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From Causality to Emergence:

Re-evaluating social media's role in the 2011 English riots

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This paper is an attempt to re-evaluate the role of social media on the riots. It draws upon interviews and qualitative analysis of tweets posted during the riots to examine how digital modalities reconfigure power relations between vulnerable and invulnerable populations as collectives seek to enact social change. The importance of social media for understanding collective action, I argue, lies in its relevance for conveying what one could call the performativity of public space. My thesis emerges in response to the rise of big data analytics as a means to predict and respond to political unrest, exploring the limits of predictive analyses with regard to issues of trust, power, memory and emotions. My claim is that understanding the power of the digital requires a more sophisticated understanding of emotions. To this end, I emphasize the need to employ multi-method approaches to study new forms of "mediated crowd" membership that combine digital methods with more traditional approaches to emotions research.

Commentary on the role of social media in orchestrating the riots

Much has been speculated about the role of social media in orchestrating the 2011 English riots. While England has an established history of rioting, the unprecedented speed and scale with which the riots escalated meant that new media technologies were targeted as an object of blame. Speaking in the House of Commons, British Prime Minister, David Cameron (2011) declared, "Everyone watching these horrific actions will be struck by how they were organised via social media." Journalists and politicians echoed these sentiments with David Lammy, the local MP for Tottenham,

claiming that the riots were an attack on the whole of the Tottenham community "organised on Twitter" (Mackenzie, 2011). As the country tried to make sense of the riots, the impression emerged of a technologically-obsessed, deviant youth culture, "Twitter rioters" (France & Flynn, 2011), responsible for what was referred to as the "Facebook riot" (Bowcott, et al., 2011) and the "BlackBerry Riots" (Economist, 2011). As Philip Blond (2011) put it:

> The riots were new in that gangs of predominately young unemployed men were able, using new media, to launch a series of semi-**organised** disturbances for the purpose not of protest, but of criminal gain.

Political discourse, most of which was ground in speculation and nineteenth-century crowd theory (Baker, 2012a), created something of a moral panic with calls to switch off social media platforms during the height of the disorder, replaced shortly after by suggestions that social media played "little" (Adegoke & Ball, 2011) or "no role" in the unrest (Thomas, 2011).

Commentary of this kind was premised on big data analytics. Digital methods were used to 'mine' key words (e.g. riot, revenge) across large data sets beyond the scope of traditional social scientific methods. While the Metropolitan Police (2012) discovered several references to riots organized on social media, it was hardly enough to warrant serious scholarly attention.[i] Instead, consensus emerged that it was Blackberry's encrypted Messenger service (BBM), rather than social networking sites as originally presumed, that was rioters' preferred mode of communication (Cellan-Jones, 2011). In what follows I point to the inadequacy of these methods, as a means to understand the role of social media on the riots.

The Social Life of Methods

Methods enact social worlds; that is to say, they simultaneously represent and enact the very objects they seek to describe (Ruppert et al., 2013). The same is true of the recent riots. The suggestion that social media played an insignificant role in the events is a direct reflection of the digital methods (e.g. Sentiment Analysis and big data analytics) employed to study the events. Big data is increasingly identified as an untapped resource. Metaphors of data 'mining' and 'harvesting' point to the value that can be extracted from digital resources for crisis management purposes, particularly with regard to social media technologies, such as, Twitter. Twitter's open-access policy makes the micro-blogging site a popular medium through which to examine the expression of public emotion. Given that social movements are concerned primarily with collective emotions, attempts to predict and manage crises tend to focus on the early detection of public emotion on these digital platforms.

Digital methods are typically premised on the notion of emotions as states. The idea is that feelings - in this case, anger or grievance - are made manifest in emotion words (e.g. 'anger' or 'revenge'). The problem with this view is not only that it fails to account for non-conscious or pre-reflective emotions; but that in reducing emotions to feelings these methods neglect the very processes they seek to predict and describe. In the case of the riots, the reduction of agency to those feelings visibly expressed on digital devices and platforms led to futile debates about whether social media caused the unrest. By focussing on issues of causality, as exemplified by the quantification of feelings and riot-related terms, it was concluded that social media was of little significance to the unrest. Arguments of this kind were similarly articulated with regard to the 'Arab Spring' with initial suggestions that social media ignited these movements rebutted by those who emphasised the human dimension of revolution - "the revolution will not be tweeted," as one commentator pointed out

(Gladwell, 2010).

To ask whether social media caused the riots risks succumbing to technological determinism. Equally suggestions that twitter is merely a tool through which to communicate is to miss the capacity of the medium to transform how users perceive, experience and respond to social life. Certainly people are capable of rioting without digital technologies. One only needs to reflect on the history of rioting in Britain, for example, to defend such a point. But these approaches tell us very little about the ways in which social media affected people's experience of the riots, the consequence of which was to overlook the impact that these mediums had on the events. If emotions were states, then big data analytics would provide a useful way to measure changes in public emotion. If, however, emotions are not states, but processes – what Jack Barbalet (2002: 1) terms "an experience of involvement" – then our concern should not be with 'mining' emotion words, but rather with understanding the affective processes through which collective action emerges.

Alternative Approaches to understand the affective dynamics of the riots

Emotions are notoriously difficult to measure and define. Despite being neither inevitable, nor automatic, there are key factors that contribute to their emergence. Understanding these factors, and how they were communicated across digital devices and platforms during the riots, is crucial to comprehending the impact of social media on such events. When we talk about emotions we invoke a strong biographical dimension that draws upon our experience of involvement with the social world. Our commitment to these experiences varies for individuals, drawing on value commitments cultivated in life. We have to be strongly committed to values, as Hans Joas (2012) points out, if the word value-commitment is itself to hold any value. There is a parallel here between our commitment to particular values and our

commitment to particular persons or symbols, which can only be comprehended or communicated in narrative form.

Emotions give meaning to actions. Meaning is attributed to actions against the background of extant collective representations. In dramaturgical terms, actors communicate meaning to audiences who interpret the present by harvesting the past and anticipating the future. If the meaning ascribed to events involves intersecting temporalities, then emotions are concerned not so much with an isolated present as re-evaluating our affective experiences in light of our memories (individual and collective). Emotional memories – their dissemination across social media platforms - played a crucial part in the riots. The riots drew on a legacy of collective emotional memories made meaningful in relation to a history of perceived police brutality. What is important here is not only the memories that rioters shared, but how Duggan's death was framed in relation to these collective representations. It was not Duggan's death as an isolated incident in August 2011 that caused the unrest, but rather how the incident came to represent a broader narrative of social injustice. Duggan's death could only rupture the social imagination if the incident affected significant parts of society - the image of Duggan as a martyr of illegitimate policing perceived to signify a legacy of racial discrimination and inequality.

Performative Politics and the Battle for Public Space

Digital modalities reconfigure power relations between vulnerable and invulnerable populations. While theories of power tend to be conceived in terms of govermentality and surveillance, my focus here is on the performative qualities of the digital: namely, how digital technologies altered the ways in which the riots were experienced and enacted. Conceiving of the riots as a mode of performative politics requires a more nuanced understanding of the occupation of public space as both a physical and

symbolic space, and the symbolic power exercised by those that occupied these spaces as forms of resistance

- The occupation of physical public space was evident during the protests that took place outside Tottenham Hale police station on 6 August, two days after Duggan was fatally shot by police, which latter escalated into rioting and looting across much of the country. These actions involved physically occupying the streets and torching police cars as visible acts of defiance that highlighted the public's rejection of State power and authority.

- Symbolically, these acts involved a rejection of the negative representations of Mark Duggan put forward by various authorities (journalists, politicians and police), and the representation of aggrieved individuals as a fused public.

This is where social media played a significant role in the riots, not merely in terms of concrete social relations but the occupation of digital devices and platforms as public spaces through which to access, and to intervene in, the social. By undermining authorities' claims to represent the public, digital technologies reconfigured power relations between vulnerable and invulnerable populations. With regard to emotions what is important here is the notion of public space as a shared arena through which to re-define meaning in narrative form. The digital object is conceived here as more than a single tweet, it may refer to the corpus of tweets (both visual and textual) that constitute a meaningful narrative. What is at stake in these online public spaces is not merely power in the sense of control and domination, but the capacity to be communicatively understood.

I propose reading the riots as a battle over the representation of Mark Duggan's death, one performed not merely in physical space but through mediated forms of

interaction. Social media was fundamental to the narrative structure of events, forming part of a dialogue with old media that materialised into concrete social relations. Here, the riots may be read as a battle over competing definitions of legitimacy, more specifically, a rejection of representations put forward in the mainstream media by politicians, journalists and police.

My claim is that the riots emerged in a way that was neither predictable, nor visible in speech-acts alone. Instead, the events assumed highly symbolic (visual) forms as counter-narratives, reinforced and made meaningful in relation to a series of rumours circulating across social media, culminating in the alleged police attack upon a 16-year old black girl posted on YouTube, Facebook and twitter. Of particular significance was the public's rejection of several allegations:

1. First, the IPCC's initial claim that Duggan shot first at police.
2. Second, what became known as the assassination rumour: an inaccurate media report published by the *Evening Standard*, the day after Duggan was killed, that described him being assassinated by police in an execution style.

The new media ecology in which Duggan was killed had a significant impact on the riots (Baker, 2014). While assassination rumors have recurrently emerged as triggers for public disorder, 24-hour news coverage, together with the ubiquity of digital devices and platforms, characterised by user-generated content and interactive social networking sites, provided a fertile environment for rumors to gain currency and momentum. The fact that rumors regarding Duggan's assassination were not rebutted until 3 days after his death, enabled the image of Duggan as a victim of illegitimate policing to circulate via these mediums throughout the community. Here, representation assumes a Platonic sense of the term with the riots signifying an attempt to re-present - to correct - false representations put forward by various

authorities in the mainstream media, a form of performative politics that in highlighting the perceived disconnect between narratives themselves contributed to the unrest. Counter-representations communicated via new media aimed not only to replace 'false' representations with a more accurate version of events, digital devices and platforms engendered a process of self-constitution by enabling fragmented users across vast temporal and spatial geographies to fuse as victims of illegitimate policing (despite being a plural citizenry), thereby, emerging as protagonists in the drama.

The incentive to riot is predicated on the collective recognition of perceived social injustice, the recognition that the object represented also represents you - the Facebook page established during the 2011 Egyptian uprising: "We are all Khaled Said," a case in point. Collective representations disseminated on social media platforms facilitated this process of mimetic vertigo, evoking pity for the victim as one like ourselves. In Duggan's case, representing his death via these mediums evoked outrage on an unprecedented scale, transpiring into collective action both online and off. In fact, a common feature of the 2010-12 protest movements was that these forms of mediated crowd membership emerged in response to a perceived Social tragedy, wherein the interactive relationships enabled by digital technologies connected aggrieved users into intense social relationships (Baker, 2014). This is not to suggest that mediated crowd membership is unique to social media. All forms of crowd behaviour are mediated with more traditional forms of media – television and radio configuring the 1992 LA riots and the 2005 French riots respectively. What is novel is the ubiquitous ownership of digital devices, which make instant messenger services and 24-hour online social networking sites powerful tools to mobilise and sustain collective action through rapid, multimedia messages that can be communicated en masse.

The proliferation of digital devices and platforms means that we are increasingly susceptible to being influenced indirectly by these mediums in our physical interactions with users, who restructure our experience without consensus or online participation. The indirect effect of social media was articulated by respondents who recalled their exposure to the riots:

> It wasn't through the news. My brother told me about the protest at Tottenham and showed me pictures. These were mostly through BlackBerry notifications from my brother and speaking to the community activists helped me to get a perspective as to why it happened. These images were very powerful (Baker, 2012b).

Crucial here is the fact that the percentage of the population consuming tweets is not reducible to the amount of registered twitter users. In the new media ecology, even if one does not use social media directly, online social networks inexorably impact their offline lives. Interviews reveal that the power of twitter was largely derived from the fact that in allowing user generated content social media was associated with friends and family, rendering the medium a powerful cultural resource through which to facilitate truth, trust and authority (though it is evident that social media can equally uphold traditional power structures and operate as a vehicle for moral traditional forms of broadcasting).

Conclusion

- In this paper I have focussed on the performative qualities of the digital, exploring how these technologies altered the ways in which the riots were perceived, experienced and enacted.

- Re-evaluating the power of new media technologies to inform collective action indicates that while not the cause of the riots, social media resulted in substantive effects.
- In the case of the riots, video footage uploaded onto YouTube, Facebook, Twitter provided alternative representations of the events to those put forward in the mainstream media, while hashtags and public pages on social media services revealed that the views of a minority were shared by a much larger majority.
- By revealing the extent of discontent, digital technologies enabled emotions to gather force and momentum, facilitating feelings of solidarity and empowering collective action. This more reflexive approach to social media's role in riots shifts the question from one of causality to emergence, a concern with the role digital devices and platforms play in the organization of contemporary sociality.

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