MORAL PANIC IN THE NARRATIVES OF ONLINE MEDIA IN SERBIA

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Abstract: Moral panic is a social phenomenon in which a particular event, group, or issue is perceived as a serious threat, provoking exaggerated reactions from the media, authorities, and the general public. The media play a significant role in the production and spread of moral panic, often exaggerating events to achieve personal, economic, or political goals, rather than focusing on the need for institutional changes. The concept of moral panic was popularized in sociology by Stanley Cohen in 1972 in his work Folk devils and moral panics, in which he defined the key elements of moral panic, including the role of the media. This paper examines whether elements of moral panic appear in the headlines of online media in Serbia regarding the environmental protest against lithium mining in western Serbia, titled "There will be no mining," held on August 10, 2024, in Belgrade. The analysis uses Cohen's criteria— exaggeration and distortion, prediction and symbolization. The unit of analysis consists of headlines from online media outlets Politika, Danas, and N1 (quality media/serious), Informer and Alo (tabloids), and Blic (semi-tabloid) covering the mentioned protest. A total of 160 headlines from the mentioned media outlets were analyzed. The method of quantitative-qualitative content analysis shows that all the analyzed media use all elements of creating moral panic in their headlines related to the protest, according to Cohen's model. This means that they use sensationalistic, dramatic, and often exaggerated headlines. Additionally, certain elements of the protest are presented in a way that suggests they will recur with even more severe consequences, and the protest itself, the participants, as well as lithium mining, are often depicted through symbols. Although elements of moral panic are evident in all media, tabloids dominate its creation. This research contributes to the theoretical and empirical understanding of the moral panic phenomenon, with a particular focus on the role of the media in its production. The application of Cohen's moral panic model to the specific case of the environmental protest in Serbia offers a new perspective on how different types of media (quality media, tabloids, and semi-tabloids) shape public opinion, and the perception of social issues.Through the analysis of headlines in online media, the research provides insight into how, and to what extent the media use elements of moral panic, such as exaggeration and distortion, prediction, and symbolization. These elements are used to shape the narrative about the protests, which can have long-term social, political, and ecological consequences.

Keywords: moral panic, online media, Serbia, media headlines, protest.
Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

In modern societies, moral panic is an essential element, identifying certain phenomena, individuals, or events as threats that must be defended against to preserve the social order and community. This often involves problematic behavior by specific people, which is seen as a danger to the very survival of society and requires punishment (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). The author Bennett believes that society is constantly exposed to moral panic (Bennett, 2018). Although various parties contribute to the creation of moral panic, this paper will focus on the media as the key creators of this phenomenon. Some scholars argue that the media play a crucial role in the production of moral panic (Alexander, 1990; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Krznar, 2014; Prodović, 2012). As creators of moral panic, the media influence the public's perception of events or phenomena. Moral panic is both a sociological and socio-psychological phenomenon. The concept of "moral panic" was first introduced in sociology by British sociologist Jock Young in 1971. His work focused on the significant rise in drug use, which caused widespread public concern (Thompson, 1998). The formal integration of this concept into sociology is attributed to Stanley Cohen. He states that a person or event is defined as a threat to values, which is stereotypically portrayed by the mass media, while experts offer solutions, but the situation either disappears or worsens (Cohen, 2011). Based on this, Cohen identified five key elements of moral panic. The first element is the labeling of someone or something as a threat to societal interests and values. The second element involves the media, which present this threat in a recognizable way, leading to a rapid increase in public concern. The fourth element is the reaction from authorities, relevant bodies, or those who shape public opinion. The final element is the eventual decrease of the panic and societal changes. Regarding the media, Cohen highlights three criteria used in the creation of moral panic. The first is exaggeration and distortion, where the media amplify the severity of an event, such as protests, using sensationalist headlines and melodramatic language. The second element is prediction, which involves media forecasting that the event will recur with even more serious consequences. The third element is symbolization, a process

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where the media assign negative meanings to certain symbols. This happens when a term is used to represent a specific status, which may be delinquent or deviant, when style becomes a visual marker of that term, and when objects themselves become symbols of status (Cohen, 2011). Media also often engage in the demonization of particular social groups, which is presented sensationally and accepted by the public (Grulović, 2024). Moral panic is also discussed by Yvonne Jewkes in her book Media and Crime. She argues that moral panic arises when the media present an ordinary event as extraordinary. She believes that the subjects of these events are often young people, as their behavior is seen as a test of societal health (Jewkes, 2004). She explains the process of creating moral panic by saying, "the media set in motion a 'deviancy amplification spiral' in which a moral discourse is established by journalists and various other authorities, opinion leaders and moral entrepreneurs, who collectively demonize the perceived wrong-doers as a source of moral decline and social disintegration" (Jewkes, 2004, p. 68). A similar view is shared by Aleksandra Ilić, who believes that the media play a crucial, even decisive role in the creation of moral panic. Through their reporting, they help achieve the goals of the elite, especially in closed societies where the media are neither independent nor objective (Ilić, 2020). Media reporting in such circumstances is not always based on truth but is often rooted in propaganda (Stojanović, 2023). Media theorist David McQueen has discussed situations that are prone to the emergence of moral panic. Similar to Jewkes, he argues that moral panic occurs when society faces significant changes it struggles to adapt to. He uses the Industrial Revolution and the widespread modernization of the 1960s as examples (McQueen, 1998). Professor Charles Acland believes that crises or events that present a threat are a natural part of many societies. He argues that without such situations, there would be less need for regulatory bodies like the police, military, judiciary, and religious orders. In this way, moral panic, as a concentrated concern, prompts organized responses from social institutions (Acland, 2018). A feature of moral panic is the critical language used to examine various phenomena that share notable similarities (Falkof, 2020). Sociologist Milana Ljubičić asserts that several parties contribute to the creation of moral panic, including the media, the public, politicians, lawmakers, representatives of formal social control, and social activists (Ljubičić, 2021). When society is in crisis, there is a higher likelihood that certain events will be viewed as significant threats, sparking moral panic. The response to these threats often includes calls for increased and stricter social control or regulation (Thompson, 1998). This study examines how Serbian online media covered the protest against lithium mining in the Jadar Valley and the company Rio Tinto, held on August 10, 2024, in Belgrade, and whether Cohen's elements of moral panic appear in the headlines of those media. The event was chosen because lithium mining is a key social issue in Serbia, leading to strong societal polarization—while most believe the project would harm nature and public health, others emphasize its economic benefits.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research focuses on how Serbian online media covered the protest against lithium mining in the Jadar Valley and the company "Rio Tinto", which took place on August 10, 2024, in Belgrade. The primary goal is to assess whether elements of moral panic appear in the headlines of online media outlets N1, Informer, Alo, Blic, Politika, and Danas regarding this protest. The online media outlets N1, Informer, Alo, Blic, Politika, and Danas were selected due to their different editorial policies and reporting styles. This selection allows for an analysis of how various media approach the same event and how they use elements of moral panic in their headlines. The research will primarily identify and analyze moral panic elements in these headlines, based on the criteria established by sociologist Cohen, including exaggeration and distortion, prediction, and symbolization (Cohen, 2011). Headlines were chosen because they often represent the first interaction readers have with media content and significantly shape their initial perception of events. The central research question is how and to what extent elements of moral panic are reflected in the headlines of Serbian online media, according to Stanley Cohen's theory. The analysis focuses on headlines published on August 10, 2024, the day of the protest in Belgrade, enabling an examination of media coverage within the context of a specific and timely event. The study analyzes 160 headlines from the selected online media outlets using a quantitative-qualitative content analysis approach. The number of 160 titles was obtained by reviewing the online archives of the six analyzed media outlets.

3. RESULTS

By analyzing 160 headlines from six Serbian online media outlets (N1, Informer, Alo, Blic, Politika, and Danas) from August 10, 2024, related to the protest against lithium mining in the Jadar Valley, we

determined that all the media use key elements of moral panic according to Stanley Cohen's theory. The elements of moral panic appear 169 times. The total number of headlines containing elements of moral panic in some media exceeds the number of published articles, as some headlines included more than one element of moral panic. Elements of moral panic are most pronounced in tabloids (Informer and Alo), which also published the most articles during the protest itself. The most commonly used elements were exaggeration and distortion (a total of 106 headlines), where protests were portrayed as a serious threat to social peace and stability, using dramatic and sensationalistic language, whether referring to direct or paraphrased statements of the actors, or when the headlines lacked specific sources. To a lesser extent (a total of 47 headlines), there is also symbolization, with protests often being described as an attempted coup and protesters as aggressors, which contributes to creating an image of the protest as something that threatens the fundamental values of society. The elements of prediction about possible outcomes of the protests were the least present (a total of 16 headlines), which indicates that the media speculated less about the future consequences of the events. The table below provides a detailed overview of the frequency of each of these elements in the analyzed online media (Table 1).

Table 1: Elements of moral panic in the headlines of Serbian online media about the "There will be no mining" protest.

Online media	Total number of analyzed headlines	The number of headlines with exaggeration and distortion	The number of headlines with prediction	The number of headlines with symbolization	The total number of headlines with elements of moral panic
N1	20	6	5	4	15
Informer	51	50	4	19	73
Alo	37	33	3	16	52
Blic	8	4	1	1	6
Politika	22	11	2	4	17
Danas	22	2	1	3	6
Total	160	106	16	47	169

4. DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of headlines from six Serbian online media outlets during the "There will be no mining" protest against lithium extraction in the Jadar Valley reveals a clear pattern of employing elements of moral panic, as outlined by Stanley Cohen, in all the examined media. These elements, such as exaggeration and distortion, prediction, and symbolization, appear in various forms and with differing intensities, depending on the type of media and its editorial policy. Exaggeration and distortion are the most prominent elements of moral panic, appearing in a total of 106 headlines, and are most prevalent in the tabloids Informer (50 headlines) and Alo (33 headlines). Headlines in these media often feature dramatic and sensational phrases such as "terror," "coup," "fascists," and "violence," among others. An example of this element of moral panic can be found in an article from Informer with the headline "Extraordinary primitivism of fake ecologists! They want to secure pocket money from the West through a coup!" (Informer, 2024), as well as an article from Alo with the headline "Everything Vučić has built and opened, they block - Trains stopped at Prokop, TERROR against the citizens of Serbia!" (Alo, 2024).

These headlines not only depict the protests as a significant threat to public order but also frequently associate them with radical and violent actors, including the opposition, foreign nations and citizens, and even extremist groups. This distortion of reality helps foster the perception that the protests undermine the very stability of the state, with protesters portrayed as potential sources of violence and instability. N1 and Danas are less inclined to feature elements of moral panic. These media outlets concentrated more on the negative impacts of the Rio Tinto project rather than focusing on the protests themselves, as seen in the tabloids. The headlines in N1 and Danas often emphasized the environmental, political, and societal consequences of the project. While these media outlets did report on the protests, their coverage was less sensational, and the protesters were not as strongly portrayed as dangerous groups. Nonetheless, some

headlines in these outlets still contained elements of exaggeration and distortion, primarily attributed to statements from specific individuals. For instance, N1 published "The Prime Minister referred to the protest participants as a rotten gang" (N1, 2024), and Danas reported "Miloš Vučević reacted to the protest: A rotten gang is blocking, they don't even know what they want" (Danas, 2024). Blic published the fewest articles on the protest, and consequently, there were fewer elements of moral panic present (just 6 headlines in total). An example of exaggeration and distortion in this media is the headline (VIDEO) Fight on Gazela during the protest: "Audi" blocked another vehicle, then KICKED THE DRIVER and attacked a young man who tried to intervene (Blic, 2024). Interestingly, Politika, as a serious media outlet, published more headlines with a dramatic tone (11 headlines), such as the headline Croatian media are calling for civil war in Serbia (Politika, 2024). The second most common element of moral panic in the headlines is symbolization, which appears in 47 headlines. It is most prevalent in the headlines of tabloid media Informer (19) and Alo (16). In these, the protests are framed as part of a broader alleged plan to destabilize the country, with protesters labeled as "fascists" or "separatists," and the protests linked to a potential "coup." For example, the headline in Informer reads Tycoon media are calling for civil war! Foreign services have prepared a coup plan and assassination of Vučić! (VIDEO) (Informer, 2024), while the online media Alo published EXTREMISTS ANNOUNCE ECONOMIC TERRORISM: Kokanović: We will strike at the Serbian economy, block the whole country! (Alo, 2024); Petković: It is clear that there are direct ties between separatists in Priština and the organizers of the alleged environmental protests in Belgrade (Alo, 2024). These headlines, instead of focusing on the protests themselves, use negative symbols, further amplifying the sense of danger and threat. N1 and Danas reported on the "There will be no mining" protest with four headlines that featured elements of symbolization. In these media outlets, this element mainly relates to mining and the Rio Tinto project. For example, N1 published Message from students before the protest: The government has committed many wrongdoings, and Rio Tinto is only part of it (N1, 2024), while Danas featured Svetlana Bojković at the protest against lithium: Our gathering is purely environmental, the government accuses us of a coup (Danas, 2024). In some headlines, more than one element of moral panic was present, and symbolization was observed in titles we previously mentioned as examples of exaggeration and distortion, such as when Prime Minister Miloš Vučević called protest participants a "rotten gang." Blic noted one headline with symbolization in the form of a direct quote: Vesić: "The blockade of railway stations is illegal and represents harassment of citizens" (Blic, 2024). Symbolization also appeared in headlines from Politika (4), a media outlet traditionally seen as reputable. In the headline Destabilization of Serbia under the guise of environment (Ćurčić, 2024), a narrative is created about the danger behind environmental initiatives. This is particularly noteworthy because the article was published in one of the more serious and reputable media outlets, which could lead to a negative public perception of environmental issues. The prediction element was the least represented in the analyzed media, appearing in only 16 headlines. N1 had the most prediction-related titles, but they mainly focused on forecasting the damage from lithium mining. The media also published headlines predicting protests, such as Lutovac: Fearmongering continues - the goal is to bring fewer people to the protest in Belgrade (Beta, 2024). In contrast to N1, Informer and Alo made more rigid forecasts about the outcome of the protests. One headline from Informer was Extreme groups will try to radicalize the protests! No one knows what they might resort to! (VIDEO) (Informer, 2024). Alo featured the headline OPPOSITION CONTINUES THE BLOCKADE, DISCLOSE NEXT HELLISH MOVE: Vučić calls an urgent meeting, awaiting an important decision (PHOTO/VIDEO) (Alo, 2024). Meanwhile, Politika ran the headline Spasić: The state will do everything to prevent the disturbance of public order and peace tonight (Politika, 2024). These headlines suggest that the protests could escalate into something more dangerous, adding to a sense of panic in the public. Regarding the aftermath of the protests, nearly all of the analyzed media outlets referenced statements from the Minister of the Interior Ivica Dačić. Danas published Dačić on the protest in Belgrade: Public order and peace were disturbed, criminal charges will be filed (Danas, 2024), and Blic featured Dačić on the protest against lithium mining: "After the rally, there was a serious disturbance of public order and peace, criminal and misdemeanor charges will be filed" (Blic, 2024). Although these predictions were not always accurate, the implications raised by the headlines stirred fear and uncertainty, reinforcing the narrative of the protest as a dangerous social phenomenon. This analysis confirms that all elements of moral panic, as defined by Stanley Cohen, were present in the media coverage of the protests against lithium mining in the Jadar Valley. In line with Cohen's understanding of how the media can shape public perception of social issues as threats, our data shows that tabloids, such as Informer and Alo, used exaggeration and distortion to portray the protests, creating an atmosphere of panic. These elements also appeared in the headlines of N1, Danas, Blic, and Politika, but in a more subdued form. The analyzed media also incorporated elements of symbolization and prediction, further contributing to the narrative of the protest as a destabilizing force. These findings align with Cohen's

theory that the media, especially tabloids, use sensationalism to create negative narratives about certain social issues. This study highlights the differences in reporting styles among various types of media. In N1 and Danas, all elements of moral panic appeared in the coverage of the protest, but their headlines mostly focused on creating a negative narrative about the company Rio Tinto project itself. The use of elements like exaggeration and distortion, prediction, and symbolization was particularly evident in tabloids like Informer and Alo, while more serious outlets and semi-tabloids such as N1, Danas, Politika, and Blic had milder but still present elements of moral panic. These results contribute to existing literature on moral panic by showing that modern media, particularly tabloids, employ strategies that align with Cohen's model, especially in the context of current social issues. The research also underscores the difference in reporting approaches across media types, helping to understand how editorial policies influence narratives on various topics. Moreover, the study suggests that the media can shape public attitudes toward environmental protests, particularly in politically and socially polarized societies.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of media headlines regarding the "There will be no mining" protest clearly demonstrates how and to what extent various types of media incorporate elements of moral panic in accordance with Cohen's theory. Tabloids like Informer and Alo predominantly use exaggeration and distortion (sensational headlines, melodramatic language, and misleading titles) to portray the protests as a significant threat to social stability. These media outlets often depict protesters as radical groups associated with violence and political destabilization, incorporating elements of symbolism and prediction. In contrast, serious media such as N1 and Danas mostly focus on the environmental, political, and economic implications of the Rio Tinto project. However, even in their coverage, milder forms of moral panic are present, as seen with the semi-tabloid Blic. An interesting case is Politika, a respected media outlet, which frequently used narratives suggesting the dangers of environmental protests, illustrating that even well-established media can contribute to the narrative of social destabilization. The findings from this study indicate that elements of moral panic are present in the headlines about the protests across all the analyzed media, but they appear in different forms and to varying degrees. A key takeaway from this analysis is that, despite the differing approaches among the media outlets, all of them employed elements of moral panic in shaping the narrative around the protests, placing the event within a context of crisis and potential destabilization. This framing could have long-term social consequences, including increased polarization and heightened tensions in society.

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