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"Race", Space and Social Action: The UK Riots 2011

"Raza", espacio y acción social: Las revueltas de 2011 en Reino Unido

Iyabo Yaz Osho
Middlesex University,
Department of Engineering and Information Sciences
y.osho@mdx.ac.uk

Abstract

The issues of "race", place and its connections to traditional and social media have never been so significant. The riots that occurred in the UK in 2011 signalled a watershed moment in locating virtual networks of communication to heterogeneous groups which resulted in *autonomous* social action. The purpose of this paper is to make intelligible the UK riots and the complexities involved in binding together disparate groups of people together during a key period of social unrest. It seeks to uncover these connections further to elucidate the ways in which old and new technologies help to create virtual and offline enclaves which transcend the confines of "race", class and gender. The methods that will be used to uncover the multifaceted responses to the riots will be multidisciplinary; it will involve an analysis of the UK press at the height of the riots, secondary analysis of public sentiment and social media

archives. These methods will result in a thematic analysis which posits the riots firmly within the context of web 2.0's hegemonic forces. Underlying these methods will be an interwoven theoretical framework which supports the arguments presented.

Keywords

"Race", "Racialization", Social Media, Recognition and Offline/Online.

Resumen

Las cuestiones de la "raza", el lugar y sus conexiones con los medios de comunicación tradicionales y medios sociales nunca han sido tan significativas. Los disturbios que se produjeron en el Reino Unido en el 2011 marcaron un momento decisivo en la localización de las redes virtuales de comunicación y los grupos heterogéneos que dieron lugar a la acción social autónoma. El propósito de este trabajo es entender los disturbios en el Reino Unido y las complejidades implicadas a la hora de vincular a grupos diversos de personas durante un período clave de malestar social. Se trata de descubrir estas conexiones para dilucidar las formas en que viejas y nuevas tecnologías colaboran en la creación de enclaves virtuales y *offline* que trascienden los límites de la "raza", la clase y el género. Los métodos que utilizados para descubrir las formas multifacéticas de las respuestas a los disturbios serán multidisciplinarios, incluyen análisis de la prensa del Reino Unido en el momento de los disturbios , un análisis secundario de la opinión pública y los archivos de los medios de comunicación social. Estos métodos se traducirá en un análisis temático que postula con firmeza que los disturbios se ubican en el contexto de las fuerzas hegemónicas del web 2.0. Subyacente a estos métodos hay un marco teórico entretejido que apoya los argumentos presentados .

Palabras Clave

"Raza", "Racialización", *Social Media*, reconocimiento, online, offline.

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"The driver behaviourial change has been technology of this"
(Mason, 2012: 133)

The last decade and a half has seen information -"rich nations" increasing reliance on information and communication which now runs on ever- changing platforms and formats. Patterns of communication have been strengthened amongst activist and protesting groups, as information and digital societies have diversified the ways in which people communicate with each other and seek forms of power and action. Demands for power and recognition have taken on new levels of visibility through the use information and technology. Social struggles and political opposition now effortlessly move between offline and online channels to spread mobilizing discourse to anyone who has access to information and social media. The Internet in particular, has not only become a fabric of our lives (Castells, 2001), but has been a key fuel in driving contemporary social action and expressing new forms of agency.

> The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere.
>
> (Debord, 1999: 23)

The 2011 riots in the UK was one instance where the grip of the spectacle was challenged through collective social action. Reacting against various forms of inequality, political dissatisfaction, alienation and deprivation, groups of people came together to form resistant collectivities to challenge the dominant order in the UK. Motivations and reasons behind the UK riots have been widely discussed (Lammy, 2012, Winlow & Hall, 2012, Moxon 2011,

Murji & Neal, 2011, Bridges, 2012), but it is the greedy opportunism and criminalistic "something for nothing" and consumerism that is important at this juncture. Through marketing, promotion, reproduction, the circulation and selling of commodities, the specticle, perpetually creates a society full of manufactured wants and needs. The specaticle does not however, create access to capital for all to acquire those needs and wants. In this respect, through the self-realization of the spectacle's exclusive capitalist self-interest, the rioters some of who were disqualified consumers, acted on instant gratification and the seduction that the spectacle encourages.

> What the riot means is that consumer ideology is so ubiquitous, so all-encompassing…. the only danger being that the tense and unstable dynamic libidinal force at its core can occasionally spill over into brief yet intense bouts of aimless social disorder.
>
> (Winlow & Hall, 2011:485)

The rioters, especially those who acted out against political and social exclusion, challenged the foundations of the spectacle by moving away from passivity and alienation towards mobilizing themselves against their realized injustices. The processes of mediation and motivation were not uniformly experienced amongst all participants of the riots. As in the case in lived experience, people exercise subjectivity in interpretation, and thus are impacted upon through the lens of their individual histories, ideologies and understandings (Hall, 1996). This situated knowledge and experience can therefore impact the way in which media messages are read and how the spectacle impacts them. The modes of organization for these protesting groups largely rested on the use of various forms of technology and social media which in themselves challenged the spectacle's stranglehold. The use of digital technologies in the UK riots demonstrated a re-appropriation of media, moving it away from the dominant media spectacle towards an alternative sphere in where people could engage, mobilize and organize (Castells, 2012, Mason 2012).

This kind of use of technology in collective action is not a new phenomenon (Van de Donk et al. 2004), but what is distinctive about the recent social unrests seen in the UK, Spain and Egypt, is the multimodal nature of networking within the movements themselves. As Manuel Castells argues, "it [social movements] includes social networks online and offline, as

well as pre-existing social networks formed during the actions of the movement" (Castells, 2012:221).

The series of networks built and sustained during the UK riots consisted of offline and online networks within the protesting movement, networks with the Internet "blogosphere" and networks with the mainstream media and society in general (Castells, 2012). These digital networks ran concurrently with mainstream media networks and allowed those who actively engaged in the events of the riots forms of explicit and implicit participation.

Using Lynne Hamill's three features of digital technology (Hamill, 2005), it is evident that the protesting and activist groups in the UK riots fully engaged with digital technologies in the following ways: first, these groups relied heavily on the use of information to exchange communication and information. This use of information signalled the use of smartphone devices which enabled multimedia commentaries on the riots in real-time. Second, information was stored through digital devices ready to upload onto social media networks adding a backdrop to the mainstream coverage of the riots. Third, because of the accessibility of information, footage from the riots was easy to transmit and reproduce (for instance, via YouTube and Twitter), thus spreading the word of the riots far and wide at an astonishing speed.

In understanding the UK riots, it is imperative not only to examine the way in which technology was used, but also to interrogate how the media spectacle portrayed the rioters. It is in this respect, that the issues of "race" and the underclass cannot be ignored. Commentators during the riots including Conservative ministers Kenneth Clarke and Iain Duncan Smith, chose to root the causes of the unrest on race, gang culture and the "feral" underclass. The processes of creating racial dynamics during the riots occurred at four key moments during the unrest. First, the prominent black broadcaster cited racial profiling as being one of the key causes of the riots calling it an "insurrection of a generation of poor, primarily, black people from the Caribbean and from Africa." (Howe, 2011). Howe was a constant feature in the media during the riots and consistently related the unrest back to the struggles and inequalities faced by black people. Second, gangs were blamed for the majority of the riots and looting in London even though figures showed that only 13% of those arrested in the riots were identified as gang members (Home Office, 2011). The use of the term "gangs" in talking about the rioters may appear neutral, but it is a term which is usually projected through the lens of race and ethnicity (Runnymede Trust, 2011).

Third, the riots were sparked by the death of Mark Duggan – a black man shot at the hands of a notoriously White UK police force which was deemed "insitutionally racist" (Parekh, 2000). This racial (white / black) and power / powerless dichotomy created a racialized dynamic which flavoured the subsequent reporting of the riots. Fourth, the historian David Starkey's now infamous comments that "whites have become black" in reference to the rioters, decidedly positioned the riots (and subsequent criminality), within a racialized frame.

Nonetheless, the causes of the UK riots were more complex than one or two causal factors. Media and social commentators who defined the riots solely through the discourse of "race" and racism conflated the complexities involved into a neat media-ready sound bite. The protests and subsequent criminality were not committed by one uniform racial group who rioted and acted out for exactly the same reasons. The riots were not simply a black and white issue:

> One of the other differences between now and 30 years ago…. is that the riots are no longer just a black-and-white story. It's a story that's complicated by all kinds of changes in our cities and our communities. It's a story that's been complicated by the development of political Islam in our communities.
>
> (Gilroy, 2011)

Protest and riots such as those seen in the UK and Brazil stem from a crisis in basic living conditions which make everyday existence unbearable. In the UK contributing factors have been the Government cuts,[1] rising unemployment, increased welfare dependence and growing social exclusion. These kinds of movements can also be spurred on by a growing distrust in political leaders and institutions (Younge, 2011).

The blacks and the underclass (or chavs) were largely labelled as the driving forces behind the riots and looting. The underclass, a much maligned and demonized "group", are viewed with fear and loathing in UK society (Jones, 2012). Class as with race remains a central feature in structuring contemporary cultural practice in the UK (Bennett, 2009). The stereo-

[1] Government cuts refers to the government's defunding of civil-society institutions in order to balance the nation's books (Sennett & Sassen, 2001).

typical portrayal of the underclass in the majority of the media, is one which is wholly negative, anti-social, criminal and immoral in behaviour. Caricatures of Chavs include working-class people who wear sport-related clothing, are aggressive in manner, criminal, obsessed with consumerism, lacking in taste and judgement (Bourdieu, 1986), poorly educated and wholly welfare dependent (Jones, 2012). Chavs are a symptom of "broken Britain" and a legacy of the iron-rule of the late Margaret Thatcher. The spate of "reality" TV programmes (e.g. Skint, Jeremy Kyle) actively encouraging and perpetuating negative stereotypes of the underclass together with the lack of diversity in portrayal serves to homogenize differences as stereotypes undoubtedly aim to do.

Much in the same way as with ethnic minorities in the UK, the working class have become another marginalized ethnic minority whose "concerns were understood solely through the prism of race" (Jones, 2012: 8). This intersection between race and class is no surprise as both facets of identity and culture are inextricably linked. For instance, ethnic minorities in the UK are twice as likely to be poor compared with white Britons. Ethnic minorities who achieve higher educational qualifications also they fail to get the same rewards as their white British counterparts thus impacting income levels and possible status (JRK, 2007). Designations of the white underclass, pejoratively known as Chavs are located at the bottom of UK society – a socially constructed racial degeneration of the white race.

> One of the big difficulties we have we disentangling race from class, given that….Blacks, in particular, and ethnic minorities in general, are found disproportionately in the lower economic strata.
>
> (Jones, 1972: 441)

In actual fact the rioters in the UK were not just the alienated underclass or racially profiled blacks, the riots contained diverse people of all races, social clases and genders protesting, rioting and looting:

> In some ways, the racial and economic diversity of the rioters has made it harder for Britons to come to grips with why the riots erupted and why they were so fierce, sudden and widespread.
>
> (Westervelt, 2011)

Nonetheless, one way in which uniformity was seen during the riots, was the collective mobilization of the rioters and protesters to be in same place -occupying the same space- at the very same time. This tightness in organization took some effort and co-ordination. Older and newer forms of media were crucial in helping to carry the storms of the riots beyond the peaceful protests in Tottenham on 6th August 2011.

This essay, posits that "race" was not a key motivator of the 2011 riots, but was one of many factors which caused the social unrest. The essay explores how the issue of "race" remained firmly rooted in the media coverage of the riots and examines how the riots gathered speed to connect multi-ethnic groups of people to carry out autonomous social action.

The Reasons for the Riots

Research by the Guardian and the LSE into the riots uncovered that the four main causes of the riots were poverty (86%), policing (85%), government policy (80%) and unemployment (79%) (Guardian, 2012). These four issues were not surprising, but if the riots were mainly about "race" as some commentators argued, where did racism or racial tension come in this research? According to the same study, racial tension was 13th on the list of causes of the riots.

"Whites Becoming like Blacks": The Racialization of the Rioters

At the time of the riots, the historian, David Starkey blamed a "profound cultural change" and the influence of black culture in "whites becoming like blacks" (Guardian, 2011) as being part of the cause for the riots.

But could the basis of the riots really be that black and white?

Anyone observer at the time of the riots would be forgiven for subscribing to this linear way of thinking given the content shown in the UK media. Black youths largely in hoodies dominated the TV screens and newspaper front pages from the outset. Prominent black spokespeople such as Howe and MPs Diane Abbott and David Lammy were consulted and ex-gang members were interviewed creating a decidedly racialized backdrop. The concentrated media focus on black individuals and black culture arguably created a sense that the riots were a "black problem".

> Although the rioters were from various backgrounds the media focused on black culture specifically and the media's choice of spokespeople was significant.
>
> (Runnymede Trust, 2011: 15).

Race and the subsequent racialization of the rioters became a focus for the media. A popular analogy circulating on social media at the time was likening the rioters to Apes in the film, "The Rise of the Planet of the Apes". The reference to "The Rise of the Planet of the Apes", acted as a fictional counter-position to the real-life struggles and protests in the UK amongst diverse groups. Nonetheless, the metaphorical comparison which appears harmless at first glance, contains racist discourses, imagery and themes which are problematic. The comparison of the rioters to Apes gave a figurative nod to the racist historic association of Apes to *particular* groups of people – black people.

> The real racial subtext is less overt and thus more pernicious. It is about the externalisation of those seen as responsible for the riots, their portrayal as bestial and thus as expendable, extinguishable – necessarily and justifiably so.
>
> (Lentin, 2011)

The online although freeing in regards corporeal existence through its disembodiment capabilities (Donath, 1999, Nakamura, 2002), is increasingly becoming a site where embodied race and racism is articulated openly and freely:

> Racism is disavowed in the public sphere but at the same time is proliferating within digital spheres. You Tube and Twitter provide places where the open voice of racism is being articulated and captured.
>
> (Back, 2012)

The media portrayed the rioters as feral youth who were labelled as more than criminal, but animalistic. In the same way, graffiti scribbled on the walls of Debenhams, Clapham Junction at the height of the riots echoes this animalistic theme:

> The animal, the beast in some of us will always be stronger. Darwin was right & will always be right.

The "Folk Devil" (Cohen, 1972) in this storm was undoubtedly youths, in particular black youths, but this can be narrowed down even further to - black male youths. The spectacle of the other left many black males feeling victimized and stereotyped. Many black males questioned at the time, believed that the media had racialized the riots and by representation, refocused sharp attention on the politics of criminality and its stereotypical connection to black males.

Substantiating the "racialized" dimension of the riots, British teacher and writer, Katharine Birbalsingh (Telegraph, 2011a) asked the public not to ignore the "fact" that the riots were about race. Birbalsingh felt vindicated in her racialized claims because her instincts were correct that "black youths would once again set London alight" (as if black youths were and are pre-destined to do so).

Elsewhere in the media, the BNP led with an article titled "London Burning after Three Days of Race Riots" (BNP, 2011) – many other media offerings at the time, would constantly

draw parallels between previous "race" riots to qualify the unequal focus on the racial dimensions of the riots.

Duggan, the man now synonymous with the UK riots was instantly raced – he was not the default "race" of white in mainstream UK consciousness. As a result, the reporting of subsequent events had a distinctly racialized hue.

Adding more weight to this argument was Starkey who argued on BBC2's Newsnight (2011) that:

> A particular sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic gangster culture has become fashion and the black and white, boy and girl, operate in this language together.

And

> The whites have become black. This language which is wholly false, which is this Jamaican patois that's intruded in England, and this is why so many of us have this sense of literally a foreign country.

Starkey then attempted to dilute his comments with interesting concluding remarks:

> "It's not skin colour it's cultural."

Starkey's comments at the time, together with the media spectacle, rooted the riots within a racialized frame. If Starkey had actually believed that the riots had nothing to do with skin colour, why mention that white skinned people had become like black people?

The choice of the word "intrude" was also interesting. It implied that the presence of Jamaicans and the Patois dialect had violated the purity of Englishness – whatever "Englishness" might be. Starkey would have been far less controversial commenting on the socio-economic characteristics of the rioters or on the particularity of the neighbourhoods where the disturbances occurred.

Starkey's reductionist and over-simplified remarks implied that that some black groups were and are inherently prone to criminal and violent behaviour. His comments also suggested

that white and black people are poles apart culturally. In this respect, Jamaicans' and their culture had negatively affected or contaminated England and "whiteness" – thus, marking difference.

> Symbolic boundaries are central to all culture. Marking "difference" leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, abnormal. However, paradoxically, it also makes "difference" powerful, strangely attractive precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order.
>
> (Hall, 1997: 237)

Following public complaints, Starkey back-tracked on his comments made on Newsnight by making a distinction between different types of blacks and whites (Telegraph, 2011b): "At the top, successful blacks, like (MPs) David Lammy and Diane Abbott have merged effortlessly into what continues to be a largely white elite..."

This racial distinction was telling, Lammy and Abbott could simply be politicians at the top of their career – they *had* to be "raced" first and foremost. Politicians such as Tessa Jowell, David Cameron and Francis Maude are never viewed in "racialized" terms. More often than not, whiteness is not "raced" unless it is seen in the context of people who are viewed as distinctly different to the norm, as Starkey's subsequent comments demonstrate (Telegraph, 2011b): "At the bottom of the heap, the story of integration is the opposite: it is the white lumpen proletariat, cruelly known as the 'chavs', who have integrated into the pervasive black 'gangsta' culture."

Chavs or the white lumpen proletariat as Starkey also calls them is equal in status to black "gangsta" culture. The important issues to raise are - what exactly is black "gangsta" culture? And what constitutes black "gangsta-dom"? For instance, is it a black person with gold teeth? Black people who wear hoodies? A black person in a gang? Black people who listen to rap music? Black people who are involved in criminal behaviour? The concept is subjective and its associations are socially constructed.

Figures from the Ministry of Justice (2012) clearly showed that those accused of rioting were predominately male (89%). The rioters were mainly young and lacking in education with over half of those appearing in court aged 20 or under (27% were aged 10 to 17). Of those

aged 10 to 17, 42% appearing in court were on free school meals and 64% of 10-17 year-olds lived in one of the 20% most deprived areas. Two-thirds of the young people who appeared in court in connection with the riots were classed as having some form of special educational need, compared with 21% for the national average. More than a third of young people who were involved in the riots had been excluded from school during 2009-10.

According to Ministry of Justice (2012) statistics in London, 33% of those appearing in the courts on riot-related charges were white and 46% were black. The figures varied by place but also reflected the different ethnic breakdowns of the cities where the riots happened. For instance, in London, 33% of defendants were white, in Liverpool, the figure was 79%.

The statistics indicated that the riots were not simply about "race" or racism. They also amounted to be more than a simple response to the shooting of Mark Duggan. In areas such as Salford where the population under 40 is 88% white and 2% black or mixed, we ought, if the riots were solely about "race", to have seen very little or no white presence. In actual fact, 94% of the defendants that appeared in courts on riot-related charges were white. Similarly, in Liverpool, 73% of the defendants were white and 13% were from the black ethnic group. It is clear then that the riots were a multi-ethnic affair, mainly carried out by the young.

Social Media and the Riots

Communicative exchange amongst young people largely consists of digital technology, in the form of mobile phones and the Internet. In the UK riots, communicating through different platforms was crucial in keeping people up-to-date with what was happening in the riots. In this respect, one of the pivotal ways in which communication was maintained and mobilization was built was through the use of mobile and Internet-based technologies.

As was seen in the case of the Arab Spring and in Greece, social media networking has in some part, played a role in various social movements. Mobile and Internet technologies helped to spread the word and encouraged collective mobilization in much the same as traditional rallies, petitions and television have done in the past. The main difference now is communication and exchange can be conducted in real time. This temporal aspect heightened the immediacy of the riots and added an increased feeling of interactivity and exchange between the people talking about the riots on social media via their mobile phones and the Internet.

The use of social media during the UK riots created an interconnectivity which has seldom, if ever, been seen in the UK. The UK, a largely information-rich country, has seen a growing consumption in social media which mirrors the way many of us live our lives now. We are increasingly mobile and connected – with one eye on what we *have* to do and another eye on our smartphones and tablets. We can be here, there and everywhere at the very same time with the use of these devices. Space, place and time have no boundaries - as was seen in the case of the riots.

The majority of rioters and looters were young in age with over half of those who appeared in court aged 20 and under. The communication method of choice for this age group according to Ofcom's "The Communication Market" 2012 report is the smartphone. The same report also suggests that the adolescents' smartphone of choice is the BlackBerry.

It was therefore unsurprising that the BlackBerry smartphone and its messaging service (BBM) played a key role in spreading the word of the riots. BBM technology offers a complete and safe up-to-the minute commentary service to networks of BlackBerry contacts in real time. Unlike Twitter and Facebook, BlackBerry Messenger is a covert social network – the messages sent are encrypted during transmission. Both Twitter and Facebook are traceable by authorities, which was one of the reasons why arrests during the riots were quickly made on intelligence from these platforms on the grounds of social media misuse.

Although, Twitter and Facebook played subsidiary roles in the UK riots, all three social media platforms combined offered rioters with a way to instantly communicate and interact with each other within the faceless flows of social media. They also offered a way for people to post pictures of real-time action and upload videos of the activities as and when they occurred. Social media messaging allowed details of the riots to spread online and offline. The capabilities of social media messaging acted as an alternative media outlet for rioters which ran parallel to the mainstream media. Mainstream media outlets, such as the BBC and ITV found themselves at least, two steps behind the rioters and protestors.

The range of social media platforms used offered a defensive social media enclave where the convergence of disparate groups of people took place. This enclave then mobilized itself, bringing about social action largely on the groups' *own terms*. Some of the reasons for this mobilization have already been stated, such as unemployment levels and policing, but social media was the key factor in bringing these groups of people together. Social media helped to

fuel the fires of anger and frustration beyond the private sphere into direct action presented in the public domain.

The anger and frustration felt by some during the riots added to the overwhelming atmosphere of discontent that was and is still experienced in certain areas in the UK. During the riots, a strange sense of suspense lingered in the air in the UK. This was certainly felt in the neighbourhoods of Battersea and Clapham Junction. For instance, Clapham Junction, usually a well-kept and clean area, turned into a littered wasteland – with empty laptop and Flatscreen TV boxes discarded on the streets, shelves in supermarkets bare, shop fronts boarded up, smashed bus shelters, youths circling people on bikes, men walking around vacantly with bare feet (presumably because their trainers were stolen) and burning buildings. There was very little police presence at the time which heightened the total sense of lawlessness experienced by people in Clapham Junction and other parts of the UK.

The youths in particular, certainly the ones personally witnessed, had an air about them - an attitude of nothing ventured, nothing gained. The youths of various races, looked as though had nothing to lose, no stake in society. There was a genuine mismatch between the accepted norms and values of society and the rioters' own newly displayed values and actions. These groups did not appear to be disguising their identities or wearing gloves or even looking out for a police presence. It was almost as if the autonomy and freedom granted by online planning (particularly, through BBM), added to their overall confidence. The online planning/exchange and offline mobilization/action, served for that short period of time to give these youths a stake in society (albeit illicit and misguided). For those few days, arguably these groups had the power and as such, felt a sense of recognition. Technology, undoubtedly, was central to creating feeling.

A Politics of Recognition

Social media messaging with a particular emphasis on BBM, was used as a vehicle of recognition[2] and created forms of empowerment through its use as an informed citizen taking ownership of one's situation:

> Empowerment can imply actively subverting existing levels of expertise, taking ownership of particular problems, gaining access to the creation of knowledge.
>
> (Galusky, 2003: 197)

The processes of communication during the riots shifted seamlessly between the flows of Internet, mobile phone based planning and offline action. The technology available to the rioters was used in a way to create recognition to get their voices heard, to record events as they happened and to create an account of reactions to their own lived experiences in real time. The use of social media messaging reclaimed power from the spectacle in regards to the politics of who represents whom, in what way and to what effect.

Nonetheless, given some of the illicit activities surrounding the riots, the politics of representation (especially of the looting) served mostly to amplify and support the negative public perceptions of these youthful rioters. Notwithstanding this, in examining the UK riots, it is still important to acknowledge the enterprising efforts made by people who recorded the events and shared them with their social media circles and mainstream media.

Much in the same way as sociology has sought not to condone or excuse the riots, but to explain and understand them; social media messaging cannot be solely blamed for the events that took place. Social media messaging can be used in a range of ways both for good or bad purposes. Social media messaging was an outlet used to express anger and opinion not only in relation to authorities and politicians, but also in regards to condemning the actions of the rioters. As a platform it situated itself as an appendage to events "telling it how it was" alongside

[2] The use of the term recognition is framed within the context of groups organizing themselves into self-empowering collectives to carry out action which results in a form of recognition (cf. Taylor, 1994).

mainstream media. This politics of representation added freedom to the acts committed (through disembodied planning) and to the dissemination of its reporting (on social media networks).

Youths recorded and uploaded footage from the events – sometimes adding commentary, captions to pictures and music as a backdrop, which allowed for a real-time digital exchange of ideas and comments. Indeed, to access the heart of the riots, the mainstream media had to relinquish power to those who were part of the riots themselves. This inter-textual exchange saw those who were filming, taking pictures, rioting and looting getting their footage and commentary heard by the masses (albeit edited by reporters for mainstream consumption and condemnation).

Overall, the acts seen in the riots would have sufficed to give these groups a politics of recognition, but through the use of social media messaging, the groups gained recognition through their own self-representation. BlackBerry Messenger with its closed servers was a digital enclave that law enforcers could not penetrate. Through the use of Twitter, BBM and Facebook, rioters and their supporters arguably felt a sense of recognition of their plight against hegemonic forces. The speed, accessibility and popularity of social media messaging during the UK riots provided a sense of one-upmanship over the police and other dominant institutions.

The social media capital[3] offered a freedom of expression and a space for solidarity which allowed individuals to come together to form collective forces. The currency in these riots was "social media capital" and was demonstrated in three distinct ways.

First, the rioters and their supporters had to have access to the tools of communication. Accessing the Internet and social media was quite easy and simple as Internet subscriptions at the time were relatively cheap to obtain and most social media sites were free to join. In this respect, the prospect of a digital or social media divide was limited thus allowing those who wished to participate in social media exchange during the riots, the appropriate capital to do so.

Second, an understanding of how to use social media effectively was important in ensuring that key information was communicated and exchanged. This component of social media

[3] The use of Capital as used here, can be viewed as a resource or currency obtained and required in specific contexts.

capital can include - understanding how to create groups, share pages on Facebook, write and send tweets, embed links within social media messages, upload images, comment on photos, set up privacy settings, set up BlackBerry Messenger, add friends onto the BlackBerry Messenger etc. – the list of social media expertise is currently endless. Setting up forms of social media exchange would not be straightforward unless capital was acquired to know what to do in the social media space.

Third, once access and knowledge was obtained, social media capital by way of having a group of followers on Twitter, "friends" on Facebook and BlackBerry Messenger contacts were crucial in completing the social media capital "cycle" required to *fully* participate in the social media dimension of the riots. For instance, to send Twitter messages – but to have no followers or having BlackBerry Messenger, knowing how to use it - but having no contacts would have been a block to the massive potential of social media networking and its interactive logic in spreading the word about the riots.

Moving this argument beyond online exchange towards collective action, social media capital enthusiasts during the riots would have had to take this capital with them into the offline space. They would have needed to act on intelligence gained from their social media capital to carry out collective mobilization and action.

It is important to stress here, that social media capital can obtained from the first and second stages combined. The third stage would be dependent on how influential a person's network of social media friends or followers were in allowing the information about the UK riots to spread. It would also be dependent on the willingness of the receiver to have acted on the intelligence gained.

In conclusion, it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the host of reasons why the riots took place. The media's role in creating ready-made racialized "folk devils" in its coverage of the riots served only to support stereotypes. The causes of the riots were not just an issue pertaining to "race" as some commentators have tried to argue. Various factors such as widespread poverty, powerlessness and wanton opportunism felt by sections of society, led individuals, many of them young and poor to come together to form autonomous and dynamic collectives. Social media played its role in spreading the word. It created immaterial linkages between individuals which moved beyond Internet and mobile platforms into real and meaningful offline and embodied action. The use of social media capital was central to fanning

the flames of the UK riots. Social media granted rioters with the possibilities of anonymity and mobility in communicative exchange which boosted the levels of recognition for plights of the rioters.

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