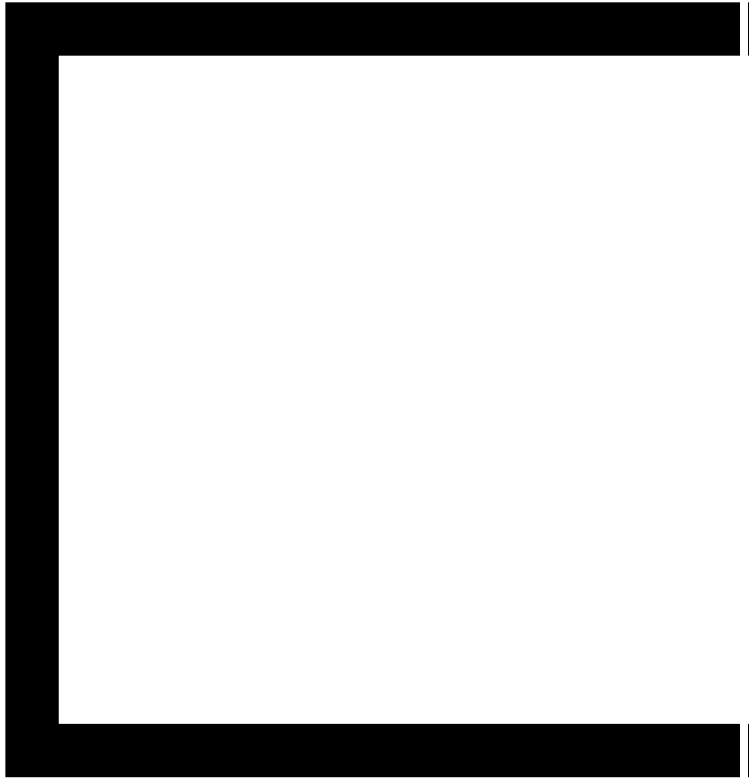panic

introduction | **Cultures of Panic**

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Perceived loss of control or groundedness can lead people to panic—we react unpredictably or irrationally when what was thought to be stable begins to shift. But in some circumstances, panic responses might seem like the only available option. As editors, we began to think broadly about these issues during a conversation about the now famous 'Falling Man' photograph taken after the attacks on the World Trade Center. Was jumping from a building on the brink of collapse an act of panic? Or was this an act of deliberation, an unthinkable choice to control the last moments of one's life? How might seeing deaths such as these intensify public, affective reactions to the disaster, and in the name of what ethical responsibility did many media producers refuse to publish such images? What cultural ground did they imagine would give way?

Panic is very much a socio-cultural phenomenon, as much as it is a bodily one. Australia's recent history of political and social conservatism demonstrates this by increasingly extreme measures against perceived and sometimes manufactured threats. Government and media responses consistently missed opportunities to understand reasons and contexts for changing social and cultural realities; at other times they refused outright to acknowledge such contexts. Instead, swift measures were taken to shut down debates and shore up the status quo. A recent example is the Howard government's speedy passing of the *Marriage Amendment Act 2004*, limiting marriage to the union of one man and one woman—a move encountering little effective opposition in Parliament. So licensed, the federal government in 2006 quashed legislation allowing same-sex civil unions in the Australian Capital Territory.[1]

In another part of the world, Iranian women's rights activist, Parvin Ardalan, was to take part in a ceremony in her honour as the recipient of the 2007 Olaf Palme Award in Stockholm early this year. The award recognised her work demanding equal rights for men and women as a central part of the struggle for democracy in Iran. But Iranian security forcibly removed Ardalan from the aircraft prior to its departure, officials claiming that she was banned from travel. Her passport was seized, and she was required to turn herself in to the security branch of the passport office within seventy-two hours.[2] Ardalan's case evidences an instrumental refining of the terms of nationality and citizenship by explicit and implicit forms of exclusion, surveillance and control, just as widespread migrations and displacements of people, from a variety of cultures and religions, challenge the very ideas of nation and citizen.

The culture of panic has been taken up in compelling television serial dramas such as David Wolstencroft's *Spooks,* which follows a group of MI5 intelligence officers as they go about their hyperbolic national security business, whether it is racial vilification and profiling or environmental terrorism that needs to be managed and quashed.[3] While *Spooks* offers its audience a bleak vision of the United Kingdom based on themes with real currency, Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* presents audiences with the fictional United States Democratic administration of Josiah Bartlet and gives viewers access to the machinations of governmental and political intrigue in times of crisis. Like *Spooks*, narratives in *The West Wing* have political currency and often model more ethical and utopian technologies of management than those employed by the current Bush administration.[4] Within an Australian context, *Underbelly*— a dramatisation of Melbourne's gangland killings—caused panic because of a representational link with an upcoming murder trial related to the city's infamous gangland war. A Supreme Court suppression order ensured that the Channel Nine series would not go to air in Melbourne. After watching all thirteen episodes of the television show, Justice Betty King declared it would be very difficult for the public to discern between fact and fiction, and that criminal justice was more important than a television network making a profit.[5] All these series act as socio-cultural and political commentaries on cultures of panic, questioning real governmental, institutional, corporate and personal ethics of response in the face of panic.

While the political landscape in Australia has shifted under the election of the Rudd Labor government, it is timely that we reflect upon Australia's recent history, our position in a global dynamics of panic, and the ethics of governmental, institutional and personal response. The contributors to this special issue of *Cultural Studies Review* critique local and global examples of panic from diverse disciplinary and theoretical positions. Each contribution is partly indebted to the foundational work of Stanley Cohen and others in identifying how the disproportionate representation of particular social problems and the attendant generation of containment narratives create a cycle of anxiety production and release. But the overarching interest here is to see how different kinds of panic function as political strategy. Two

contributors begin this interrogation with examples from contemporary Australia. Greg Noble looks to media representations of 'faces of evil' and the media's role in visualising that evil as marked cultural difference and characteristic of Arab 'otherness'. Also concerned with slippages of representation, Robert Payne unpacks the gender and sexual panic inherent in examples of language used in governmental and media attempts to explain the death of the first Australian solider in Iraq.

Addressing global concerns, the development of technologies of the 'war on terror' allow Joseph Pugliese to highlight the production of racialised fear by Western governments and agencies in order to assume 'identity dominance'. Turning in particular to the recent United States mediascape, Sara Knox maps the cultural and epistemological ground of disaster in interrogating media responses to the Hurricane Katrina crisis. Cristyn Davies returns to the United States 'culture wars' of the 1990s to examine how normative conceptions of gender and sexuality, decency and artistic value were deployed in the politicised de-funding of controversial performance artists. And panic around the perceived crisis of over-prescription of Ritalin for 'troubled' American children forms the focus of Toby Miller's discussion of the politics and economics of medical and pharmaceutical technologies. Continuing moral panics over child protection are also of interest to Kerry Robinson, who documents moral panic and double standards in relation to controversies of childhood sexuality. Finally, Anna Gibbs examines the neurological and affective dimensions of individual bodily panic to offer insights into how outbreaks of panic may then take hold socially and culturally, in such circumstances as those discussed by her fellow contributors.

In bringing all of this together, thanks are due to several people: to Katrina Schlunke and John Frow for their guidance; to Ann Standish for her amazing efficiency and skill; to the peer reviewers for their effort and timeliness; and to the contributors for their hard work and inspiration.

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1. In 2004 the *Marriage Amendment Act (No. 126)* was designed to exclude recognition of same sex marriages. Subsection 5 (1) defines the meaning of marriage: '*marriage* means the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life'. Section 88EA was inserted stating: 'A union solemnized in a foreign country between a) a man and another man; or b) a woman and another woman; must not be recognized as a marriage in Australia'. Common law already dictated marriage was between a man and a woman.
2. 'Iranian Woman Activist Barred from Travelling', *Taipei Times*, 5 March 2008, p. 6. <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archive s/2008/03/05/2003404111>; 'Slamming its Doors on the World', *Time-Online Edition*.
3. *Spooks* is produced by the independent production company Kudos for BBC One and first screened in Spring 2002. In the United States and Canada the show is aired under the title *MI-5*.
4. *The West Wing* was originally broadcast on NBC 1999 to 2006 and was produced/written by Aaron Sorkin (for the first four seasons) and also produced by Thomas Schlamme. After season four John Wells produced the series. Later, Warner Brothers Television produced the series.
5. See Heather Ewart's 'Underbelly Ban Sidestepped in New Media Era', *ABC News*, 28 February 2008. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/02/28/ 2174818.htm>.