

Social media didn't start the fire: Proposals for the temporary shutdown of social media during riots are unlikely to prevent further unrest

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The impact of the riots that took place across England last month are still reverberating. We have seen long sentences handed down for those involved and rhetoric from the government on the social media that was seen to have helped rioters organise themselves. [Paul Reilly](#) evaluates these accusations and concludes that a focus on the disruptive potential of social media obscures the need for an inquest into the contexts and motivations of those who riot.

Many UK politicians appeared to blame social media for the recent riots in English cities. Prime Minister David Cameron's response to the riots was to call for talks with representatives of [Research in Motion, Facebook and Twitter](#) to explore the possibility of temporary closures of their respective networks during periods of civil unrest. He received vociferous support from Conservative MP Louise Mensch via her [Twitter feed](#). On 11th August she wrote: "Common sense. If riot info and fear is spreading by Facebook & Twitter, shut them off for an hour or two, then restore. World won't implode."

While it is true to say that many users would be ambivalent towards the loss of these services for a short period and many appear supportive of these measures, Mensch misses two key points about the riots. First, Blackberry Messenger didn't cause either the violence that marred a peaceful protest against the shooting of [Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan police](#) in Tottenham on August 6th, or the looting or disturbances seen in Manchester or Birmingham days later. A complex set of macro and micro factors were at play here, including anger at Mark Duggan's death, the [disenfranchisement and disillusionment of young people](#) as well as the '[wanton criminality](#)' that has been the subject of many politicians' ire. Second, the legitimacy and practicality of a temporary shutdown of these sites has to be called into question.

Throughout the series of popular uprisings in the Middle East known as the Arab Spring, the UK and US governments have been vocal in their opposition to efforts by authoritarian regimes to prevent their citizens having unrestricted access to the internet. To argue that social media users in the UK should be subject to such restrictions would appear contradictory. Moreover, the police would appear reluctant to repeat the mistake of closing down mobile phone networks in the aftermath of the 7/7 attacks given the potential for its use to gather intelligence on the rioters. In the words of Acting Metropolitan Police Commissioner Tim Goodwin: "The legality of that is very questionable and additionally it is also a very useful intelligence asset."

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It should also be noted that many of the UK constabularies used social media to keep local residents updated about the riots, often responding immediately to dispel rumours and hearsay about events. For example, the Leicestershire police received positive feedback for its use of Twitter for providing real-time information on the relatively minor trouble that broke out in the city on August 9th.

However, a more pressing matter for policymakers is surely the impact that these closures might have upon members of the public who use platforms such as Twitter to source real-time information on events such as riots. While the use of Blackberry Messenger and Twitter to mobilise rioters was the subject of [much media attention](#), there was also evidence that shopkeepers following first-hand reports of riots in Hackney were able to board up their shop windows before the violence spread to their respective areas. Another positive use of social media during the riots was the creation of the riotcleanup hashtag ([@riotcleanup](#)) by members of communities affected by the violence to help organise the [clean-up of their areas](#). These acts demonstrate the rich potential of social media to generate solidarity amongst communities against anti-social behaviour and criminality in their areas.

The UK government appears to have done a u-turn on its proposals to shutdown social media during periods of civil unrest. After a recent meeting with representatives of [Facebook, RIM and Twitter](#) they have decided instead to seek closer cooperation with these service providers to obtain data about those who use them for anti-social and illegal behaviours. Yet, questions remain about how the UK government will address the socio-economic deprivation that blights many of the affected communities and the detachment from society felt by many of the young people who participated in this unrest.

This brings me back to my own work on policy responses to the use of social media by young people to organise 'recreational rioting' in Northern Ireland. Recent reports in the [Belfast Telegraph](#) have suggested that young people who live in close proximity to sectarian interfaces, the barriers between Catholic and Protestant districts that local residents often refer to as "peace walls," have used Bebo to organise street riots in contested areas of North and East Belfast, with the perpetrators often posting videos of these attacks on YouTube. [My article](#) set out to explore the level of awareness and the responses of stakeholders, such as community workers and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to the use of social media to organise these incidents of what has been called "[recreational rioting](#)," a phenomenon defined as: "clashes between young people in interface areas" that "occur out of boredom and bravado rather than having an overtly political basis."

Many media commentators would argue that the riots in English cities could be described as 'recreational'. While it would be overly simplistic to draw too many comparisons between the teenage rioters in contested areas of Belfast and those involved in last month's disturbances in England, it would be fair to say that sections of the media and political elites in both contexts tend to highlight the role of new media in the organisation of

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anti-social behaviour rather than address its root cause. What was interesting about my study was that community workers and the police downplayed the significance of social media in street riots in Belfast.

The consensus among the people I interviewed was that this form of anti-social behaviour could be organised via SMS text messaging if sites such as Bebo and Facebook were no longer available to young people situated in or around interface areas. The use of social media to organise recreational rioting in interface areas is likely to continue sporadically until such time as the causes of this anti-social behaviour are addressed in these contested geographical areas. Clearly, a similar conclusion could be reached in relation to the riots in English cities last month. While social media undoubtedly made it easier to bring people onto the streets, they didn't start the fires in London, Birmingham and Manchester in August 2011. The focus should be on the context and motivations of the rioters rather than their use of smart phones.