Mobs and mobiles – the “dark side” of social media

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The August 2011 UK riots

The riots last year took everyone by surprise. True, tension had been building for some time, around cuts and the rise in tuition fees; but few would have expected the biggest outburst of civil unrest in thirty years. Civil violence occurred in multiple places at the same time, and quickly spread from Greater London to other cities. The police seemed to have lost control of the streets, and it took time before the country returned to quiet.

Since the beginning, a distinctive feature of the riots seemed to be the massive use of digital communication technologies, particularly mobile phone message systems (like the BlackBerry Messenger) and social media (like Facebook or Twitter). Technology apparently facilitated collective action on an unprecedented scale, allowing to gather, move around and disperse many people very rapidly, way beyond the capacity of older communication systems.

Digital technologies and social media: tools of liberation or tools of social conflict?

The power of communication technologies and social media was already apparent in the height of the Arab Spring, a few months before. Social media were instrumental to the coordination of protesters in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries in their efforts to overthrow local dictators: they helped recruit activists, communicate, and raise awareness among the population. In that context, social media were praised as vehicles of liberation and democracy; but in the midst of the UK riots, with chaos in the streets of England, the very same power of social media to bring people together appeared much scarier. When visiting Egypt in February 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron welcomed the country’s transition to democratic rule and encouraged "reform, not repression"; but in August, he said that "when people are using social media for violence we need to stop them".

So, are digital technologies and social media good or bad? Can they really produce such massive effects? And if so, how do they work?

As a social scientist, I felt the urge to address these difficult questions. It is part of our job, I believe, to understand social phenomena as they unfold and inform public debate -even, or perhaps especially, in emergencies or disruptive situations. So, with a colleague, we immediately put ourselves to work. We did not follow the standard process of research: refining analyses, submitting to a scientific peer-reviewed journal and waiting patiently for publication years later. A rapid response was needed. So we released our results as we obtained them, bit by bit, on our blogs, on Twitter and on open online repositories, inviting comments and engaging in dialogue with readers.

The starting point of our reflection was that social media themselves can't possibly give rise to riots or protests. Internet penetration is low in many Arab countries; only 21% of Egyptian households had broadband access last year. Yet demonstrators obtained wide support from the
population. But what about the UK, where 82.5 % of the population are connected, through mobile phones or the likes of Facebook and Twitter?

**A message is not just content - it's a social tie**

Let's take an example. The BlackBerry Messenger is a tool that allows users to send one-to-many messages to their network of contacts. Because it is cheap, easily accessible and relatively secure, it is believed to have been significantly used during the riots. On 7th August 2011, a Sunday, a message circulated very widely:

"Everyone in edmonton enfield wood green everywhere in north link up at enfield town station at 4 o clock sharp!"

There was indeed much disorder afterward at Enfield. Other such messages were sent out, and some of their authors were later caught and convicted. But not all those messages circulated as extensively; some were followed by action just as at Enfield, some much less, or not at all. Why these differences?

It's not just the *content* of the message that produces an effect: it may or may not do so, depending on the *network* of relationships in which it flows. Who sends it, who receives it, and who forwards it? Social networking is not like TV: it does not simply beam a message into the air. To be touched by the stream of communications, you have to belong in the “right” circle of relationships. Just owning a BlackBerry device is not enough. I, for one, did not belong to such social circles... and read that message only two days later in a newspaper! But suppose for an instant you had received that message, on that Sunday morning: would you really go to the gathering, in the afternoon? Even if you agreed in principle (let's suppose so for the sake of the exercise!), you wouldn't go if you didn't trust the sender of the message: you want to be sure that the message is genuine, that there will be a lot of other people. You don't want to be there alone: the risk of arrest would be too high, and it would make little sense anyway. It's your relationship to the sender that matters here.

Then, you have to decide whether to re-send the message to your own contacts, and you would probably be very selective –you would avoid getting it into the hands of your boss, for example. Here, it's your relationship to your recipients that is crucial. In short, messages do not spread through social media automatically but flow through people's ties, and these ties shape their movements.

Can we tell, then, how people's social relationships look like?

**Ego-centred networks**

Social science offers a simple tool to do so, known as "ego-centred networks". Just imagine a set of concentric circles in the shape of a target, and position yourself in the centre. Then, add the people you know (your friends, relatives, colleagues, schoolmates, neighbours) and position them around you. Place your closest friends or family next to you, within the inner circle: they are your "strong ties". Then, place in the outer circles the people you know less well: your "weak" ties. You can enrich the picture by drawing ties between the persons who know each other (for example, if two of your friends are in a romantic relationship), and you can group them together: for example, you can distinguish those whom you talk to at school, those with whom you practice sports, and so on.

In a situation of civil violence, which of these ties would you activate? Whom among these people would you listen to, and whom would you send messages to?
The "strength of weak ties", revisited

Sociologist Mark Granovetter wrote an influential paper in 1973 about the benefits of tapping into one's weak ties. If you are strongly tied to someone else, then your friends will also be tied to their friends and all of you will share the same knowledge and information: Alice will tell you what you already know from Bob. Surprises are unlikely, and few new opportunities will arise. Instead, weak ties connect individuals and groups that would otherwise have no links with each other. A friend from primary school whom you have just found on Facebook after many years. Your cousin who lives in another city. These ties are more likely to channel new information: your cousin may tell you things that are unknown to your friends next door. It is through weak ties that people find jobs, discover new music, and even find the best deals for a car or a house.

A similar mechanism applies to rioters. How? Via what we can call the "vision" of a person. Without mobile phones, Internet and social media, you would probably only see your immediate surroundings, that is, the inner circles in your ego-centred network, containing your strong ties. But with social media, the diameter of your vision can easily and inexpensively increase and include the outer circles too, reaching out to your weak ties. This way, you can quickly become aware of what happens 1, 5 or 50 miles away. Information is richer, coverage is more extensive and reactions can be immediate: things can propagate much more rapidly than they used to.

This means social media give rioters more vision, so to speak, by helping them reap the benefits of their weak ties. Less close persons provide rioters with a finer awareness of their environments and give them an advantage relative to the police. This mechanism operates in different contexts, whether there are more explicit political contents and demands (like the Arab Spring) or less clearly so (like the UK riots).

So, it's true that social media don't cause riots, but they still make a difference. They empower participants by leveraging on their social relationships.

Social influence

Now, when people get the information through their networks, do they act upon it? Consider again that BlackBerry message about Enfield:

"... link up at enfield town station at 4 o clock sharp!"

Did all those who read this message join in? How many just disregarded it, deleted it, or perhaps replied "are you mad"? To answer these questions, we need another social science notion, that of "social influence". People change their behaviours through their social relationships: those who stay together tend to think and act alike. This happens for different reasons, from persuasion and imitation to the sharing of common norms and values. That doesn't mean anyone who is told about a riot will participate; one may also be influenced not to. For example, a man who was interviewed by a researcher from the London School of Economics said about his girlfriend:

"I had my shoes and coat on ready to go too, but she's the reason I didn't. [...] She wouldn't let me past the front door. She's a hero... lots of [my friends] are now in jail."

It's not just joining or not joining: a third type of influences that played an important role during the riots, were those that incited to clean up the streets and support victims of the violence. They came from people who thought there were serious grievances underlying the
riots and that simply staying at home would not help sort things out, but that there could be non-violent ways to voice these grievances. Social media offered them a quick and easy promotion tool: on Monday 8th August (after the Enfield eruption), a Twitter campaign tagged #riotcleanup rapidly became the top trending topic in the UK. A Facebook group called "Post riot clean-up: let's help London" received a lot of "likes", and a collaborative wiki listed time and location of scheduled cleanup events. News organisations and individual journalists contributed to the visibility of these initiatives.

So which of these contrasting messages would one listen to? Again, it depends on strong and weak ties. Strongly tied groups tend to have the same behaviours because they are subject to the same influences: that is, rioters are usually strongly tied to others who are also rioting. However through their weak ties, they may also be touched by different influences and may change their behaviours. Many stopped the violence when they felt their communities were turning decidedly against it.

Would a ban on social media restore quiet?

What happens, then, if the government shut down communication networks, and specifically social media? Egypt destitute dictator Hosni Mubarak did so in an unsuccessful attempt at surviving the protests; in UK, David Cameron considered such a measure, but did not implement it. To understand the consequences, remember the notion of "vision", the capacity of people to scan their social network of both strong and weak ties. A media shutdown is the same as narrowing vision: people lose sight of their weak ties and are less able to appreciate their environment. Obviously, this destroys the advantage of rioters relative to the police. But taking out weak ties also means isolating rioters: they remain linked only to their strongly tied others who are also rioting, are less likely to be reached by different influences and don't change their behaviour. The effects on non-rioters may be even worse as they are deprived of crucial information (on how to move around safely, for example) and have fewer opportunities to engage in constructive initiatives (like clean-ups). In short, the likely scenario is that violence persists, while the self-healing forces of society slow down.

Policy choices

So what are the most appropriate policy responses?

If society contains its own anti-bodies, then it is best to let them operate as smoothly as possible. Make sure the more constructive influences spread widely. Use social media to this purpose and remember that they work both ways, to speak and to listen. They are most effective when they enable different voices to be heard, and offer a unique opportunity to get a sense of people's views and to take their problems on board. That's not just the job of the police but should involve different public services, together with local communities, civil society organisations, and I would add, perhaps us researchers.