

THE COMMON CORE MORAL PANIC

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative was initially met with great enthusiasm from politicians and education experts. However, as states began rolling out the standards, backlash against the Common Core became widespread, and several states ended up pulling out of the initiative. To explore and better understand why there was such a negative reaction to the Common Core, we make use of the sociology construct of moral panics, and present an argument that the response to the CCSS was indeed a moral panic.

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For decades, mathematics educators and politicians have called for a uniform, national set of mathematics standards as a way of improving mathematical instruction in the US. In 1989, the National Research Council, in the book *Everybody Counts* (National Research Council, 1989), asserted that “America needs to reach consensus on national standards for school mathematics” (p. 46). In 2009, President Barack Obama called for states to work together to set higher standards and combat the disparities that arise from the fifty states’ different sets of educational benchmarks (Montopoli, 2009). More recently, mathematics educators Deborah Ball, Mark Thames, and James Hiebert (Hiebert, 2013; Thames & Ball, 2013) argued “that the lack of a central or a common [national] curriculum is a major impediment” (Thames & Ball, 2013, p. 34) to improving the mathematical education of children in the US, and suggest that by unifying the nation on the mathematical learning goals for our students, we can greatly improve the teaching of mathematics.

With so many advocating for a set of national mathematics standards as a way to improve mathematics education in the US, it is no wonder that the Common Core State Standards Initiative ("Common Core State Standards Initiative," 2015), was initially met with great enthusiasm. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) ("Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts," 2010; "Common Core State Standards for Mathematics," 2010) were developed by a state-led initiative in 2009, that included

... governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia, through their membership in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). State school chiefs and governors recognized the value of consistent, real-world learning goals and launched this effort to ensure all students, regardless of where they live, are graduating high school prepared for college, career, and life ("Standards in Your State," 2015).

Through examining the best state standards then in existence, consulting with teachers, educational leaders, state political leaders, and leading thinkers, and eliciting and reviewing feedback from the public, the CCSS were developed to achieve the goal of unifying the states’ learning goals for students across the nation.

Many in the mathematics education community had largely positive outlooks at the time the CCSS were unveiled. The 2010 Critical Issues in Mathematics Education conference at the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute (Rehmeyer, 2010) called the CCSS “an unprecedented

opportunity to promote reasoning and sense-making across the United States,” (p. 5), and further described the standards as “coherent: build[ing] the mathematical concepts in a logical, orderly way, introducing new ideas only when students have had a chance to master the concepts they are built on” (p. 5). The National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) President Diane J. Briars also described how political leaders and educators were enthusiastic about the CCSS “and how having common, rigorous, world-class college- and career-ready standards would benefit both their students and the nation” (Briars, 2014). It seemed the CCSS would be a major step in improving the mathematical education of students in the US, unifying the mathematical learning goals of a majority of the states, and fulfilling a dream of many mathematics educators.

Despite the overwhelming optimism that the CCSS originally generated, these standards grew hugely controversial after their initial implementation. Views among large numbers of parents, educators, and politicians soured, and many began acting for the repeal of the CCSS, citing numerous negatively charged reasons for disposing of them.

As we examine how hostility towards the CCSS grew and became more widespread, it makes sense to ask: What happened? Why did a unified, research-based, national set of mathematics standards designed to improve mathematics education in the US become so controversial? To explore these questions and better understand the nation’s reaction to the Common Core, we make use of a sociology construct originally developed by Stanley Cohen (2002), namely that of a *moral panic*.

The Moral Panic

Cohen (2002) defined moral panics as moments when

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; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates ... Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself. (p. 1).

These moral panics arise quite suddenly when a large, empowered sector of society labels something as deviant and threatening to the norms of that society, and urges that steps must be taken to repair the damage and prevent the perpetrators from further destruction of the moral order (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). These perpetrators become “folk devils” (Cohen, 2002), and are seen as “legitimate and deserving targets of self-righteous anger, hostility, and punishment” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 35).

Elements of a Moral Panic

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) elaborated on the initial definition of the moral panic given by Cohen (2002) by identifying five crucial elements that appear within moral panics. First, there must be a heightened level of concern over the actions of a certain group or category of society whose behavior supposedly endangers other sectors of society. This concern should be manifest through a variety of outlets, such as public opinion polls, public commentary, media attention, and proposed legislation.

Second, there must be an increased level of hostility towards the deviant group, for the harm thought to be caused by them. In other words, “not only must the condition, phenomenon, or

behavior be seen as threatening, but a clearly identifiable group in or segment of the society must be seen as responsible for the threat” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 38). As society begins to see a split between “us” – good, honest members of society – and “them” – the troublemakers or deviants – stereotyping of these outsiders occurs. This results in the creation of “folk devils” or villains whom society can blame for the phenomenon, and fight against, in order to maintain societal order.

Third, there must be substantial agreement or consensus that an actual threat exists, and is being caused by the behavior of the deviant group. “This sentiment must be fairly widespread, although the proportion of the population who feels this way need not be universal or, indeed, even make up a literal majority” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 38). Thus, if only a few scattered, separate individuals believe that a threat exists, then there is no moral panic, despite these individuals heightened emotions and concerns.

Fourth, as implicitly assumed in the term moral panic, the reaction to the supposedly harmful occurrence or behavior needs to be disproportionate. This disproportion is manifest through: (1) a belief that a more sizeable number of individuals are engaged in the deviant behavior than actually are; (2) a belief that the threat, danger, or damage is far more extensive than what is warranted; and (3) the wild exaggeration of numbers and figures, such as the number of deaths, violent acts, crimes committed, injuries, and dollars of damage caused by the behavior of the misbehaving group. “In short, the term moral panic conveys the implication that public concern is in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 40).

Fifth, moral panics are volatile, erupting suddenly onto the scene of social conscience, and, almost as suddenly, subsiding from the awareness of the concerned members of society. Some moral panics become institutionalized, that is, the concerns that arose during the moral panic lead to the creation of social movement organizations, legislation, or rules of enforcement. Other moral panics simply fade away, with little to no trace or effect on society. The volatility of moral panics does not mean that the issues involved had no structural or historical antecedents; in fact, “the specific issue that generates a particular moral panic may have done so in the past, perhaps even the not-so-distant past” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 42). However, the degree of hostility generated during a moral panic flares up quickly and is not typically sustainable, hence its volatile nature.

Actors in a Moral Panic

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) further point out that within a moral panic, there are usually five main “actors” or groups of participants. The first and most important actor is the press or mass media. As noted by Cohen (2002), within industrialized societies, the information that society uses to build ideas about societal norms, and who or what should be labeled as deviants, is received second hand. In other words, what the general public receives as “news” has already been processed by the mass media, who determine what is newsworthy and how it should be presented, based upon the commercial and political constraints within which the media outlets operate. Thus, one of the main instigators and sustainers of a moral panic is the press, who plays a large part in defining and displaying to the public the groups or episodes that should be considered as “the enemy,” by exaggeration and over-reporting of events, as well as stereotyping characters and behaviors (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). The second actor is the public. A moral panic cannot erupt unless the issues pointed out by the media strike a responsive chord within the general public, where the perpetrators identified can be focused on and vilified as a symbol for larger problems plaguing society. The third actor in a moral panic is the social control culture, or

those who are responsible for keeping order within society. Within most moral panics studied in sociology, this group consists of police and the courts, or law enforcement. Public concern about a supposed threat within a moral panic leads to the creation of public attitudes about what law enforcement should be doing to quash the problems “the enemy” is producing. The fourth actor within a moral panic is the group consisting of politicians and legislators. In past moral panics, when politicians and legislators recognized that the media and general public identified a threat to society, they “... aligned themselves against the devil and on the side of angels; the fact is, they picked an ‘easy target’ ... What counted was not the nature of the target but what side they were on and what they were against.” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 26). These politicians and legislators within a moral panic push for immediate action within government and the law to end the disturbances to society caused by the groups or events branded as deviants. The fifth actor comprises “action groups,” or members of the public who come together to advocate for solutions to the problems created by the deviants to society, usually claiming that existing remedies are insufficient.

While some of the actors involved in the reaction to the Common Core fall into the above categories (e.g. the press, the public, politicians, and action groups), there are some differences. First, since the Common Core does not involve crime or criminal acts, the police, courts, and law enforcement are not relevant. However, the analog of law enforcement within education, those who are part of the social control culture that are expected to uphold and enforce societal norms and improve the quality of the education of children locally, are state school boards. Thus, in examining the reaction to the CCSS, it is important to study how school boards reacted to the standards. Second, in the past few years, social media has vastly changed (1) the way people interact with one another, (2) the ease and accessibility of creating groups that call for action and change, and (3) how the public receives and interprets news. In fact, a recent study by the Pew Research Center found that about 30% of US citizens get their news on Facebook (Anderson & Caumont, 2014). Hence, in studying the nation’s reaction to the CCSS, we also must pay particular attention to the public opinions, “news” displayed, and action groups active on social media.

Methods

Data sources for this paper include social media posts, news outlets, school board meeting notes, and legislative action. In particular, four states were chosen to examine in depth: Indiana, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Utah. Data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics to examine volatility and consensus, and qualitative coding and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of various sources to identify concerns, hostility, and disproportionate reactions of the public towards the common core. In the next section, we present evidence that all of the elements of a moral panic existed in the reaction against the Common Core.

Evidence of the Common Core Moral Panic

Concern

A wide variety of concerns arose as the Common Core was implemented, as illustrated by a popular picture circulated on Facebook, presented in Figure 1. These concerns manifested through Facebook posts, school board meetings, legislation, and news outlets, and include loss of state and local control over education decisions, developmentally and age inappropriate standards, relentless testing that students will be subjected to, and the privatization of education.



Figure 1. Widely circulated Facebook illustration from www.StopCommonCoreinNewYork.com.

Hostility and Folk Devils

Through examination of hundreds of Facebook posts of anti-Common Core groups, we were able to identify two categories of folk devils that were vilified as those responsible for the CCSS. The first category consisted of those who could be blamed for taking over state and local control of educational decisions, such as President Barack Obama, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, or the federal government in general. The second category consisted of people or companies that people felt would benefit financially from adoption of the standards, including Bill Gates, Pearson, and other educational “big businesses” or test developers. In each post, the identified folk devil was blamed for the problems that the CCSS were believed to cause, including concerns mentioned in the previous section, as well as criticized for trying to make money through exploiting children’s education.

Consensus

We identified three types of evidence for consensus that the CCSS were problematic. First, hundreds of anti-Common Core Facebook groups were created, with some consisting of thousands of members. Second, numerous articles about the CCSS were produced by national news outlets in 2013 and 2014. Third, because the voice of opposition became so loud, and had such a large number of people behind it, several states were forced to legislative action, such as Governor Herbert of Utah organizing a team to review the quality and legality of the standards (Herbert, 2014), or states (e.g. Indiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina) choosing to completely pull out of the standards altogether (Strauss, 2014).

Disproportion

Disproportionate claims that the CCSS were detrimental and causing great harm were not uncommon. Klein (2015) reported on five of the extreme claims, including that the Standards (a) “turn kids gay,” (b) “indoctrinate kids under a Nazi society,” or (c) “turn kids into communists or socialists.” Considering that the CCSS are only a set of learning goals and not a brainwashing effort, these claims were clearly unfounded and over-reactive.

As another example of the disproportionate reaction towards the CCSS, consider what happened in the state of Indiana. On May 11, 2013, Governor Mike Pence signed a bill that paused implementation of the CCSS (Castleman, 2013), and by March of 2014, Pence signed legislature that completely withdrew Indiana from the Common Core Initiative (Nicks, 2014). Despite clear warnings from the Obama administration that fines would be enacted if the state’s new standards were subpar (Lucas, 2015), Indiana pushed forward trumpeting their actions as an act of support toward state’s rights. “By signing this legislation, Indiana has taken an important

step forward in developing academic standards that are written by Hoosiers, for Hoosiers, and are uncommonly high,” Governor Pence said in a statement (Calvert, 2015). The committee for creating new state standards met in October 2013, but after a draft of these new standards was released, the Indiana Department of Education found that 70 percent of the standards were exactly the same as the CC with another 20 percent of the content simply a modified version of the CC (“Open the Floodgates”, 2014). These similarities to the CCSS continued on through to the final draft, with many seeing the new standards as little more than a “rebrand” (Kurtz, 2014) or a “warmed-over version of Common Core’s standards” (Calvert, 2015). Hence, it seems that the negative reaction towards the standards themselves was unwarranted, and most likely an overreaction, as the state found it difficult to write high-quality standards that were different from the Common Core.

Volatility

Despite the CCSS development in 2009-2010, and the adoption of the standards by a large majority of states from 2010-2012, news coverage about the CCSS was fairly minimal until midway through 2012, when the number of news articles mentioning the CCSS grew rapidly. According to a LexisNexis Newspaper article search analysis of US publications conducted by the American Enterprise Institute (Hess & McShane, 2014), this rapid growth in articles reporting on the Common Core rose quickly from August 2012 to a peak in the number of articles in August 2013 (see Figure 1).

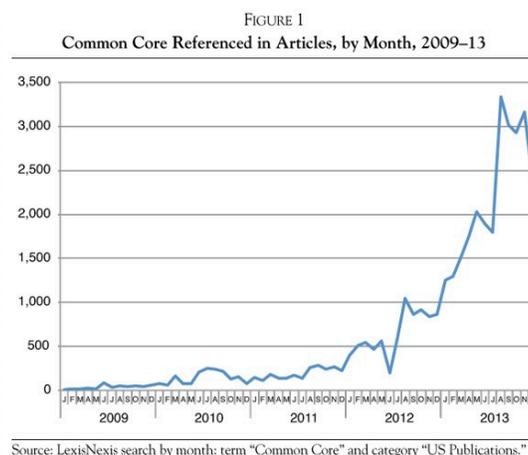


Figure 2. Number of US newspaper articles mentioning “Common Core” per month. From Hess & McShane (2014). Adapted with permission.

As additional evidence of the volatility of the reaction towards the CCSS, Figure 2 presents the number of anti-Common Core Facebook groups created by month, from a sample of 191 of the largest of these groups across the US:

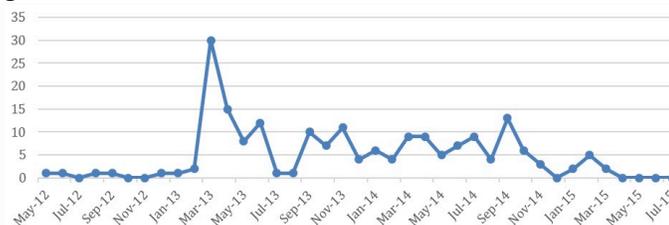


Figure 3. Number of anti-Common Core Facebook groups created per month from a sample of 191 of the largest groups in the US.

From these two figures, it is clear that public and press awareness of, and concern with, the CCSS erupted during the spring and summer of 2013, but over the past five years, concern and calls for repealing the CCSS have lost their prominence in the public square. However, this is not to say that distress over the Common Core will not reach these levels again, as some moral panics can become “a conceptual grouping of a series of more or less discrete, more or less localized, more or less short-term panics” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 42). Thus, other spikes in concern about the CCSS may still occur in the future.

Discussion

As education is a highly politicized, highly charged discussion within the US, it might not seem surprising that such opposition to the CCSS arose during their implementation. However, the sociological construct of moral panic gives us a more detailed description of the negative reaction towards the Common Core, helping us see why it was so easy for the public and media to paint the CCSS as a terrible idea.

Intriguingly, the Common Core moral panic afforded both sides of the political spectrum concerns and arguments against the Common Core. For those on the Left, the idea of big businesses profiting from the education of the nation’s children was maddening. For those on the Right, Federal Government taking over local control was a large overstep of power. In both cases, calls for the repeal of the CCSS ran rampant across the country.

This leads us to end with the following question: if more educational reforms are desired, how can we avoid another moral panic in the future? Sadly, because education is so politicized, the answer may be that a moral panic cannot be avoided; nevertheless, it could be minimized. Better communication with parents and teachers, and a slower implementation of standards could have benefitted the CCSS greatly. Future educational reformers, including educators and politicians, should look closely at the Common Core Moral Panic, and consider carefully how mistakes made in its implementation could be avoided in implementing future reform.

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