

The social media pleasure of a riot

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Unsocial Acts

One of the overlooked elements in assessing behaviour is pleasure. Ask people why they use social media, even for quite functional tasks, and it's clear they enjoy the actual process of typing, swiping, beeping and clicking. Put that together with a dramatic event and social media helps turn enjoyment into excitement. You see it at work (or in play) at sports events, music festivals or even watching Newsnight. And perhaps riots, too.

The English riots have been caused and catalysed by a whole range of social and economic factors and a specific set of topical circumstances provide the setting. But we do forget that for some people this is the most exciting thing they will ever do and that is partly why they are prepared to break

normal restraints.

Mobiles, texting, BBM, Facebook, Twitter and the rest clearly [added pace and power](#) to the whirl of high-speed, socialised, personalised communication that helped organise and celebrate the appalling acts of anti-social violence. Talk to young people – either innocent or complicit in the riots – and they exude the excitement that social media brought to their experience of the last few days.

(If you are going to look for a media factor here, though, I suspect TV was as much of a driver, especially for the spread of copycat events across the country.)

In a sense the rioters using social media were only doing what we celebrated when it happened in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab Uprisings. As [I have written before](#), social media didn't create those political actions but it certainly helped them to scale up and to spread. It also showed how 'weak ties' through social media can create powerful movements.

However, those movements are more diffuse and harder to control. Which can make them more potent for democratic activists, but also, I suspect, for people trying to burn down or loot their local sports clothing store.

I don't want to push this analogy too far in detail because the circumstances are so wildly different. And the role of media of any kind is significant but hardly critical in the case of the English riots.

As [others have reported](#), there is also a very positive side to social media around these disturbances as people use Twitter and Facebook to heal and bond damaged communities. I am sure those using the new online tools for these progressive acts will get a lot of pleasure and even excitement out of the process, too. It's much more fun and often more effective than the boring old-fashioned methods such as public meetings in draughty council halls.

It all reminds us that technology is pretty much morally neutral. They are tools of us to use for good or ill. But I think we do have to keep in mind the actual pleasure of their use.

For the rioters it made a very exciting event even more thrilling. It gave them a way of sharing and controlling their violence. Just like football hooligans who love the culture of their transgressive crime, the rioters enjoy the pleasure that their (un-) social media use brings.

It's up to the rest of us to promote the positive role of communications. We are going to need a healthy media

around these issues if we are going to have a full and realistic debate about the causes and possible cures for what went wrong.

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