manner in which audience posts on newspaper websites are being used to not only respond to mainstream news narratives but to challenge and even counteract them, it was necessary for the 2,809 individual postings read during the course of the virtual ethnography to be split into two broad categories: straightforward *comments* (including those supportive of the 'claims' central to the story concerned) and those better described as *claims*, or *counter-claims*, in themselves. The latter were those posts in which audience-members either affirmed or contradicted the narrative underpinning an article based on direct references to their own observations, experience(s) and/or 'expertise'. These claims-based comments were coded into

two categories: affirmative (supportive of the news narrative) and oppositional (against it). The oppositional posts – those taking issue with a given narrative based on the prior knowledge and/or experience of the poster – were then further sub-coded into ones asserting a level of additional *information* about the subject of an article (including that which may have been obtained from secondary sources, such as books, other articles and/or the Internet) and those explicitly citing *personal and/or vicarious experience* as the basis of their challenge to the journalistic discourse.

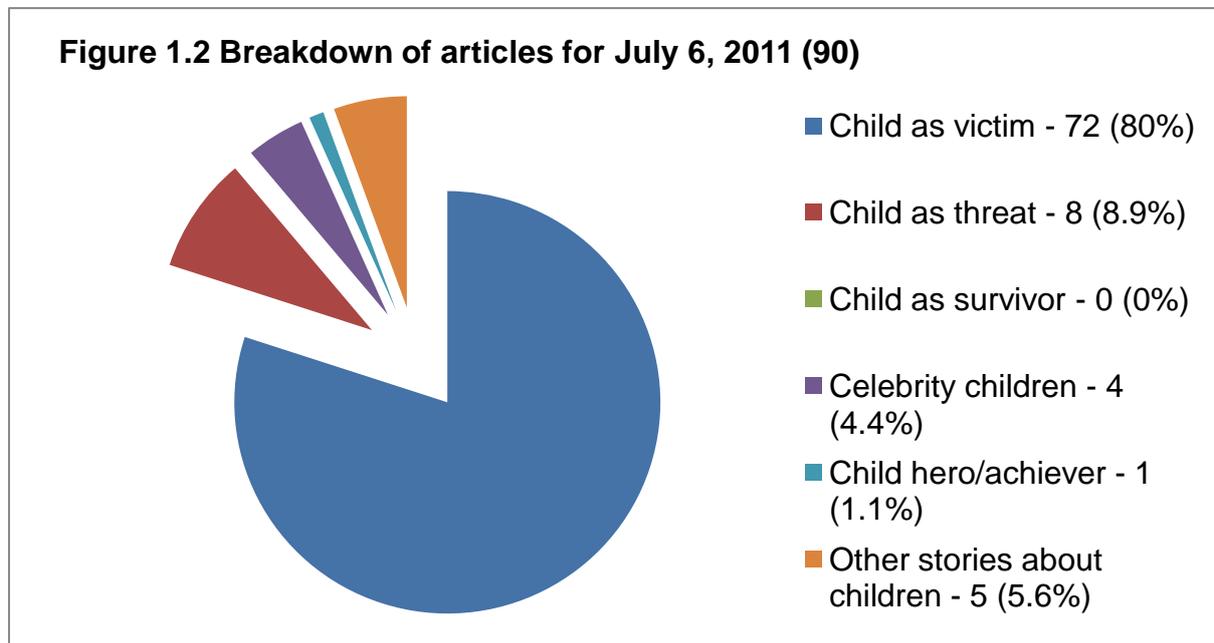
Research outcomes and analysis

Content analysis

As stated above, content analysis of the 63 national newspaper editions and six issues of the Brighton *Argus* carried out during July 2011 identified a total of 430 articles focusing on children and/or teenagers under the age of 18. Of these, 253 (or 59%) were classified as falling into the ‘children as (potential) victims’ category and a further 44 (10%) into that of ‘children as (potential) threats’. The author’s initial hypothesis – that the majority of articles would fall into either of these classes – was therefore proven. The overall breakdown of articles across the month is given in Figure 1.1 below:



The biggest individual 'news day' proved to be July 6, on which 72 articles appeared positioning children as actual or potential victims (eight out of ten of the total) and eight (a further 9%) as threats. The breakdown for this single day of newspaper coverage appears in Figure 1.2:



Breakdowns of article type for the newspapers featuring the most and fewest stories about juveniles – the *Sun* and the *Guardian* respectively – and for the *Argus* can be found in Figures 1.3 to 1.5 in the appendix. An attempt was also made to divide articles about children as victims and children as threats into sub-categories, and these can be also be seen in the appendix (Figures 1.6 and 1.7). More than a quarter of articles positioning children as potential or actual victims (70 out of 253) had as their subject paedophile attacks and/or murders, with an identical number focusing on serious and/or fatal medical emergencies/conditions. Other forms of attack and/or abuse, besides of that of a sexual

nature, accounted for just under a further quarter (60 articles). Of those positioning children as actual or prospective threats themselves, the largest portion (36% or 16 out of 44) concerned criminal and/or antisocial behaviour of a non-violent nature, with a further quarter focusing on incidents involving children as attackers and/or killers, or debates and issues related to juvenile violence.

Virtual ethnography

Perhaps predictably, of the 2,809 comment posts coded for the virtual ethnography, the overwhelming majority (2,244 or eight out of ten) could be classed as straightforward reactions to the articles beneath which they were posted. Equally predictably, most tended to concur with the editorial line of the website concerned - in other words, to endorse the angle and/or narrative thrust of the story about which they were commenting - as one might expect from media-users who chose to visit a particular site in preference to others. For example, a common response to articles about unruly children or, conversely, those who mistreated or abused the young was one of disgust and/or anger. The single comment posted beneath a July 6 story on the *Sun's* website headlined 'Shy weeps as paedo stepdad freed earl: abuse campaigner's fury' was typical in tone and content of many of those posted in response to stories about child sexual abuse. An audience-member using the alias buffy71 wrote:

"This man should rot in jail, until the space reserved in Hell for him is ready for him to rot there, for what he did to Shy. The "justice" system in the UK is far from its title."

Similarly, a lengthy July 11 article on the *Daily Mail's* website about the pregnant 15-year-old daughter of a welfare-dependent "mother of 14" attracted some 745 comments – many of them condemning the latter's "breeding" habits (Charlotte, Cape Town; J Thompson, Bangor; Cathy, West Yorkshire), with some using the story as an excuse to launch into wider invectives about the "underclass" (deji, London), using often lurid language like "vermin" (Ibid) and "scroungers" (Jane von M, the Netherlands) to describe the family. Similarly hot-tempered responses – often, though not exclusively, to be found on the *Mail* website – greeted articles on everything from misbehaving school pupils ('Teachers will be allowed to use force on unruly pupils as ministers lift 'no touching' ban',

www.dailymail.co.uk, July 10, 2011) to a father prosecuted for warning fellow parents that the husband of his ex-wife was a convicted paedophile (Father fined £1,000 and found guilty of harassment for warning families about a paedophile, www.dailymail.co.uk, July 11, 2011).

However, given the preoccupation of this paper with evidence of *claims-making* by audience-members posting on newspaper websites – as opposed to mere *reaction* – the responses of greatest interest to the author were the one in five that went beyond endorsing or criticising the editorial line taken by a particular article, to present additional and/or alternative information and perspectives with a bearing on the ‘facts’ of a story and/or the portrait of social reality it sought to construct. Although just under 60% (327) of the 546 responses falling into this category amounted to *affirmative* claims – i.e. personal testimonies from audience-members who claimed that their experience and/or expert knowledge of a particular subject supported the narrative direction taken by the article on which they were commenting – the remaining 40% (219) presented *oppositional* claims based on information and/or expertise that contradicted the newspapers’ version of a story or issue. The significance of this small but vocal minority of informed ‘dissenters’ – or counter claims-makers – was further emphasised by the number whose challenges to the website’s official narratives were based on their own (declared) *experience* of a social phenomenon, rather than ‘outsider’ *knowledge* about it. One in four (87) of the counter-claims posted in response to the articles analysed were based on their authors’ assertions that they had personal or vicarious experiences and/or knowhow of direct relevance to the narratives they were contesting. Of the remaining six out of ten (132), all we know for certain about them is that they were able to cite background knowledge (e.g. statistics, quotes and examples) that contradicted the narrative of an article. It is possible, though, that some of this knowledge might itself have been obtained firsthand, and that a number of counter claims-makers who did not ‘declare an interest’ so explicitly – by, for example, referring to information and expertise obtained while working in a particular job or for a specific organisation – might also, in fact, have been ‘experienced’ knowers.

Affirmative claims-makers

Of the affirmative claims, a large number consisted of posts that endorsed the (implicitly) critical narrative of an article – for example, the value-laden language and strongly angled intros used in stories about menacing children on the one hand and those who menace them on the other – by

reference to the (allegedly) similar experiences of their authors. A poster using the alias “aussiemaverick” responded to a July 26 story in the *Independent* about the Vatican’s decision to withdraw its ambassador to the Republic of Ireland following Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny’s condemnation of its handling of the long-running controversy over paedophile priests with a comment drawing on his or her own experience of being “physically and psychologically” abused by nuns at a school in Melbourne. Likewise, “Ruth, Essex” argued on July 10 in support of the principal claims-makers (the Department for Education and an outspoken former deputy head-teacher) cited in a *Daily Mail* story about a government decision to lift a “no touching” ban on disruptive schoolchildren, stating that she had been forced to give up teaching herself after 34 years due to a “breakdown” caused, she implied, by unruly pupils whose parents had failed to discipline them properly at home. Depending on the subjects under discussion, *Daily Mail* message-boards also tended to contain large numbers of posts in which claims-makers referred to their own relatively ‘poorer’ position compared to those of the (undeserving) protagonists of the articles on which they were commenting. In two extensive pieces focusing on the “mother of 14” mentioned earlier, many of the 88 claims posted endorsing the *Mail’s* (critical) editorial line referred to their frustration and/or anger at being taxed to finance her supposed lifestyle. For example, “RB, Republic of Yorkshire” wrote of his disgust at the fact he appeared to receive the same income as the single mother, despite working hard for a living and having higher outgoings, while self-declared pensioner “smauriman, Gillingham Kent” contested a point made previously by “Richard, Bedford”, in which he had argued that the woman’s children would be needed as adults to help pay for Britain’s ageing population. Smauriman’s point was that, despite being retired, he was himself being taxed in the present to fund the benefits claimed by her and her brood. Interestingly, though – and by way of a footnote to this particular exchange – one of the most enthusiastically ‘argued’ aspects of the dialogue surrounding this article related to the counter-claim, made by several posters, that far from being a burden on the UK tax system the “mother of 14” lived on Guernsey and was therefore, in fact, drawing on that of the Channel Islands.

Oppositional claims-makers

A common characteristic of the counter-claims posted in response to the articles examined for this paper was their presentation of additional and/or contradictory ‘factual’ information (e.g. data or forms

of other acquired knowledge) that cast a different light on the stories being reported, often directly undermining or debunking the websites' own favoured narratives. Thus on July 26, "Christine, Newport" posted a comment on the *Daily Mail* site countering the central claim(s) of a story headlined 'Headmaster resigns after being suspended for 'manhandling' 8-year-old - despite pupil's family saying he did nothing wrong' – namely that teachers were barred from using physical force, even to protect themselves or other pupils – by referring to rules permitting the use of "appropriate restraint methods". In a *Daily Telegraph* article on July 26 focusing on a new initiative by Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell to promote happiness among children, "susan t" reminded fellow posters that Britain's top civil servant earned an estimated £250,000-plus – some ten times the then national average salary.

Another common form of counter-claim was the post which *re-presented* facts contained (if often buried) in the original article itself, and *emphasised* those details over ones fore-grounded by the writer to contest the impression of a story the latter appeared to be trying to give. The various posters who interrupted the stream of critical comments generated by the two articles about the "mother of 14" to point out that her benefits were actually funded by taxpayers on Guernsey, rather than those in Britain, were cases in point. In response to criticisms of her single mother status, two posters drew attention to the fact that (as the text of the first article itself acknowledged) she had only become "single" three years earlier, after her husband left her. An extension of the idea of 're-presenting' information carried (but not emphasised) in an article to provide a contrasting perspective on it is the practice used by a handful of posters of drawing attention to stories published elsewhere on the same website whose narratives appear to contradict that in the 'current' article. Once more in the case of the "mother of 14", a poster calling him or herself "AF, UK" noted the following on July 11:

"The UK has a rapidly ageing population and this paper has repeatedly raised concerns about the falling birth rate among white, educated people and compared it to the higher birth levels in other cultural backgrounds in the UK. If the middle class aren't going to have the children (and they weren't having children before the economic crisis so don't try and blame that) then the working class may as well fill the gap. You will be grateful for these 14 healthy, clean and english [sic] children when you are older..."

Perhaps the most illuminating (and powerful) counter-claims of all, however, were the small but significant minority arising out of direct or vicarious experiences posters professed to have had themselves. For instance, a July 30 *Telegraph* story reviving familiar concerns about the nefarious influence of magazine depictions of physical beauty on girls with eating disorders was countered by more than one poster who claimed to have had anorexia herself but was less than sympathetic to fellow sufferers who sought to blame their conditions on media portrayals of idealised body types. Similarly oppositional claims appeared in response to a July 20 article in the *Telegraph* concerning the expulsion of three pupils from the exclusive public school, Bedales, over an alleged sex and alcohol scandal – with alumni, other privately educated posters and at least one former staff member lining up to defend the institution on the basis of their positive experience of independent schooling.

Of all the counter claims-making examined by the author, though, the most ‘positive’ was that posted in opposition to a story run by the *Mail* (and several other newspaper websites) on July 10, focusing on allegations that a gang of travellers or Gypsies had callously drowned a pony in a lake. The *Mail*'s version of the story – headlined ‘Gang 'deliberately drowned' pony in lake in front of horrified families’ – attracted some 216 web posts. Stripping out the 204 which took the form of (largely condemnatory) reactions to the alleged crime, 12 of the posts contained claims of one sort or other by people purporting to hold informed views on the subject. Of these, eight were counter-claims – outnumbering the claims ‘supporting’ the *Mail* narrative by two to one. The claims-makers who drew on unspecified sources of knowledge about travellers/Gypsies and/or horses to back up their criticism of the *Mail* line included “Polly, Yorkshire”, who disputed the likelihood of the “gang” abandoning the pony’s trap and tackle (as the story stated), given the cost of these items of equipment, and “horace4831, Gravesend, Kent”, who contrasted the paper’s description of events with the BBC’s version of the same story, which made “no mention of them [the culprits] being Gypsies”. Most noteworthy, however, was a post by “John, Reading”, which attempted a wholesale contradiction of many key claims of the original story. In a counter-claim which positioned his “friend” as both an eyewitness to, and protagonist in, the events reported, he wrote:

“This story is awfully inaccurate and rather spiteful, bordering on racism. I spoke to a friend who works at the lake, teaching sailing, last night and he told me the horses were taken into the water to cool off after a hot ride. Apparently this is a common practice, although it was rather stupid to do it in a gravel

pit. The member of public who went to hospital sustained his injuries from several kicks to the head from the HORSE, [sic] he tried to rescue. I know this because my friend jumped out of his boat and pulled him out of the water. It was a terrible accident, nothing sinister and the owners of the pony are guilty of stupidity, leaving the scene of an incident and not being compassionate but they are certainly not guilty of deliberately trying to drown their ponies. If you want to check this out, telephone Hawley Lakes Sailing Club, they will confirm this story...”

Here, then, we have a firm demonstration of how counter claims-making on online message-boards can be used to re-frame the overarching constructions placed by news websites (by accident or design) on individual events/issues. By posting a counter-claim that ‘authoritatively’ contradicted the *Mail’s* original narrative, “John, Reading” singlehandedly altered the final form that narrative took.

Conclusion: online newspaper claims-making and the new public sphere

Although its scope is necessarily modest, given the limited timeframe and breadth of articles on which it focuses, this paper aims to offer a glimpse of the possibilities presented by the emerging sites of claims-making and counter claims-making on online newspaper comment-boards and discussion threads. Much more work needs to be done by researchers to illuminate this new realm of social construction (and deconstruction), embracing wider definitions of user-generated content to demonstrate how grassroots claims-makers and counter claims-makers might harness the virtual public sphere to challenge hegemonic narratives (Gramsci 1971) even more effectively, and to explore more fully how some may already be doing so. As Habermas (1996) has emphasised in relation to the social and political forces that successfully counteracted establishment narratives in the late 20th century – notably the movements against global poverty and atomic energy – it is often grassroots claims-makers (you and me) who bring big issues to the world’s attention. Is it so fanciful to envisage a time when posts on the *Guardian’s* “Comment is Free” – or, for that matter, the *Daily Star’s* “Your Shout” - are being used to alert us to the era-defining issues and injustices of tomorrow?

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Appendix

Figure 1.3 Breakdown of types of articles on children (83)

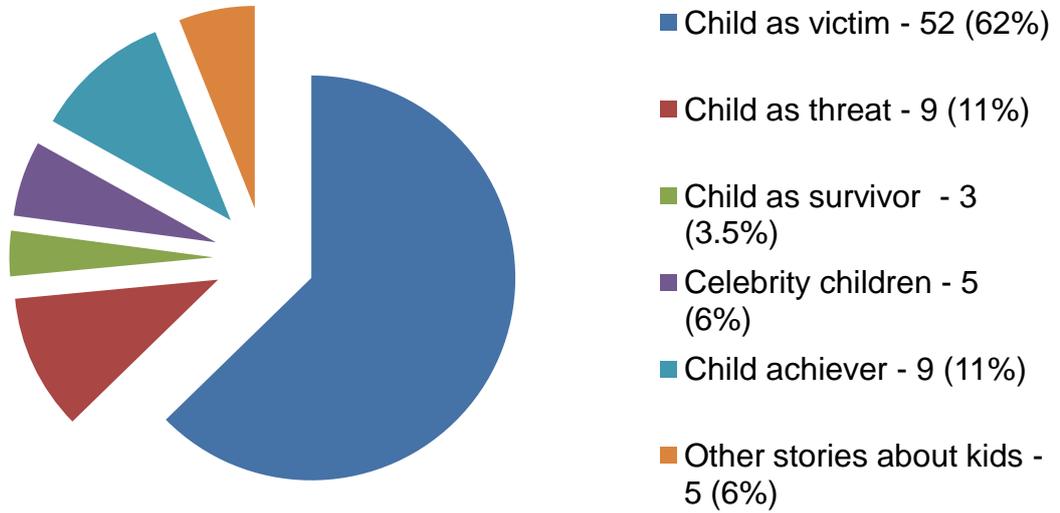


Figure 1.4 Breakdown of types of articles on children (18)

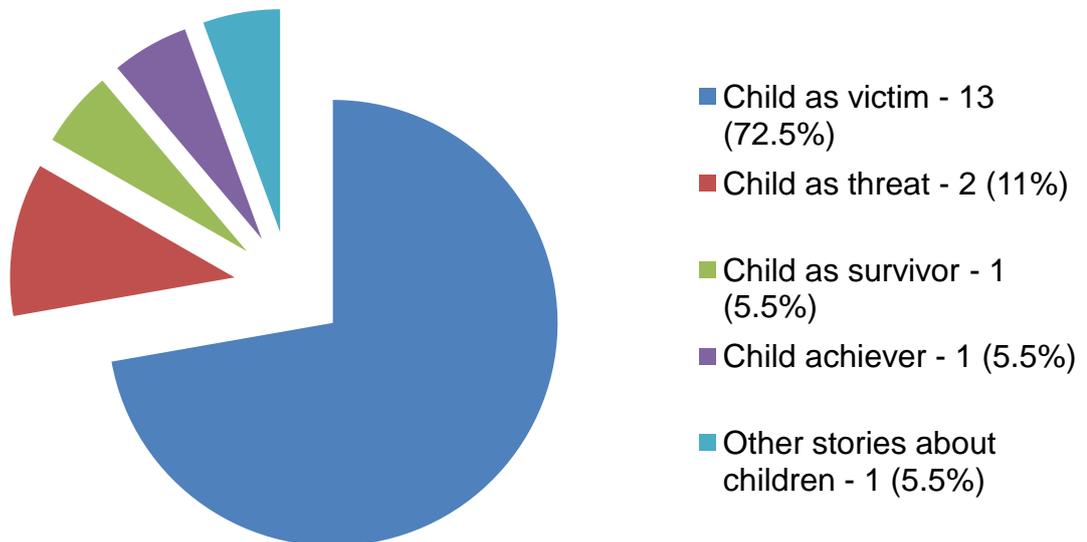


Figure 1.5 Breakdown of types of articles about children (53)

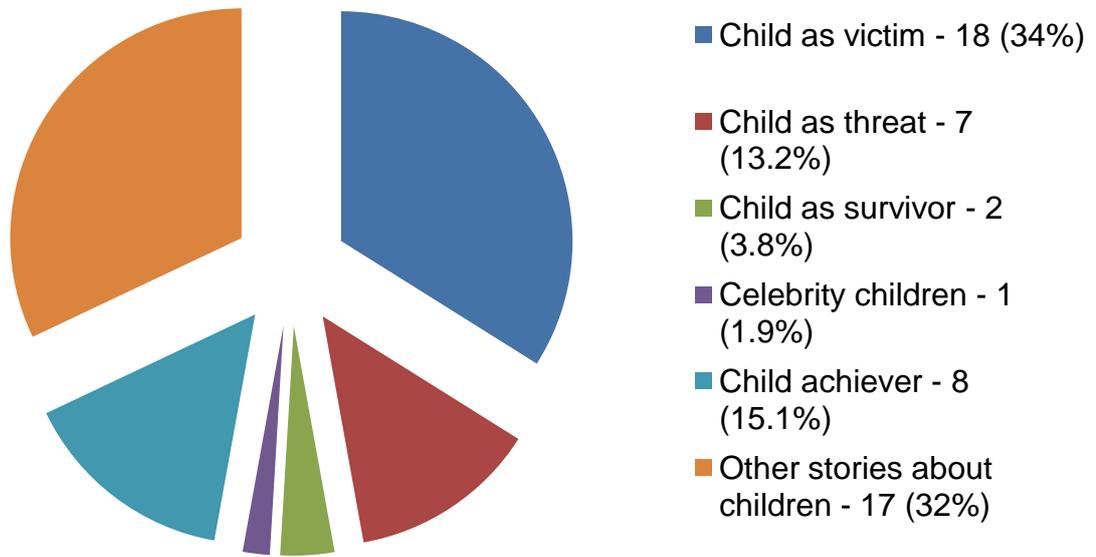


Figure 1.6 Breakdown of threats faced by children (253)

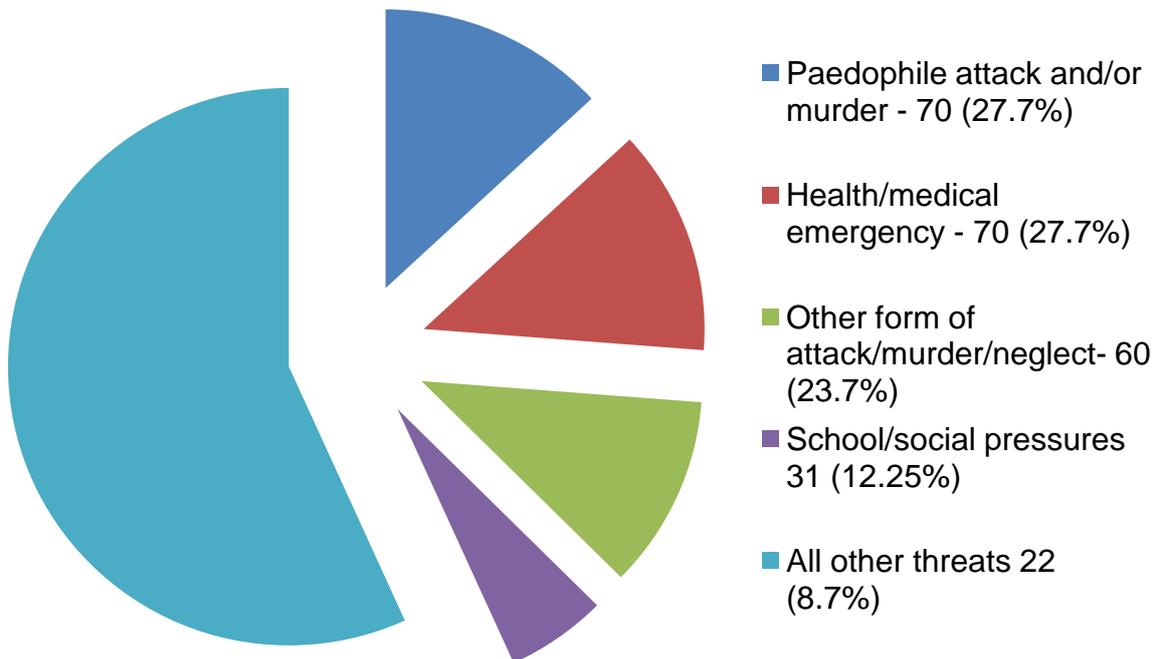


Figure 1.7 Breakdown of threats posed by children (44)

