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The Mediated Crowd: New Social Media and New Forms of Rioting

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Abstract

Commentary on the recent riots largely reflects ideological differences with political discourse reviving traditional debates of social inequality and moral decline. While the 2011 riots resemble former incidents of rioting in twentieth-century Britain, it is argued that the recent unrest was significantly enhanced by the development of new social media, requiring new understandings of mediated crowd membership in the twenty-first century. I introduce and outline a model of the 'mediated crowd' commencing with the impact of new social media, and develop this paradigm in conjunction with emotions research, to account for the emotional dimensions of collective action, and the social and political effects these technological developments have on contemporary forms of rioting. Here, it is argued that attempts to understand the causes of the recent riots must recognise that while social media contributed to the speed and scope of the unrest, emotions play a crucial role in motivating and sustaining collective action as the structures of feeling that intersect geographic and virtual public space. This innovative approach provides insight into the particular conditions in which the English riots emerged, while demonstrating how social media contributes more broadly to new forms of collectivity in the media age.

Keywords: Emotions; English Riots (2011); Mark Duggan; 'Mediated Crowd'; New Social Media; Social Networking

Introduction

1.1 Riots are not new to England. The country has experienced recurrent incidents of civil unrest throughout the late-twentieth century, in particular during the 1980s with the Brixton riots in 1981 followed by further rioting in Liverpool, Manchester, West Yorkshire, and Birmingham in the same year. In 1985 London, Brixton, and Birmingham were again subject to riots, as was West Yorkshire in 1987, and more recently Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford in 2001. While the riots of the 1980s were largely thought to be symptomatic of extant racial discrimination toward Afro-Caribbean communities, the 2001 riots were regarded as an ethnic issue that further forewarned of the challenges facing multicultural Britain (Bagguley and Hussain, 2008).[1] The common theme connecting these incidents was the use of the street as a public space for members of the community to riot against perceived social inequalities with crowd theory traditionally focusing on this theme of geographical proximity as a precondition for collective consciousness to emerge (McPhail, 1991).

1.2 Commentary on the recent riots has drawn parallels between the social conditions that witnessed the riots of the 1980s – government cuts;[2] austerity; poverty; and discrimination (*Economist*, 2011), with others suggesting that the racial inequalities that characterised the decade are no longer salient in contemporary British society (Addley *et al.*, 2011). While the 2011 riots resemble former incidents of rioting in twentieth-century Britain, it is argued that these debates misrepresent the emotional dimensions of collective action by reviving traditional perspectives on crowd theory that are incompatible with present forms of mediated crowd membership. Here, I argue that attempts to understand the recent riots must engage with a series of technological developments in the form of new social media, which increasingly characterise emotional relations and public communication in what has been referred to as the 'media age' (Thompson, 2000). Advancements in communication technologies in the twenty-first century have had a considerable impact on mediated forms of crowd membership by increasing the speed of public communication, and the scope of social networking to a plurality of non-present others. This means that whereas traditional crowd theory focused on crowd formation in spatial and temporal proximity,

contemporary scholarship must examine a new social phenomenon that I have referred to as the 'mediated crowd' – an interactive community that both traverses and intersects geographical public space and the virtual public sphere.[3]

The emergence of the 'mediated crowd'

2.1 New social media have fundamentally changed public communication practices in the twenty-first century giving rise to a nascent social phenomenon referred to here as the 'mediated crowd'. The introduction of Web 2.0, which is characterised by user generated content and interactive social media, allows public users to co-develop and exchange content on the Internet via blogging, tagging, wikis, and media sharing, and to network socially in novel ways via the proliferation of social networking sites, such as, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. In 2004, Facebook introduced social networking to the masses, while Twitter made social networking instant and mobile in 2006. Coupled with new mobile technologies (smart phones, broadband Internet access and digital cameras), these technological innovations enable instant modes of mediated exchange, which have broadened, and indeed transformed, the spatial and temporal configuration of contemporary public life. It is important to remember here that ubiquitous online communication is a relatively recent phenomenon. For, despite the fact that the World Wide Web has been in existence since the late twentieth century, before the age of widespread home computer ownership the Internet was only visible and accessible to a limited audience (Macnamara, 2010). While the creation of these so-called 'virtual geographies' (Wark, 1994) were first described in the late-twentieth-century, the introduction of new social media in the early twenty-first century has made substantive contributions to online communication with the 'mediated crowd' mobilised through instant and mobile social networking in the virtual sphere.

2.2 The 'mediated crowd' pertains to collective action that occurs in the virtual (and geographic) arena as opposed to a traditional crowd, which is typically limited to physical congregation in a shared geographical location. Just as Hannah Arendt (1958: 195) described the *polis* as the Athenians, rather than Athens itself, so, too, the notion of a mediated public sphere destabilises the privileged association of topography as the defining feature of publicness. Instead, the digitalisation of social life has made public space more dynamic with public life temporally and spatially contingent on a range of mediated communication practices (e.g. mobile smart phones, instant messenger applications, online social networks) and the public deriving their status from collective virtual identities, rather than merely as co-inhabitants of a shared geographical locale. These two public domains are not mutually exclusive, of course, with the 'mediated crowd' able to traverse from the virtual public sphere into geographical public space, or to occupy both spheres simultaneously via new social media in the form of mobile smart phones and handsets – the 'Occupy' movement, which refers to the occupation of public space as a symbolic and political form of protest, a vivid reminder that mediated crowd membership is not divorced from standard forms of communication. Accordingly, while media communication technologies operate as 'disembedding mechanisms' that dislocate social relations from the confines of time and space (Giddens, 1991), this new social phenomenon reorganises and extends temporal and spatial boundaries rather than simply replacing 'real' time and space. From this perspective, the very notion of the 'mediated crowd' is distinguished from a standard crowd by its reliance on media communication technologies to mobilise and sustain collective action. The visibility and accessibility of the mediated public sphere means that not only is the crowd extended to include a larger body of the community than standard face-to-face interactions permit, mediated communication has altered the scale and speed of mass mobilisation with social networks able to communicate their messages instantly to members of the public across vast temporal and spatial spheres.

2.3 It is the scale and speed of the 'mediated crowd' that has been the most striking development with regard to the recent riots and accordingly new social media have been the focal point of discussions regarding the unrest. In an article entitled: 'The Blackberry Riots' (2011), *The Economist* reflected on the relationship between technology and disorder suggesting that the encrypted messenger service offered by Blackberry handsets were largely to blame for the riots given that the BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) service allowed users to send free messages to all their contacts simultaneously as an effective means to summon mobs to particular venues. This view was echoed by a range of journalists, social commentators, and politicians, including David Lammy, the Minister of Parliament for Tottenham, who called for the Blackberry Messenger service to be suspended, and Britain's Prime Minister, David Cameron, who suggested disconnecting the service to the Commons in a move to prevent potential rioters from facilitating further violence. Cameron defended this move towards censorship by arguing that those watching the riots would be 'struck by how they were organised via social media', and that 'police were facing a new circumstance where rioters were using the BlackBerry Messenger service, a closed network, to organise riots' (Cellan-Jones, 2001).

2.4 New social media appeared to play a key role in organising the riots with smart phones giving those with access to these technologies the power to network socially and to incite collective disorder. Facebook and the Blackberry Messenger service were the main mediums used to organise the English riots, while the social networking site, Twitter, displayed regular reports and updates of the incidents of a credible and false nature. The effectiveness of social media was particularly apparent in London where rioting extended to over thirty locations on 8 August 2011. While the rioting emerged from a political protest in Tottenham in 'real' time and space, its development across London and other cities in England, such as Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, Liverpool and Gloucester, was facilitated by new social media as an effective form of social networking. Here, social media functioned to recruit rioters by providing the ability for Internet users to connect with mass audiences using social networking to communicate their messages. Yet, while social media can help to explain the speed and the capacity to orchestrate riots in many cities across England, social media cannot account for the failure of attempts to organise riots via social networking sites in areas, such as, Plymouth in southwest England, and Northwich in northwest England. Or, as said another way, while new social media contributed to the form and effect of the riots,

they were not the initial cause of the civic unrest – a Blackberry handset does not cause one to riot, just as being a member of Twitter or Facebook does not make one more susceptible to violence (a point further demonstrated by the role of new social media as a form of resistance to the riots, as a police tactic to locate those responsible for the unrest, and in the 'clean up' operations that took place in areas across England affected by the riots – Baker, 2012). Consequently, to blame technology as the cause of the riots is limited. Riots have occurred at regular intervals in modern Britain long before these technological innovations, and while new social media facilitates social networking in diverse temporal and spatial boundaries, it is a facilitator rather than the underlying cause of collective action. Here, it suggested that attempts to understand the causes of the recent riots must recognise that emotions play a crucial role in motivating thought and action.

2.5 The 'mediated crowd' necessarily emerges from either a common emotional atmosphere or a shared emotional climate.[4] Joseph de Rivera has defined an emotional climate as:

> An objective group phenomenon that can be palpably sensed-as when one enters a party or a city and feels an atmosphere of gaiety or depression, openness or fear-only, as the term "climate" implies (1992: 2).

2.6 Whereas an 'emotional atmosphere' refers to 'temporary moods' that emerge in relation to transitory events, such as the grief that ensues from the unexpected death of an icon or the collective joy felt in the weeks following a sports mega event, an 'emotional climate' emanates from 'more pervasive emotional relationships between members of society that are related to underlying social structures and political programs' (de Rivera, 1992). The two are not always clearly demarcated as empirical analysis of the recent riots suggests. For example, while the initial unrest in Tottenham appeared to reflect an 'emotional atmosphere' of anger and resentment towards police that ensued from the police shooting of Mark Duggan, to situate the unrest in an 'emotional climate' refers instead to the deeper structural conditions of political and social inequality, such as the discrimination of black youth, welfare cuts, and poverty, and the public's corollary feelings of anger and resentment, that were said to facilitate such responses. Here, an emotional climate is not synonymous with structural determinism or susceptible to what Margaret Archer (1995) refers to as 'downwards conflationism': the diminution of agency as an epiphenomenon of social structure. Instead, the term denotes a common structural environment that influences how individuals and collectives experience the social world, rather than predetermining behaviour through mechanical notions of cause and effect. To be collectively involved in a crowd, then, is not simply an act of emotional conformity. For, as the recent riots convey, agents are liable to adapt to common structural conditions in unexpected and creative ways with the riots demonstrative of the fact that individuals from similar environments responded emotionally to the unrest in readily different ways, where the decision not to riot was itself a form of action. In this sense emotions operate as the intermediary between social structure and agency, with individual and collective action reflecting the agent's evaluation of a given circumstance (Barbalet, 2002).

2.7 To suggest that the 'mediated crowd' emerges from a common emotional climate is not to say that participants experience the same emotions en mass or operate through some sort of homogeneous 'group mind', as the nineteenth-century crowd theorist, Gustave Le Bon ([1895] 2002), had suggested. Instead, emotions are understood as an 'experience of involvement', structural processes that influence the 'immediate contact with the world the self has through involvement' (Barbalet, 2002: 1). The structural theory of emotions shows how emotions may be conceived as existing *between* people, as various sorts of interactions which transform their bodies and perceptions, rather than a fixed internal state (de Rivera, 1992; Kemper, 2002). From this perspective, emotions are inherently social even if interaction only occurs between two people or one person and an imaginary other, as encapsulated by George Herbert Mead's (1934) notion of the 'generalised other'. Social networking is based on this interactive component of sociality and imagined reflexivity, operating as a tool that allows people to communicate instantly to a large group of public users. Biz Stone, one of the founders of Twitter, explains the interactive component of the social networking site through metaphor:

> The metaphor is a flock of birds moving around an object in flight. It is something that looks incredibly choreographed and complicated but it is rudimentary behaviour among individuals in 'real time' that allows them to behave as though they were a single organism (*BBC Radio*, 2011).

2.8 The point is that while crowds may appear to be homogeneous, monolithic entities, acting in unison 'as though they were a single organism', an individual's decision to participate in collective action itself reflects the agent's particular value judgment and disposition to act. To speak of a national or a collective emotional climate, then, denotes not simply an aggregate of all the emotional relations existing within these groups. Just as emotions experienced on an individual level signify one's identity and values (de Rivera, 1992), emotions experienced collectively maintain the political or cultural identity of the given group. Such an understanding of emotions is crucial to the 'mediated crowd', for it is suggested that this new social phenomenon may emerge with regard to affective reflexivity rather than merely as the consequence of 'emotional contagion' or a 'group mind'.

2.9 The 'mediated crowd' is formed through reflexive communication in the virtual public sphere. Broadly defined as 'the process of referring back to oneself' (Johnson, 2000: 255), reflexivity denotes the human capacity to refer to oneself as a self or a collective member of society (Rowe and Baker, 2012). While reflexivity is a pervasive feature of modern social life (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994), developments in media technologies have intensified reflexive processes in modernity through the expansion of 'disembedding mechanisms', which, according to Giddens (1991: 2), increasingly dislocate social relations from the confines of time and space. Media communication technologies have accentuated this process of reflexivity as:

> Mediated images of media exemplify what might be called “media reflexivity”, where media mirror themselves (or other media). Just like other forms of reflexivity, media reflexivity seems to increase in late modernity (Fornäs *et. al.*, 2007: 83).

2.10 When applied to the recent unrest in England, it is apparent that reflexivity is a vital component of the ‘mediated crowd’. While political unrest emerged from a common ‘emotional climate’, early empirical evidence suggests that the perceived injustice made visible and accessible through communication technologies equipped media users with a sense of collective consciousness and the confidence to act (Baker, 2012). In this instance, a common object was integral to reflexive consciousness with the police shooting of Mark Duggan operating as a referent point for collective action in Tottenham, and further unrest across the country. Here, concordance between the subjective observer and the objective victim – the notion that what is being represented is also representing you - facilitates confidence through numbers while becoming the justification for action. In the former case, the ‘mediated crowd’ emerged through complex systems of planning and co-operation that undermine conventional explanations of crowd formation as the corollary of ‘emotional contagion’ or impulsive action. Instead, individuals feel empowered to act in groups when they realise that their feelings are common to fellow members of society. With regard to the recent riots, what media users shared was a resentment of common symbols ranging from local authorities to society in general. The ‘mediated crowd’ gave way to collective action via social media because social media is immediate with the emotional reflexivity communicated via social media becoming a major factor in the mobilisation of the ‘mediated crowd’. While the heightened communication typically associated with crowds entails that emotions are more readily associated with social interaction in physical proximity, it is erroneous to overlook the capacity for mediated communication to evoke collective emotional responses. Increasingly public communication traverses geographical and virtual arenas, the consequence being that distinctions between ‘real’ and mediated emotions are undermined the more one examines the affective processes constituting what has been referred to as the ‘mediated crowd’. The importance of these virtual public spaces is that they establish the terrain for political protest, and new conceptions of society more generally, through the process of reflexivity that accompanies the continuous innovation of technology. The ‘mediated crowd’ reflects such a process with new social media shaping public consciousness through situating crowd members in a reflexive position of both subject and object. Consequently, it would be limited to suggest that mediated communication displaces the corporeal dimension and communal ethos traditionally associated with crowd membership. Instead, the instant and mobile form of communication afforded by social media has engendered a ‘double-reflexive crowd’ experience in which the user can simultaneously 'occupy' both geographic and virtual public arenas.

Conclusion

3.1 In this article I have argued that new social media were instrumental to the organisation and proliferation of the 2011 English riots, and that academic scholarship must engage with this nascent mode of public communication in the media age. From this perspective, while the 2011 riots may resemble previous forms of rioting in twentieth-century Britain, social media have made substantial contributions to contemporary forms of crowd membership in the twenty-first century. I suggest that although political and media reactions to the disorder have acknowledged the effect of social media that this has largely been as a means to canvass their own ideological positions, overlooking the substantive implications these technologies had on the unrest. Introducing the notion of the ‘mediated crowd’, I demonstrate that social media do more than just accentuate the speed and scope of crowd membership, these new instant, mobile forms of communication contribute to a ‘double-reflexive-crowd’ experience, opening up novel temporal and spatial contexts for mediated interaction that may operate simultaneous to live interactions in a shared geographical locale. Finally, I propose employing this conceptual model in conjunction with emotions research to understand more comprehensively the common experiences that incline individuals to form a ‘mediated crowd’.

Notes

[1] The political and media reaction to 2001 riots fixed into the national consciousness an image of young South Asian Muslim men as the new ‘enemy within’ (Bagguley and Hussain, 2008).

[2] Britain’s ‘government cuts’ refer to ‘the government’s defunding of civil-society institutions in order to balance the nation’s books. Before the riots, the government had planned to cut 16,200 police officers across the country. In London, austerity means that there will be about 19 per cent less to spend next year on government programs, and the burden will fall particularly on the poor’ (Sennett and Sassen, 2001).

[3] The term ‘virtual’ used advisedly here to refer to communication that occurs through media technologies (not merely online) and commonly takes place beyond standard face-to-face interactions in a geographical locale, rather than denoting that which is not ‘real’. While recent forms of 'mediated crowd' membership (e.g. the 2011 English riots, the 'Occupy' movement and the Arab Spring) often simultaneously occupy both geographic and virtual public arenas, a 'mediated crowd' may remain largely online as exemplified by the 'Anonymous' movement in support of WikiLeaks (although this is not to suggest that such forms of resistance displace the physical or are somehow less 'real').

[4]‘The basic idea of emotional climate is relatively easy to grasp. I have in mind an objective group phenomenon that can be palpably sensed-as when one enters a party or a city and feels an atmosphere of gaiety or depression, openness or fear-only, as the term "climate" implies, I am less interested in temporary moods than in more pervasive emotional phenomena that are related to underlying social structures and political programs. I have in mind, for example, the climate of fear which existed in Chile during the Pinochet regime and which has recently changed to a climate of hope’ (de Rivera, 1992: 2).

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