

New media, race and reporting the riots (guest blog)

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Polis intern Terrine Friday asks what the reporting of this summer's English riots says about British media and its attitude to both social media and social conditions such as race.

The Guardian newspaper is on a mission to do what the British government has declined to do: conduct an empirical study with the goal of detailing in an academic report how and why the pandemonium that was last summer's riots could happen in a civil society.

In a [talk called "Tweeting the riots/Reading the riots" at the LSE's inaugural Polis lecture](#) for the year, Guardian special projects editor Paul Lewis explained how Twitter is a tool that levels the playing field in terms of access and breaks down the barrier between that of the observer and the participant in a developing news story (we can infer participatory journalism).

While journalists and the public converse with each other in a public setting with no barriers to informational access, the world turns to the only place where they can get unfiltered data directly from various sources: Twitter.

"We had more intelligence at some stages, I would argue, than the police," Lewis said, calling the 2.5 million tweets clocked during the riots "a digital footprint."

So then can we call the live reporting via Blackberry to social platforms like Twitter actual journalism?

We can certainly say the mass migration from print to the online arena says something. During the riots, the Guardian hit a record 5.7 million users simply because they focused on digging for information through social media (notably Twitter and Blackberry Messenger, or BBM) from early on.

But there are drawbacks. While Lewis pointed to the benefits of reporting via social media platforms like Twitter – immediate publishing and proximity to others – he also highlighted the dreary realities facing newsrooms: fewer resources, diluted voices, lack of originality and a steady decline in readership.

The Guardian alone has a daily circulation of 260,000, down from 311,000 in 2009 and 343,000 in 2008. However their website traffic is not so far off the Daily Mail's, attributed to that same mass movement of the strongest UK papers to an online presence (or perhaps attributed to their readership preferring free online content due to the diminishing critical insight in print because of a lack of resources due to declining sales, and so on the story goes).

So we return to the critical question Lewis asked: why did the riots spread across England in otherwise unseen proportions? The Guardian's report, co-commissioned by the LSE, will seek to answer that question.

But a key question, which Lewis omitted from his presentation, is that of the racial dynamic: why is it that the reporting of the incident by The Guardian, the Daily Mail, Reuters, the Associated Press and other international media focused on the cause (police shooting of Mark Duggan, a black man) and effect (the ensuing riots), framing their stories within a specific racial dynamic?

After the dust had settled immediately following the riots, it was revealed that perpetrators, vandals, thieves and hoodlums were of all ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic classes and sexes. Most importantly, there seemed to be no relation between their illegal actions and the police shooting of Duggan.

So why did these reputable organizations not distinguish between the demonstration in Tottenham after the police shooting of Duggan and the flagrant disregard for social order across England?

Lewis told his audience "race just wasn't an issue." Ironically, the Reading the Riots report is to be modelled after

the 1967 Detroit riots survey.

Journalism is about reducing harm, especially when misconstrued information can potentially harm. Omission can be just as harmful.

William Bratten, famed for introducing his broken window theory and reducing New York City's crime during his tenure as the city's police commissioner in the 1990s, said the same night Lewis spoke at the LSE you will have less success trying to solve or understand a problem as an ends in itself; you need to understand people.

So is new media, where discourses and varying narratives are often rendered invisible while the focus rests on the spectacle, better for journalism? Or is it failing to engage people in the long run because of its need to "stick to" the purely representational?

I don't really know the answer. But maybe this can help us to understand why people don't really want to buy newspapers anymore.

This report by Polis intern Terrine Friday

Polis Media Agenda talks are every Tuesday at 5pm: details [here](#)

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