Panic over Sexting
Regulating Sexuality in the Age of New Media Technology

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Abstract

Through moral panic studies the long term regulation of social norms and morality can be traced. The expansion and integration of technology has transformed the social world, thereby propelling a struggle for power over who should create the new norms which will govern social relations. In this paper, I analyze the current moral panic of teens sexting, or sending and receiving sexually explicit photos via text messaging, in order to highlight the regulation of sexuality in the context of new media technology. By conducting a discourse analysis of 600 newspaper articles discussing sexting, I aim to answer the questions: what cultural discourses are being produced and reinforced through news coverage of the moral panic of sexting? How do these discourses impact ideologies of gender and sexuality? How does power operate through moral panics? As teens stand at a unique nexus of power and marginalization, this research contributes to the existing body of research on moral panics a more complex understanding of how power functions in the struggle between folk devils and moral entrepreneurs. Furthermore, I argue that news media discourses reinforce notions of adolescent vulnerability, women as sexual objects, and sexual expression as a criminal activity with durable consequences which aim to regulate sexuality for both adults and adolescents in the context of new media technology.

Introduction

Moral panics serve as a key arena for understanding cultural ideology, since they constitute a drastic reaction to the deviant social behaviors and reinforcement of normative social practices. In this paper I analyze news media discourses regarding the moral panic of "sexting," which is the process of sending and/or receiving sexually explicit text and/or photographs through text messaging via cell phones, to identify the production of gender and sexuality ideologies. The discourse presented in news media often reflects hegemonic social ideologies, thus perpetuating these dominant belief systems. This dissemination and reinforcement of normative ideology is significant, because ideologies influence patterns of social relations and inequalities. As a current moral panic, I find this is a prime moment to study the workings of moral regulation through the panic about sexting as we are actively engaging in forming and policing new norms about sexual practice in the context of new media technology.

The goal of my research is to use a feminist lens to identify and deconstruct the patterns of representation in news coverage of sexting in order to determine how these regimes of truth produce inequalities for women and adolescents. To understand this process my central questions are: What cultural discourses are being produced and reinforced through news coverage of the moral panic of sexting? How do these discourses impact ideologies of gender and sexuality? How does power operate through moral panics? I argue that circumscribed within a complex framework of productive power, the moral panic of sexting aims to regulate norms of sexual practice in the context of new media technology by targeting the bodies of adolescents. We have an opportunity to think and speak critically about the relationship between adolescence, sexuality, and technology, but instead the news media discourse reinforces notions of adolescent vulnerability, women as sexual objects, and sexual expression as a criminal activity

with durable consequences. Furthermore, I find that while on one level the sexting moral panic serves to police the behavior of youth, the discourse generated also actively produces expectations for what appropriate sexual behavior looks like when it meets technology which regulate the lives of all people, regardless of age.

Theoretical Framework

Moral Panic Studies

Moral panics serve as an effective frame for understanding social issues as they constitute a dramatic reaction to a social event or practice. A moral panic develops when a "condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen 1972, 9). Coined by sociologist Stanley Cohen, a moral panic is an overreaction to a behavior which challenges the current social order; the risks and dangers associated with the behavior are also exaggerated. At the center of public discussion and concern, the features of these events are magnified and disseminated on a large scale. This is a useful tool for analyzing social norms and control, because when the normative routines of daily social life are interrupted, as they usually are by deviant actions or events, the invisible expectations of interaction come to light and become vulnerable to critique.

In the last couple of decades studies of moral panic have transformed as many scholars have dedicated research to new case studies, as well as to critiquing and expanding the ideas of canonical moral panic texts, i.e. Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* and Stuart Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis*. There exists clear contestation among scholars who study moral panic concerning when the concept is applicable, what its key components are, and how to best approach the study of moral panics. Applying the findings of my own research on the news media's representation of sexting, I will further complicate this conversation.

The conceptualization of moral panic is wide-ranging, but as Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2011) argue what makes it useful is the broadness and lack of precise parameters in its characterization. While keeping this flexibility in mind, I find it helpful to also employ Goode and Ben-Yehuda's operationalization of moral panic in order to concretize its application. There are five central criteria which qualify a social reaction as a moral panic: increased concern about the issue, heightened level of hostility towards the group engaging in the behavior, social consensus about the threat posed by this behavior, volatility (the capacity for the reaction to emerge and/or dissipate in a sudden, explosive manner), and a reaction disproportionate to the threat (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). Some panics will not fit perfectly within the components of this ideal type as the manifestation of these features occurs on a sliding scale. These aspects are all apparent in the panic over sexting as increased concern and social consensus are evident through the media coverage and legislative initiative to incorporate sexting into laws; hostility and disproportionate reaction are conveyed when courts put children on trial for distributing sexually explicit photos of themselves to their peers, resulting in felony charges and registration as sex offenders; and volatility is evident as news coverage of sexing spread across the nation in a matter of months in 2008. Overall, these five facets allow us to see the disparity between the deviant activity at the center of the panic and the reaction on a larger scale. We must aim to understand the motives behind the creation of panic and why the public feels widely threatened by the troublesome activity.

A new link has been made in moral panic studies which reconceptualizes moral panics as more than an irrational overreaction to social behavior threatening to the social order, but instead frames it as a short term mechanism within a long term process of moral regulation (Heir 2008, 2011). In other words, we are constantly engaged in a process of producing a dialectic of right

and wrong; moral panics function as one part of this long term process, since they amplify the presence of one issue at the center of a morality debate. We must continually establish and reestablish what is considered appropriate behavior from deviant behavior, especially when our social context shifts due to political, economic, or technological changes. This connection between moral panic and moral regulation is pivotal for understanding what panics mean on a larger scale, such as what the social implications of a particular moral panic are on wider social values and the construction of hegemonic ideologies. It is also important to understand who is involved in this process of moral regulation, since each social group is guided by particular interests and must work within the limitations of their own social contexts.

Cohen (1972) identifies two key players in moral panics: the moral entrepreneurs and folk devils. The folk devils are comprised of the members of the groups accused of engaging in a behavior that poses a threat to the rest of society. On the other hand, the moral entrepreneurs are responsible for calling this activity to the light and generating the framework of deviance, risk, and anxiety directed at the folk devils. Extensive theorizing around these two terms has been conducted, most of which revolves around the production and dispersion of power between the two groups. Although many scholars have claimed that these social actors look characteristically different in contemporary panics than they did in Cohen's study of Mods and Rockers in 1960s Britain, I am critical of this stance as I find these conceptual transformations flatten power relations between all the groups involved.

Understanding the construction of the folk devil remains important to moral panic studies as it highlights the nature of the behaviors and threat at the center of social anxiety, thereby revealing the activity moral entrepreneurs are aiming to regulate. In its origins, the concept of folk devils identified a marginalized group which was scapegoated when a problematic activity,

like mugging in the case of Hall et al.'s research, was brought to the public's attention. A

marginalized group would be targeted, because they lacked the social, political, and economic

power to defend themselves. However, scholars have further developed this concept within the

contemporary conceptualization of moral panics as a process of moral regulation. Although

previously studies of folk devils conveyed them as an objectified group caught up in the midst of

panic, recent studies attribute greater agency to these social actors in the context of panic. In her

reconsideration of folk devils, de Young (2011) argues that modern fold devils possess more

resources and power than the conventional folk devils of Cohen and Hall et al.'s research, thus

enabling them to resist the forces of the panic. In this regard, I find that when we consider the

place of youth in moral panics, the power dynamic is not as simple as the dialectic of

conventional and modern folk devils, as youth inhabit a unique position of privilege and

marginalization in society, particularly in regards to a panic centering on new media technology

use. Adolescents are denied the rights contracted by adulthood as they are viewed as

incompetent and immature, yet as my research will show youth are also conveyed as standing at

the forefront of technology use and application. This complicates the relationship between the

folk devils and moral entrepreneurs as the process of regulation and resistance is muddled when

power is attributed to both groups.

As the news media focuses specifically on the application of this technology in the sexual

realm of adolescents' lives, I argue that the moral panic over sexting relies on the unique

intersection of marginality and power that many teens possess in order to propel the panic

forward. I find that in the context of the moral panic over sexting, youth stand on the line

between deYoung's conception of a conventional and modern folk devils. Although I agree that

modern folk devils may have more power and resources, in the case of teen it does not

necessarily appear to grant them more of a capacity to resist the panic. On the contrary, the panic may be in reaction to the increase of power and autonomy enabled by access to new media technology which has rendered them in control of the production of norms regarding the integration of the is technological resources in our daily social lives. However, due to their position at the bottom of the age hierarchy, youth lack other social resources, like full rights in the eyes of the legal system, which would allow this power to translate within social institutions. As adults seek to maintain power being lost by the teens ruling the digital world, institutions, like the news media, and hegemonic stereotypes are mobilized to pursue this goal. Therefore, panicking over teens sexting may be largely derived and fueled by a power struggle between the adult moral entrepreneurs and young folk devils. In this light we may need to rethink the complex role that power plays in the creation of moral panics. This paper will illustrate through the panic over youth sexting that maintaining power hierarchies and regulating social norms are equally important motivations in the development of moral panics.

Sociology of Adolescence Perspective

With teens inhabiting the bottom of the hierarchy in this case, I have conducted my research from the perspective of the sociology of youth. Often children and teens are assessed on a developmental scale as they take on certain traits and behaviors attributed to particular age groups and life stages as if these changes are a natural and necessary sequence (Ito et al. 2010). Youth have been viewed as passive recipients of culture and social rules, as if they do not actively engage in producing and reproducing the social categories to which they belong (Thorne 1993). On the contrary, this project is grounded in the understanding that "children are active, creative social agents who produce their own unique children's culture while simultaneously contributing to the production of adult societies" (Ito et al. 2010). Assuming that adolescence is

a social construction, I aim to show how panic around teens sexting is not derived from fabricated activities, but is instead a rational reaction aiming to regulate teen behavior as they are overtly and actively impacting the rules of social relations. I do not intend to downplay the actions of teens; quite the reverse, I hope to highlight what role they are playing in constructing a technologically mediated world.

Ito et al. conducted a collaborative ethnographic study of new media technology use in over several years looking at a range of location and age groups. This extensive study involved 28 researchers and research associates conducting 23 case studies. Studying the impact of new media technology on adolescent's lives in the context of friendships, families, gaming, and work, Ito et al.'s data and analysis serve as the foundation for my work on moral panics, as their findings highlight what teens are in fact doing with this technology. I position this research in dialogue with my own as I set the representations and reactions to the experiences of teens conveyed in the news media in contrast with the lived experiences of teens highlighted by Ito et al. Through this juxtaposition, I hope to show how as a process of moral regulation, the moral panic of sexting functions as a mode of constructing and policing the rules of sexual practice within the environment of new media technology.

The Construction of Sexuality

Providing a queer feminist framework for my analysis, Gayle S. Rubin (1984) argues in "Thinking Sex" that sexuality is always political; therefore, the historical and cultural context in which sex is constructed is important. In other words, the meaning and parameters of sexuality have transformed over time and vary by cultural location. Sexuality is always organized in a complex system of power with its own inequalities, modes of management, and oppressions. As sexuality is tightly bound up within a process of moral regulation its rules continually fall subject

to debate, since various religious, political, legal, and social groups have great stakes in defining morality. Rubin emphasizes that sex enters public attention and faces special ridicule and renegotiation in times of social instability. For instance, as England and America departed from the Victorian era at the end of the nineteenth century morality was renegotiated as prostitution, obscene literature, masturbation, abortion, birth control, and public dancing fell under attack (Rubin 1984). The ideologies forged in this period have resonated in contemporary society, and we are still engaging in many of these same debates, as evidenced by the central role that women's reproductive health has played in the 2012 presidential race. In this vein, I find that moral panics play a part in the war over the meaning of sex as they generate fear and amplify the consequences of certain sexual activities which are viewed as a threat to social values.

Following the assumption that sex is always political and entangled a complex system of power, the moral panic of sexting is not merely reinforcing norms of sexual interaction, but is producing them through discourse which frames what behaviors and circumstances are deemed appropriate or deviant. Some sexual practices are accepted and rewarded while other are considered deviant and subject to punishment and suppression. By adhering to the politicized nature of sex, I hope to foster an understanding that the practice of sexting is not inherently right or wrong, but is instead subject to the social conditions in which it has emerged and we are currently in the process of constructing its meaning. In the context of new media technology, worrying about sexting appears symptomatic of the potential for sexual practices to be impacted and transformed by the tools provided by real time interactive technology. Therefore, as moral panics aim to produce and regulate norms, this panic may serve to establish new norms and expectations concerning the use of technology in one's sexual life.

Context of Sexting

As sex is always political, how we understand sex and establish standards regarding appropriate sexual practices and partners develops relative to the social context in which these norms are negotiated. In this vein, I begin my discussion of sexting with a contextualization of the panic, as this context is relevant for understanding both sexual norms and moral panics more generally. In line with this assertion, as the term "sexting" emerged in news media beginning in 2008, the social, political, and economic conditions in which this panic grew reveal an intersection of power struggles. Three key components of this context include the momentum and influence of the Religious Right movement, the 2008 financial crisis, and the rise of new media technology. These factors play a pivotal role in generating the social instability necessary to propel parents, teens, educators, lawmakers, and the media into a state of fear and anxiety characteristic of a crisis of hegemony and, in turn, a sexual panic.

Economy

The financial crisis of 2008 and following economic recession created a point of contention in hegemonic power and social consensus. Economic troubles generate class tensions and as class intersects with other social locations, taken for granted ideologies and structures can destabilize. This tension may inspire the emergence of moral panic as an imperative to reestablish and reinforce existing social norms which may be inscribed within the new social context while maintaining previous power relations. Therefore, although recession may not directly influence the construction of sexual values, it does provide the context in which power potentially shifts and fears amplify. When this factor intersects with other facets of social structure, the organization of sexuality is called into question.

Politics

The rise of the Religious Right plays a significant role in the positioning of sexuality as a highly contested issue in American politics as topics of reproductive rights and sexuality education remain at the forefront of partisan platforms and policy debates. Since the 1970s, and especially in the 2000s during the Bush administration, the political arena has been leaning towards the right-wing, thereby allowing this movement to have a powerful influence over sexual policy in the United States (Di Mauro and Joffe 2009). This political arrangement places issues of sexuality in the public spotlight, framing abortion and comprehensive sex education as threats to American values. Within this framework, it is no surprise that moral panic is generated around debates over appropriate sexual practices as the discourse utilized by the Religious Right is grounded in ideologies of morality and risk.

New Media Technology

Furthermore, the arrival of new media technology at the end of the twentieth century has transformed social relations as this innovation mediates interactions on and offline. New media technology impacts family, friend, education and business relations as devices enabling global and real time interaction are portable, readily available, and are in many ways necessary to remain current in a social context inundated by technology. As defined by Ito et al. (2010) the term new media refers to a "media ecology where more traditional media such as books, television, and radio are intersecting with digital media, specifically interactive media and media for social communication." As our social reality is limited by the resources provided by the natural world, I find conceptualizing the context of new media technology as an ecology is a useful tool as this highlights the role new media plays as an existing, albeit socially created, environment within which our interactions are mediated. Due to this environmental change,

society has been pushed into a period of social transition as we must negotiate what role this technology will play in our lives. As the capabilities of new media technology continue to expand, society must continually reassess what function it will serve. In this regard, sexting has moved to the forefront of social concerns as technology integrates into an already highly contested arena of sexual relations and practices.

When technology intersects with adolescent sexuality in particular, the stakes in the sex war increase significantly. Youth have been raised in this new media ecology, thereby providing them with a leg up on adults regarding learning how to use and apply technology to their daily lives (Pascoe 2011; Ito et al. 2010). As new media use becomes an activity which consumes more of teens time than any other pastime with the exception of sleeping, it is clear that youth stand at the forefront of creating the new rules and expectations regarding new media use in daily social interaction, including dating and sexual relations (Roberts and Foehr 2008). Camera phones, text messaging, and social media websites have enabled photographs and personal information to be sent around the world, or around a high school, in a matter of seconds without the consultation of adults. With teen technology use at the center of policy, law, discipline, and education debates, it is clear that adults are anxious about the potential of teens to act autonomously within this realm, and as a result counter measure are being taken to regulate actions through fear. In this light, studying the moral panic of sexting may allow us to better understand the motives behind new sexual policies, highlight the limitations, and envision new ways of imagining the possibilities for the roles new media technology may play in social life.

Data and Methods

To address my research question regarding the discourses being produced and reinforced through news media coverage, I gathered data on sexting representations from the panic's

conception in 2008 through the beginning of my data collection in October 2011. I coded 600 newspaper articles; 300 were from 18 California newspapers and 300 were from 25 Texan news sources. As I was aiming to have an equal number of representative articles from each location, the disparity between the number of newspaper selected by state was impacted by volume of articles published about sexting by each paper; California newspapers tended to publish articles on this topic in greater numbers, so I utilized fewer news sources as a result. I conducted a systematic search of full-text newspaper articles in the Newsbank database to find articles where the keyword "sexting" appeared in any part of the text. To narrow my search I restricted the results to the states of California and Texas, as I was interested in what the differences between the former state with a liberal comprehensive sex education curriculum and the latter with a conservative abstinence-only sex education policy. However, after analyzing my data I found little relevant contrast applicable to my research inquiry.

The Social Production of News

Utilizing news media presents unique challenges, since the media industry has a distinctive organization which impacts the representation of social events. Reporters have professional interests and social influences which construct the framework in which articles about sexting are written. As news stories are not inherently newsworthy, choosing what will be represented in a newspaper and how it will be covered involves a complex process, not all of which is even obvious to the reporter. However, despite the social factors influencing journalistic decisions, the news is often viewed as an objective reflection of society. As a result of this dynamic, in order to understand how to analyze news content and its impact on the organization of society, we must first understand how news is produced.

News reporters must sift through the countless events which occur on any given day for stories that are considered newsworthy. As outlined by Hall et al. (1978) in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, there are three key dimensions to the social production of the news: the bureaucratic organization, the structure of news values, and the construction of the news article. The bureaucratic structure of specialization enables newspapers to generate issues on a daily basis. By breaking down the paper into sections, such as editorials, features, politics, technology and sports, with staff specializing in each niche, newspapers utilize a divide and conquer approach (Hall et al. 1978). However, this method also generates differential expectations and value for each section with "hard" news written with an aura of objectivity placed on the front page, while "softer" news, like features and editorials, gets pushed into the middle (Hall et al 1978). With this in mind, the articles selected for my data sample include discussions of sexting within any of the news genres, as material for all sections of the newspaper is carefully chosen and influences the representation of social life.

On this note, the structure of news values guides choices regarding what stories are of enough import to cover in a newspaper. Exceptional events which fall outside of the realm of the ordinary living often gain the status of newsworthy occurrences. Beyond these extraordinary events, newspaper often also favor events which evoke emotions, involve a sense of personalization, are dramatic, have negative consequences, or concern elite figures (Hall et al. 1978). This set of priorities also often encourages reporters to play up the remarkable features of the event, while pushing the more mundane elements of the story to the side. Evident in the coverage of sexting as events relating to these topic gain precedence due to its dramatic combination of teens and sex, the involvement of elite political figures, and the possibility of severe consequences, the desire for sensational events impact the overrepresentation of sexting,

thereby feeding moral panic. In this vein, moral panic and news media are inextricably tied as the components of each process reinforce one another through generating simultaneous discourses of exceptionalism and wide spread risk. As these norms influence what stories are published, the way in which the article is written also plays a role in the representation of events.

The construction of the news article, or the presentation of the event, influences how the audience comes to understand the problem or issue described. This process involves two levels: the identification and contextualizing. Identification serves to define the event and provide other necessary information for understanding it, while contextualization enables the reader to understand the importance of the event by placing it within a particular context and familiar system of social meaning (Hall et al. 1978). For example, in the majority of articles covering sexting, the term is defined and past occurrences are described in order to enable the reader to comprehend the event central to the article. Additionally, the articles build on cultural understandings of protecting children and the growing pervasiveness of technology in social interactions. Therefore, contextualization relies on the news media assuming that the audience shares a broader cultural understanding.

A final unique feature of the social production of the news is the role of the Associated Press in producing and distributing news content. The Associated Press (AP) is a not-for-profit cooperative of 1,400 U.S. daily newspapers. Focused on finding, reporting, and distributing news, the AP has 3,700 employees worldwide and provides articles for the 1,400 newspapers in the cooperative as well as numerous other paying subscribers (ap.org). This means that the all newspapers in the cooperative contribute stories which can then be published in hundreds of different newspapers across the country. Many of the articles about sexting included in the data sample were written by the AP. In this vein, the lack of divergence between article published in

Texas and California may be impacted by the fact that many articles were not written in either state, yet published in the majority of newspapers in both locations.

Coding Procedures

The coding schemes were created and the data was analyzed with the aforementioned facets of news production in mind. The main categories for coding focused on who the folk devils, moral entrepreneurs, and victims are; how the parents, elites, boys, girls, and teens are depicted; the motives, consequences, and solutions for sexting; and what sources are cited to make the claims seem legitimate. Ultimately, 200 original eligible articles were coded, after 187 repeats were identified and 213 articles were found ineligible. An eligible article was one that centered on sexting as a social practice or at least compared it to another similar behavior, like cyberbullying. Most repeats were exact duplicates of articles published in a different city distributed by the AP, and others presented the same discourse as previous articles on the same topic, for instance a scandal involving Rep. Anthony Weiner was covered dozens of times in the same way and when Texas passed a law that made sexting a misdemeanor newspapers all over Texas covered and described the reform in the same manner. The analysis of the data collected consisted of tracking the frequency of patterns in the representation of sexting, thereby revealing the most common discourses utilized in the news media coverage of sexting.
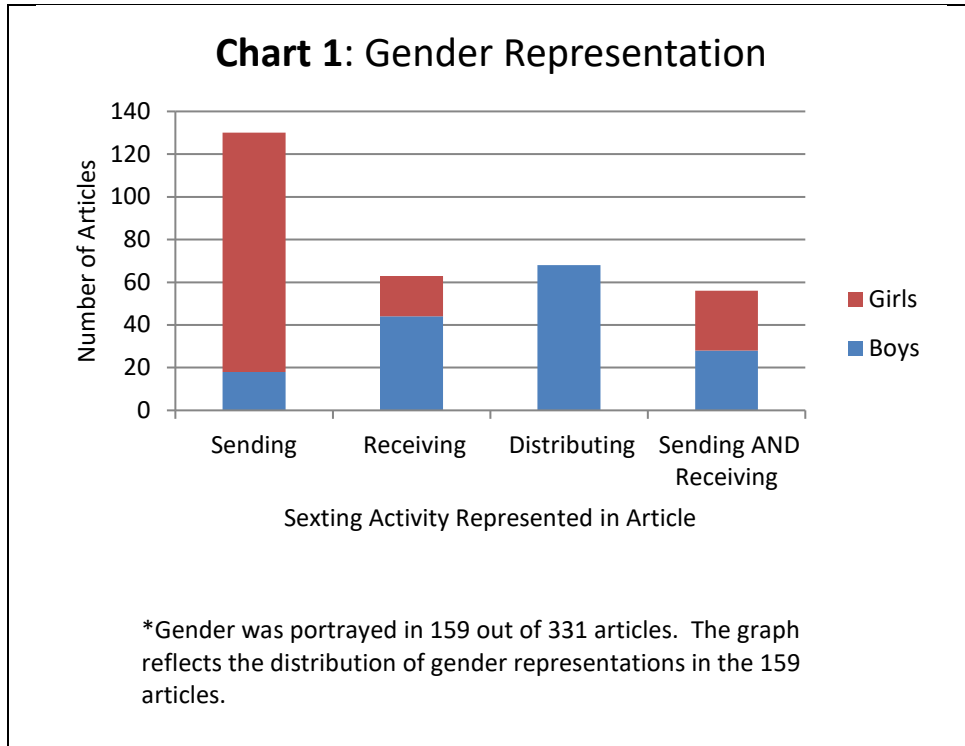
Findings and Discussion

The goal of my research is to show how the moral panic of sexting functions as a mechanism of moral regulation. Since media representations play a key role in generating and disseminating moral panic, in order to understand this process I have looked at newspaper articles covering sexting and analyzed the representations of this practice to determine the mechanisms of the moral regulation. I have found that this panic is regulating sexual practices

within the contemporary context of new media technology. We are trying to establish and maintain new rules regarding sexual expression through new media by generating a discourse of fear, which is a usual characteristic of moral panic. I have found three main components to this fear discourse: threats to gender, threats to youth, and an overall threat of durable consequences for anyone who utilizes new media technology as a form of sexual expression. Beginning with the role of gendered discourse in the moral panic of sexting, I will expand on these processes of regulation.

Gender

One mode of moral regulation emerges at the level of gender. The representation of sexting in news media operates to police gender in two ways: by reinforcing the gender dichotomy and by creating further panic through highlighting a potential threat to young girls. The representation of the panic not only speaks to what sexual practices are appropriate for men and women in the context of new media technology, it also sends a reminder about how to perform gender properly. In the following discussion of gender representation in the coverage of sexting I will show how both of these standards reinforce patriarchy and heteronormativity, thereby maintaining existing hegemonic power relations.

I found that in terms of sending, receiving, and distributing sexually explicit messages if a gender distinction is made, girls are most often characterized as the ones sending photos of themselves and boys are depicted as distributing them. As shown in Chart 1 on the following page, when gender is represented, 70% of the articles portray girls as sending sexual images via text message, while 71% of these articles depict boys as receiving sexually explicit images. Breaking down the figures for boys, 28% of the articles depict them as only receiving sexual picture messages, whereas 43% convey boys as receiving and distributing the photos to friends.

Chart 1: Gender Representation

*Gender was portrayed in 159 out of 331 articles. The graph reflects the distribution of gender representations in the 159 articles.

This pattern is reflected both in terms of the pronouns utilized in the articles and examples chosen by the reporters to support their stories. Illustrating this pattern Ellen Goodman writes in an article distributed by the Associated Press to both California and Texan news sources that "it's mostly girls' pictures that get passed around. It's often boyfriends…who hold the trump photo." Furthermore, boys are not only depicted as the viewers of the pictures, but they also show these images to their friends. For example, Erika Mellon from the Houston Chronicle describes the practice of sexting as troubling to schools because, "a girlfriend sends a picture to a boyfriend, who sends it to a friend, and pretty soon it's all over the school." Contrary to the image depicted, through a national survey of youth ages 12-17 years of age, the PEW Research Center found in 2008 that there is no difference in this practice by gender; boys and girls are equally likely to send a sexually suggestive picture to another person. Overexaggeration and a distortion of facts are characteristics of moral panics. However,

understanding why this representational disparity persists may highlight the gender and sexuality ideologies that these dominant media discourses generate and may also allow us to surmise the implications of these unequal representations.

Within the frame of the social construction of news media, this pattern of representation in which girls send and boys receive photos results as an unintended consequence of these news norms. News media often relies on common social tropes in order to make sense of social events and generate stories in a limited time frame (Hall et al. 1978). In this sense, a reporter may easily call on the existing assumption of girls as objects and boys as subjects as this pattern is evident in other realms of media, like cinema and advertising, and thus logically assert that girls are more likely to send sexually explicit photos. Reporters are situated within their own social contexts and fall subject to the norms of gender as well; consequently they may engage in this process of representation unknowingly as they are merely representing social reality as they understand it.

I argue that, consciously created of not, this pattern of representation functions as a mode of moral regulation in terms of constructing appropriate gender relations foundational to normative conceptions of morality. As British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey found in the context of cinema, gender dichotomous patterns such as those reflected in the data perpetuate the patriarchal power distribution in which men are subjects and women are objects. Dualistic representations position boys and girls on two different ends of a spectrum; girls are "to be looked at" while boys are in a position to gaze at these images (Mulvey 1975). So, girls become passive objects while boys are active observers. Representations such as these reinforce existing patterns of gender imagery as women are often depicted in movies and advertisements as sexual objects waiting for the desiring gaze of men. Additionally, when boys are portrayed as

distributing the images to friends and acquaintances the power at stake becomes clear; girls lose control over these pictures and their own representation as images of their bodies are passed around without their consent.

In terms of this notion of consent and coercion, these representations discursively deny girls the possibility of cultivating their own sexual subjectivities. Reporters represent the actions of young girls as either motivated by a lack of common sense or as the result of being pressured by peers of adult sexual predators, never are their actions portrayed as a normal and legitimate form of expressing sexual desire. Building on problematic gender constructions like the Madonna/whore dichotomy, these representations feed into a larger system of patriarchy which continually silences and denigrates women's sexual desires (Tolman 1994). The "missing discourse of desire" moves from a representational context in the media into girls' own descriptions of their sexual experiences (Tolman 1994: 325). Representations turn into realities when adolescent girls face disempowerment in regards to understanding their own sexual desires and pleasures, thereby limiting their sexual freedom. If we do not provide and discursive space which allows for the possibility of girls' sexual desire and pleasure, then adolescent girls will lose out on opportunities to develop strong sexual subjectivities. Therefore, the male as subject and girl as object dichotomy may be manifested in lived sexual relationships and further perpetuate gender equality. Furthermore, this discursive frame must enable an opening for girls to express sexual desire towards any gender, thus extending beyond the limits of heterosexual representations presented in the newspaper articles.

In this vein, through the reproduction of the gender dichotomy, these gendered representations also serve to reinforce heteronormativity. Gender functions as a major form of social organization; structuring our daily social life, it permeates relationships, interactions,

institutions, and discourses (Dowsett 2009). As the gender dichotomy serves as the foundation for social organization, heterosexuality also becomes institutionalized. Sexuality and gender are mutually reinforcing as the gender dichotomy sets up the framework for understanding normative sexual practices while sexual relationships emphasize gender difference (Connell 1987). In this way, the discourse surrounding adolescent sexuality utilizes a heteronormative frame and forecloses the possibility for other sexual relationships. Although this pattern is only a representation of teen gender and sexual relations, media discourse contributes to ideologies which form the foundation for institutionalized social inequality.

The reinforcement of heterosexuality for youth is not only prevalent in the news media; it permeates many of our social institutions, including education. Heteronormative ideologies are constructed around adolescent sexuality though the marginalization of LGBT youth in sex education curricula as the experiences of white, middle class heterosexuals are privileged and, in many cases, exclusively represented (Pascoe 2011). By maintaining and reinforcing heteronormative representations of sexuality, inequalities persist ideologically as well as tangibly when information and resources regarding sexual practices and health are denied to LGBT populations. Like in the news media representations of sexting, what is said and what is not said are equally important. When LGBT realities are silenced in these pedagogical practices or omitted from news representations, heterosexuality is actively produced as the right or only way of engaging with one's sexuality. In this light, the heteronormative and gender dichotomous representations generated through the moral panic contribute to a larger gender discourse which upholds hegemonic power relations organizing social life and inequalities.

Age

Another mode of moral regulation is evident through representations of teen behavior which construct notions of adolescence. Many teens stand at a unique intersection of power and marginalization as their young age strips them of rights and credibility while their exposure to and understanding of technology grants them advantages in the age of new media technology. Youth have been the folk devils of many moral panics dating all the way back to the Cohen's study of the mods and rockers in the 1960s. Their unique social position makes them prime targets of moral panic as they possess the power to impact social organization and meaning, while on the other hand, they lack the status and means to defend themselves. The case of sexting is particularity telling, since in this context youth have the power to establish norms regarding the use of new media technology as they stand at the forefront of its application in our daily social interactions.

The newspaper articles represent these conflicting attributes through the juxtaposition of adolescent vulnerability with technological savvy.   As show in Chart 2, teens' behavior is characterized in newspaper articles about sexting in three main ways: immature, vulnerable, and technologically-mediated.   By intersecting these qualities, news media discourse serves to construct a specific narrative of adolescence and moral panic. Contemporary teens are living in a new autonomy-granting digital world, but they face the same limitations as teens of the past— they do not know how to make sound decisions because they are too young and they are at risk of being taken advantage of by their peers and predatory adults due to their naivety. The need to both protect teens and take back control spins society into a whirl of panic as the regulation of morality and adolescent sexuality in the context of new media technology are at stake. These stakes are framed in terms of teens exploring new modes of sexual expression through new

media technology and the threat of adult sexual predators. In sum, through the discourse of danger and fear, news media reinforces a specific view of morality in which youth should not engage in any form of sexual activity.

Chart 2: Characterizations of Teen Behavior
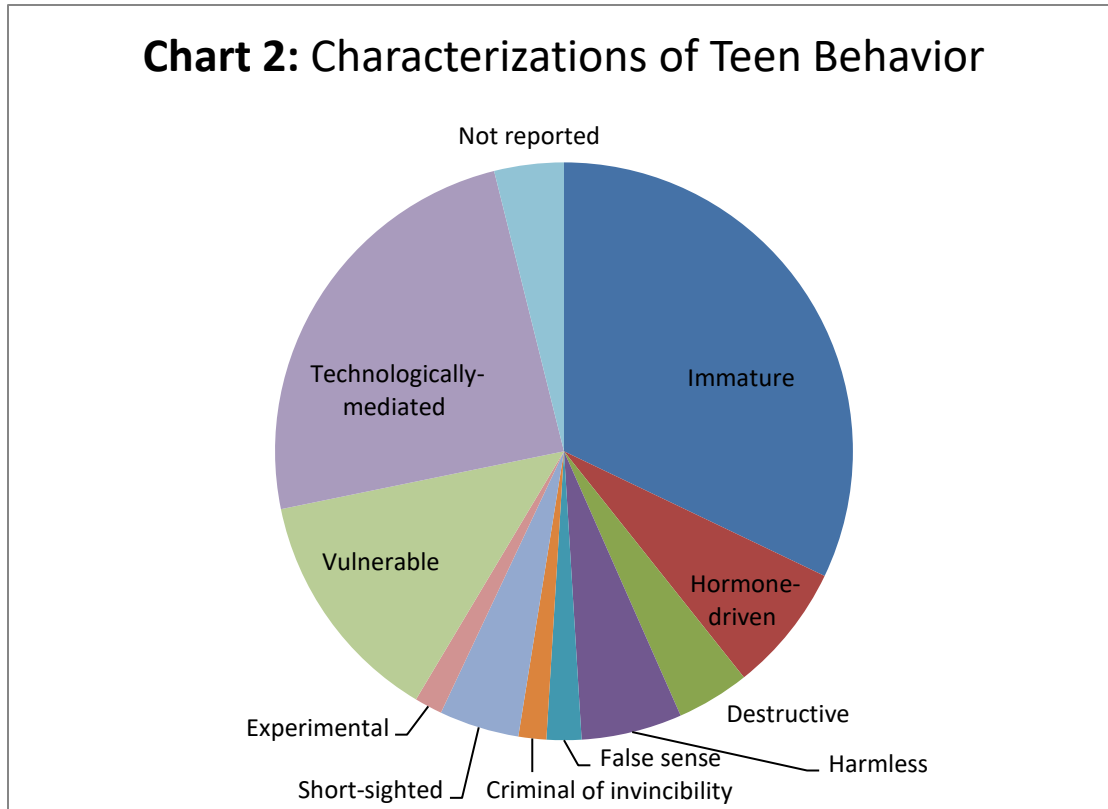
The Threat of Sexual Predators

By centering a discourse of fear on the threat of adult sexual predators, news media discourse both reinforces the child/adult dichotomy and lays out the first reason why youth should have no relation to sexual activity. Overall, 17% of the articles claimed that teens were motivated to sext because they were coerced by an adult. The logic of the sex predator panic is as follows: youth take sexually explicit photos of themselves and are coerced into sending them to adults they met online or youth will post them on the internet where anyone will have access to them, at which point adults with deviant sexual desires will find them and, in turn, contact the

children in the photos. For example, Michael Donahue of Scranton is quoted by the AP saying that "naked pictures of children on the Internet draws predators the same way a swamp draws mosquitoes….Authorities must sometimes protect children from themselves." Additionally, stories about adult strangers sexting children and then trying to meet them in person were also a common theme in articles that warned against sexual predators. Both narratives have the same message—sexting leads to children falling victim to adult sexual predators.

By setting up the dualism between adult predator and child victim, the adult/child dichotomy is reproduced through these media representations. The reinforcement of this dichotomy is important, because it reestablished the positionality of adolescents as a marginalized social group by generating a boundary between them and adults. This boundary sets up the social framework which allows adults to have sexual rights, whereas children are shielded from sexual knowledge and restricted from engaging in sexual activity. In terms of the legal regime, Gayle Rubin (1986) analyzes how this division is sustained and asserts that

> The law is especially ferocious in maintaining the boundary between childhood 'innocence' and 'adult' sexuality. Rather than recognizing the sexuality of the young and attempting to provide for it in a caring and responsible manner, our culture denies and punishes erotic interest and activity by anyone under the local age of consent.

In this way the news media and the law, among other social institutions, are working together to establish differences, and by extension differential rights, between children and adults.

Furthermore, it appears that youth are using new media technology as a resource for opening new possibilities to establish social relationships, not to meet adult strangers online. In a study of youth and new media technology use, C.J. Pascoe finds that most teens are using this technology "to get to know the friend of a friend or further get to know someone with whom one has had only a casual or brief meeting" (Ito et al. 2010: 123). Instant messaging and text messaging enable adolescents to interact in a way that minimizes the level of vulnerability

characteristic of face-to-face communication by offering a "controlled casualness" in which youth have the time to think about what they are going to say and carefully deliberate their responses (Ito et al 2010: 124).   Also, new media technology allows for teens to investigate the interests of their peers and provides a buffer where they have time to carefully construct the identities they want their peers to perceive. Therefore, teens appear to be using this technology as a resource for safely building stronger friendships and romantic relationships while minimizing the threat of social embarrassment. By narrowly focusing on the act of sexting, news media discourses foreclose the opportunity to think about the positive potential of these applications of new media technology.

Within the purview of the news media, teens are not only threatened by adults, but they are also a danger to one another. The news media describes this vulnerability as stemming from teens being hormone driven and too immature to make sound decisions. For instance, Claudia Feldman writes for the Houston Chronicle that "they're teenagers…By definition they're impetuous and hormonal, and their relationships reflect those starts and stops and ups and downs." Moving into a more biological explanation for both immaturity and vulnerability, AP Education Writer, Libby Quaid writes, "Research shows teenage brains are not quite mature enough to make good decisions consistently. By the mid-teens, the brain's reward centers, the parts involved in emotional arousal, are well developed, making them more vulnerable to peer pressure."   This behavior is linked to more troubling problems as articles inform readers that "teenage suicides have been linked to online bullying…half of all young people have been targets of digital bullying." This analysis does not aim to downplay the seriousness of teen suicide or bullying, but instead highlight the complexities of this discursive web.   For instance, bullying is not a new phenomenon and it will likely occur with or without new media

technology. Teens are integrating new media technology into their every day interactions, therefore it is expected that this incorporation will affect both positive and negative social relations.

Furthermore, while the wrongdoings of adults are portrayed as deliberate and predatorial, yet the potentially threatening actions of adolescents are derived from their immaturity. These portrayals undermine the agency and power that adolescents may have by making all of their actions appear thoughtless and irrational. Bullying occurs within a complex social structure of norms and hierarchies, thus by highlighting the agency adolescents have in this process I do not mean to imply that bullying is always the result of individual malice. The central point is that although news media represents youth as passive and vulnerable objects in being molded by the social structures they inhabit, teens may be more actively and calculatingly involved in this process than they are being portrayed. I argue that a moral panic has developed precisely because of the possibility that youth are engaging in the development of molding new norms regarding the use of new media technology sexuality.

The Threat of New Social Norms

Despite representations of adolescents' underdevelopment and high risk of exploitation, teens are also portrayed as beyond the control of adults as they dominate the digital world. For instance, an editorial published in Torrance, California's Daily Breeze says, "mom knows that there is no way short of murder to prevent a savvy kid from hopping over all the electronic barriers the feeble adult world might place in her path." The role of technology in industry, institutions, and social relations has grown significantly in the last few decades. Having an understanding of technology is powerful in this new social ecology, as knowledge of technology can translate into greater success in institutions and industries, and in the case of new media

technology it can also expand social networks. Emmison and Frow (1998) argue that knowledge of Information Technology use falls under the category of cultural capital, as it is often passed from parents to children and influenced by a family's social status as this impacts access to computers. However, I find that as technology has transformed in the last decade and opened new possibilities for communication and network building, technological knowledge may warrant a category of its own. Contrary to Emmison and Frow's (1998) assertion that technological knowledge is passed intergenerationally, youth do not appear to be inheriting knowledge of technology from their parents, because they have technological competencies which far exceed those of their elders (Ito et al. 2010). In this light, teens appear to possess what can be understood as technological capital—knowledge of technology use which is potentially transferrable into Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) categories of cultural, social and economic capital. Many youth possess technological capital which may grant them advantages in a social system reinvented by these technological advances. Since a long standing, systematic power differential exists between adults and children the fact that youth's technological savvy may be tipping the scale stirs up a moral panic (Ito et al. 2010). Adults have long been in control of educating children and monitoring what information youth had access to, but the advent of the Internet has thrown their unquestioned power into peril.

The potential to influence social norms is perhaps the greatest threat to this power hierarchy, as youth now have the capacity to set the foundation of new media technology use in our social and sexual relations.   In this light, the moral panic of sexting serves as a mechanism for regulating the production of norms regarding the use of new media technology. As new media technology becomes integrated into our lives, we have an opportunity to decide what role it will play. The period of transition when new technology is introduced to the social scene

generates what is referred to by social theorists as a window of "interpretive flexibility" in which "different social actors mobilize to construct the meaning of a technological artifact" (Ito et al. 2010: 25). Over time the meaning of the artifact will stabilize, but as it stands we are negotiating how new media technology will fit into our lives. News media representations of teens sexting resonate with the idea that teens have a leg up in terms of using technology, which upon closer analysis highlights an underlying motive for the panic over sexting. If youth have more technological capital, then they potentially have greater power to affect the outcomes of this period of interpretive flexibility. Youth are actively negotiating the norms for using new media technology in their friendships, family lives, and dating practices (Ito et al. 2010; Pascoe 2011). As they are constructing these norms, there is a chance that rules and expectations they establish will be the standards which stabilize and endure beyond the phase of interpretive flexibility.

Illustrating some of these norms in the making, Pascoe highlights the complex web of expectations established by teens in the world of dating as they weave in and out of technologically mediated spaces. For instance, youth construct an online language with its own grammar rules and standards of use (Ito el al. 2010). Different modes of new media use correspond to certain levels in the development of a relationship. For instance, teens will use instant messaging programs to get to know one another and post on each other's Facebook walls to indicate their interest in one another publically. Additionally, youth generate 'controlled casualness' through utilizing ambiguous language in online conversations, by carefully constructing statements which appear informal. For example, the following excerpt from Pascoe's ethnographic research shows how this ambiguity is constructed through the deployment of an online language:

> From the outside, sometimes these comments appear so casual that they might not even be read as flirting, such as the following wall posts by two Filipino teens—Missy and

Dustin—who eventually dated quite seriously. After being introduced by mutual friends and communicating through IM, Missy, a northern Californian sixteen-year-old, wrote on Dustin's MySpace wall: "hey…hm wut to say? iono lol/well i left you a comment…u sud feel SPECIAL haha =)." Dustin, a northern Californian seventeen-year-old, responded a day later by writing on Missy's wall: "hello there..umm I dont know what to say but at least i wrote something…you are so G!!!"

Pascoe argues that teens have carefully and strategically constructed this online language of abbreviation and informality in order to gauge the romantic interest of peer while decreasing the level of vulnerability inherent in the potential of rejection. Therefore, contrary to news media's representations of teens' actions as reckless and hormone-driven, in some ways at least, youth appear to be thoughtfully using new media to build friendships and intimate bonds with their peers.

Chart 3: Solutions for Sexting
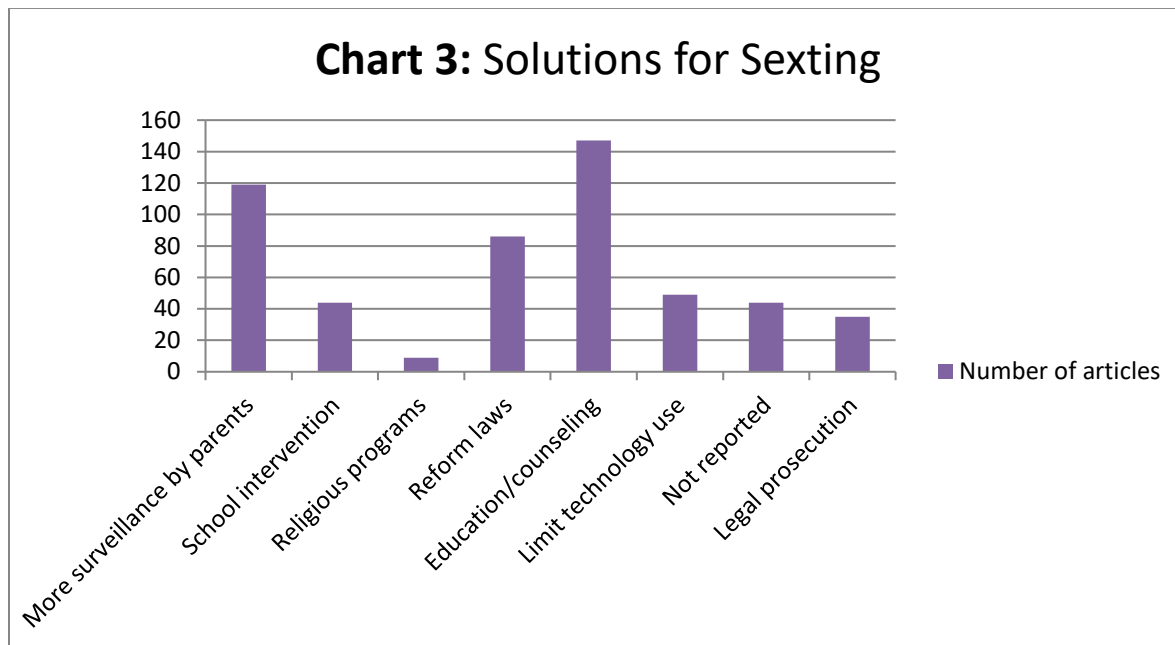
So, if youth are carefully integrating this technology into their social lives, why are the portrayals of their behaviors and the moral panic centered on sexual activity, predatorial adults, and teens bullies? Looking beyond the fact that the juncture of sex, teens, and technology creates a compelling news article, thinking about the moral panic of sexting as a process of social

regulation enables us to see that the panic is often about more than meets the eye. In this case, at the crossroads of age and sexuality, the moral panic reflects a power struggle between adults ad youth over the creation of new norms regarding new media use. Bolstering this assertion, Chart 3 shows that news articles presented two main solutions to the problem of sexting which reinforce the notion of out-of-control teens: 44% of the articles indicated that teachers and parents must educate teens about the risks of using technology, and 36% advised that adults must limit and monitor the use of technology by youth. Highlighting the adult-child power differential, both of these solutions function to put adults back in control by limiting the freedom and autonomy youth have found through technological resources. The struggle over power between adults and youth is a struggle over control of moral regulation. Whomever hold the most power in terms of the use of new media technology has the upper hand in determining how this resource will be employed in the realm of moral and sexual practices. The final element in this process of regulation rests in the deployment of a discourse of durable consequences which generate risks for people of all ages.

Durable Consequences

Representing extreme negative consequences for an action is a surefire way to generate a social deterrence of any behavior. By presenting consequences for teens who sext, news media sparks a discourse of fear for teens' lives. Most articles represent various consequences for engaging in the practice of sexting, many of which may have a lasting impact on their futures. Out of the articles coded, 62% mentioned the possibility of being charged with a felony for distributing child pornography, 45% represented youth as facing impaired education and career opportunities due to these photos circulating and enduring on the Internet where prospective authority figures may find them, 32% claimed that convicted youth will end up on the sex

offender registry, 30% highlighted the increased chance of being a victim of bullying or sexual exploitation, and 13% indicated an increased probability of psychological issues and suicide. All of these consequences have a durability that transcends the constructed period of adolescence which the news media represents as being at the root of their misbehavior. The role of technology in producing these consequences makes them especially durable, as one's "digital footprint" leaves a trail of online activity which cannot be deleted (Ito et al. 2010). An editorial writer for the Daily Torrence Breeze summed up this phenomenon of durability by writing, "Sexting is anthrax. Once it's out, it's out there forever. It's also stupid and wrong." Overall, the representation of these consequences clearly frames sexting as a deviant and immoral activity and the discourse of durability generates an urgency to put an end to this activity immediately.

Youth as Targets of the Law

As previously discussed, there is nothing inherently amoral about teens using new media technology for sexual expression; therefore, the representation of risk and danger associated with sexting is not a natural consequence of the activity, but is instead strategic. Adolescents are easy targets for legal prosecution as the law continually denies them sexual rights, thereby making any engagement in sexual activity criminalized (Rubin 1987). The legal consequences are central to the media debate over teens sexting. One camp finds it problematic that the "law makes no distinction between teens who sext and adults who traffick in child pornography, whereas the other side feels that the there is no reason to "soften the criminal blow knowing that it is probably the only factor...that can restrain teens from engaging in risky behaviors." Reflecting this paradox, 15% of the eligible articles specifically discussed the proposal of Texas Senate Bill 407 which would "downgrade sexting to a Class C misdemeanor for first-time violators under age 18. The sexter and parent would have to attend an anti-sexting class."

Bearing in mind that only half of the articles coded were from news sources distributed in Texas, this debate took up a significant portion of the news media conversation about sexting in the state of Texas, thereby highlighting the centrality of legal consequences in the moral panic.

The multitude of ways in which we formally penalize sexual activity serves to construct sexual norms which shape how we understand our own sexualities, and this system overtly denies youth access to sexual expression. No matter what side the news articles represented, never was the act of teens sexting deconstructed as unproblematic in its essence. The debates centered on what the consequences should be, instead of questioning why formal consequences are presumed necessary. Perhaps the answer to this debate lies in rethinking the role of sexuality in adolescent's lives, especially now that new media technology is altering the social ecology. As previously discussed, new media technology functions as a new resource in the lives of youth and it generates both risks and rewards. By focusing on risks and consequences, the complex potential this technology has to mitigate some of the inequalities youth face is lost.

Scandals as a Lesson for Adults

With the exception of legal charges, all of the consequences represented can potentially fall upon adults as well. Many powerful adults are implicated in the panic over sexting, as well. Politicians, such as Rep. Anthony Weiner and Wisconsin District Attorney Ken Kratz, are continually discussed in the news media regarding the divulgence of the accusation that both married men sent sexually explicit pictures to clients and young women. The news media provides details of both transgressions, debates the level of immorality of these actions, and proposes potential consequences, such as calling for their resignations. Displaying the immorality of sexting, Ken Kratz is quoted by the AP saying, "My behavior was inappropriate. I'm embarrassed and ashamed for the choices I've made and the fault was mine alone."

Furthermore, quotes from political figures condemning the "sordid affair" and highlighting potential consequences are interspersed throughout the articles. For example, fellow politicians, like Rep. Steve Israel, claim "Anthony's inappropriate behavior has become an insurmountable distraction to the House and our work for the American people" and Rep. Chris Van Hollen, insists that Weiner's "repeated violation of the public trust is unacceptable. He can best advance the issues he fought for by resigning immediately." However, these statements also show how although the reputations of both men are marred, legal actions cannot be taken as in the case of teens, because technically neither man has committed a crime. Their actions are publicly reprimanded and they are in essence asked to punish themselves, but overall the consequences are beyond the scope of the law.

In this vein, the role of scandals in moral panic studies proves useful in understanding the application of this panic to large scale moral regulation. Scandals and panics both manifest as ways in which harmful events are viewed as part of a larger threat to normative social order (Knight and Roper 2011). Moral panics are directed at transgressors located down the social hierarchy and convey alarm in terms of fear and hostility caused by a lack of certainty and security in the social order. Scandals, on the other hand, embody reactions of outrage and disdain rooted in sentiments of unfairness, injustice and incompetence while targeting those at the top of the social hierarchy for expressing self interested amorality (Knight and Roper 2011). Panics generate fear while scandals prompt scrutiny and fascination by the public. These are constructed as two separate concepts and there is limited research showing how these two social processes may be mutually reinforcing. I find that when the panic and scandal occur simultaneously regarding the same topic, as in the case of sexting, there may be unique

implications as both those at the top and bottom of the hierarchy are implicated in the threatening behavior.

As exemplified by the scandals represented in the article, adults face the same durable consequences as youth. For instance, paralleling cyber bullying of youth, Kim Morgan from the Houston Chronicle, highlights a new cyber-crime, "sextortion" which is "basically…online sexual blackmail." In this vein, adults are also vulnerable as they may have their reputations ruined and they are also threatened by the possibility of a digital footprint resulting from the fact that "photos that get on the Internet are virtually impossible to remove and can pop up years later." In other words, in the case of sexting, scandals enable the narrative of fear to translate into the world of adults. Therefore, the threat of enduring consequences to adults serves to regulate the behavior of all social actors by highlighting the fact that when technology and sex mix, there will be evidence and the digital proof will live on forever. In this light, when the discourse of both scandals and panic over sexting are placed in conversation it appears that this dual discourse serves as a mechanism of combating the process of integrating the use of new media into all people's sexual lives. Consequently, this moral panic furthers the goal of long term moral regulation of normative sexual practices as those initiating the panic (media, legal and political forces) fight back against possible transformation spurred by the rise of technology through generating a discourse of fear. The final message presented by news media coverage of sexting is that sexuality should remain as it once was: sex does not belong in adolescents' lives and it should be far removed from the new media ecology as a whole.

Conclusion

Panicking over teens, sex, and technology is not a new phenomenon and new panics will surely develop as technology continues to evolve, thus this serves as one more chapter in an

ongoing analysis of the long term regulation of sexuality in society. The story told by the data is one of concern over maintaining gender norms, adolescent innocence, and a divide between sexual expression and new media technology. This concern is heightened as the folk devil youth are recognized as being in control over the future of the new media technology integration into social relations. Therefore, panic stirs in response to this potential transformation at the hands of adolescents. The unique power dynamics between adults and teens in the context of a technologically mediated world highlighted in this paper may prove beneficial to further research regarding youth and technology as it highlights the agency adolescents have to impact the social world.   Additionally, the data utilized for this analysis did not convey significant representations of race or class, which limited the potential for an intersectional analysis. Further research regarding the intersectional implications of the moral panic over sexting could deconstruct the category of homogenous youth and generate a more comprehensive picture of the effects of these representations on a diverse range of adolescents.   Youth marginalized due to race, class, gender, or sexual orientation among other positions may face different dynamics in the struggle with adults over power and sexuality in the context of new media technology. It will be interesting to see how this power struggle plays out over time as newer technologies are introduced into our social relations. With no doubt I anticipate we will see more moral panics mirroring that of sexting dominating the news media in the future.

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