

Folk devils and fear: QAnon feeds into a culture of moral panic | Populist Publics

By Jennifer Evans

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Using conspiracy theories that include child sex traffickers and restaurants serving human flesh, QAnon has unleashed a modern-day moral panic.

It is now more than 30 years since sociologists proposed moral panic as a way to understand the incitement of fear around a perceived enemy. In the opening paragraph of his canonical study of popular media from 1972, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, sociologist Stanley Cohen outlined his basic thesis:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.

In President Donald Trump's America, those people are queers, racial minorities and Jews.

At the time Cohen was writing, his focus was on popular media and the manipulation of mods and rockers as moral degenerates. He argued that those in positions of authority used sensationalized headlines to enforce what they saw as threats to social order.

We find ourselves in a similar place today. The media in question is social, but the targets are as old as journalism itself.

[...]

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