

Constructing Parenthood in Moral Panics of Youth, Digital Media, and 'Sexting'

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Abstract

This study examines 93 articles published in major U.S. newspapers between November 2008 and April 2009 regarding the dissemination of sexually explicit images using cellular phone cameras and multimedia message technology, or “sexting,” among youths. The results show that these media sources viewed sexting through the lens of a moral panic and uncritically disseminated essentialist representations of teens as impulsive, libidinous, and lacking self-control. However, these articles also uncritically disseminated stereotypical representations of parents as ignorant, technologically inept, and incapable of controlling their children’s behaviors. Moreover, these articles aggressively propounded parenting strategies for addressing sexting in the family, preferring authoritarian solutions to less restrictive or confrontational solutions and invoking draconian legal consequences as justification for implementing harsh parental restrictions. These findings suggest media sources play an especially significant role in constructing exemplary parenting with regard to youth’s use of digital media, while complicating critical theory’s tendency to conflate parents, law enforcement officials, and journalists as harmonious co-conspirators in the oppression of youths.

Introduction

The social problem of disseminating sexually explicit images of oneself using cellular phone cameras and multimedia message technology, or “sexting,” recently rose to public prominence in the early months of 2009, after a methodologically dubious study reported that one in five teens had sent a sexually explicit image to another teen (Sex and Tech 2008). A more representative study from November 2009, however, has since found that only 4 percent of teens have engaged in sexting, raising doubts about the validity of breathless media reports (Lenhart 2009).

The results of this study are based on a content analysis of 93 articles published in major U.S. newspapers between November 2008 and April 2009 regarding sexting among youths. The results show that these media sources viewed sexting through the lens of a moral panic and uncritically disseminated essentialist representations of teens as impulsive, libidinous, and lacking self-control. However, these articles also uncritically disseminated stereotypical representations of parents as ignorant, technologically inept, and incapable of controlling their children’s behaviors. Moreover, these articles aggressively propounded parenting strategies for addressing sexting in the family, preferring authoritarian solutions to less restrictive or confrontational solutions and invoking draconian legal consequences as justification for implementing harsh parental restrictions. These findings suggest media sources play an especially significant role in constructing exemplary parenting with regard to youth’s use of digital media, while complicating critical theory’s tendency to conflate parents, law enforcement officials, and journalists as harmonious co-conspirators in the oppression of youths.

Youths, Technologies, and Moral Panics

Critical scholars have long emphasized the role of mass media sources in perpetuating an essentialist construction of adolescence (Giroux 2003; Males 1996; Mazzarella 2003).

Deterministic theories supposing an inevitable developmental duration of impulsive urges, sexual insatiability, delusions of invincibility, susceptibility to seductive market forces or peer pressures, and psychological “storm and stress” have achieved popular acceptance, encouraging the promulgation of discriminatory narratives, and the construction of youths as objects to fear and fear for (Giroux 2003; Males 1996; Mazzarella 2003).

In contrast to these popular narratives of youth, sociological research emphasizes the relatively recent historical, cultural, and social construction of adolescence (Buckingham 2008). Rapid urbanization in the nineteenth century fueled fears of delinquent children causing crime on city streets, resulting in the widespread passage of curfews and other laws restricting the civil liberties of youths (Epstein 2007). As ruling adults increasingly feared African-American, impoverished, and immigrant youths, they increasingly sought to protect white, middle-class, second-generation or greater youths from corruptive influences or hazardous environments. The essentializing framework of G. Stanley Hall, influenced by racial eugenics, social Darwinism, and muscular Christianity, provided supposedly scientific legitimation for a socially engineered extension of childhood (Lesko 2001).

Labor activists, who sought to prevent industrialist exploitation of youths in the workplace and thwart youths from competing for a dearth of jobs, allied with compulsory education advocates to displace adolescents from adult spheres at the state level, culminating in the 1930s with the passage of federal laws mandating education until the age of 16 (boyd 2008). Paradoxically, as adults sought to control youths by separating them from the adult world, the

partial abdication of adult authority to a teachers produced a popular perception of even less control. Youths increasingly contested adult models of adolescence as a benevolent extension of childhood, and adults increasingly fretted over the moral and normative direction of youths (Cross 2004).

These conditions are conducive to the phenomenon of moral panic, in which the perceived threat of a particular social stimulus to dominant norms and institutions greatly exceeds the actual threat (Cohen 2002). Moral panic literature has demonstrated that moral panics of youth reflect the dual constructions of youths as potential victims and potential perpetrators: panics involving white, middle-class youths are likely to be framed as nefarious external threats corrupting impressionable youths, while panics involving youths belonging to subordinate racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic statuses are more likely to portray the youths as perpetrators (Binder 1993).

Moral panics of youths’ interactions with technologies, in particular, have been common throughout the twentieth century. Mazzarella (2003:228), in her review of media representations of youth, concludes that “the same concerns we hear now about gangsta rap...the Internet, and videogame violence...were expressed in the 1920s about movies, in the 1930s about radio, in the 1940s and 1950s about comic books, in the 1950s about rock ‘n’ roll and television, and so on.” It is not a stretch, therefore, to argue that American society has existed in a perpetual state of moral panic regarding the impact of technologies on the development of youths since the early twentieth century. Often it is the enabling capabilities of technology that combine with essentialist constructions of youth to produce the panic. Lynd and Lynd’s seminal Middletown study (1959), for example, reported adults who scorned cars as “beds on wheels” and blamed this technology for allowing youths to escape direct adult supervision. When the opportunities of

technologies are combined with the motives of “raging hormones,” it seems every youth is rendered a suspect.

These themes are particularly salient to today’s moral panics of youths and digital media. Computers and cellular phones enable youths to interact with anyone at any time, even when physically situated in supervised spaces. Users of digital technologies have access to millions of digital spaces, millions of hardware portals by which to access these spaces, and the freedom to move to another digital space if their location is infiltrated by undesirable actors. Popular narratives also “view the Internet through an adult lens, applying labels such as ‘unprecedented’ and ‘transformational’ from [adults’] historically situated perspectives in ways that exoticize technologically mediated communication and its youthful users” (Herring 2008: 72). Although youths are the same corruptible agents of biologically deterministic perspectives, they are now perceived to possess a strange new medium in which to cause or attract mayhem.

Recent research indicates that the widespread adoption of digital technologies has been accompanied by several moral panics involving youths, in which media sources have played a considerable part. These studies, however, have tended to focus upon indirect means of influence, such as misleading characterizations or faulty analyses. Potter and Potter (2001), for example, examined the panic surrounding the digital dissemination of pornography in the 1990s and concluded that media narratives constructed and perpetuated “urban myths” targeted at middle-class parents. More recently, Marwick (2008) analyzed media reports of this same cyberporn panic as well as the ongoing panic surrounding the sexual predation of youths on social network websites. Her analysis demonstrates that the statistics invoked to support the prevalence of online sexual predators and passage of the Deleting Online Predators Act (2007) were poorly derived and uncritically disseminated.

Media sources may also directly influence adult perceptions of youth and justifiable panic by addressing the topic of parenting; however, this phenomenon seems to be less prevalent and rarely studied. A study by the Harvard School of Public Health, for example, found the supply and demand of parenting advice in mainstream media is significant and increasing, but also found significantly less advice for parents of adolescents than parents of younger children (Simpson 1997). A recent content analysis of newspaper articles concerning binge drinking among college students supports this conclusion, as the authors found less than 20 percent of articles addressed parenting strategies regarding this undesirable behavior (Askelson et al. 2009). These findings suggest that media sources rarely attempt to influence parents directly; rather, they typically resort to misleading presentations to manufacture social problems, which are then addressed by parents individually according to their own judgments.

Panics of youths’ interactions with digital media are unique, however, as youths are popularly perceived—with some justification—to be more advanced users of technologies than their parents; as a result, parents may be especially receptive to parenting advice from experts, law enforcement officials, media sources, and other adults who claim authority on the topic. These authorities, meanwhile, may be more likely to directly address the role of parents in combating the perceived dangers.

This exploratory study investigates mainstream newspaper articles of sexting through the lens of moral panic and constructing parenthood. In addition to the familiar moral panic characteristics of vulnerable youths and misleading evidence, I suggest that most articles will emphasize the lack of awareness of parents, exhorting them to become more acquainted and involved with their teens’ use of cell phones. Moreover, I hypothesize that most of these articles that address parenting strategies will present restrictive measures such as depriving youths of

their cell phones or monitoring their cell phone behaviors in a positive light. In so doing, media sources and the experts whom they cite will aggressively propound a pedagogy of parenting that bifurcates parents into opposing groups of exemplary tough-lovers and negligent enablers.

Method

The dataset for this study was generated using the LexisNexis Academic search engine, which indexes and archives the contents of over 700 U.S. newspapers (LexisNexis 2009). A search for all articles containing “teens” and “phones” between November 2008 and November 2009 returned 991 results. These articles were manually screened to limit valid results to mainstream U.S. newspaper articles whose topic dealt with sexting among teens as a group. Aggregate news sources, letters to the editor, and university newspapers were excluded.

In all, 125 articles met the specified criteria. The temporal distribution of articles, shown in Table 1, is suggestive of moral panic, rising from 2 articles in November 2008 to a peak of 58 articles in March and April 2009 before trailing off into relative obscurity during the summer months. The 93 sexting articles between November 2008 and April 2009 were selected for further analysis and coded according to several dimensions.

2008		2009									
Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.
2	8	8	17	29	29	11	4	3	2	9	3

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Sexting Articles by Month (N = 125)

First, to assess for common characteristics of moral panics, articles were examined for (1) incidence of sound empirical evidence and (2) incidence of uncritically disseminated, biologically deterministic representations of teens as a group. In the case of the latter, care was taken not to include accusations of teen subordination that may be attributed to social conditions rather than inherent life course development. Moreover, care was taken not to include accusations of impulsive or foolish behavior directed at individual teens shown to have participated in sexting; only blanket statements attributable to teens as a group were coded as indicative of an essentialist representation of teens.

In addition, articles were examined for (3) evidence of a stereotypical portrayal of adults as ignorant of the dangers of sexting, lacking the technological aptitude to understand or keep pace with teens’ use digital media, or lacking the ability to control their children’s behaviors due to adolescent resistance, the flexibility of the technology, or an unwillingness to discuss controversial behaviors with their teens. Finally, articles were examined for (4) explicit exhortations encouraging parents to address the issue with their teens in some manner, and (5) the incidence of exhortations advocating authoritarian advice, such as monitoring cell phone use, restricting cell phone features, or depriving teens of cell phones.

Results

Empirical evidence for the sexting “epidemic” was based on the results of a single study by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. This study, conducted online via *cosmogirl.com*, found that 20 percent of teens “have sent/posted nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves.” However, the sampling frame only included teens with Internet access who had volunteered to participate in surveys distributed by a private research agency.

Demographic data shows that midwestern youths, rural youths, and youths belonging to minority races and ethnicities are underrepresented; the report admits that “respondents do not constitute a probability sample” (Sex and Tech 2008). It is very likely, therefore, that expressive, digitally connected youths more likely to engage in sexting were overrepresented in the study.

This study was cited as evidence in 51 (54.8 percent) articles from November 2008 to April 2009. Of these, forty-two (82.4 percent) accepted the study’s results and used it to make the case that sexting among teens is widespread. Seven (13.7 percent) cited the study as evidence but qualified its assertions, while only 2 (3.9 percent) disputed or rejected the study’s results. Significantly, no other empirical study was presented as evidence for the prevalence of sexting; all other evidence presented was anecdotal.

Nevertheless, several articles, such as a March 23 article in the *Lincoln (NE) Star Journal*, declared that the U.S. was witnessing “an absolute explosion of self-manufactured child pornography.” “This practice [is] apparently is more widespread than jaywalking,” declared an April 6 article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. “Consider, fellow parents,” proclaimed a December 11 *Boston Herald* article, “if there were five teens hanging around your TV room after school yesterday, one of them, God forbid your daughter, is topless, bottomless, perhaps both, on somebody’s cell phone—maybe hundreds of cell phones—immortalized in cyberspace.” Even articles that did not cite the unrepresentative study overwhelmingly adhered to the trope of a sexting “epidemic.”

Many of these articles—82 percent—did not consult teens in their reports, preferring instead to cite adults claiming expertise in the area. In the articles that consulted teens, most derided the practice as “childish” or “stupid,” and some claimed not to know anyone who had sexted. Others, however, testified to the notion that sexting is prevalent and teens are

unconcerned about the potential consequences. Among the results of the unrepresentative Sex and Tech Survey was the finding that 22 percent of teens considered the practice “no big deal,” which was featured prominently in a December 10 *USA Today* article as well as several others.

Twenty-nine percent of articles uncritically disseminated a biologically deterministic perspective of adolescence, while many more suggested that the moral and intellectual development of contemporary teens is undermined by social forces such as peer pressure or lascivious media content. As a result, teens were consistently framed as lacking the ability to use technology responsibly. “Even the oldest teenagers are not old enough to appreciate [the] power” of cell phones, argued one teenage “life coach” in an April 21 *Dayton (OH) Daily News* article. “Teenagers...by definition, lack the fully developed brains that maturity afford, at least in theory,” charged another article from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* on March 31. “Adding technology to adolescent hormones and impulsiveness,” a *Minneapolis Star Tribune* article from April 25 concluded, “can be a recipe for regret.” Although these demeaning perspectives prevailed, a few articles doubted such absolutist constructions. A March 30 article in the *San Jose Mercury News* directly challenged them: “Kids aren’t stupid...and, faced with the facts, most will wise up. We also know that kids who get in trouble online are the same kids who get in trouble offline.” Statements such as these, however, were infrequent.

Parents, too, were actively constructed by media reports: nearly half of all articles—44 percent—presented parents as ignorant of the risks of cell phone use, technologically inept, or incapable of controlling their children’s behaviors. “Do you sext? Do you even know what sexting is?” asked a *Minneapolis Star Tribune* article from April 25 published near the end of the panic, when parents were most likely to answer affirmatively. According to the author, “If you’re a middle-aged person reading the paper over breakfast,” the answer is “probably not.” Among

the reasons for this widespread ignorance, other articles asserted, was parents’ lack of technological aptitude. A *Sentinel & Enterprise* (MA) article from March 8 reprised a refrain that was echoed by countless other articles: “Parents and guardians need to be up-to-date on all the technology their kids are using.”

Still other articles displaced a lack of parental control onto the inherent intransigence of their rebellious teens. “Most parents do their best to instruct their teenage children in moral and responsible sexual behavior,” argued a January 25 article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. “But many teens don’t listen.” One mother quoted in a January 6 article in the *Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC) exemplifies the stereotypical spirit expounded in many other articles: “As parents, we know that kids are impulsive...They are irresponsible. We can talk till we are blue in the face, but they already know everything. We have to keep a close eye on what they are doing to save them from themselves. But I think if you ask most parents, they have no idea who their kids are texting or what they are texting about.”

To address these supposed parental deficiencies, a staggering 60 percent of articles presented parenting advice for concerned readers, citing law enforcement officials, members of advocacy groups, other experts, and even the opinion of the author. The vast majority of these articles demanded that parents talk with their teens about sexting, although the nature of these talks varied widely. Often the advice was vague, as in a March 28 article in the *Evening Sun* (Hanover, PA) which simply asserted that “legal experts and educators agree that parents need to be more involved,” or an April 6 article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* which declared that “it’s time to remember who the adults are in the room.”

Nearly every article addressing parenting strategies advocated talking with teens about sexting. Although some of these articles emphasized that the conversation should be “non-

confrontational,” such as a March 30 article in the *San Jose Mercury News*, most suggested that these conversations frame the activity in terms of severe disciplinary consequences and a “zero tolerance” policy. Fifty-two percent of articles offering parenting advice advocated the use of restrictive measures in at least some cases, and unlike the vague advice about talking to teens, these recommended stringent measures were usually much more specific. Deprivation was frequently recommended for offenders, and surveillance was recommended even for those teens who had displayed no inclination to perform such undesirable behaviors. A *Telegram & Gazette* article from March 12 further suggested that teens should not have cell phones with Internet access, while a February 11 *Boston Herald* article suggested that parents consider buying cell phones without cameras.

An unexpected finding was the contentious relationship between law enforcement officials and other adults. Seventy percent of articles noted that sexting could invite legal consequences on senders as well as recipients of sexts. Many articles, however, were critical of attempts to punish sexting teens through the legal system, which in some cases would lead to their registration as a sex offender. “It is sadly ironic,” a representative article in the *San Jose Mercury News* on April 7 concluded, “that the very child porn laws written to protect children from being exploited by adults could wind up having a devastating impact on the lives of children who, while acting stupidly, have no criminal intent.” Many articles, such as an April 14 article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, argued for legal revisions that “[recognize] the precociousness of the teens,” relying upon essentialist constructions of youth to support their agendas for legal reform.

Law enforcement officials cited in articles were themselves often lukewarm in their approval of such punitive laws. “A nude picture of a child being created and disseminated is a

crime,” one district attorney declared in a *York Dispatch* (PA) article on April 16, “There is [sic] no ifs, ands or buts about it.” Others, however, were less accepting: “Should we criminalize adolescent stupidity?” one police lieutenant asked in *Kansas City Star* article on February 8. “Isn’t this a parental issue and not a criminal one?” a defense attorney asked in the same article.

This sentiment of law enforcement officials encroaching on authority rightly possessed by parents was promulgated frequently, and the specter of crusading law officials was often cited as justification for harsh parental measures. An April 20 article in the *Albuquerque Journal* made this point most explicitly, as the journalist described how her own child had become embroiled in a sexting case. Although the contrite teen averred that she would never do it again, the parent and author flippantly replied, “Well, of course not. I took that kid's cell phone away. For life.” “It could have been worse,” she asserted in defense. “In certain parts of the country, my child's foolish mistake in the hands of an overzealous justice system could have resulted in criminal charges and a permanent spot on the sex offender registry.” The author later cites a district attorney who argues, “Lots of things are stupid...Does that mean they shouldn't result in some charges of some sort?” The attorney then suggests that prosecution is merited in some contexts, particularly “if Mommy and Daddy aren’t doing their jobs.”

“You can't punish stupid in the already strained criminal justice system,” the author ultimately concludes. “But we parents can. And these days, we parents must.”

Discussion

As expected, media representations of sexting fit the criteria of a moral panic. Despite deficient empirical evidence, nearly all articles presented sexting as a widespread menace. Less than one in five articles, moreover, consulted teens for their interpretation of the prevalence of

sexting, and a significant percentage of those who did only cited teens who supported the assertion that sexting is pervasive. As a sex therapist quoted in a March 21 *San Francisco Chronicle* concluded, “Sexting is the latest way adults are getting panicky about teen sexuality and for mainstream culture to get panicky about technology.”

The presentation of sexting as widespread, moreover, was contingent upon essentialist constructions of teens and parents. A significant minority of articles presented teens as inherently impulsive and lacking self-control, while many more made similar claims but attributed these phenomena to social influences. An essentialist construction of parents, however, was no less prevalent. “I consider myself a responsible parent,” one parent declared in a January 31 article of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, “and I feel I need to be educated.” “We are the first generation of parents to deal with these types of issues,” another mother declared in the same article. This perspective was propounded by parents, experts, and journalists alike. Parents were consistently presented as failing to exercise good parenting with regard to their children’s use of digital media: they were too ignorant, too lacking in technological aptitude, and too ineffectual in their attempts to control their teens’ behaviors. Although not all of these conditions were presented as parents’ fault, these conditions were consistently presented as primary reasons for the supposed prevalence of sexting.

Most media sources took it upon themselves to present parents with possible strategies for controlling their teens’ ability to engage in sexting. While less than 20 percent of articles concerning the no less significant but more enduring menace of binge drinking offered parenting advice, 60 percent of articles about sexting did so. Parents were unanimously encouraged to become more involved, mostly by talking with their teens. However, many other articles suggested surveillance, restriction, or deprivation as alternate solutions. Although these solutions

were often presented in conjunction with less extreme solutions or suggested only in cases of untrustworthy teens or previous offenders, future studies should consider the effects of this pedagogy of parenting upon parents and parent-teen relationships. If parents believe themselves to be deficient and are relentlessly exposed to extreme measures to control teens’ technological behaviors, they may be very susceptible to employing these extreme measures even in cases when they are not warranted.

The implementation of extreme legal consequences in some jurisdictions was an important impetus for encouraging harsh parental interventions. Although parents who severely disciplined their teens were presented favorably, authors, experts, and other adults generally resisted attempts by law enforcement to sanction sexting teens. The panic, it seems, was as much a result of the actions of crusading law enforcement officials as the practice of sexting itself. Sexting exposed a legal contradiction: laws against child pornography were designed to protect teens, yet the application of these laws to sexting teens targeted the very population the laws were designed to protect—as such, parents were as concerned about protecting their teens from sexting’s legal consequences as its social consequences.

These legal concerns fueled attempts to construct exemplary parenting behavior as overbearing and restrictive. In the case of the mother who took her child’s phone away “for life,” for example, the legal consequences were simply too great to risk in the hands and minds of impulsive, stupid, perpetually aroused teens. With parents presented as bumbling technophobes whose pleas for control fell on deaf ears, the solution became clear: err on the side of excessive regulations, and ask questions later. The results of this study suggest that this construction is prevalent in media representations of youths and digital media, although further research is required due to its exploratory nature and limited scope.

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