



Cyberbullies

Description

Why had Australia banned mobile phones in schools? The ban was to reduce classroom distractions, improve academic concentration, and curb *cyberbullying*. That summary is from a Google search on my opening question, which demonstrates a further challenge to learning posed by instant in-hand access to AI-enabled Internet search.

Such search-based shortcuts to information and insights are bound to impact the formation of inquiring minds ??? in people of all ages. (Google sourced the information about school bans from several [Guardian articles](#) from 2025-26.)

Iâ??m reviewing my post of March 2014 [Unlocking natureâ??s secrets](#) (#188) in which I rehearsed various back-to-nature arguments against hyper-online connectivity. The prospect of *cyberbullying* hadnâ??t yet entered the frame, or at least my framing, of emerging online practices.

How have mobile phones been used in bullying? Referencing the UK [National Bullying Helpline](#), Google offers a summary:

Mobile phones are used in bullying to enable 24/7 harassment through social media, text messages, and instant messaging, causing victims to feel safe nowhere. Common tactics include spreading rumors, posting humiliating photos, creating fake profiles, sending threats, and engaging in â??doxingâ?• (releasing private info). These digital methods often serve as an extension of, or amplify, face-to-face bullying.

A Critical Theory take on issues of bullying is to start by recognising that all existence is imbued with struggle and domination. Those of us with a liberal and progressive disposition should expose and resist the oppressors on behalf of ourselves, and the oppressed. Schoolyard bullying is a symptom of such struggles. Emboldened by anonymity and profligate connectivity, bullies are as much enabled and even oppressed by â??the systemâ?• as their putative victims.

Play and resistance

Another cultural framing of the problem of cyberbullying is through the metaphor of *play*, as articulated in Roger Caillois's influential book *Man, Play and Games*. I outlined his characterisation of the four aspects of play in my later post from 2018 [Bad players](#).

We human beings compete, take chances, mimic and engage in thrills. We share these play instincts with other higher organisms. Caillois graces these instincts as ideal game types: competition (*agôn*), chance (*alea*), simulation (mimicry) and vertigo (*ilinx*). We humans also train and hone these instincts as **pastimes** – play in which consequences are instructive, sociable, local, and accompanied frequently by feelings of pleasure, and even laughter.

From child's play we graduate to larger, more consequential practices and organisation. As I show in that 2018 post, for Caillois, games discipline instincts and institutionalize them. So, we have formalised sports and fair business competition. As developments on chance, we have financial risk taking, speculation and indemnity. Mimicry manifests formally in costumes, drama, and military parades. Vertigo informs those with an appetite for risk involving speed and heights, such as rescue, tree topping, constructing tall buildings and the military.

Thinking of schools, the obvious institutionalisation of the instinct for contest are organised sports, quizzes, academic gradings, and competitive exams.

Play and corruption

On the other hand, according to Caillois, games and their institutionalised counterparts can be corrupted. He shows that our tendency towards competition can lead to violence, power mongering and trickery. I don't think he references bullying, but the description fits.

Outside of the arena, after the gong strikes, begins the true perversion of *agôn*, the most pervasive of all the categories. It appears in every conflict untempered by the rigor or spirit of play. Now competition is nothing but a law of nature. In society it resumes its original brutality, as soon as it finds a loophole in the system of moral, social, and legal constraints, which have limits and conventions comparable to those of play. That is why mad, obsessive ambition, applied to any domain in which the rules of the game and free play are not respected, must be denounced as a clear deviation which in this case restores the original situation.

He advocates for a restoration of the basic play instinct as antidote to this corruption. By *avidity* in the next passage he means something like enthusiasm and unrestrained ambition.

There is no better example of the civilizing role of play than the inhibitions it usually places upon natural avidity. A good player must be able to contemplate with objectivity, detachment, and at least an appearance of calm, the unlucky results of even the most sustained effort or the loss of large sums. The referee's decision is accepted in principle even if unjust. The corruption of *agôn* begins at the point where *no* referee or decision is recognized.

I feel he could be describing Trump's America. I recently heard someone on a podcast say that political bullies (fascists) hate satire. It's a form of mimicry and hence play that has the potential to unsettle power relations.

The ultimate humiliation of the bully is a common resolution in schoolyard fiction and television-dramas, though not every bully, cyber or otherwise, has the wit to recognise ridicule, or the oppressed the opportunity to deliver it.

Ridicule: late 17th century: from French, or from Latin *ridiculum*, neuter (used as a noun) of *ridiculus* 'laughable', from *ridere* 'to laugh'.

Reference

- Caillois, Roger. 1961. *Man, Play, and Games*. New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Category

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2. Play
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