

CIVITAS Comment

#Londonsburning: Gen Y likes this

The Relationship between social media and the UK riots

By Tom Hall, September 2011

For a few dramatic days in August 2011 the twin pillars of law and order seemed on the verge of collapse as an epidemic of riots and vandalism spread across the United Kingdom. The question of how a small protest against apparent police brutality in Tottenham could spark upheaval as far afield as Huddersfield has given rise to a number of competing explanations.¹ Significantly, many commentators and politicians have homed in on the role of social networking and its relationship with Generation Y. Given Twitter and Facebook's past form – many have labelled the Arab Spring the "Facebook Revolution" – it is worth seriously considering their effects on Generation Y. This article will tackle the interrelated questions of whether social media caused the UK riots (including Twitter, Facebook, and Blackberry messenger) and, if so, whether these platforms should be suspended from use during times of crisis.

Many observers have downplayed the causative effect of social media. For Naomi Klein it was not Facebook but a sense of injustice that drove youths to smash up their high streets. Comparing the London riots to the Argentine *el saqueo*, Klein argues that the riots were a response to the looting of the public sector by political elites and the continuation of bankers' bonuses. Some may question whether Klein's thesis overestimates the political motives of rioters that were spotted trying on shoes before they stole them from JD sports. Yet, there is alternative evidence to suggest willingness amongst members of Generation Y to challenge, and attempt to change the actions of, authority. Donald Moore has argued that Internet music piracy is viewed by GYers as a way to punish companies for, and drive down, high prices.² Other analysts have also downplayed the importance of social media as a direct cause. The BBC has commented on the misleading way in which the Daily Mail has presented tweets. For example, the paper reported the user AshleyAR's tweet thus, "Hear Tottenham's going coco-bananas right now. Watch me roll." The tweet in full actually reads: "I hear Tottenham's going coco-bananas right now. Watch me roll up with a spud gun :|".³ It is conceivable then, that the spirit of Tahrir square and the attendant Facebook revolution failed to descend on Britain. Indeed, the gangs that took over parts of London were almost certainly driven more by profit

¹ Simon Rogers, Ami Sedghi, and Lisa Evans, 'UK riots: every verified incident - interactive map', The Guardian, Thursday 11 August 2011:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/interactive/2011/aug/09/uk-riots-incident-map>

² Donald Moore, of Arizona Software, 15/10/08, remark in an interview with DZNet's Marilyn Wheeler: <http://www.zdnet.co.uk/news/specials.html>

³ Iain Mackenzie, 'Is technology to blame for the London riots?', *BBC News Technology*, 8 August 2011:

rather than politics.

However, we should not be so quick to dismiss accounts that focus on the role of social media. Even if we accept that social media did not directly cause the disturbances, their role as a catalyst is undeniable. Numerous reports attest to the ways in which rioters and onlookers used social media to organize and communicate. Birmingham police stated that they had prepared for trouble after uncovering campaigns on Facebook and Twitter that had warned of, or encouraged, violence.⁴ While the aforementioned pair has received a lot of attention, the Blackberry messenger service has been singled out for the most criticism. David Lammy, MP for Tottenham, went so far as to demand the service be shut down during the riots. BBM's popularity during the riots was largely down to its security. Unlike Facebook and Twitter on which published information is easily accessed by outside observers including law courts,⁵ the Blackberry encryption facility ensures users' messages are hidden from public view. Given the rapidity and anonymity of their means of communication, it is hardly surprising the rioters were always one step ahead of the police.

This view, that social media was merely the catalyst for the riots, is the most commonly held. Nevertheless, the findings of recent research into Gen Y's relationship with social media and the Internet more broadly, slightly complicate this conclusion. The transformative effects of social media on Gen Y have been revealed as a global phenomenon. Pamela Rutledge argues that in Chile President Chavez' attempts to shut down Twitter in the country will prove ineffective at halting popular criticism of the government. This is down to the irreversible psychological effects of the increased communication facilitated by social media.⁶ Even China, where Internet users are faced with the Great Firewall, has witnessed internet-driven changes to society. For Michael Stanat, the use of proxies to access censored websites and a general culture of computers (young males use them for up to 12 hours a day) has resulted in a generation of Chinese youths with vastly different views to their parents.⁷ In particular, GYers possess the individualism, consumption, and optimism that many of their parents lacked.⁸ These three traits should not be overlooked as they clash with many aspects of traditional Chinese culture.

Establishing a link between the psychological effects of social media and the London riots is difficult but there are several interesting points to reflect on. Firstly, the current debate on the existence of, and drivers of, a criminal underclass lacks any consideration of the role of Facebook's filter function. In particular, few have been alert to the work of Eli Pariser. For Pariser, the "personalization" function of Facebook and Google, whereby the two sites tailor their respective news feeds and

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-14442203>

⁴Nick Britten, 'Birmingham hit by riots as internet campaign encourages violence', *Daily Telegraph*, 09 August 2011:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8690273/Birmingham-hit-by-riots-as-internet-campaign-encourages-violence.html>

⁵Zeljka Zorz, 'Private info on Facebook increasingly used in court', *Help Net Security*, 02 February 2011:

<http://www.net-security.org/secworld.php?id=10524>

⁶Pamela Rutledge, 'Chavez & Twitter: Censorship Won't Change the Psychological Impact of Social Media', *Psychology Today*, 14 December 2010:

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201012/chavez-twitter-censorship-wont-change-the-psychological-impact-social-m>

⁷ Michael Stanat, *China's Generation Y*, (New Jersey, Homa and Sekey books, 2006), p.61.

⁸ Ibid, p.49.

search results to suit the preferences of users, has helped to create a filter bubble or “you loop”.⁹ Facebook and Google act as virtual mirrors and ensure that users are continually fed information that fits their preconceptions. For instance, Pariser noticed that on his Facebook news he only received updates about his left wing rather than conservative friends as Facebook had identified him as a Liberal. In the context of the riots then, it is conceivable that those users who displayed an interest in the photos and statuses of friends involved in riots were exposed to more and more updates of criminal activity. Whether this development would lead Facebook users to take part in riots themselves is questionable. Yet, the foregrounding of groupthink – the phenomenon wherein group members quickly form opinions that match the consensus rather than critically evaluate information themselves – in many explanations of the riots suggests we should not be too quick to dismiss Pariser’s polemic.

Secondly, the sense of power that is potentially bred by social media and the Internet has been overlooked in analyses of the social context behind the riots. E J Westlake’s work on Facebook has drawn attention to cultural theorists’ use of Roland Barthes to analyze the Internet. In particular, Barthes’ distinction between a writerly and a readerly text has been applied to illuminate the novelty of Facebook.¹⁰ Unlike the readerly printed text, which can only be read, the Internet, with its hyperlinks and edit functions, enables readers to actually write. For instance, users can edit Wikipedia entries and Facebook allows users to post each other’s walls, poke people, and search through the many links between different accounts. Facebook users have a real sense of control and individual agency. This feeling of individual potency has been picked up by other analyses of Internet users. Freestone and Mitchell have found that the anonymity of the Internet has led many GYers to downplay the illegality of activities such as music piracy and, in certain cases, hacking.¹¹ These ideas of power and invulnerability were evident in the actions of many of the rioters. Based on this evidence, the riots appear as a process in which the morality and sense of power members of GY have online, crossed over in to the real world. Nevertheless, we should not assume so concrete a link between the psychological effects of social media, the Internet, and the events of August 2011. Many view the personalization feature as a useful tool in saving time and, in any case, it can be turned off. Moreover, there were many involved in the riots that do not take part in hacking or Internet based crime. Any suggestions that a life of crime online breeds law breaking on the streets should be made warily. In short, it is more persuasive to view social media as a facilitator of the London riots. The unsettling implications of recent research, however, demands that more work is required on the psychological effects of social media.

The question remains as to whether social media and, in particular, blackberry messenger should have been shut down during the riots. During the riots, the Home Secretary, Theresa May, did meet with representatives of Facebook, Twitter and RIM (the maker of Blackberry) to discuss potential network closures. Political leaders outside of the UK have shut down Internet and mobile networks. In Egypt during the Tahrir square uprising the government ordered the closure of the Vodafone network for 24 hours. Upon the resumption of service Vodafone was forced to send pro government

⁹ Bryan Appleyard, ‘The Filter Bubble’, *Sunday Times*, 19 June 2011:
<http://www.bryanappleyard.com/2011/06/the-filter-bubble/>

¹⁰ E J Westlake, *Friend me if you Facebook*, *The Drama Review* vol. 52 number 4 Winter 2008, p.26.

¹¹ O Freestone and V W Mitchell, *Generation Y attitudes towards E-ethics and Internet related misdemeanors*, *Journal of Business ethics* vol. 54 No.2 Oct 2004, p.127.

text messages urging protesters to go home. However, as the fall of Mubarak and the earlier case of Chavez in Venezuela demonstrate, such tactics are largely ineffective. Questions also remain as to both the legality and feasibility of closing down Internet access or mobile coverage. The Police do possess MTPAS (the Mobile telephone privileged access scheme), which allows them, only after permission from Gold command, to shut down mobile coverage in an area. Many critics of this scheme argue that its effects would not be to prevent the use of mobiles in a particular area but merely to increase traffic and overload receivers nearby. Civil rights campaigners point to the morally questionable nature of government led prohibition of communication and free speech among citizens. Decisions on such matters are deemed the preserve of law courts and judges rather than the police.

What then can we learn from the various analyses of the London riots? Firstly, the most evident point is the central role social media and, more generally, the drive to communicate plays in the lives of GYers. In the context of the riots BBM was used by many but certainly not all of the rioters to spread news about, encourage, and, at times, to condemn the violence. Here it is worth noting that BBM was more a catalyst than prime mover of the riots. This especially proved to be the case with gangs involved in the rioting. Secondly, although this article has sided with the argument that social media did not cause the riots, more general research into the psychological effects of Facebook et al. do suggest their relationship with Gen Y needs to be examined further. Thirdly, David Lammy's calls for BBM to be shut down during the riots were rightly criticized. Technology available to police now lacks precision, and, more worryingly, shutting down networks impinges upon the right to free speech that is at the heart of our society. Furthermore, the clean up campaigns organized on Facebook and BBM in the immediate aftermath of the riots emphasized the positive impulses that can activate social media.