How to Run a Successful Moral Panic

By Austen Tucker · 2026

The Singularity Log: How to Run a Successful Moral Panic

"A chaotic crowd storms the Bastille, weapons and smoke rising over the stone walls of the fortress." By Charles Thévenin — Carnavalet, Public Domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1321984

I've been the target of enough panics, as a perennial early adopter and unwilling soothsayer, to give some advice to those who want to run one.

A long time ago I wrote for the Bilerico Project, one of the larger queer news sites on the internet. I wrote a parody essay about splitting the T off from LGB. It was a field guide — same shape as this one. If you wanted to do this successfully, here is how you would do it.

People told me I was full of shit.

Years passed. The T became a separate target. The movement got split. The people who did not like us found the seam and worked it open.

For naming the pattern out loud, I got called a "trans Uncle Tom" by another trans person on LiveJournal. I printed it and pinned it above my desk like a trophy. (Yeah, writers are weird like that.)

I'm not saying the current assault on trans people happened because queer communities failed some perfect unity test. I'm saying I learned early how easily a movement gets split once people decide some members are negotiable.

That was my first moral panic.

Later, I found refuge online. Trans communities. Furry communities. Places where my transness wasn't disqualifying — where I could breathe and make things and be strange without litigating my right to be there.

Ten years passed. I put time and effort into the furry community. I volunteered for large conventions. I became, I suppose, a graymuzzle.

Then AI arrived.

The community that had once given me solace fragmented under my feet.

Different panic. Same architecture.

What I learned on the other side: panics run on misunderstanding and emotional appeal. That is the fuel. Once you see it, dodging is easier than facing it head-on. It is cleaner to stop playing the game once you realize the other person is not arguing toward understanding, they are arguing toward your submission.

So if you still want to run a successful moral panic, allow me to offer a field guide and a warning: you will be worse off as a result of the panic.

1. Remember that you are on a timer

Every moral panic has a shelf life. You have two years to claim victory before the panic runs out of steam. Maybe three, if the media keeps feeding it. But sooner or later, ordinary life seeps back in.

The people doing the thing you hate will keep doing it. They will find quieter ways to keep doing it. They will move to other rooms. They will build their own spaces. They will stop asking for your permission.

And they will build opposition to the villains of their stories, which now includes you. This is how moral panics end: not with a grand moral reckoning, but with a whimper and a label you didn't ask for.

The loudest people may continue to panic. They may still be posting. They may still be purity-testing. They may still believe they are the final guardians of civilization.

But most of the world quietly moves on.

In the furry community, there was a moral panic about iPads. People argued that digital art wasn't really art — only physical media counted. There were hashtags. There were campaigns. People pushed hard.

Two years later, everyone was using an iPad.

Ask people about the panic now and many will pretend it did not happen.

That is why moral panics need urgency. The second people start understanding what you are afraid of, your hold weakens. The second they realize they have alternatives, your now-salted fields will run fallow.

2. Be ruthless

If you want a moral panic to work, disagreement is not enough.

You cannot simply say, "I think this is wrong."

You have to salt your fields and slaughter your cattle, so that no one may use your community resources for the evil new thing.

You have to make sure anyone who touches the evil new thing understands the cost. You have to bring up the panic at every opportunity. You have to purity-test every conversation. You have to make the correct answer obvious inside the community.

The litany matters. The repetition matters. The fear matters.

Because if people stop being afraid of the thing, they may start trying to understand it. If they understand it, they may start understanding the people who do it. Once that happens, the panic fails.

A moral panic depends on social shame and ostracization. Its central question is always: are you still part of my tribe, or not?

That is the weapon.

Not persuasion. Not argument. Not patience.

Shame.

If I call you a bad enough name, perhaps you will change your mind about what you are making.

But this is a risky tool to use on a writer.

Writers take that sort of thing as a challenge.

3. Recognize that people leave

Moral panics thrive online because online relationships are easy to overestimate.

You see your internet friends in person once a year for a week. Over four years, that's one month face-to-face. Everything else is social media, Discord, group DMs, screenshots, and grudges. That doesn't make those relationships fake. Some of mine are the most important I have. But it does mean online communities confuse constant access with depth.

When a moral panic starts, the thin bonds break first. People who once seemed kind become impossible to trust. People who once seemed generous turn into prosecutors. People who once seemed like they could handle disagreement reveal that what they really wanted was mayonnaise — a perfect emulsion where everyone is on the same page on all things.

There are people I once would have recommended for any job I have ever worked. People I thought were kind. People I thought were decent. After watching how they behaved during the AI moral panic, I'm not sure I could recommend them now. Not because they disagreed with me. Because of how they chose to disagree.

And here is what moral panics forget: you are not anyone's only option.

The harder you push, the more people seek other rooms. They may not argue. They may not give you the satisfaction of a dramatic exit. They may just leave.

The people who work early, who experiment, who do the thing before the social permission structure catches up — they often end up outside the community that cast them out. Not because they lost. Because being yelled at is not fun.

I did not come to community to be yelled at. I came to have fun. I came to make things. I came to find people. I came to be less alone.

So, of course I left.

By starting a panic, you make people inside your community reconsider whether they want to stay.

The more people moralize, the more the community fractures. People do not stop wanting community just because one room becomes hostile. They build other rooms. Alternative servers. Alternative conventions. Alternative publications. Alternative economies. At first, the panic looks like discipline. Then the exits become infrastructure. Then the infrastructure starts competing with the thing that used to be a united front.

You may think you are defending the walls.

You may actually be teaching people where the exits are.

4. Understand that purity tests split forever

A community built on shared likes and hates, in-groups and out-groups, purity tests and correct opinions, will always find a new line to draw.

It may not be the line you expect.

It will probably be something stupid. Something that makes you stop and think: really? This is the thing?

But that will be the thing. The differentiator. The next test of who belongs.

If you hang out with people who split and factionalize, eventually the faction will split on you.

Identity-based and affinity-based communities are especially vulnerable to this. The more a group defines itself by moral consensus, the more fragile that consensus becomes. Every disagreement becomes existential. Every tool becomes a symbol. Every preference becomes a political position. Every person becomes a possible contaminant.

Eventually, the panic comes for everyone.

Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow.

But eventually.

5. Know what you get, and what you lose

What do you get out of a moral panic?

You get a sense of superiority. You get a dopamine hit every time you tear down someone else's life. You get the feeling that your community is cleaner, smarter, kinder, more ethical than any other community in the world.

What do you lose?

You lose a basic sense of humanity. You lose decency. You lose the ability to claim the high ground, because at some point you become just another person moralizing at strangers.

You may think your cause is better. You may think your target deserves it. You may think you are punching in the correct direction.

But cruelty does not become kindness because you like the politics attached to it.

You do not get to be the hero just because you think you are morally superior.

You can still become the villain in someone else's story.

And once that happens, you do not control the story they tell about you.

6. You only get one shot

Here is the part people forget.

If someone has already been targeted by a moral panic, they will see through the next one.

They may not react in kind. They may not argue. They may not write a rebuttal. They may not sit there and offer you a courtroom drama where you get to feel righteous.

They may just stop talking to you.

If you use fear and manipulation to keep someone on your side, expect to lose them. That is the cost. The relationship will never be the same, and they will start thinking about exit strategies.

You could have avoided all of it by being kind.

Not permissive. Not spineless. Not silent.

Kind.

There is a difference.

7. Make the better case

The alternative to moral panic is not moral laziness. The alternative is persuasion.

Do the hard, slow work of persuading people one at a time. Make a better argument. Talk about the harm. Talk about the labor. Talk about the ethics. Talk about the future you are afraid of.

And if someone does not get persuaded, you still have choices.

You can decide the disagreement is too large and leave. Sometimes that is necessary. Or you can agree to disagree — find a place where you can both talk about danger and complexity without being mean. Don't turn every disagreement into a loyalty test.

Maybe the thing you are railing against is something you do not understand. Maybe you do not understand their perspective. Maybe you do not understand how anyone could think the way they think.

That is not evidence that they are evil.

Sometimes that is on you, boo.

That is a failure of imagination. A failure of dialogue.

The better question is not, "How do I make this person afraid enough to stop?"

The better question is, "What would it look like if we were kind to each other while we figured this out?"

I am not arguing for kindness because it is soft. I am arguing for kindness because it is logical.

Cruelty narrows the world. It makes communities smaller. It teaches people to hide. It teaches them to leave. It teaches them that honesty is dangerous and disagreement is contamination.

Kindness expands the world. It makes conversation possible. It gives people room to change without humiliation. It lets a relationship survive a disagreement.

Moral panic feels powerful at first. You feel righteous. You feel clean. You feel like you are protecting the group.

But you are on a timer.

Sooner or later, people will stop listening. Sooner or later, the world will move. Sooner or later, the forbidden thing becomes ordinary, the community fractures, or the panic finds a new target.

And when that happens, the question will not be whether you were pure enough.

The question will be what kind of person you became while trying to prove it.

You do not need the approval of any community to make art. You do not need a permission slip to build a life. And you do not need to set someone else on fire just because you are afraid of what they are making.

Make the better case.

Choose the harder work.

Be the person someone remembers as kind.

That story lasts longer.