

Reporting The Riots – Paul Lewis at Polis LSE

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Paul Lewis at Polis LSE

Burning buildings, wrecked cars, raided shops, youths in hoodies wreaking havoc, and five deaths. These are the lasting images of the London Riots that went on virtually unchecked for four consecutive nights in August 2011, leaving Britain's leaders and security forces stunned. The events were no less daunting for journalists intent on reporting the events. Singled out as targets, many were attacked for merely carrying a camera.

Polis intern Faith Malmer reports on a lecture given as part of our free public Tuesday [Media Agenda Talks](#) by Paul Lewis at Polis/LSE on how he covered these extraordinary events in a cutting edge way.

When award-winning journalist Paul Lewis, Special Projects Editor for the Guardian since 2010, wanted to cover the riots he went in disguised in a hoodie. Instead of using a camera he used his mobile phone and instead of a microphone he used Twitter. The application, whose users now number over 200 million worldwide, suddenly proved crucial in providing real-time professional coverage of the events. Over a period of five nights Lewis was able to publish instant updates on the situation, earning him widespread acclaim as well as over 35,000 new followers.

But it is not Lewis' novel use of Twitter alone that has got people talking. Followers discussed the happenings amongst themselves and more importantly gave him advice that enabled him to get to the right place at the right time. "This is a whole new form of reporting", Lewis explained, later adding: "We had more intelligence at some stages than the police".

Millions of Tweets

An astonishing 2.5 million tweets were recorded during the events and make up what Lewis refers to as an "encyclopedic resource of the riots". Nowadays non-professional users are leaving digital footprints of breaking news stories from around the world. "It lends itself to collective reporting, to people who want to help", he said, describing a shift from "old-school reporting" towards a conversation with audiences who are no longer just consumers but active participants.

How then do you recognise fact and fiction? Masses of information saturate the Internet, much of it unreliable and unfiltered, but Lewis maintains that social media tools like Twitter are self-regulatory with false rumours dispelled by the "wisdom of users" as quickly as they were released.

Moreover, the issue of censorship came to the fore in the immediate aftermath of the riots as perpetrators were largely thought to have incited violence across the UK through social networks like Twitter and Facebook, but above all the untraceable Blackberry Messenger. This prompted MP David Cameron – rather controversially – to explore the possibility of introducing measures to prevent suspected criminals from accessing social networks.

The journalist's role in all this, however, has become blurred. Lewis' innovative reporting has earned him widespread acclaim but begs the question of whether professional reporters are still reliable sources of information, or is social media making them redundant?

In a time where even long-established media giants are clearly suffering from the multiple effects of a weak

economy, dwindling readership, and reduced investment, it's either adapt and innovate or face slow and painful obliteration.

Moment of Truth

Lewis sees this as a moment of truth for the media, one in which the role of the journalist is not disappearing but shifting. "One assumption is that journalists don't matter anymore because so many people are using Twitter to report happenings, but if you look at it from a historical point of view the people who have been most trusted with providing information are journalists", he explained, "Rather than lose their jobs journalists have to change their jobs".



Lewis' role in reporting the riots is a testament to this. During his five-day coverage alone the Guardian's website had over 5 million hits. The newspaper has since gained a substantial number of readers, many of whom are based in the United States.

Having explained that we need to let go of the myth of journalists as gatekeepers of information, Lewis' outlook is optimistic: "We have to reinvent ourselves. Things are not as they used to be, but this is a good thing".

Building on this Lewis is taking his role as an investigative journalist further as he teams up with Professor Tim Newburn, head of the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics, to examine the causes and effects of the UK Riots in an empirical study supported by the Open Society and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The large-scale project entitled Reading the Riots involves experts based throughout the UK, the analysis of 2.5 million Tweets, and interviews with hundreds of rioters. The study is modelled on the Detroit Experiment, a collaborative effort between the Detroit Free Press and the Michigan Institute for Social Research that aimed to explain the causes of unrest in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 Detroit Riots. Reading the Riots, which is scheduled for publication by the end of this year, is driven by an urgent need to shed light on what is surely one of the worst bouts of civil unrest London has seen in decades.

This article and the photographs by Polis intern reporter Faith Malmer

Polis holds free public lectures by media practitioners every Tuesday at 5pm at LSE – details of speakers in October and November [here](#).

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