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New media, new panics

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ABSTRACT
When Stuart Hall and his Birmingham School colleagues argued that media technologies were essential to the production of moral panics, they focused on the relationship between mass media and the state. Because new technologies have altered our cultures of ostracism and punishment, we offer a revised analysis of this relationship that examines the role of online shaming in current moral panics. Not only do we analyze the new technological affordances of digital media, we argue that our current shaming culture is symptomatic of a deep-seated political disenfranchisement that leaves subjects grasping to "do something." Contributing to a social media-driven panic culture that punishes and ostracizes deviants thus stands in for meaningful political participation. Ultimately, we argue that the evolving orientation to public life fostered by these new technologies has created a culture of shaming whereby citizens often prosecute their own discrete moral panics amid the more sustained sense of political crisis that characterizes contemporary life.

At the rear of a busy conference room in March 2013, a computer developer named Alex Reid turned to a co-worker and made a quick joke in computer lingo. The two then snickered under their breath about "big dongles" before looking up to see Adria Richards, a fellow session attendee, smile and snap a photo of them with her cell phone. Citing the conference's hashtag, #PyCon, Richards then tweeted the photo to her 10,000 followers, saying, "Not cool. Jokes about forking repos in a sexual way and 'big' dongles. Right behind me." Two more of her tweets swiftly followed: "Can someone talk to these guys about their conduct? I'm in lightning talks, top right near stage, 10 rows back," and "Code of Conduct," which featured a link to the organization's website. A few moments later, as the two men were escorted out of the conference session, Richards tweeted, "Issue being addressed with individuals. Thank you." As we will see, however, the matter did not end there. Instead, Richards's actions set off the protracted chain of attacks, threats, public shaming, and firings that *Mother Jones* magazine would dub "Donglegate" (Liebelson & Raja, 2013).

Long before a dongle joke set off this campaign of digitized moral entrepreneurism, a number of scholars had addressed the inextricable relationship between media

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technologies and "moral panics." Perhaps the most influential of these contributions was made by Stuart Hall and his colleagues at Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, in their 1978 book, *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order*. In that book, Hall et al. analyze how public officials and the corporate mass media collaborated to create a public moral crisis over a vague collection of criminal activities that were suddenly dubbed "mugging." Yet, as Hall himself pointed out in a 2012 interview,

> *Policing the Crisis* was of a particular moment, and it now needs to be seen in its own conjuncture, in its own conjunctural moment—because now we are in a different moment …. We couldn't write the chapter on the media in that way any longer. We couldn't dream of doing it! It would have to deal with interactive social media, the so-called democratization of public opinion and comment, individualization; they are what has transformed the situation.
>
> (Hay & Hall, 2013, p. 31)

Indeed, the new technical capacities and cultural velocities introduced by digital technologies have "transformed the situation." It is this essay's primary task to examine the political contours of this new conjuncture, which involves entirely different relationships between media technologies and moral panics.

Perhaps the most interesting example of this shift is the increasingly common phenomenon of shaming. As Peters (2013) of *Slate* has recognized, our society's tendency toward shaming has reached epic proportions: "Breast-feeding advocates are sometimes accused of formula-shaming moms. I've also seen *social-media-shaming, tattoo-shaming, luxury-shaming, attendance-shaming, snack-shaming, bigot-shaming, privilege-shaming, salary-shaming, single-shaming* (i.e. shaming the nonmarried or nonattached), [and] *fedora-shaming*." And as scholars like Ronson (2015) have pointed out, social media like Twitter and YouTube have made shaming easier—and more common—than ever. The rise of social media and ubiquitous computing, in fact, have fueled the most important change between the moral panics of today and those of 1978, when *Policing the crisis* was penned: while the direct mediation of the corporate mass media and state officials was once needed to produce and prosecute moral panics, citizens today have acquired an unprecedented capacity to independently investigate, judge, and punish their peers for moral infractions. Unlike in 1978, newspapers and television are no longer necessary to galvanize moral panics; and the police and the courts are often unable to mete out punishments as severe or intimidating as the ostracism, job loss, death threats, and physical attacks that can accompany what Urry (1999) calls our "increasingly mediated culture of shame" (p. 320).

To begin our essay, we analyze how Hall and his colleagues characterized the relationship between the media and moral panics in *Policing the crisis*. After reviewing how more recent scholarship has revised and updated the insights of Hall et al., we argue that scholars have yet to fully grasp this evolving relationship between moral panics and media technologies. Not only do we analyze the new technological affordances of digital media, we argue that our current shaming culture is symptomatic of a deep-seated political disenfranchisement that leaves subjects grasping to "do something." Contributing to a social media-driven panic culture that punishes and ostracizes deviants thus stands in for meaningful political participation. Ultimately, we argue that the evolving orientation to public life fostered by new media has created a culture of shaming whereby citizens often prosecute their own discrete moral panics amid the more sustained sense of political crisis that characterizes contemporary life.

Moral panics and panic ideology

In postwar social and cultural theory, scholars often recognized the inextricable relationship between moral panics and media technologies. When Marshall McLuhan deployed the term in 1964, he charged that much of Western philosophy was based in a "moral panic" about the influence media have over our everyday lives and the patterns of our culture (1964/1994, p. 82). And in 1972, when sociologist Stanley Cohen introduced the term to mainstream social theory, he framed the moral panic as essentially a media-driven phenomenon. While McLuhan had focused on the public's recurrent anxieties over new technologies, Cohen considered how "the media"—i.e. mass media such as television, newspapers, and radio—were essential to generating and stoking moral panics about the conduct of "folk devils" and other marginalized subcultures.

For Cohen, moral panics appear with the emergence of deviant communities whose conduct—some of it illegal, such as theft or assault, and some of it lawful, such as listening to raucous music and wearing exotic clothes—violates a society's dominant behavioral norms. According to Cohen, those offended or threatened by deviant behaviors generate among the police and sectors of the general public a backlash that gets exacerbated by journalists and other mass media personalities who "translate" the threat into a public idiom (see DeYoung, 2011, pp. 218–219). Once this media-galvanized outcry reaches a certain threshold of publicity, the panic is then reinforced by local activists, moral entrepreneurs, and experts. At that stage, the state and its arms of police repression are not far behind (Cohen, 1972/2002).

This brings us to Hall's contribution, which has been highly influential in sociology and criminology but has gone largely overlooked in media and cultural studies. When Hall and his Birmingham colleagues published *Policing the crisis* in 1978, they focused on the processes by which media power and state power converge in the production of public moral crises. Like Cohen, for Hall and his colleagues "the media" were mass media; and hence, the media's complicity in the production of moral panics had a structural basis. For Hall et al., the media's role in generating and sustaining moral panics can be broken down into two essential, related elements: first, the manufacture of ideological mystification; and, second, active complicity with the state.

In the first case, Hall and his colleagues develop an essentially structuralist theory of ideological production. The key to the moral panic phenomenon, they argue, is the epistemological distance between material events and their mediated representation in the rhetoric of newscasters, journalists, police officers, and public officials. This ideological distance, in fact, provides the backbone for their definition of moral panic:

> When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons, or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when "experts," in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians, and editors perceive the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk "with one voice" of rates, diagnoses, prognoses, and solutions, when the media representations universally stress "sudden and dramatic" increases (in numbers involved or events) and "novelty," above and beyond that which a sober, realistic approach could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a moral panic. (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, p. 16)

Thus for Hall et al., moral panics are characterized by a media-driven ideological obfuscation: in particular, a "disproportionate" and rhetorically consistent reaction to certain

forms of crime and immorality (see Critcher, 2006, p. 2). This "ideological construction of reality," they argue, provides the essential political ingredient of the moral panic:

> When such discrepancies appear between threat and reaction, between what is perceived and what that is a perception of, we have good evidence to suggest we are in the presence of an ideological displacement. We call this displacement a moral panic. (p. 29)

This ideological displacement, which results from a disproportionate response to actual social events, relies on the mass media to construct—and exaggerate—a coherent, consistently labeled threat based on disparate events in the social order.

Yet the media do not effect this displacement on their own. They are reliant on what Hall and his colleagues call "primary definers" (1978, pp. 218–219). These primary definers are experts—typically representatives of the state, such as police officers and court officials—who collaborate with media actors to define the parameters and protagonists of a given social threat. So, while Hall et al. recognize the "key role of the media" (p. 30), they also emphasize media institutions' reliance on "other collective agencies in the … drama—the central apparatus of social control in the state: the police and the courts" (p. 30). This is a crucial aspect of Hall et al.'s theory of moral panics, as it places the essential definitional authority in the hands of the state. In fact, Hall and his colleagues argue that an important way the "capitalist state" manages class struggle is through the construction and prosecution of moral panics (pp. 218–219). Primary definers like police officials and politicians offer the first layer of mediation in the rise of a moral panic: by "structuring" and "amplifying" the discourse of the social threat (p. 38), these primary definers play a crucial role in the organization of class power through the organs of the state (pp. 218–219). It is only after this initial definitional stage that media actors and media institutions begin to play a pivotal role.

The mass media then articulate the threat's social significance to a broad network of social ills—a process that Hall and his colleagues refer to as a "signification spiral" (pp. 222–223). This spiral signals the crucial stage at which the complicity between media agencies and the state seeps into public discourse. For example, an emergent phenomenon like "mugging" is articulated—in the rhetoric of media actors, judges, police officials, moral entrepreneurs, and other figures—to a concrete, motley assortment of folk devils. Rather than a specifiable, isolated brand of criminality, "mugging" thus becomes evidence of a growing social menace attributable to a rather predictable set of phenomena, such as single motherhood, juvenile delinquency, HIV/AIDS, or drug abuse; likewise, it thus becomes associated with a matrix of marginalized communities and folk devils that embody these threats, especially youth, immigrants, communities of color, and welfare recipients.

In the words of Mary deYoung, this

> linking of 'deviant' activities from different sources and the linking of atypical actors … create[s] a signification spiral that not only amplifies the threat, but also propels it and those who embody it across the thresholds of tolerance in order to legitimate social control.
>
> (p. 122; also see Walby & Spencer, 2011, pp. 108–109)

Thus the specter of "the mugger" in the context of 1970s Britain gains a certain material specificity by being representationally grounded in these marginalized communities. That signification spiral thereby intervenes into the public consciousness, orchestrating consent

by galvanizing and distributing public anxieties about a supposedly accelerating collapse of the social and moral order (see McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p. 562). With the threat specified and localized, the state and its allies then develop methods for re-establishing order, neutralizing the panic, and justifying further supervision and control over suspect populations.

Panic fragments

In short, what Hall and his colleagues propose is a structural model of the production of panic ideology. The key actors in this process are (1) the "primary definers," such as cops and public officials, who define the situation and mediate its composition into a coherent, targetable phenomenon, and (2) media personalities and institutions, which present to the public a consistent vision of the threat's contours, identify its culprits, and propose potential solutions. This influential account—like Cohen's before it, and like many that have followed it—takes for granted a certain structural relationship between the state and "the media." In this model, the production of panic ideology is a relatively straightforward process of signification and intervention: discourses, labels, and definitions produced by the police and their allies are reproduced and exacerbated by various mass media actors, who then generate in the broader public a sense of anxiety about an emergent social threat that is embodied by certain folk devils and marginalized communities.

While *Policing the crisis* lays out an invaluable framework for thinking about how public and private actors collaborate to marginalize their enemies and reproduce social injustice, recent changes in media culture call for a rethinking of how moral panics are established, prosecuted, and circulated throughout communities. As digital media appeared on the horizon of our technological culture, Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton used Hall and his colleagues as a conceptual launch pad for thinking about the impact that emerging media could have on moral panics. In their farsighted analysis, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) argued that new media technologies would shift the political and cultural role of moral panics:

> The proliferation and fragmentation of mass, niche, and micro-media and the multiplicity of voices, which compete and contest the meaning of the issues subject to 'moral panic,' suggest that [the traditional theoretical models] are outdated in so far as they could not possibly take account of the labyrinthine web of determining relations which now exist between social groups and the media. (p. 560)

Since mobile and social media dealt an important blow to the elite mass media's monopoly over panic production, attempts to analyze the fragmented, "grassroots" nature of current moral panics have become increasingly common (see Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994/2011; Hier, Lett, Walby, & Smith, 2011). Yet much of this renewed attention has recycled the classic panic ideology model, focusing, for example, on how radical groups' social media accounts have facilitated the production of bourgeois moral panics (McKendrick, 2015). While scholars of media and culture have yet to fully conceptualize how moral panics have been transformed during the present technocultural conjuncture, there has been a general recognition that emerging social and political crises have potentiated a new brand of moral panic. This new panic, manifest particularly in varieties of shaming, has been fueled by competing groups of moral entrepreneurs being equipped

not only with their own publics and enemies, but also with effective digital technologies of surveillance, publicity, and marginalization.

Shaming and moral panic

In the moral panics described by Hall and his colleagues, moral entrepreneurs and public officials latched onto some form of perceived negative conduct and then enlisted various methods of publicity to mobilize public opinion against the offender. Today, shaming is a more or less inextricable stage in the moral panic process (Friedman, 2015). This is especially true given the "fragmented" quality of our panic culture that McRobbie and Thornton—as well as, in the intervening years, many others (for example, Bratich, 2008; Hier et al., 2011)—have described. Hall et al. and other early developers of the moral panic concept focused on the corporate mass media and the state as our society's principal punishers and moral arbiters. As soon as the mass media and the state spoke with "one voice" on a given social threat, Hall and his colleagues observed that one could count on the police and the courts to mete out punishments and reinforce the moral status quo. Yet, while the mediation of the corporate mass media and the state were once needed to produce and prosecute moral panics, newspapers and television are no longer necessary to mobilize vigilance against moral offenders (c.f. Hess & Waller, 2013). And, perhaps most importantly, the police and the courts are often unable to mete out punishments as severe or intimidating as the ostracism, job loss, death threats, and physical attacks that can accompany shaming in the digital era.

To better analyze this problem, let's return to the example with which we opened the article. After Adria Richards's Twitter activism resulted in the two dongle jokers being escorted from the conference, her tweets began spreading among conference attendees and throughout the computer developer community. Respected online forum Hacker-News dedicated several threads to the controversy, and each quickly gained hundreds of comments. Word quickly spread to San Francisco, where Andy Yang, the CEO of international gaming firm PlayHaven, learned that one of his employees had made one of the dongle jokes. Yang immediately fired the (still unnamed) jokester and released a statement condemning his former employee's actions (see Holt, 2013).

As she watched this turmoil developing online, Richards penned a blog post explaining her actions: "I was telling myself if they made one more sexual joke, I'd say something. The [sic] it happened" (Richards, 2013). After the dongle comment pushed Richards over the edge, she considered how she might best seize the moment with political action:

> Three things came to me: act, speak and confront in the moment. I decided to do things differently this time and didn't say anything to them directly. I was a guest in the Python community and as such, I wanted to give PyCon the opportunity to address this … . I walked back in with the PyCon staff and point [sic] them out one by one and they were escorted to the hallway.
>
> (Richards, 2013)

Returning to her seat, Richards penned a few more tweets and blog posts, proclaiming that she, like Joan of Arc, had made an important blow for social justice:

> As an advocate for digital equality, my actions today at #pycon made me feel like Joan of Arc, minus the visions … . As I walked back to my seat, I cannot tell you how proud I was of the

> PyCon and Python community at the very moment for keeping their word to make the conference a safe place to be … . Yesterday the future of programming was on the line and I made myself heard. (Richards, 2013)

Before we return to more of Richards's story, we would like to assert that it is just this growing impulse to *make oneself heard* that arises from the larger political crisis toward which we have been gesturing. Fueled by digital technologies that have changed the nature of political participation and networked communication, moralistic online shaming is becoming an important expression of the technologically empowered yet politically precarious digital citizen.

Communicative capitalism's orgies of feeling

As the internet and its networked applications have enabled subjects to broadly disseminate messages, we have become saturated with an abundance of information presumably thought, at least by those who generate it, to have some public use-value. But as producers and consumers of discourse, we are overwhelmed. Against the excitement of offering our opinions, tastes, and ideas for public measure, we face the defeat of their so often disappearing into a vacuum of voices speaking only to themselves. Dean (2009) calls this phenomenon "communicative capitalism"—"a political-economic formation in which there is talk without response" (p. 24). Dean's concern, which we share, is that communicative capitalism animates the *fantasy* that our digital participation gives us democratic agency to improve the social good, though in fact our mediated forays into public life "consolidate and support the most brutal inequities of corporate-controlled capitalism" (p. 24). Online shaming, we're suggesting, has become a particularly nettlesome symptom of communicative capitalism's "fantasy" because its material consequences seem so compellingly to indicate that we *can* initiate social change by intervening in moments of moral crisis.

In this light, Adria Richards's penchant to shame her peers in order to "make herself heard"—in order for her "talk" to garner a "response"—provides evidence of how our society's relationship to moral panics has shifted in recent years. In 2002, when Stanley Cohen reflected on his foundational 1972 work, he argued that his theoretical model of discrete moral panics—which focused on discrete issues and social threats, such as skinheads, mods, rockers, and mugging—was now becoming obsolete. "Discrete and volatile moral panics might indeed once have existed," he writes, "but they have now been replaced by a generalized moral stance, a permanent moral panic resting on a seamless web of social anxieties" (1972/2002, p. xxxvi). Cohen's explanation, however, returns to the same representational media politics that characterized his and Hall et al.'s work in the 1970s: he blames the emergence of this generalized moral panic on the mass media "reproducing and sustaining the dominant ideology" (p. xxxvi). While this might well be the case, we are interested in moving beyond ideology critique in order to analyze how participatory digital technologies have fueled this new, "general" sense of moral panic.

As Dean (2009) would acknowledge, new media technologies have altered the social field at a time in late-capitalist liberal democracies when people feel beset by a generalized (i.e. "permanent") moral panic over their powerlessness to initiate change. One feature of communicative capitalism, for Dean, is that participatory digital media have led the use-

value of our messages to be replaced by the exchange-value of merely making a contri-bution (p. 27). On one hand, we then want to say more, to make our voice resound even louder, so that it might have an impact that is more than just phatic. On the other hand, we are powerless when the very effort to do so only further saturates us with infor-mation-glut, entrenching those very conditions that reduce our messages to mere contri-butions in the first place.

From this perspective, it is no wonder that online shaming has become so prominent: it establishes or enters a domain of social intervention over which we might actually exert some influence relative to the more pervasive sense that our communication remains inef-fective and powerless. This is one reason that social media are so often connected in popular discourse with political and social activism. By appearing to offer a method of communicative immediacy to everyday citizens, social media proffer the semblance of an escape from our powerlessness. Now, ordinary citizens—and not just "the media" at large—can prosecute a moral panic as a way of attempting to bring about their vision of a better future, or at least as a way to "do something" that might mitigate, however momentarily, the vague sense of powerlessness that characterizes life in late liberalism. To gain momentum, in other words, moral panics simply no longer need the same layers of mediation that Hall found so imperative. Instead of moral entrepreneurs commu-nicating information to the police and public officials, from whom it is then communi-cated to "the media" for wide dissemination, today moral entrepreneurs can widely disseminate the panic themselves, cutting out the police/state and mass media from the panic production process.

Mobile technologies make it easier for ordinary people to communicate widely, in real-time, and from amid the actual social contexts where behaviors perceived as morally unde-sirable are observed to occur. Certainly, these are all among the "new" affordances of so-called new media. But that still does not explain why public shaming—and not, say, pub-licly complimenting people for righteous action—has become so common. New media, that is, do not just make *shaming* easier. They make a whole range of communicative prac-tices possible in new ways. Amid this state of generalized political and moral crisis, what's new about new media is not just the raft of communicative affordances they provide us—immediacy, mobility, wide dissemination, etc.—but the ways they affectively orient us to believe, to hope, that we are *not* powerless, that now we *can* do something about the crises with which we find ourselves confronted. Shaming thus becomes a way of punishing moral offenders and publicly affiliating oneself with the righteous (Cavender, Gray, & Miller, 2010, p. 255; Skoric, Chua, Liew, Wong, & JueYeo, 2010), while at the same time suspend-ing one's sense of powerlessness with the distraction of intense affective involvement in a social cause.

According to Nietzsche (1887/1989), this intense affective response to powerlessness took one of its most remarkable forms in the Christian ascetic ideal. Asceticism, for Nietzsche, is a practice of abstinence (p. 163) that helps subjects seize at least some self-control as a countermeasure against their prevailing sense of otherwise having ineffectual agency. Asceticism, in other words, is a willed moral response of those suffering from a profound sense of powerlessness. It leads people to pursue temporary distractions from "a desire to *deaden pain by means of affects*" (p. 127). But these affects must be intense —"as savage an affect as possible," he says (p. 127)—if they are to deaden and distract

us from the still more unbearable suffering of our ultimate powerlessness. The name he gives to these savage affects is *orgies of feeling*.

For Nietzsche, the purpose of an orgy of feeling is near paroxysmal: "to wrench the human soul from its moorings, to immerse it in terrors, ice, flames, and raptures to such an extent that it is liberated from all petty displeasure, gloom, and depression as by a flash of lightning" (p. 139). Nietzsche is clear, though, that such a purpose has only a palliative effect. Like taking a narcotic, an orgy of feeling may feel good for a while, but it ends up making things worse. As he puts it, "Every such orgy of feeling has to be *paid* for afterward, that goes without saying—it makes the sick sicker" (p. 140). Sickness, of course, is just a metaphor, but it offers a clue to an essential component of Nietzsche's thinking on this matter: namely, that those who gravitate toward orgies of feeling do so out of a profound sense of personal responsibility and personal *guilt*. The ascetic priest, for instance, tells us we should not blame others for any perceived crisis; we should blame ourselves.

According to Anker (2014), however, the melodramatic nature of contemporary orgies of feeling reverses the locus of responsibility found in Nietzsche's model. "Within melodrama," she writes,

> the self is innocent. The evil cause of suffering is embodied in a villain outside the self, which is why melodrama's orgies of feeling are less predictable; they only come about through a crisis event that is unexpected and uncontrollable, rather than a self-inflicted wound. (p. 165)

As a result, Anker's (2014) melodramatic orgies of feeling are much more endurable than Nietzsche's. Their intensity is not as paroxysmal. Those who indulge them "disavow their own accountability for their suffering and place blame on others, on villains outside the virtuous and victimized subject they construct" (p. 165). By reversing Nietzsche's concept, so that the powerless now ascribe guilt to others rather than to themselves, Anker allows us to better understand why shaming has become such an important public expression of current orgies of feeling.

Making the sick sicker

The citizen shaming we see today is, in some degree, an event-based response to the crisis of our uniquely contemporary sense of powerlessness. Shaming expresses and fuels an orgy of feeling insofar as the sense of urgency to publicly expose a perceived moral failure is, on one hand, affectively intense enough to distract us from the everyday defeat of our ongoing lack of power and, on the other, a way of exercising what seems actually to be a powerful agency against an exemplar of the moral crisis around us (see Anker, 2014, p. 15). By publicly shaming others, that is, we are both distracted from a larger crisis we seem to have little agency to affect *and* we perform a semblance of that agency on a smaller digital scale. It is significant, however, that shaming's twofold minimization of powerlessness is only possible because of more widespread changes in the technological conditions affecting political agency today. Those conditions, as Dean's notion of communicative capitalism underscores, are marked by a widespread tendency to invest nearly utopian hope in technology's ability to solve all of our society's ills, exemplified not least in a belief that our public missives, tweets, posts, our networked communication generally, gives us a role in mitigating the moral faults of our world. Unfortunately, as

Nietzsche foretold and Dean diagnosed more recently, this belief comes at the price of making worse those very conditions it is trying to forestall.

If "Donglegate" had ended only with the unwitting jokester being fired, with Richards proclaiming the triumph of her voice as an effective agent of public intervention, then the cost of communicative capitalism's orgies of feeling would not have been so great. After all, Adria Richards ultimately got what she wanted: she "made herself heard." But for that she also had to pay a price. Although Richards later insisted that she had not intended for the dongle joker to lose his job, her Twitter shaming sparked a series of unintended consequences that quickly resulted in her own life being threatened. When word got out that the offending jokester had been fired from his job, angry keyboard activists lashed out at Richards. One Twitter user spewed, "@adriarichards you need to kill youself [sic]," while another posted a photograph of a bound, bleeding woman with the underlying caption, "@adriarichards when I'm done." A home address and phone number, presumably belonging to Richards, accompanied the photo (see Holt, 2013).

Anonymous, the hacker collective, soon joined the "orgy." After hunting down the client and donor lists of SendGrid, Richards's employer, they threatened to disrupt its business by publishing its employees' and clients' credit card information, medical records, and other sensitive data. As Anonymous knocked SendGrid's email services offline with distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, a number of developers and programmers began to circulate boycott threats to Richards's employer. The international reach of the new media platforms disseminating this panic even led a man from Hungary to begin a Change.org petition calling for Richards's dismissal, which soon procured over 1,500 signatures.

In response to these escalating threats, on March 21—four days after Richards's original message—SendGrid publicly posted to Twitter and Facebook that Adria Richards had been fired. Although within hours more than a thousand people "liked" the dismissal announcement on Facebook, some members of the hacker community were still not satisfied: one even suggested they scour Richards's online activities to find evidence of speech offenses: "Want to deal another blow? Since she claims to be a youtube partner, email youtube about her breaking community guidelines by linking her account with a racist/sexist twitter" (Holt, 2013). Despite this overwhelmingly negative response, however, a few hackers came to Richards's defense, turning the tables on her most vicious attackers by hunting them down online and publicizing their personal information (including the LinkedIn profile, email address, and phone number of the poster who tweeted the photo of the bound, bleeding woman). As Hill (2013), a writer for *Forbes*, insightfully reflected on the lessons of Donglegate, "One tweet. Thousands of comments. Four days later, two people have been fired. Welcome to the digital age." Welcome, indeed.

A sense of something

Donglegate provides a stark illustration of the constitutive role of new media technologies in forming, fueling, and prosecuting the moral panics of today. Not only did digital technologies help initiate the panic in the form of Richards's tweets, they exacerbated it as others began weighing in through digital resources of their own. The integral role of digital technologies in communicative capitalism, which transforms our communication power into mere "contributions," has fostered a general sense of disenfranchisement

that is often expressed in melodramatic outbursts of shaming, blaming, and other digital forms of moral outrage. As the battles between Anonymous, Richards's flamers, and Richards's allies illustrate, these melodramatic episodes can quickly fall victim to a logic of escalation whereby attacks breed further attacks, which breed further attacks still. Such a situation too easily generates a dystopian version of what Punathambekar (2010) calls "mobile publics"—that is, those transient networks of momentarily co-articulated actors that rely on new technologies for their very formation, sustenance, and public expression. It is no surprise, therefore, that many of these mobile publics are constituted through collective, orgiastic expressions of moral rage. In the US, where 92% of adults now own a cell phone (almost all of which are equipped with cameras and audio recording capability),[1] moral entrepreneurs can all too mindlessly launch moral panics with evidence gleaned from the deeds and conversations of others.

The implications of this state of affairs are manifold, from the disruption of traditional relations of publicity and privacy (Andrejevic, 2007), to the escalation of social unrest (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012), to all the ways citizens now act as surrogate sensing mechanisms of the police (Ritchie, 2015), as broadcast mechanisms of the state (Reeves, in press), and as laborers producing data on which corporations capitalize (Scholz, 2012). Though we have not endeavored to explore all of these and the many other implications that may result from the ways that new media capacitate new panics, we have tried to use this general insight as a way to update and expand the invaluable contribution that Hall and his collaborators made to moral crisis research nearly 40 years ago. We would like to imagine that Hall would approve. Not only did he concede in 2012, as we mentioned in our introduction, that the radical changes in technology since the 1970s called for a revision of *Policing the crisis*'s media analysis, it was one "Hallmark" of Hall's (1980) long career to insist upon always adapting research to change, on pursuing "the rigorous application … of historical specificity" to those problems and phenomena we take as our objects of study (p. 336). This is the spirit in which we've taken up our inquiry.

But we want to conclude by clarifying why the historical specificity of communicative capitalism in an American context of nearly ubiquitous new media technologies has led us to a very different position than the variations on ideology critique that Hall showed to be so generative in a different time (also see Packer, 2013). We've suggested that the anxiety of our powerlessness arises from communicative capitalism because the inclusion and participation that new media enable is *use*-less—except, that is, insofar as it produces exchange-value for the corporations to do with as they choose, which of course just makes the system of communicative capitalism more powerful relative to those subjected to its influence (see Andrejevic & Burdon, 2015). It's no wonder that these conditions cultivate a sense of ongoing crisis. How can we envision a different future if our very means of trying to actuate one only serve to hold it in abeyance? One answer is the turn to more and more desperate, passionate, but ultimately dangerous attempts to strike out with moral rage.

In a 2010 interview, Hall reminded us that "crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given" (p. 57). If our inquiry has borne fruit, we could also put it differently: it is the unknown resolution of our precarious future that now makes crisis less a "moment" than a new ordinary. It is precisely the perniciousness of communicative capitalism that the digital technologies through which it operates have an astonishing capacity to make it seem like we are in a moment that burgeons with

potential change. After all, more people really can broadly communicate and "participate" than ever before. Yet our efforts to do so more often than not make but the scantest of ripples on the sea of information around us. In turn, the longing to "make oneself heard" and to "do something" becomes ever more intensified. "What does it mean," Berlant (2011) has asked, "to want a sense of something rather than something?" (p. 176). It means, as new media give rise to new panics, that our affective investments in moral regulation—and often in digital public life more generally—are not always in our best interest.

Note

1. As of October 2015, 68% of U.S. adults owns a smartphone (Anderson, 2015).

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