There's a riot going on
Media, young people and the 2011 riots

I wrote this article for the Media Magazine (targeted at 16-18 year old students) in the wake of the 2011 riots. It tries to apply Media Studies 'key concepts' to make sense of the media coverage; but it also makes a broader argument about the marketing and circulation of opinions in contemporary media.

In August of this year, a wave of civil disturbances spread across Britain's inner cities. Following a peaceful demonstration against the death of a black man, Mark Duggan, at the hands of the police in Tottenham in North London, police officers beat a teenage protester on the street. The disorder that ensued subsequently spread to other areas of the capital and thence to most of England's major cities. Newspapers, TV screens and the internet were flooded with reports and images of crowds rampaging through the streets, setting buildings and vehicles alight, fighting with police and smashing and looting from shops.

How might media students make sense of this enormous outpouring of media coverage and commentary? What might an analysis of this material tell us about media representations, about media effects, and about the role of the media in public debate?

Representing young people

A good starting point is to look at the language that was used to describe what took place. To talk about 'riots' rather than, for example, 'civil disturbances' or 'unrest' - or even 'uprisings' or 'protests' - immediately defines the meaning of the events in particular ways. The word riot suggests something wild and unrestrained, something fundamentally irrational that cannot be explained. The riots, we were told, were simply an 'orgy of brutality', in which people appeared to lose all rational control.

In particular, it's interesting to look at how the participants were described. In most of the media coverage, the rioters were consistently and repeatedly identified as *young* people. These were the 'feral youth', the 'hoodies' and 'yobs' who apparently rampage uncontrolled in our cities, bent simply on destruction for its own sake.

This was reinforced by the selection of images – and perhaps especially by the iconic image of one black, hooded young man which appeared on at least five front pages following the first day of the disturbances (and in many reports since then). The newspapers consistently featured large, dramatic images of what the *Daily Mirror* called 'young thugs with fire in their eyes and nothing but destruction on their mind', or the *Daily Express* called simply 'flaming morons'.

The spectre of the mob, of marauding gangs, of the violent underclass, has a long history; although in the Conservatives' account of the social collapse of 'Broken Britain',

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these fears have taken on a new urgency. These young people, we were told, had not been sufficiently socialised: they were led simply by a kind of 'childish destructiveness'.

In fact, many of the people ultimately convicted for crimes during the rioting were by no means young. Youth offending, youth detention and reoffending have declined in recent years. Meanwhile, just a few weeks later, young people achieved record passes in their GCSE and A-level exams. The young people involved in the riots were obviously a small minority. Yet in much of the media coverage, they came to stand for young people – or particular categories of young people - in general.

There is obviously a class dimension to these representations. The feral youth imagined by the politicians and the headline writers are implicitly working-class. In his recent book *Chavs*, Owen Jones points to the emergence of a new form of class contempt in modern Britain. The working class, he argues, has become an object of fear and ridicule, not just in this kind of media coverage but also in popular figures such as *Little Britain*'s Vicky Pollard and Catherine Tate's 'Am I bovvered?' character.

Again, this is despite the fact that many of those ultimately convicted after the rioting were in respectable middle-class jobs, or from wealthy backgrounds. There were incredulous press reports of an estate agent, an Oxford graduate, a teachers' assistant, a ballerina and an army recruit – not to mention a doctor's daughter, an Olympic ambassador and a church minister's son – who all appeared in court. 'A star pupil from £1m home. How did she end up in the dock?' wondered the *Daily Mail*.

To some extent, race was also an issue – and it was certainly implicit in the media's selection of images. Clearly, there was a racial dimension to the events that initially sparked the disturbances; but while many of those involved were black, a great many were not. The question of whether these were 'race riots' was hotly debated in the black press, although the issue of race was ignored or disavowed in much of the mainstream coverage, as if it were somehow too awkward to discuss.

These kinds of images of young people are unfortunately typical of much news media coverage. A 2005 IPSOS/MORI survey found that 40% of newspaper articles featuring young people focused on violence, crime or anti-social behaviour; and that 71% could be described as having a negative tone. Research conducted at Brunel University during 2006 found that television news reports of young people focused overwhelmingly either on celebrities such as footballers or (most frequently) on violent crime; while young people accounted for only 1% of the sources for interviews and opinions across the whole sample.

A more recent study by the organisation Women in Journalism analysed over 7,000 stories involving teenage boys, published in online, national and regional newspapers during 2008. 72% of the stories were negative – more than twenty times the number of positive stories (3.4%). Over 75% were about crime, drugs, or police: the great majority of these were negative (81.5%) while only a handful were positive (0.3%). Even for the minority of stories on other topics such as education, sport and entertainment, there were many more negative than positive stories (42% versus 13%). Many of the stories

about teenage boys described them using disparaging words such as yobs, thugs, sick, feral, hoodies, louts, heartless, evil, frightening and scum. A few stories described individual teenage boys in glowing terms – model student, angel, or 'every mother's perfect son' – but, without exception, these were all about boys who had met an untimely death.

There is a history to these representations too. In his classic study *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, first published in 1972, Stan Cohen analysed media coverage of an earlier generation of 'riots' – the pitched battles between gangs of mods and rockers (and the police) on beaches in the South of England in mid-1960s. Cohen argues that the media talked up the disturbances into a bigger 'moral panic'. In a moral panic, he writes:

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

Cohen also argues that the media play a role in 'deviance amplification': in reporting the phenomenon, and in expressing the fear and outrage of 'respectable society', they make it more attractive to those who might not otherwise have thought about becoming involved.

None of this, of course, is to excuse the behaviour that took place this summer. Nor is to suggest that it was harmless. The media did not simply *mis*represent what happened, and 'moral panics' are not just irrational responses. Media stereotypes are never simply inaccurate: they always contain a 'grain of truth'. Yet in this case, the media coverage can be seen to reflect a much more general fear of young people (and especially of working class young people) that is very common among many adults: the media speak to anxieties that many people already have.

This fear is not confined to adults, though. The Women in Journalism study also interviewed 1000 teenage boys, and found that 29% of them often or always felt wary when they saw other teenage boys they did not know. Media stories about teenagers were identified as the single biggest reason for this wariness (51%) although both personal experience (40%) and the experience of people the respondent knew (also 40%) were almost as important. 79% also felt that adults were slightly or much more wary of teenage boys than they had been a year earlier.

The media in the riots

As this implies, the role of the media here isn't straightforward. However, when we look at how media commentators themselves talked about this, we find a much simpler story. Much of the blame for the violence was put on popular culture: it was rap music,

violent computer games or reality TV that was somehow provoking young people to go out and start rioting.

The *Daily Mirror*, for example, blamed 'the pernicious culture of hatred around rap music, which glorifies violence and loathing of authority (especially the police but including parents), exalts trashy materialism and raves about drugs'. Others suggested that the looting of sportswear shops had been inflamed by advertising – it was like *Supermarket Sweep*, said the *Daily Mail*; while images of looters posing for the cameras and displaying their pickings were seen as evidence of the narcissism and consumerism of the '*Big Brother* and *X Factor* generation'.

As Stan Cohen and later researchers have shown, blaming the media is a common aspect of moral panics. In fact, there's a very long history of the media being blamed for young people's misbehaviour, which can be tracked back from current concerns about videogames or the internet to earlier fears about the influence of television and the cinema, to debates about music hall and popular literature in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the earliest example of this is the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who proposed to exclude the dramatic poets from his ideal Republic on the grounds that they had a harmful influence on the young.

In this case, however, there was a new dimension in the form of social networking. Despite being depicted as mindless thugs and morons, the rioters were also seen as somehow skilful enough to co-ordinate their actions by using Facebook, Blackberry and Twitter. The *Sun*, for example, reported that 'THUGS used social network Twitter to orchestrate the Tottenham violence and incite others to join in as they sent messages urging: "Roll up and loot"'.

According to the *Telegraph*, 'technology fuelled Britain's first 21st century riot. The Tottenham riots were orchestrated by teenage gang members, who used the latest mobile phone technology to incite and film the looting and violence. Gang members used Blackberry smart-phones designed as a communications tool for high-flying executives to organise the mayhem.'

A very similar argument was used in media debates about the 'Arab spring' earlier this year: there was much discussion about the use of social networking in the revolutions that took place (and are continuing) in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Syria – although in those instances, this was generally interpreted by the Western media as a positive thing.

These observations in turn caused some – such as Tottenham MP David Lammy – to call for companies like Blackberry to suspend their services. Some even argued – quite absurdly – that the police might be empowered to 'turn off the internet' at the first sign of trouble.

Here again, the media were identified as a primary cause of what took place – as through riots and revolutions were simply created by the use of technology. But of

course there have been riots and revolutions long before the electronic media came along.

Furthermore, as Evgeny Morozov argues in his recent book *The Net Delusion*, media and technology can also be used by authorities as means of surveillance and control. As in the earlier demonstrations this year about education cuts, the police were able to use social networking sites to monitor the plans and movements of protestors. It's also worth noting here the use of CCTV (Britain has the highest penetration of CCTV cameras in the world), and indeed of 'rolling' 24-hour news channels, as means of surveillance. As many of the rioters subsequently found out to their cost, their actions were carried out under the watching eye of a whole range of media.

The rise of the 'commentariat'

Of course, there are many possible interpretations and explanations of these events; but there are some further questions to be asked about the media's role in promoting debate and circulating opinion.

Many media researchers have looked at how social issues are 'framed'. By putting a frame around a particular issue, the media draw it to our attention; but while the frame includes some things, it always excludes others. In framing issues, the media define them in particular ways; and in the process, they may or may not help us to understand what is going on.

Often, as Stan Cohen implies in his definition of a moral panic, there is a struggle for 'ownership' of the issue. Different people – politicians, community leaders, media commentators, 'experts' - offer different accounts of what is happening; although they often receive most attention if they can come up with simple explanations, and propose simple solutions. Yet how they do this often reflects their own social or political interests: the issue becomes an opportunity for them to get much broader points across, and to promote their own views.

In the case of this summer's disturbances, there was a veritable tsunami of such commentary in the press, on the television and online. Perhaps understandably, politicians of all persuasions were keen to use the opportunity to promote their own agendas; but they were joined in this by a large group of journalists and other pundits – what some now refer to as the 'commentariat'. Prominent among them are newspaper columnists, who are also frequently interviewed on radio and television and run their own blogs or websites.

Such people are hardly ever experts on what they are discussing – on the contrary, their main qualification appears to be their ability to spout strong opinions about anything and everything at a moment's notice. Most commentators are more than ready to rush to publication well before the facts have been established.

Just one example of this came in a column written by the right-wing ex-teacher Katharine Birbalsingh, who is now making a successful career as a blogger and newspaper columnist. In her *Daily Telegraph* column, Birbalsingh alleged that the Tottenham man Mark Duggan had fired at the police; although when the facts subsequently proved otherwise, there was no retraction.

In today's media, this kind of instant commentary has proliferated, and ordinary people are much more able to become involved than was the case before. While channels for public debate have long been available through radio phone-ins and the letters columns of newspapers, new media have created many more opportunities for people to have their say. In this case, the web forums (not least of newspapers and broadcasters) were overflowing with opinions, while an army of bloggers and tweeters effectively created a running commentary on events as they unfolded.

Some media scholars like Henry Jenkins tend to celebrate these kinds of 'participatory' media; while some even see this as evidence of a wholesale democratisation of the communications system. The age of 'Big Media' - of powerful, centralised corporations controlling media – is now finished, they argue: hierarchical, top-down communications have been replaced by a more egalitarian approach.

Yet others would argue that these new media are simply providing more opportunities for ignorant people to mouth off about whatever happens to have annoyed them that day. Certainly, when one looks at some of the online forums that followed the disturbances, it would seem that we are now living in a world of instant opinion – and indeed instant abuse and bigotry. In new as well as old media, the strength of one's opinions, and the speed of one's response to events, seems to count for everything. It's though everyone from the Archbishop of Canterbury through to your local minicab driver is expected and required to wade in with an immediate response.

Yet very few of these commentators have any direct experience of the events they are talking about, or of living in the kinds of areas concerned. People introduced as 'experts' often seem to have very little relevant expertise, or any valid evidence to back up their opinions.

Instant explanations

In this case, we can identify two contrasting explanations, broadly speaking on different ends of the political spectrum. For those on the political right, the riots represented some kind of judgment about our civilisation as a whole. This is the story of 'Broken Britain' – the claim that we are living in a fractured society that is rapidly spiralling down into anarchy. According to such commentators, the riots reflected a collapse of moral values, a failure of discipline, and a sense that society has 'gone soft'.

Probably the most astonishing example of this argument came in an article by Max Hastings of the *Daily Mail*, headed 'Years of liberal dogma have spawned a generation of amoral, uneducated, unparented, welfare dependent, brutalised youngsters'. As this

suggests, Hastings' main target is 'liberal' (that is, left-wing) values, and particularly the idea of the welfare state: too much permissiveness, he argues, has bred a generation of young people with no respect for their elders and betters, and no 'moral compass'.

Such young people – by which Hastings primarily means working-class youth – apparently live lives of 'absolute futility':

> They are essentially wild beasts. I use that phrase advisedly, because it seems appropriate to young people bereft of the discipline that might make them employable; of the conscience that distinguishes between right and wrong. They respond only to instinctive animal impulses — to eat and drink, have sex, seize or destroy the accessible property of others…
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> The depressing truth is that at the bottom of our society is a layer of young people with no skills, education, values or aspirations. They do not have what most of us would call 'lives': they simply exist. They are products of a culture which gives them so much unconditionally that they are let off learning how to become human beings… My dogs are better behaved and subscribe to a higher code of values than the young rioters of Tottenham, Hackney, Clapham and Birmingham.

For some right-wing commentators, it is parents who are principally to blame for this situation; while others, such as Katharine Birbalsingh, blame schools for failing to instil discipline and respect for authority – especially, according to her, in black children. For some, this failure even extends to the police – as for one *Daily Telegraph* letter writer, who argued that the riots were 'a result of the police caring more for community relations than for the rule of law'.

Framing the issue in this way, as a failure of discipline, thus inevitably leads to a call for disciplinary responses. During the disturbances themselves, such commentators were calling for the use of water cannon and plastic bullets (or in some cases, real ones). Subsequently, there have been many calls for punitive sentences, some of which are still being fought through in the courts. These include the case of the person jailed for six months for stealing a bottle of water, or the two jailed for four years for inciting a riot via Facebook – a riot which never actually took place.

More generally, there have been proposals for curfew zones specifically for teenagers; and in some instances whole families are to be deprived of benefit or evicted from their council homes. And perhaps predictably, there have been calls for the reintroduction of compulsory national service in the army, and for troops to be brought in as teachers in schools.

If this way of framing the issue is favoured by the political right, those on the left tend to prefer economic explanations. From this point of view, the riots were primarily about poverty and inequality.

Such commentators point out that the UK has one of highest levels of inequality in the Western world. They argue that it was hardly a surprise that most of the disturbances erupted in areas with high levels of poverty and deprivation – and, they point out, it was tragic that these communities also bore the brunt of the damage.

More specifically, they point to the cuts in youth services (Haringey, the borough in which Tottenham is located, recently closed 8 of its 13 youth clubs), rising youth unemployment (which is now over 20% in the 18-25 age group) and the removal of the Education Maintenance Allowance. While these are valid arguments, they also appear to look only to *youth* as the cause.

Much more generally, there are those who see capitalism itself as the problem. Peter Oborne (writing, surprisingly enough, in the right-wing *Daily Telegraph*) was one of many to make the link between the rioters and the bankers and politicians. The rioting, he argued,

> … cannot be dissociated from the moral disintegration in the highest ranks of modern British society… It has become acceptable for our politicians to lie and to cheat… the sad young men and women, without hope or aspiration, who have caused such mayhem and chaos over the past few days… have this defence: they are just following the example set by senior and respected figures in society.

Others, like Dan Hind on Al Jazeera, argued that the government's decision to bail out the banks was indicative of 'a social and political order that rewards vandalism and the looting of public property, so long as the perpetrators are sufficiently rich and powerful'.

In the same vein, some commentators have pointed to the vandalism carried out by politicians such as David Cameron and Boris Johnson as young members of the Bullingdon Club at Oxford University; while others have pointed to the fact that Nick Clegg was convicted of arson in his youth – bringing the accusation of hypocrisy rather closer to home.

As readers can probably tell, I am much more sympathetic to this kind of explanation – although I very much doubt whether most of the people who were happily looting Foot Locker saw themselves as being engaged in some kind of political struggle, or even as responding to police harassment.

Whose voices?

Ultimately, we can come to our own conclusions on such matters. The central issue for media students here, it seems to me, is to do with how far the media contribute to – or actually prevent – public understanding. Do the ways in which the media frame and represent such issues really help us to make sense of what happened?

On all sides of the media debate, there was a rush to instant judgment – or at least instant opinion. Advocates of participatory media would see this as indicative of healthy

public dialogue. Personally, I feel there is a risk that more considered and thoughtful responses will be marginalised.

However, thoughtful responses are not always to be found where we might expect them. For example, when the producers of BBC2's *Newsnight* invited the eminent Tudor historian Professor David Starkey to discuss the riots, they might have been hoping for a considered historical perspective. What they got was a fairly astonishing diatribe about how 'the chavs, the whites are now black', and about gangsta rap – a topic on which he clearly knew nothing at all. Starkey also invoked the racist Tory politician Enoch Powell's prediction that immigration would result in 'rivers of blood' in Britain's cities.

Starkey's remarks were challenged by the other guests, and subsequently by a large number of other academics (as well as some skilful mash-up artists on YouTube). Of course, there are questions about whether such people should have the right to express such views: we could see this as a matter of freedom of speech, or as one of the incitement to racial hatred.

But perhaps the more challenging question, and the one to be asked by media students, is why the media see it as appropriate to give space to people who – whatever other expertise they may have – clearly have none whatsoever in the area they are supposed to be discussing. The danger is that we end up simply shouting at each other, without ever stopping to listen.

Making sense of 'riots'

The murder of Mark Duggan and the subsequent treatment of his family by the police clearly did spark the disturbances in Tottenham - especially coming on top of hundreds of earlier deaths in police custody (there have been 330 since 1998, disproportionately of black people). But it doesn't explain what happened over the ensuing days in places much further afield – or indeed why rioting did *not* happen in places where it might have been predicted.

We need to explain why people suddenly seem to want to step beyond the boundaries of the law – why they *choose* to act in this way. Accusing them simply of 'brutality', or of being 'animals' or 'morons', does not help with this.

Social scientists who have looked at this area know that 'riots' – or civil disturbances - are unusual events, with complex causes. What some call a riot, others call an uprising – and often those who are involved have a wide range of different motivations. Riots are sometimes sparked by specific events, but in other cases they appear to be almost arbitrary and spontaneous.

Riots may well have deep-seated social causes; but there is often an emotional element – even a kind of adrenaline rush. There may be a copycat effect (which is similar to Cohen's idea of 'deviance amplification'): people may respond to rumours or media coverage of riots in other areas by seeking to 'make their mark' in the media. There may

also be an element of opportunism, as people take the chance to indulge in behaviour that would normally be taboo.

History can also tell us much about the origins of riots. Much of the media coverage this summer looked back to the inner-city disturbances that took place in many of the same areas in 1981 – and which were clearly a response to police harassment. But there have also been riots more recently in the poor suburbs of French cities, in Los Angeles, in Denmark, and even on the beaches of Sydney, Australia. Each of these had their own complicated history and causes, but each of them was about much more than 'feral youth'.

So 'riots' are complex events that vary across history and across different cultures. Yet in this case, amid all the coverage and commentary, the media gave us very little opportunity to think in any more considered way about *why* they were happening.

Above all, amid all the voices that were raised and all the instant opinions that were offered, we heard hardly anything from the people who were involved, or who were closest to what was happening – although of course there are some who would argue that these are precisely the people who have no right to speak in the first place.

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