Labelling theory and moral panics

Along with an interactionist tradition of media theory that tends to focus on everyday social interactions or rituals, there is a similar tradition of interactionism that takes its theoretical ideas from the study of deviance or what some might call 'criminal activity'. Howard S. Becker's *Outsiders* (first published in 1963) considers deviance to be a social construction used by certain groups in order to exclude and criminalize others:

> *social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance* . . . From this point of view, deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label.
>
> (Becker 1991: 9)

Similar in some ways to Foucault's theory of discourse, this approach is nonetheless fundamentally different because discourse in Becker's sense is socially created – not dispersed and manifested in society via powerful institutions of the state. So an act of deviance, such as a child using an expletive, is only labelled deviant if others in that social context of interaction (i.e. adults) classify it as 'not normal' behaviour, in which case *they* create

the label. On the other hand, one adult using an expletive among other adults might be construed as perfectly normal behaviour and not worthy of a deviant label. Becker applied his ideas about deviance, known as **labelling theory**, to various deviant groups such as marijuana users and jazz musicians. The jazz musicians he studied, for instance, rejected the various labels – some derogatory, some complimentary – which non-musicians gave to them and distanced themselves from commercial forms of jazz that could be heard on record or the radio. Indeed, these musicians acknowledged the deviance associated with them by applying labels of their own to others. As one musician says, 'outside of show people and professional people, everybody's a fucking square. They don't know anything' (Becker 1951: 140). Deviance becomes a vicious circle – once labels are attached to a deviant group, the deviance is accentuated by group reactions that in turn label the 'labellers', which provokes further social condemnation of the group.

Becker's labelling theory helps us to understand broader types of interaction between mainstream and deviant cultures but, in its original formulation, it had little to say about the social role of media in labelling processes. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to find examples of how media partake in the social creation of labels that classify certain individuals or groups as deviant, such as asylum seekers and single-parent families. One of the most significant attempts to adapt the interactionist framework of labelling theory to media practices is Stan Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (first published in 1972). The concept of a **moral panic** is defined as a situation wherein

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people.
>
> (Cohen 2002: 1)

We sometimes hear the phrase 'moral crusade' used when, for instance, a newspaper begins a campaign against some 'social ill' like drugs or soccer hooliganism. Media crusades amounting to misrepresentation of drug and hooligan cultures have been critically analysed by Young (1971a; 1971b; 1973) and Hall (1978) among others. Moral panics have been provoked in particular by youth cultures and subcultures of the kind that Hebdige semiotically analysed (see Chapter 4). In contrast to Hebdige's structuralist approach, however, Cohen suggests that subcultures are not primarily deviant because of their political resistance to the social system, but because societal – including media – reaction has labelled them as 'folk devils': 'visible reminders of what we should not be' (Cohen 2002: 2). Folk devils are the

personifications of moral panics, labelled as villains by 'right-thinking people' as well as the police and legal system, but hailed as martyrs by fellow outsiders.

Cohen applies his theory of moral panics to the mods and rockers – two opposing groups of working-class youth who came into conflict with each other at English seaside resorts in the mid-1960s. Cohen argues that media did not merely *report*, in an objective way, the crowd disturbances that occurred between the two groups, but actually helped to *construct* social reaction to the 'deviance' of the mods and rockers by sensationalizing the level of violence and disruption that occurred on the beaches and promenades of Brighton and other seaside towns. Tabloid newspapers in particular used dramatic phrases such as 'orgy of destruction' and 'screaming mob' (Cohen 2002: 20). These mediated messages, in close interaction with public opinion, contributed to increased concern about the threat posed by the mods and rockers to societal rules and norms. This process is known as 'deviance amplification' (Figure 5.1).

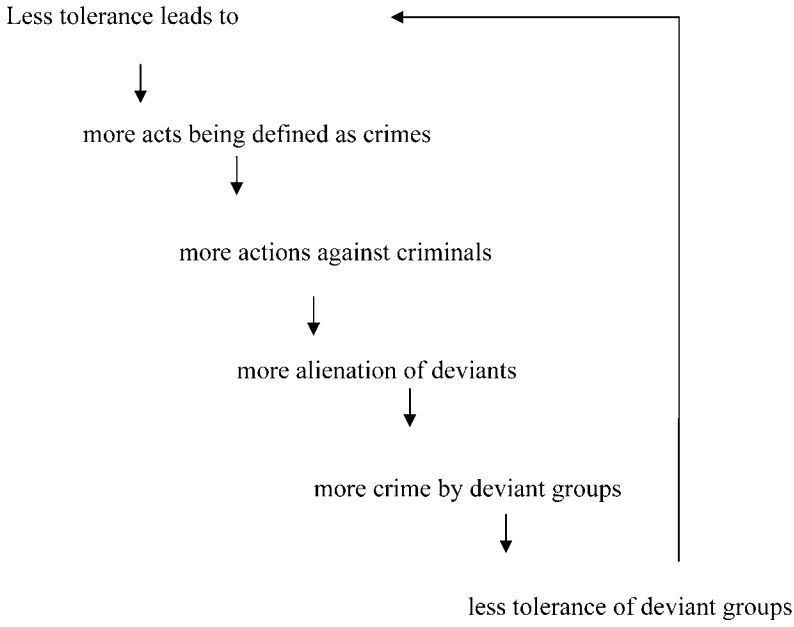

Figure 5.1 Deviancy amplification model

Source: See Wilkins (1964: 90)

As we can see in Figure 5.1, the defining and labelling of deviance have a spiralling effect in alienating and criminalizing those deviants or folk devils.

In the case of the mods and rockers, media had a fundamental impact on their deviance amplification. Stereotypical phrases associated with these youth cultures – 'thugs', 'hooligans', 'menaces' – were freely highlighted in bold news headlines to reinforce pre-existing perceptions and beliefs held by 'normal' (i.e. white, middle-aged, middle-class) folk. The manufacture of news stories as a means of constructing and amplifying definitions of deviance from conformity is discussed by Cohen and others elsewhere (Cohen and Young 1973; see also Schlesinger 1978).

Deviance amplification via mass media may increase societal concern and trigger widespread moral panic (see Figure 5.2), but – as with Becker's jazz musicians – it also bestows credibility and helps to recruit members to the groups being labelled as deviant. When the line between insiders and outsiders is clearly drawn, there are always similarly disaffected individuals who wish to identify with what the wider society would call 'outsiders' but what they identify as 'insiders'. Likewise if tabloid newspapers label you as a 'thug', you might not like it but you're also likely to gain rather a following among 'would-be-you' devotees. Cohen (2002: 135–9) shows how media effectively provided pre-publicity for the mods and rockers – individuals scattered the length and breadth of Britain could pick up the *Daily Mirror* to learn when and where to meet up for a confrontation. Moreover, the presence of cameras and photographers provided a metaphorical public platform for mods and rockers to engage in role-playing behaviour. Pleasantly surprised by the amount of media attention being given to them, the mods and rockers would 'play up' their image of rebelliousness, and therefore effectively play the stereotypical roles created for them by mass media – as well as other 'right-thinking' elements of mainstream culture. Media also contributed to an accentuation in the differences between the two youth subcultures. Cohen notes that 'the antagonism between the two groups was not initially very marked' (2002: 139), partly explained by the fact that the mods and rockers lived in the same working-class neighbourhoods, but subsequent media representations that juxtaposed aspects of the mod subculture (scooters, the smart-casual image, the Beatles and Kinks motifs) with those of the rocker subculture (motorbikes, the Hell's Angel image, the Rolling Stones and Elvis motifs) cut deeper into differences and indirectly helped to stir up conflict.

Although moral panic theory was initially applied to deviant youth cultural activities of various kinds, it has since been applied to societal and media reaction to AIDS (Watney 1997), 'video nasties' (Petley 1997), and paedophilia (Critcher 2003) – topical issues that emphasize how deviance is by no means exclusively a 'youth' problem. The theory has undergone criticism and revision, however. One criticism we might cite is a tendency to overemphasize the power of media in determining how people – including 'right-thinking' politicians and policy-makers – react to particular issues and events. There is no straightforward connection between media and public opinion.

Journalists tend to justify their journalism in the way it mirrors 'the public interest' but sometimes sensationalist stories can appear absurd and unprofessional, evidenced by a drop in a newspaper's circulation figures, for instance. Thornton (1995) has also questioned whether moral panics necessarily result in deviance amplification and criminalization, given that more recent youth cultures – particularly rave and dance cultures – have actively sought to spread panic as a means of publicizing their hedonistic values and presenting their side of the argument on the health consequences of ecstasy use. It seems that moral panics in practice are more complex and not always driven by tabloid journalists and other moral crusaders, but this in turn makes Cohen's theory of moral panics all the more intriguing to develop and refine.

Figure 5.2 Newspaper front page