RESEARCH ARTICLE

Why All the Outrage? Viral Media as Corrupt Play Shaping Mainstream Media Narratives

Samuel Duncan

Holmesglen Institute, Melbourne, AU
Sam.Duncan@holmesglen.edu.au

The way we use social media can be viewed through the notion of 'play'. According to Dutch cultural historian and play theorist Johan Huizinga (1950), play is characterised by fun, freedom, spontaneity, and creativity; while not overtly serious, it can have serious outcomes. Huizinga (1950, 8–10) believed that it was in 'playing' that we reveal our true selves and thus form genuine, strong, and binding relationships with others who are also playing. However, if play becomes too serious, no longer fun and takes on notions of overt seriousness then it is, in fact, corrupted. When this occurs play no longer stimulates genuine relationships; rather 'corrupted play' becomes divisive (1950, 75). Importantly, for Huizinga, play creates order, but if corrupted, it can stimulate chaos. This paper will analyse how negative viral sports-related commentary, as an example of 'corrupted play', has led to an age of chaotic anger and outrage. Crucially, it will illuminate how the rapid fire social media response to ssports-related controversies has impacted the type of news created by mainstream media outlets, the tone of social and traditional media narratives and, ultimately, the decisions made by sporting organisations in times of controversy and crisis. In particular, this paper will focus on the ball tampering scandal that rocked the Australian Test cricket team during their tour of South Africa in 2018. By examining the fallout from the cricketing controversy on social media, it will become evident that the viral response to that controversy fuelled emotive and sensationalist mainstream media narratives and news and even significantly influenced the decisions made by Cricket Australia relating to the penalties handed to the guilty players. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to highlight how viral media, as an example of corrupted play, has led to an age of sensationalism, anger and outrage which impacts the quality of important discussions, narratives and news.

Introduction

Visiting any of the major social media platforms that increasingly rule the online world can leave even the most optimistic social media user scratching their head at all the outrage, anger and heightened emotion. While not all social media activity is negative and sensationalist,

much of it is, with recent studies highlighting that anger is the emotion that spreads most freely on social media. Joy comes a distant second (Fan et al., 2013).

The way we use social media can be seen as a function of play. At their best and most vibrant, social media networks provide platforms for spontaneous creativity, to have fun, to contest ideas, to share important information and to build strong, meaningful relationships with others. In doing so, social media can stimulate a sense of community and togetherness that transcends geographical boundaries and national borders.

However, as Coles and West (2016) note, social media also has a darker, more sinister side to it. In contrast to the creative, fun, constructive and productive activity that can character-ise social media, it can also be chaotic, and, more disturbingly, negative, sensationalist, and destructive. Importantly, it is this type of activity that resonates with the online community more rapidly than most social media tones (Craker and March, 2016). Anger and outrage increasingly prevail as the most discussed, shared, engaging and interactive type of content posting amongst social media users (Fan et al, 2013).

Indeed, as Crockett (2017) states in his paper 'Moral outrage in the digital age', the idea of citizens expressing outrage is nothing new, but rapidly developing technology has changed the way people now express negative emotion. Indeed, his research reveals that citizens are far more likely to express their 'moral outrage' online than in person or via traditional media. Further, Craker and March (2016) argue that the open, immediate nature of social media platforms such as Facebook ensures negativity and trolling can occur 'very easily'.

Significantly, as Mackay (2017) states, the views expressed on social media are often extreme – either overtly positive or negative, which can create conflict and a sense of divisiveness, as well as over-hyped tones reflecting the extremes of various issues. As Mackay (2017) writes:

> People are more motivated to express an opinion if they really like something or if their opinion is strong; so, the majority in the middle, who do not have very strong views, are under-represented.

Barnes (2018) argues that the obvious online culture of commenting and trolling is a social issue, more so than one confined, or even caused, by the internet, but notes that online abuse is indeed powered and exacerbated by technology. He (2018) also observes that online behaviour is often fuelled by emotion, noting that emotive comments can provoke other emotive comments and 'aggression can thus incite aggression in others.' According to Barnes (2018), 70% of those aged between 18 and 29 have experienced some form of online harassment.

To understand these opposing uses of social media, we can interpret social media use as 'play' and the 'corruption' of play, according to the cultural and historical observations of Johan Huizinga. In doing so, we can begin to understand why 'corrupt play' on social media resonates and spreads to a wider audience, and at a more rapid pace, than 'play', and impor-tantly, what the consequences of this are for society. This discussion will expand to examine how viral outrage, in the guise of 'corrupted play' can shape broader, mainstream media nar-ratives, which can ultimately impact the quality of news, the information we receive, and the outcomes of important decisions made by organisations.

To expound the theory of this paper, a case study focussing on the cricket ball tampering scandal that rocked the Australian Test cricket team during their tour of South Africa in 2018 will be used. Examining the fallout from the cricketing controversy on social media helps illustrate how the viral response to the saga there, as a form of 'corrupt play', resonated in mainstream media narratives and news and even potentially influenced the decisions made by Cricket Australia relating to the penalties handed down to the guilty players.

Duncan: Why All the Outrage? Viral Media as Corrupt Play Shaping Mainstream
Media Narratives

39

While this theoretical study does not attempt to draw definitive, scientific conclusions, it does create a theoretical lens through which we can understand online outrage as corrupt or false play, and further, provide important insights into how corrupt online play can shape mainstream narratives. In creating a theoretical framework using Huizinga's historical observations about play and its corruption, we can begin to question how things could be different or, indeed, better.

However, in order to interpret social media activity as a function of 'play' it is first necessary to understand the cultural observations of Johan Huizinga and how he defined play and its corruption.

Social media as play

In his most famous study of play, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1950, 2) describes play as 'a discharge of superabundant vital energy' to seek the satisfaction of imitative instinct.

Four characteristics define play for Huizinga (1950, 8–10):

1. Play is free, in fact, it is freedom.
2. Play is not ordinary or real.
3. Play is secluded and limited.
4. Play 'creates order, is order'.

He goes on to define the play element as:

> a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga 1950, 13).

For Huizinga (1950, 2), the notions of fun, enjoyment, and freedom underpin the key characteristics of play: play must be fun, free and voluntary, spontaneous, and separate from the ordinary and real. In its most autonomous sense, play creates, encourages, and stimulates meaningful relationships. According to Huizinga, when we play, we not only reveal our true, whole, authentic self, we also form our strongest, most genuine and authentic relationships.

Other theorists such as Caillois, Hans, Millar and Sutton-Smith[1] have critiqued Huizinga's study of play and utilised *Homo Ludens* as a starting point to further develop the play concept and introduce notions of play forms, games and rhetoric; however, most play theorists appear united in believing that play has a number of fundamental characteristics at the core of its existence – in any form and across any discipline. Furthermore, these fundamental characteristics arise in Huizinga's study of play and are particularly significant in understanding what Huizinga believed was the corruption of play.

The most commonly, agreed upon fundamental characteristics of play are: play must be fun; play must be free and voluntary; play must be spontaneous; play must be separate from the ordinary and real; and play must create order. While Huizinga's exact terms may not be universal amongst all play theorists, they are reflected in most notable works.

In her classic work, *The Psychology of Play*, Susanna Millar (1968, 21) writes that at the core of play is 'an attitude of throwing off constraint.' Whether the 'constraint' is emotional, social

or physical, once one breaks free of the constraints of real and ordinary work and plays within an autonomous play field, people can be spontaneous, instinctive, and, importantly, free.

Furthermore, when individuals are able to throw off the constraints and burdens of real life, they are able to leave behind their real life roles, responsibilities and limitations and fully embrace the autonomous play environment. Because they are unrestricted or uninhibited, the individual is free to be spontaneous and give their full self when playing.

As Viola Spolin (1963, 11) writes:

> In spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and the total person, physically, intel-lectually, and intuitively, is awakened. This causes enough excitation for the student to transcend himself or herself – he or she is freed to go out into the environment, to explore, adventure and face all dangers unafraid … Every part of the person functions together as a working unit, one small organic whole within the larger organic whole of the agreed environment which is the game structure.

These defining characteristics can be applied to social media networking. When citizens actively engage on social media, they may feel a greater sense of 'freedom' to express them-selves than they would in the physical world, largely because they may deem social media as separate from their ordinary physical existence, or limited to an online presence that they see as different from their other roles in the physical world. As such, when they are using social media, they are playing – often being spontaneous, throwing off constraint, and, in particu-lar, having fun. This was highlighted by Frissen, de Mul and Raessens (2013, 83–84) in their chapter 'Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity'. The authors illustrate how Huizinga's study of play relates to the digital media world, stating 'The concept of play, as elaborated on by Huizinga, is a very useful starting point for the analysis of the media experience.' Frissen, de Mul and Raessens (2013, 84) also highlight that our play and media experiences share a range of common experiences, or, more to the point, 'new opportunities to play'.

Huizinga (1950, 78) states that play, while not serious, can have serious and very meaning-ful outcomes. This aspect of play is particularly important to social media networking. Social media is often used to discuss various issues, be they social, political, sporting, or general news. If we are 'playing' on social media, we can still discuss these issues in serious ways for, just like a sporting contest can be utterly absorbing, so too can a discussion about politics or sport. In fact, Huizinga would argue that 'playing around' with ideas and contesting different arguments is fundamental to the notion of play advancing society and shaping culture.

Indeed, using the notion of 'play' to argue a point, to contest ideas, or to 'play around' with the prospect of change is fundamental to 'creating order' and making fair, reasoned decisions that the majority agree with or, at least, understand. Thus, at its best, social media can be seen as play – spontaneous, free, fun and limited, where users can 'play around' with important ideas, contest important arguments and construct resolutions that advance communities and, in doing so, create order. All the while, playing on social media ensures real and genuine relationships are built and advanced as we reveal the best of ourselves.

However, while Huizinga was discussing a 'play ideal', in reality 'play' has been corrupted. Indeed, in many respects, pure play may never have truly existed. Huizinga was increasingly frustrated by the 'corruption of play', believing money had led to society reducing play with the additional cost of increasing overt seriousness. In the final chapter of *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1950, 206) concluded that never, to that point in history, had an age taken itself with more seriousness. He believed that culture had ceased to be played – instead, it was imposed from the top and sold to consumers as an item of entertainment.

Huizinga's views about the corruption of play can also be applied to social media activity. Indeed, it appears even the angriest, most sinister social media post still upholds notions of

Duncan: Why All the Outrage? Viral Media as Corrupt Play Shaping Mainstream
Media Narratives

41

spontaneity, impulsiveness and freedom. Likewise, it appears that much of the anger and outrage that leads to one social media user shaming or abusing others, is based on the idea that social media provides them with a certain anonymity that they might otherwise lack in the 'real world', which also upholds the play characteristic of not being 'ordinary and real', and that it is, in many respects, 'limited' to their online persona.

However, other play characteristics and important aspects of Huizinga's play definition have indeed been corrupted. For Huizinga, play must be fun and free, and while those who are venting or expressing rabidly angry views might be having fun, it is likely those being shamed are not. It's also likely they will feel less free to participate in meaningful discussions if they are subject to online abuse.

However, perhaps more importantly, outrage and anger on social media often impact the quality of discussions concerning various issues, which ultimately undermines social media's ability to uphold the play characteristic of play 'creating order'. As Quandt (2018) notes in his article titled 'Dark Participation', the toxic nature of social media has undermined and corrupted the quality of the news and views discussed on online platforms. According to Quandt (2018), who was comparing social media commentary to the comments section of various mainstream, traditional media outlets, 'the negativity and toxic atmosphere there (on social media) can be equally bad, and multiple studies imply that the deliberative quality is even lower.'

Too many social media users have stopped playing with ideas or contesting arguments. Rather, they personalise their channels to limit their information flow to individuals or organisations they agree with or endorse. They are less likely than ever to move outside of their 'echo chamber' and acknowledge the views of those who they don't agree with (Crockett, 2017). Thus, social media posts are increasingly often designed to add to a common narrative, rather than to add to an engaging, constructive discussion including several sides of one issue (Crockett, 2017). This highlights the corruption of play on social media, as important discussions are being overlooked in favour of simply adding to a prevailing narrative. Significantly, this has corrupted social media's ability to advance important discussions, construct meaningful outcomes and build authentic relationships. Instead of creating order, chaos prevails. Furthermore, it is this chaos, characterised by anger, outrage and sensationalism, that resonates most on social media, that spreads rapidly to a wide audience (Fan et al, 2013). This viral medium can even shape mainstream media narratives and important decisions that shape our social norms.

The viral nature of anger and outrage

As the somewhat overused joke goes, on Twitter, 'What are we angry about today?' (Wayne, 2014). Of course, the idea of people venting or shaming on social media is not new. Elements of social media have always been rude, aggressive, angry, and outraged, but it appears the overall online tone has become more extreme. A 2013 study by Fan et al., relating to anger expressed on Weibo, a Chinese 'Twitter like' microblogging social media site, found that anger spreads most easily and more rapidly than any other emotion on the social media platform. Joy came a distant second.

Furthermore, there is a growing consensus amongst scholars, media commentators, and citizens alike that the tone and content on social media are becoming increasingly aggressive.

Teddy Wayne of *The New York Times* wrote in 2014 that:

> Bile has been a part of the Internet as long as Al Gore has; peruse any epithet-laced comments section or, worse, a chat room. But the last few years have seen it crawl from under the shadowy bridges patrolled by anonymous trolls and emerge into the sunshine of social media, where people proudly trumpet their ethical outrage.

Art Markman, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, claims the online world is 'extraordinarily aggressive, without resolving anything' (cited in Wolchover, 2012). *The Guardian*'s Rafael Behr (2017) describes the style of social media debate as 'pulpit and pillory' and believes 'rage is contagious. It spreads from one sweaty digital crevice to the next, like a fungal infection', while conservative English political commentator Iain Dale (2018) describes Twitter as 'a hateful place, an absolute sewer', where complexity is ignored and 'Shades of grey have been driven out.'

Driving the viral nature of anger and outrage is a range of factors. M. J. Crockett's (2017) study of moral outrage on digital and social networks discusses a range of triggers for venting anger and outrage. Crockett outlines one reason as being that we are exposed online to 'a vast array of misdeeds' where we 'learn about immoral acts' relative to what we see and experience in our 'offline' lives. As such, the sheer number of people expressing their anger and disgust at the immoral acts is merely a result of people being exposed to such deeds more often online compared to the physical world (Crockett, 2017).

Yet Crockett (2017) also points out that research on virality 'shows that people are more likely' to share content that elicits moral emotions such as outrage, which spreads quickly as studies have shown that 'anger begets more anger.' Furthermore, we can express our anger online at any time, anywhere in the world. It is not 'limited on location, time of day, or the probability of chance encounters with perpetrators' (Crockett, 2017). Thus, with few barriers, people can express themselves at will, particularly considering many who participate in social media discussions do so with anonymity and pseudonyms (Atchison, cited in Synovitz, 2018). The spontaneous nature of social media may also exacerbate this. As Ryan Martin, psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin, states, 'You get mad, and you can tell the world about it in moments before you've had a chance to calm down and think things through' (cited in Wayne, 2014). It might be spontaneous, but it is also often mean-spirited.

According to Guy Atchison (Synovitz, 2018), a researcher on social media behaviour and ethics at King's College London, social media outrage is bolstered by an online disinhibition effect. 'When you don't see the person in front of you, you can't judge their emotions', Atchison says. 'You can't judge their tone of voice. You can't see their facial expressions. Then you are more inclined to denounce them, attack them, and abuse them in ways that you would never do in person.'

But why are people motivated to vent, shame, humiliate, and degrade others online? For many, it's a matter of virtue signalling. As Crockett (2017) states, 'moral outrage benefits individuals by signalling their moral quality to others', giving them reputational reward. In other words, speaking out against something or someone on social media immediately 'advertises your character'.

As Jason Brennon (2018) wrote on the *Bleeding Heart Libertarians* blog:

> What's really going on, most of the time, is that people expressing such outrage are trying to demonstrate that they are morally better than other people. Much of the time, outrage is moral masturbation. The people who express outrage do so in order to demonstrate to others that they have increased moral sensitivity and a stronger than normal concern for ethics than others do. Thus, they are better people, and should be admired.

However, others, such as philosopher Helen De Cruz (2018), believe expressing anger online is also a way of 'signalling in-group membership'. Indeed, venting or expressing certain beliefs is a 'cheap, but effective and reliable, signal for expressing group membership'. By expressing outrage, social media users are stating to others, 'I belong with all the others who have

expressed the same view as I have.' Thus, often those who express outrage on social media are not necessarily signalling virtue, but rather that they have the 'right beliefs' that are important for their 'in-group'. By expressing their views, their position within the group is consolidated, solidified or even enhanced. However, De Cruz (2019) also warns that this kind of behaviour can lead to an inconsistency of expression, for people will only vent or express outrage when they know it will align with the views of their in-group. Thus, one can never be certain whether their outrage is based on what they really think, or what they know their in-group expect them to think, or what they feel they should say as a member of the group. This stands in contrast to Huizinga's notion of play. For Huizinga, when we play, we reveal our true, whole, real, authentic self.

More broadly, the idea of expressing views to fit in with like-minded others also corrupts play. An important part of play is to 'play around' with ideas to debate important topics in a reasoned, fair manner. To do this, people must be free to express themselves and not be inhibited by the expectations of others. If a social media user doesn't feel free to express their own considered, respective views, based on the fear of being shamed or becoming the target of outrage or anger, or because they feel they can only express what their group expects of them, then important discussions are corrupted.

Anger on social media can present a 'lynch mob' mentality where the very notion of punishing others whets our appetite for moral outrage. This can lead to a chorus of condemnation which presents an overwhelmingly clear and loud narrative for those participating in the 'echo chamber' but ignores the views that might sit outside their personalised flow of online information (Crockett, 2017). While these outraged and angry narratives might violently swirl around the echo chambers, they may not truly reflect the broader society's views on the issue. This is problematic as the debate lacks different voices and concerns. Indeed, it's often reduced to a hashtag, rather than a meaningful debate (Synovitz, 2018). At this point people have stopped 'playing' with different ideas and arguments in any adequate depth; instead they are venting anger to construct a narrative which may or may not reflect the broader beliefs of those discussing the issue with greater civility in pubs, clubs, lounge rooms and offices in the physical world. Here, play is corrupt as order is lost to the destructive chaos of the echo chamber.

Worryingly, according to Crockett (2017), a recent study claims this kind of viral anger and outrage can deepen social divides, suggesting a desire to punish others makes them seem less human. Again, here play is corrupted. Instead of uniting, social media divides. Instead of creating strong, authentic human relationships, it, in fact, serves to dehumanise others.

Of course, there are those, such as Jackson and Welles (2015), who argue that online activism, in the form of 'hashtag activism', allows for marginalised voices to collectively organise, gain power, and raise awareness of important issues. Jackson and Welles (2015) investigated the takeover of the Twitter hashtag #myNYPD, following the launch of a public relations campaign by the New York City Police Department, to highlight how the social media platform was used to promote narratives about racial profiling and police misconduct. The notion of social media raising awareness of important issues is true and highlights that outrage and anger can indeed be leveraged for prosocial purposes; however, one wonders just how nuanced these debates truly are. After all, while a trending hashtag can raise awareness of serious issues, it does not, on its own, enable a playful contest of ideas or meaningful debate. Rather, it is superficial and extreme. As Mackay (2018) notes, social media commentary tends to highlight the extreme views of the opinionated few and under-represent the majority 'middle'. But more so, it restricts important debates to a hashtag or 280-character tweet.

This can be seen as corrupt play, for, while Huizinga argues play can be serious, it should also 'create order'. Heightened, emotive, extreme activism, no matter the cause or issue, does

not create order or solve problems, it merely increases awareness of them. Also, one wonders just how 'fun' these acts of hashtag activism are. Indeed, much of it is based on anger and outrage.

The role of the mainstream traditional media, in both creating this level of anger and feeding off it, should not be understated as it plays a vital role in shaping important narratives and decisions emanating from viral outrage.

Mainstream media sensationalism

There's little doubt mainstream media organisations play a key role in exacerbating viral outrage. Indeed, it appears mainstream media plays a role in both stimulating and feeding emotive, sensationalist debates online as well as feeding off them to create and disseminate content they believe generates engagement and interaction on various social media channels. This is largely a result of 'business' for media organisations. Put simply, to attract advertisers to their platforms, media organisations need to attract consumers to their websites and other digital applications. To ensure consumers click through to their websites, media outlets increasingly turn to social media.

To reach their target audience they use sophisticated algorithms to promote content that is most likely to be clicked on, shared, linked, retweeted, commented on and discussed (Crockett, 2017). Given the evidence about how quickly and earnestly outrage and anger can spread, it is no surprise that much of the content disseminated by large media organisations is, in fact, sensationalised, designed to invoke a passionate, often fiery response. According to media organisations, the more a consumer engages or interacts with their content, the more their content is valued, ensuring it remains a part of their personalised information flow online.

Thus, in these instances, the mainstream media are, in fact, fuelling the fire of viral outrage. As Crockett (2017) states, 'These observations suggest that digital media transforms moral outrage, by changing both the nature and prevalence of the stimuli that trigger it. The architecture of the attention economy creates a steady flow of outrageous 'clickbait' that people can access anywhere and at any time.' Crockett (2017) goes on to explain that clickbait headlines are often presented alongside 'highly distinctive visual icons' that act as cues for people to vent their anger at the click of a button. Furthermore, consumers of news via social media come to expect and anticipate this kind of sensationalist news and become habitual venters and 'shamers' to the point where they may express outrage and anger without actually feeling those emotions.

This ensures outrage is constantly present in our social media channels partly because it becomes a habitual part of a consumer's online habits. Crockett (2017) worries that this makes it harder to change society for the better: 'If your news feed is constantly making your blood boil, you may not have the energy left for actions that make a difference, such as volunteering, marching or voting.' Furthermore, consuming 'outrageous news' and contributing to social media outrage can, in fact, 'intensify subsequent experiences of outrage'.

Importantly, this kind of 'outrageous' news comes in the form of extreme opinion, designed to invoke a response. It's these opinions that many worry remove the nuance and complexities from important issues. Instead, opinions are presented to us in black and white, binary terms and pit society's groups against each other. Thus anger prevails over more sophisticated emotions and, perhaps even more problematic, important issues are not discussed with an adequate level of nuance and depth. Thus, social discourse about issues is corrupted. What can start as an extreme, 'hard line', overly simplistic view published online by mainstream media can quickly spread as viral hate, anger, outrage, and shaming. Often important decisions are based on this 'noise', rather than reasoned debate.

However, once an issue generates online outrage, the media often seek to stoke the fire. They identify which issues are causing the most angst and anger online and they seek to add to it by producing further sensationalised news and views for fans to consume, with the aim of ensuring further engagement and interaction with their content. When this occurs, long-held assumptions about who sets the agenda for society are turned on their head. Desperate for clicks, likes, shares, retweets, and increases in other metrics relating to engagement and interaction, media publishers begin to be dictated to by online consumers. Messner and Distaso (2008) and Wallsten (2007) found that bloggers do in fact influence what journalists choose to write about, which, according to Grzywinska and Batorski (2016) highlights that social networking audiences are 'telling the media what to write about instead of the other way around'. They also write that 'the first empirical studies conducted in this field show that Social Networking Sites (SNS) can indeed become the source of media agendas (Jacobson, 2013 and Maier, 2010, cited in Grzywinska and Batorski, 2016). This was supported by the research findings of a survey of US journalists by Omnicom Group (2018), which found 'blogs are not only having an impact on the speed and availability of news but also influencing the tone and editorial direction of reporting'. Furthermore, in a study of Australia's changing media landscape, Wilding et al. (2018) found that negative effects on the mainstream news cycle, including shorter, more emotive content, can be attributed to social media platforms.

However, if the mainstream media is both stimulating and feeding off social media outrage, the consequence of this is that many issues will then be discussed via social and mainstream media in ways that lack empathy, nuance, complexity, depth, and context. Instead they are filled with emotive discourse that often oversimplifies issues, disregards the feelings of those at the centre of moral outrage, pits groups against each other and creates an overall narrative that is often more extreme, emotive and outraged than what is necessary or reflective of the broader community sentiment. In other words, social media 'play' has been corrupted, ideas are no longer contested, reasoned debate is ignored, and chaos ensues. And, rather than 'play' stimulating relationships and communities, 'corrupt play' leaves them divided.

Indeed, when individuals are being attacked after committing a moral or ethical offence, there are often calls for punishments that outweigh the severity of the crime. However, often the punishments that are actually handed out to those who have transgressed are as ferocious as the online outrage. In fact, they are designed to satisfy that outrage. This process of viral outrage shaping mainstream media narratives and important discussions and decisions is best illuminated through the case study of the cricket ball tampering scandal that rocked the Australian Test cricket team, and Australian sports fans, last year.

'Sandpaper-gate' and viral hate

The Australian ball tampering scandal, also known as 'Sandpaper-gate', caused an immediate, rapid fire response on social media in Australia and, indeed, other parts of the world, in the immediate aftermath of the incident on 24 March 2018. In the third Test match of the series against South Africa in Cape Town, Australian fielder Cameron Bancroft was caught by television cameras trying to 'roughen up' one side of the cricket ball, with what was later confirmed to be sandpaper. By 'scuffing' one side of the ball, the Australians were hoping to make the ball swing in flight more rapidly than it otherwise would, thus increasing their chances of taking the wicket of their South African opponents (ESPNcricinfo, 2018). However, the practice of tampering with the ball with a foreign object such as tape or sandpaper is illegal and a form of cheating.

Following the end of play, Bancroft was accompanied by his captain Steve Smith at a press conference. Bancroft admitted to tampering with the ball with 'yellow adhesive tape' (ESPNcricinfo, 2018). It was later revealed that he was being dishonest at the press conference

and that he had actually used sandpaper (Ferris, 2018a). For his part, Smith said he knew of the plan to tamper with the ball as it was devised during the match's lunch break by the 'leadership group', but he did not mention which members of the group were involved. It was later found that Australian Vice Captain, David Warner, was also involved. Smith said at the press conference that tampering with the ball was a 'big mistake' but that he would not be standing down as captain of the team (Ferris, 2018b).

Due to the time difference between Australia and Cape Town, the ball tampering incident took place overnight in Australia. However, the response on social media was immediate, furious, angry, outraged, and set the tone for the level of public condemnation directed at the players over the coming days, led by an emotive mainstream media narrative. Furthermore, Australians vented and shamed the three Australian cricketers at the centre of the scandal with pointed, angry social media commentary, which quickly went viral. Much of it was led and driven by high profile current day athletes, former athletes, and celebrities who have large followings on social media, giving their views significant reach.

Former Australian Captain Michael Clarke (@MClarke23) tweeted, 'WHAT THE …… HAVE I JUST WOKEN UP TO. Please tell me this is a bad dream', (Twitter, 24 March 2018).

Former Australian cricketer Rodney Hogg (@RMHogg) labelled it 'blatant cheating' on Twitter: 'Unfortunately this is blatant cheating and Steve Smith will have to step down as Australian captain' (Twitter, 25 March 2018).

Politicians also turned to social media to vent. Richard Colbeck (@richardmcolbeck), Liberal Senator for Tasmania, claimed on Twitter that he was 'bloody furious': 'Bloody Furious! Bring them all home, don't want them representing my country! Tour over. Wasn't a "mistake" it was premeditated. @CricketAus have to deal with this now and show we won't put up with this behaviour' (Twitter, 25 March 2018).

Leader of the Australian Labor Party Bill Shorten (@billshortenmp) tweeted, 'Like all Australians, I can't quite believe what we saw last night. For the sake of all cricket lovers I hope Cricket Australia make it clear that this behaviour is unacceptable #SAvAUS #Auspol' (Twitter, 25 March 2018).

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was even more pointed, stating the actions of Smith, Warner, and Bancroft were 'completely beyond belief' and 'a shocking disappointment' and called for Cricket Australia to take 'decisive action soon'. This was then posted to social media by Sky News Australia (@SkyNewsAust) (Twitter, 25 March 2018).

These comments were only a part of the rapid fire viral outrage, with many cricket fans taking to social media to express their dismay and demand the Australian cricketers be punished.

In sourcing examples of typical responses to the cricketing scandal online, Twitter posts relating to the Australian Cricket team in the first 24 hours following the 'sandpaper gate' incident were monitored. Tweets were found using the designated match hashtag #SAvAUS. The first page of responses was used as a sample of tweets with a range of those randomly selected.

Examples include:

Penny O'Shea (@pennyo61), 'They let themselves down but also the game and the country that I love. It is blatant cheating. The so called "leadership group" need to be banned and Smith removed as captain. We all make mistakes but there must be repercussions for those mistakes' (Twitter, 24 March 2018).

Daniel McKay (@Daniel Mc1979), 'The leadership group needs a massive punishment!! If it's the coach, he has to be sacked!! The captain and vice-captain need to be removed from their positions and have at least a 3 test ban!!' (Twitter, 24 March 2018).

Duncan: Why All the Outrage? Viral Media as Corrupt Play Shaping Mainstream
Media Narratives

47

Sel (@cooloolaman), 'They have been busted cheating, plain 'n simple, sack all involved, especially the so called leadership group for starters, send a clear message to Australians that we don't need to cheat to win' (Twitter, 24 March 2018).

Avtar Singh (@aman_avtars), 'Heads must roll. This was a betrayal of the public trust. We want accountability' (Twitter, 24 March 2018).

(@melbourneminker), 'Have never liked the Australian Cricket team. Have always been arrogant wankers now cheats!!! @CricketAus' (Twitter, 24 March 2018).

David Brown (@DavidDbbear), 'They need to send the whole team home… Ban for life from test cricket those who were orchestrating this horrid act…' (Twitter, 24 March 2018).

Other social media memes compared the three cricketers to disgraced cycling drug cheat Lance Armstrong (Glenn Runnalls, (@GlennRunnalls), Twitter, 24 March 2018). The social media outrage shaming Smith, Warner, and Bancroft was echoed by mainstream media through a range of online posts and content distributed via their traditional channels.

The *Daily Telegraph*'s front-page headline of 'Shame', with an image of the iconic Australian 'baggy green' cap (Lalor, 2018b), was followed up with headlines on their website including 'Deplorable Smith Should Be Sacked as Captain' (Gould, 26 March 2018). Online, News Corp's *The Weekend Australian* led their website with headlines condemning the Australian team and, in particular, captain Steve Smith, including 'Blatant Cheating. Disgraceful' (Lalor, 2018a) and 'Smith. You're Gone. Now' (Smith, 25 March 2018). The *Sydney Morning Herald* also shamed captain Steve Smith, with their leading online story claiming the scandal was 'The worst Australian captaincy crisis since underarm incident' (Barrett, 25 March 2018).

These are just some of hundreds of stories published and shared about the issue. The common theme amongst those venting on social media, which was then supported by mainstream media headlines and opinion columns, was that the Australians had cheated, bringing shame on the cricket team and, by extension, the nation. As such, the overwhelming sentiment was to punish the players, in the form of long term suspensions. Those outraged on social media appeared particularly critical of captain Steve Smith, who many claimed should be sacked as captain.

For their part, because the reaction was so immediate and angry on social media, Cricket Australia were largely on the back foot in responding to the outrage, and, while difficult to prove, it appears the punishments given to the three Australian players were designed to satisfy the outraged venters on social media. The three players were sanctioned by Cricket Australia for breaching article 2.3.5 of Cricket Australia's Code of Conduct by engaging in conduct that was contrary to the spirit of the game, unbecoming of a representative, harmful to the interests of the game, and/or which brings the game into disrepute. As such Bancroft was suspended for nine months from 'all international and domestic cricket' and he 'will not be considered for team leadership positions until a minimum of 12 months after the conclusion of [his suspension] from international and domestic cricket' (Ferris, 2018).

Vice-Captain Warner and Captain Smith both received a twelve-month suspension from 'all international and domestic cricket'. Warner's punishment also stated he will not be considered for team leadership positions in the future. Smith 'will not be considered for team leadership positions until a minimum of 12 months after the conclusion of [his suspension] from international and domestic cricket' (Ferris, 2018).

Interestingly, any return to a leadership position would be 'conditional on acceptance by fans and the public, form and authority among the playing group,' (Ferris, 2018). This further highlights the role the public had in setting the tone for broader discussions relating to this issue, including the penalties all players incurred and the conditions concerning their return to the game.

Understanding the Australian ball tampering controversy as corrupt play

The viral outrage in the immediate aftermath of the ball tampering scandal did indeed reflect some of the key characteristics that are fundamental to Huizinga's definition of play. It was, for many, spontaneous and instantaneous. Many others appear to have vented and expressed their feelings without inhibition. In fact, they were free. Some, no doubt, also had fun and enjoyed shaming the Australian players and calling for them to be punished. Some would have limited expressing their views about this issue to social media, while others may have believed that banning the players would in fact restore order. These are all key characteristics of Huizinga's play ideal.

However, in reality, the overall viral outrage that swept social media in Australia following this incident created an angry, heated, outraged, extreme tone that sits in opposition to the key play characteristic of 'fun'. Indeed, many fans took to social media to express their dismay, to vent, and to shame those involved. They called for heads to roll and for the players to be suspended. However, the discussion lacked a sense of 'play', and, for the most part, there was little evidence of nuanced debate that showed a respectful contest of ideas.

On the contrary, as is often the case for the 'outraged', many social media posts lacked any sense of compassion. The issue, for them, was black and white. Evil had run amok; good must be restored. The athletes were wrong; they had cheated; they must be banned. Few appeared to consider the personal feelings of the players who had erred. They appeared dehumanised. This, too, sits in opposition to Huizinga's 'play', which advocates strong and real relationships, rather than the dehumanisation of individuals. However, sentiments of anger and outrage rapidly changed when perpetrator Cameron Bancroft and Australian captain Steve Smith conducted separate emotional press conferences where they tearfully apologised to the Australian public for their wrongdoing (ABC, 2018). Smith's father stood beside him in support.

Following the raw and revealing press conference, the tone of social media changed, as it perhaps dawned on several fans that they might not have considered all aspects of the issue when furiously venting and shaming the cricketers.

For the first two hours following the press conference by Australian Captain Steve Smith, tweets were monitored by searching 'Steve Smith'. The first page of responses was used as a sample of tweets with a range of those randomly selected.

Examples (including the former England cricketers, Pieterson, Prior and Vaughan) included:

Kevin Pietersen (@KP24), 'Just seen @stevesmith49's press conference. As a parent, I'm gutted for him & his family! Shout me down if you want, but I'm speaking as a parent! It will get better mate!' (Twitter, 29 March 2018).

Matt Prior (@MattPrior13), 'Fair play Bancroft and Steve Smith taking it head on and fronting up. That was hard to watch and can't imagine what they're going through. People make mistakes but being able to own up and take responsibility takes guts', (Twitter, 29 March 2018).

Harsha Bhogle (@bhogleharsha), 'Haven't Australia made enough of a spectacle of Steve Smith? I'm blown by what he is being put through', (Twitter, 29 March 2018).

Duncan: Why All the Outrage? Viral Media as Corrupt Play Shaping Mainstream
Media Narratives

49

Michael Vaughan (@MichaelVaughan), 'Good people make mistakes. I honestly think Steve Smith & Cam Bancroft are decent guys who had a moment of madness, they deserve a 2nd chance and hopefully get the right support around them now. Takes a lot guts to do what they did today…', (Twitter, 29 March 2018).

Deborah Knight (@deborah_knight), 'Just spent 20 minutes consoling my crying 9 year old who is a major Steve Smith fan after he watched the press conference. Encouraging him and all kids to write Steve a letter telling him how much you love and admire him', (Twitter, 29 March 2018).

Laurie Oakes (@LaurieOakes), 'Time to give Steve Smith a break, I think', (Twitter, 29 March 2018).

Chris Mitchell (@ChrisMitchell15), 'You're not Australian if you don't feel for Steve Smith. Whoever's fault it was, he will have to live with it for the rest of his life. Hard to watch', (Twitter, 29 March 2018).

Viral media shaping mainstream narratives

Following the announcement of the penalties handed to the players, many pondered if they were too extreme. Yet, it seems Cricket Australia was acting to satisfy the outrage so evident on social media in the immediate aftermath of the incident. Because the ball tampering controversy first broke in Australia overnight, social media audiences were, the first to react. They were furious and angry and as such the broader discussion that played out in the mainstream media reflected this. This, arguably, perhaps quite likely, contributed in some way to the penalties handed to the players.

However, were the penalties fair? Many would claim they were; however, the heightened emotion around the issue on social media, matched with the damning headlines and opinions shared by mainstream media, meant that few alternatives were discussed; few ideas were 'played with'; few arguments were contested. One outraged post simply piled on top of others, creating a clear, relatively unchallenged narrative in the 'echo chamber' of social media, amongst sports fans and media organisations. Perhaps the penalties would have been the same without the extensive viral rage; however, had we had a more nuanced, respectful, reasoned, in-depth, playful debate, we'd be more certain.

Conclusion

When viewing social media activity through the notion of play it is clear that social media's increased moral outrage can be viewed as the corruption of play. It now takes on serious tones and shallow debates where ideas and arguments are no longer properly explored or contested. As Huizinga would argue, playing with ideas can have very meaningful and important outcomes.

However, replacing playful social media activity are the emotions of anger and outrage, which spread more rapidly and with more power than any other emotion. This is exacerbated by mainstream media who stoke the flames of negativity with content designed to invoke outrage in order to increase their rate of clicks, shares, likes, comments, retweets, and other engagement metrics. Likewise, they are also likely to feed off anger and outrage by monitoring what is trending online and joining the conversation with more sensationalised content.

While this ensures constant online interaction, much of it lacks depth, nuance, and an appreciation of complex issues, which ultimately means that more elevated public discourse can be marginalised at the expense of bite sized venting and shaming. The ultimate concern

of this is that social media viral outrage, as a form of corrupt play, can set the tone and agenda for important discussion and, in the case of the Australian cricket ball tampering scandal outlined above, there is evidence to suggest social media outrage can also impact the important decisions being made about a range of social, political or even sporting issues.

For this to change, social media users will be required to separate themselves from the echo chambers they clamour to be part of. For, if they engage in more playful, moderate, considered, thoughtful discussions where all the sides of an argument are presented, considered and contested, the mainstream media may follow suit; thus, more meaningful, and possibly fairer, outcomes will be achieved and order created.

Note

[1] For a more in-depth analysis of play theorists and their critique of Huizinga see: Caillois, R., 'The Definition of Play and the Classification of Games'. In *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology,* Salen, K. and Zimmerman, E., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, 2006; Sutton-Smith, B., *The Ambiguity of Play.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1997; and Hans, J. S., *The Play of the World.* University of Massachusetts Press, Boston, 1981.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information
Samuel Duncan is a lecturer in Sports Media and Sport Business at Holmesglen Institute, Melbourne, Australia. His main areas of research are sports media, sports business and the link between sport, community and culture. He is the author of *Footy Grounds to Grandstands: Play, Community and the Australian Football League* (2016) and has been published in a range of peer reviewed academic journals with a focus on play, sport, media, society, theory, and philosophy.

References

ABC. (2018). Steve Smith apologises for ball-tampering incident after arriving back in Australia. *ABC*, 29 March. Retrieved from https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-29/steve-smith-apologises-for-ball-tampering-scandal/9603670 (accessed 15 May 2019).

Barnes, R. (2018). *Uncovering Online Commenting Culture − Trolls, Fanboys and Lurkers.* London: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70235-3

Barrett, C. (2018). The worst Australian captaincy crisis since underarm incident. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March. Retrieved from https://www.smh.com.au/sport/cricket/ball-tampering-episode-the-worst-australian-captaincy-crisis-since-underarm-incident-20180325-p4z63v.html (accessed 10 May 2019).

Behr, R. (2017). You can log off, sure. But you can't stop the outrage economy. *The Guardian*, 27 December. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/27/log-off-stop-outrage-economy-media-dark-side (accessed 13 May 2019).

Brennon, J. (2018). If you're not continuously outraged, you must be a horrible person!!! *Bleeding Heart Libertarians*, 24 October. Retrieved from: https://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2018/10/if-youre-not-continuously-outraged-you-must-be-a-horrible-person/ (accessed 1 May 2019).

Caillois, R. (2006). The definition of play and the classification of games. In K. Salen, & E. Zimmerman (Eds.), *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology.* Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Coles, B. A., & **West, M.** (2016). Weaving the internet together: Imagined communities in newspaper comment threads. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *60*, 44–53. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.02.049

Craker, N., & **March, E.** (2016). The dark side of Facebook®: The Dark Tetrad, negative social potency, and trolling behaviours. *Personality and Individual Differences, 102*, 79–84. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.06.043

Crockett, M. J. (2017). Moral outrage in the digital age. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1, 769–771. Retrieved from: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-017-0213-3 (accessed 10 May 2019). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0213-3

Dale, I. (2018). After a year of poisonous new political lows, is it too much to hope our nation can heed the Queen's call for civility and respect in 2019? *Daily Mail*, 30 December. Retrieved from https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-6539143/IAIN-DALE-hope-nation-heed-Queens-call-civility.html (accessed 5 May 2019).

De Cruz, H. (2018). What explains moral outrage on social media? *Medium*, 24 October. Retrieved from https://medium.com/@helenldecruz/what-explains-moral-outrage-on-social-media-336189637948 (accessed 5 May 2019).

ESPN cricinfo. (2018). Bancroft, Smith admit to ball tampering. *ESPN cricinfo*, 24 March. Retrieved from http://www.espncricinfo.com/story/_/id/22897468/cameron-bancroft-steven-smith-admit-ball-tampering (accessed 18 May 2019).

Fan, R., Zhao, J., Chen, Y., & **Xu, K.** (2013). Anger is more influential than joy: Sentiment correlation in Weibo. Preprint submitted to Elsevier. Retrieved from https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0110184 (accessed 14 May 2019).

Ferris, S. (2018a). Australia's banned former opener Cameron Bancroft's declaration he used sticky tape in ball tampering case exposed as false. *Big Bash News*. Retrieved from https://www.bigbash.com.au/news/sandpaper-not-sticky-tape-revelation-australia-media-statement-ball-tampering-cameron-bancroft/2018-03-28 (accessed 15 May 2019).

Ferris, S. (2018b). Australia own up to ball tampering. *cricket.com.au*, 25 March. Retrieved from https://www.cricket.com.au/news/cameron-bancroft-steve-smith-ball-tampering-umpires-tape-pockets-australia-cape-town-video/2018-03-25 (accessed 15 May 2019).

Frissen, V., Mul, J. D., & **Raessens, J.** (2013). Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity. In *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, M. de Lange, et al. 2015 (Eds.). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Available at: https://www.dhi.ac.uk/san/waysofbeing/data/governance-crone-frissen-2013.pdf. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048523030-001

Gould, R. (2018). Deplorable Smith should be sacked as captain. *Daily Telegraph*. Retrieved from https://www.heraldsun.com.au/sport/cricket/steve-smith-must-be-sacked-as-australia-captain-for-role-in-ball-tampering-against-south-africa/news-story/ddd0a92196964daf49e2ad1cc7e63761 (accessed 12 May 2019).

Grzywinska, I., & **Batorski, D.** (2016). How the emergence of social networking sites challenges agenda-setting theory. *Konteksty Spoleczne, 4*(1:7), 19–32.

Hans, J. S. (1981). *The Play of the World*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.

Huizinga, J. (1950). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Jackson, S., & **Welles, B.** (2015). Hijacking #MYNYPD: Social media dissent and networked counterpublics. *Journal of Communication, 65*(6), 932–952. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12185

Lalor, P. (2018a). Blatant. Cheating. Disgraceful. *Weekend Australian*. 25 March, p. 1.

Lalor, P. (2018b). Shame. *Daily Telegraph*. 26 March, p. 1.

Mackay, H. (2017). Social media analytics: Implications for journalism and democracy. *Journal of Information Ethics, 26*(1), 34–48.

Messner, M., & **Distaso, M.** (2008). The source cycle: How traditional media and weblogs use each other as sources. *Journalism Studies, 9*(3), 447–463. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700801999287

Millar, S. (1968). *The Psychology of Play*. Oxford: Penguin.

Omnicom Group. (2008). The state of the news media: An annual report on American journalism. *Report by Omnicom Group*. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2017/05/State-of-the-News-Media-Report-2008-FINAL.pdf (accessed 1 December 2019).

Quandt, T. (2018). Dark participation, media and communication. (accessed 1 December, 2019). DOI: http://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1519

Smith, P. (2018). Smith, you're gone. Now. *Weekend Australian*, 25 March, p. 1.

Spolin, V. (1963). *Improvisation for the Theatre*. 3rd edition. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Synovitz, R. (2018). Forget about civil discourse, my keyboard Is outraged. *Radio Free Europe Liberty*. Retrieved from https://www.rferl.org/a/social-media-outrage-civil-discourse-keyboard-warriors/29677441.html (accessed 13 May 2019).

Wallsten, K. (2007). Agenda setting and the blogosphere: An analysis of the relationship between mainstream media and political blogs. *Review of Policy Research*, *24*(6), 567–587. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-1338.2007.00300.x

Wayne, T. (2014). Clicking Their Way to Outrage. *The New York Times*, 3 July. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/fashion/social-media-some-susceptible-to-internet-outrage.html (accessed 14 May 2019).

Wilding, D., Fray, P., Molitorisz, S., & **McKewon, E.** (2018). *The Impact of Digital Platforms on News and Journalistic Content.* NSW: University of Technology Sydney.

Wolchover, N. (2012). Why is everyone on the internet so angry? *Scientific American.* Retrieved from https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-is-everyone-on-the-internet-so-angry/ (accessed 10 May 2019).