Chapter Title: The Language of the Unheard: *Social Media and Riot Subculture/s*

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the relationships between social media, subculture identity and riots. In 2011 riots in Bristol (UK) attracted global media coverage. These riots were one of the first in the UK where social media played a significant role. Social media was used during the riot to disseminate information about when and where riots were taking pace and how the events were developing. The emergence of a '*riot subculture*' that uses social media has become an easy target for politicians looking for causes of riots. This research does not find evidence for social media as a tool for the instigation of riots. Instead the research points to the more complex inter-relationship between social media and riot subcultures. Social media provides an alternative unofficial record of history as it unfolds; this alternative is no more accurate or unbiased than the official version, but provides an important counterpoint to the formal record. Social media has facilitated a production of knowledge that reflects the views of riot subculture that is often allied with a rejection of mainstream media and a looser alliance with a subversive ideology. The battle for power is the real riot; this power struggle is manifest most obviously in the violent actions in the streets, but equally the challenging of existing power relations occurs through social media.

Keywords: Riot, subculture, social media, knowledge production, urbanism.

INTRODUCTION

'Around 10pm on Thursday 21st April, people from Stokes Croft and St Pauls in Bristol, reacting to blatant provocation, started attacking riot police gathered from three different forces with glass bottles' (Bristol Anarchist Federation, 2011).

Riots took place in Bristol in 2011; the events began early on 21st April and lasted until the early hours of the 22nd April. Much of an inner-city area in Bristol was blocked by hundreds of protestors, demonstrators and onlookers as well as a large police presence. Whilst the daytime was relatively peaceful, in the evening there were a series of violent exchanges between police and protestors. The violent episodes involved 'riot vans, police in full riot gear with shields.' (@pearcafe, 2011a); 'stone and fireworks being thrown at the [police] vans, bins being set on fire' (efergan, 2011) and 'wheelie bins on fire… a police landrover was trashed, with paint tipped all over it and people trying to pull the doors off' (McCarthy, 2011). Police and protestors clashed for several hours which left dozens of people injured as well as damage to buildings and cars in the area.

Many people filmed and photographed events then uploaded this information via social media, along with tweets and other text-based commentaries on the events: 'ripped all the photos over to my laptop, blogged an image' (Taphouse, 2011). Commentary, films and photographs uploaded onto social media real-time were watched by (more) people online who subsequently posted their own interpretation of events. Social media was used by individuals to keep informed about the riots as initially there was little or no information on media 'seems the only good source of information for what's going down in Bristol right now is the #stokescroft hashtag' (@robjmills, 2011). So important was the role of social media that one blogger suggested that 'it all started on social media: #bristol's #stokescroft riots' (Beleaga, 2011). Even when mainstream media did carry news of the events, mostly the day following the events, many people preferred to source their information from social media.

This research examines the relationships between social media, subculture identity and riots. The first part of the chapter briefly contextualizes the key terms within existing literature and then situates the events, in terms of existing social, urban, economic and political context, in the specifics of this inner-city location. The term

'*riot subculture*' is adopted here to loosely ascribe those individuals and groups who express support, or sympathy, for these riots and/or riots more generally. The second part of the chapter draws on empirical research concerning the April 2011 riots that broke out in Stokes Croft, an inner-city part of Bristol UK. The findings show how individuals and groups produce knowledge about the riots that differ on alternative forms of media. The portrayal of the riot varies significantly between mainstream media and social media. Two representations emerge: the 'official representation' of the police which is echoed by mainstream media; and 'unofficial representation' which rejects the official view and provides a variety of alternative perspectives of the events. There is an appendix at the end of the chapter detailing the methodological issues raised in this research.

What is social media?

Social media is a widely used (and abused) term that refers to myriad forms of digital communication. Social media enables users to create and share textual information and visual data such as photographs and video footage (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013). Communications can be shared between friends and groups with common interests but can be disseminated to strangers (and can be anonymously created). All social media operates over the Internet or other digital communication networks. Social media is accessed from personal computers and laptops as well as portable devices such as mobile phones and tablets. Social media can be described as the 'many relatively inexpensive and widely accessible electronic tools that enable anyone to publish and access information collaborate on a common effort, or build relationships' (Murthy, 2013). There are many different providers of social media sites and applications, however those most commonly used in this context are: Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube. Whilst there are differences between the platforms, all enable users to upload, 'post' or 'tweet' information (textual information and/or visual material) online. Social media as a popular, global phenomenon began in earnest in the mid-to-late 2000s.

Social media and social unrest

'Everyone watching these horrific actions will be struck by how they were organised via social media' British Prime Minister: David Cameron (cited in Halliday, 2011)).

Social media has played a significant role in situations of urban and social unrest, protests, riots and revolutions (Procter, 2013). The 'Arab Spring' is perhaps the best-known example of political unrest related to social media (Howard et al, 2012). Starting in 2010, a series of demonstrations, protests and riots erupted across much of the Arab World. The protests involved marches, strikes, rallies, street protests and the occupation of major public spaces (Rice, 2013). Social media was used to organise, disseminate and raise awareness of these events. The virality of these social media practices concerned the governing regimes. States attempted censorship and blackouts of social media such was their fear of the role of social media in promulgating these events. The role of social media is particularly pertinent in this context because much of the mainstream media was state controlled (Hearns-Branaman, 2012). Social media enabled the production and publishing of content that was prohibited through traditional media channels. In the same way, social media is linked directly to riots in the UK. The term 'Facebook riot' was used by national newspapers in relation to an incitement to riot (Bowcott & Clifton, 2011; Whitehead & Bunyan, 2011). The August 2011 riots in the UK were dubbed the 'Blackberry Riots' due to the role of the Blackberry[1] messaging service being the communication system used by organizers of some of the lootings (Lewis et al, 2011).

The production of knowledge

Social media permits individuals and groups to publish with (almost) no censorship or controls. Users can create, harvest or produce knowledge and disseminate online via social media. Social media enables the production of knowledge outside of traditional or mainstream media. It is argued that traditional media mostly involves the 'consumption' of knowledge with television viewers or newspaper readers passive consumers (Debord, 1983). The shift from consumption of knowledge to production of knowledge is considered to be a significant change brought about by social media (Schmidt, 2013). Perhaps one of the most innovative aspects of 'user generated content' is the ability to produce content collectively. Users and groups can work

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[1] Blackberry is the generic trademark name of a mobile phone manufacturer.

together in a 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2006) to produce an account of an event or a shared interest. Schmidt (2013:4), the CEO of Google, defines the importance of this shift in production as: 'the largest experiment involving anarchy in history'. Anarchy is defined here, not as chaos and disorder, but as a system of self-government in the absence of a controlling authority (Chomsky, 2013). The notion of anarchy echoes much of the commentary in relation to the riot subcultures (examined further in the next part of this chapter).

Social media differs from traditional media, such as newspapers and television in that the content is created outside of large institutions and organisations. According to Schmidt (2003:4) social media: 'will make it possible for almost everybody to own, develop and disseminate real-time content without having to rely on intermediaries'. The absence of intermediaries is also seen as removing powerful corporate or political bias from knowledge production. Newspapers and television broadcasters are sometimes considered to be inherently biased as they invariably need to meet the requirements of advertisers or editorial standards of overtly political organisations (Herman & Chomsky, 2002) and also work within (rather than outside of) established structures of power. Individuals who publish via social media are free from such editorial constraints and pressures. This independence can be seen as enabling social media to allow the 'truth' to be published. However very little of the content of social media content is verified, making it difficult to know which information is speculative or factual. The emerging capacity to create knowledge is liberating in the sense that anyone is free to produce information or disclose previously unreported issues or points of view. Those without the power to speak on mainstream media (or in society more generally) are given freedom to comment. Issues that might be uncomfortable in *'normal'* social situations, for example taboo or embarrassing topics, are aired more freely via the anonymity of social media (Jordan, 1999). There are concerns over social media content as radical, revolutionary, seditious and illegal views can be published (Hale, 2012). Extremist material on social media is very difficult to censor or control.

Subcultures, social media and identity production

Social media is a popular forum for many subcultures. A subculture is a group of people with shared beliefs or interests who differentiate or segregate themselves from others within that society (Hebdige, 1988). Each subculture shares or adopts artifacts, values, opinions, clothing, mannerisms, language and/or behavioral traits specific to that subculture (Thornton, 1997). Social media can enable subcultures to gather and/or assemble (online) and social media itself may act to propagate a subculture. The '*sub*' in subculture does not denote a lesser nor inferior culture, rather it merely indicates a smaller part or subsection of society in general. A fundamental criterion often associated with subcultures is the adoption of a subversive ideology (Hebdige, 1988). The term subversive is broadly defined as those seeking to undermine the power of the established system of authority and control. The ideological position of a subcultural group might be latent or expressed, but is often found underpinning much of the groups shared value system (Barthes, 2000; Hall & Jefferson, 1993). Ideologies are often based on the rejection of capitalism or the repudiation of the notion of '*work*' - particularly in relation to mass production or regimented lifestyles (Van Gelder, 2007). The use of social media for following topics such as '#riots' is common to individuals and subcultures unified by a subversive ideology.

A subculture can develop through social media. It is no longer necessary for a subculture to have a physical space to communicate; this can now occur through social media. In turn, social media can play a role in the development of personal and subculture identity (Lev Manovich, 2009; Ito, 2012). The process of identity formation in this context is related to the iterative psychic and social performative actions of individuals or groups (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1992; Castells, 1997; Michelson, 1999; Foucault, 1998). Social media's collaborative production can enable '*new*' collective identities to be constructed. Furthermore, individuals and subcultures predisposed, or receptive, to a subversive ideology may become radicalized through social media (Klausen, 2015). Social media can play a role in facilitating new identities, however there is skepticism about the impact of social media on individuals or society acting in the 'real world' (Boyd, 2014; Jenkins, 2006; Elliot & Urry, 2010; van Dijk, 2012). There is concern about social media being a platform for illusory agency with individuals exorcising their subversive views exclusively in the virtual domain. The precise influence or power of social media on identity formation and

action is contested and unclear. However there are many governments and regimes that are sufficiently convinced about the correlation between social media and riot subcultures that they attempt to block, control and censor social media.

PART TWO: FINDINGS

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The relationship between social media and riot subcultures findings

For the first time in the UK, social media was used on a large scale to report a riot real-time. The research analyses why social media was used and by whom. This analysis provides a clearer understanding of the relationships between social media and riot subcultures. Posts on social media provided differing accounts of the events of the riot. These accounts of the riot are a form of knowledge production and have been categorised into two polarized groups: *'official'* knowledge of the riots (which is dominated by the police version of events and subsequently re-iterated by mainstream media); or *'unofficial'* knowledge (which tends to reject the official account and instead provides a variety of alternative accounts which are mostly hosted on social media platforms). The findings then examine how this *'official'* and *'unofficial'* knowledge is disseminated and *re*presented. Social media becomes the location where riot subculture knowledge is presented and *re*presented. Through this process, social media becomes a representation of the riot subculture itself. The findings are based on analysis of the empirical evidence gathered from the case-study of the 2011 riots in Bristol. The chapter begins by situating the riots within the local conditions, describing the existing socio-political and urban context.

The cultural context of the riot

Stokes Croft is a neighborhood in Bristol, located amidst one of the most deprived parts of the UK (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2010). It is a 'typical' inner-city area with some derelict buildings and space as a result of post-war planning blight and economic abandonment (Tallon, 2010; Larkham & Barrett, 1998).

Clement (2012:81) contextualizes the riots amidst the background issues of: 'gentrification, lack of housing and rising levels of inequality; the mixed and multicultural nature of the local population'. The area now houses a diverse demographic: a relatively deprived local population along with a vibrant and active 'artistic' subculture and more recently an influx of wealthier white-collar workers. Whilst similar to many UK inner-city areas, Stokes Croft does have its own unique characteristics and identity. A number of squats were established in the derelict and abandoned buildings. One of these squats, known locally as 'Telepathic Heights' (due to these words written on the building as graffiti) was at the epicentre of the riot. Somewhat allied to the squatter population was an influx of artistic/creative subcultures that set up a number of low-rent galleries and studios as well as independent cafes, bars and nightclubs. There were many protest groups in the area who were trying to address issues such as: rejecting expensive residential developments; supporting more affordable housing projects; deterring big property developers from taking control of the area; resisting (perceived) attempts by the local council to enforce a top-down regeneration of the area; and promote 'bottom-up' development. Many of these protest groups could be described as sharing a subversive agenda. The area itself was perhaps most (*in*)famous for being the '*birthplace*' (in the artistic sense) of Banksy who produced many of his earliest pieces of graffiti here. Whilst graffiti has become much more mainstream, particularly in the case of Banksy whose work is now revered and officially preserved in Bristol, graffiti can still be categorised as an indicator of a specific subculture of protest. Graffiti is *antisocial* media - for many councils, local authorities and property owners. This triumvirate of squatters, artists and Banksy generated a distinctive presence to the area.

Much of the violence in these riots was focused on a Tesco supermarket located in the heart of this area (located opposite the 'Telepathic Heights' squat). As a result of the prominence of the damage to this Tesco supermarket, the riots in Bristol 2011 are sometimes referred to as the *'Tesco Riots'* (Clement, 2012; Dutta, 2011; Kemp, 2011). The presence of this Tesco supermarket was unpopular with many of the nearby community. The Tesco store was granted planning permission, despite considerable local opposition and protestation. The antipathy towards Tesco relates both to this specific supermarket and more broadly to the practices of large corporations. Tesco is

very powerful economically; it is the biggest private employer and retailer in the UK (Winterman, 2013). Tesco has attained almost iconic status qua '*capitalism*' as a result of its size and dominance.

The Police arrive…

The above contextualizes the local area of the riot in terms of demographics, cultural context and social media presence in a broad sense. In the more immediate timeline was a precursor event to the riots: the attempted eviction of the 'Telepathic Heights' squat by police. Some commentators point to this as the catalyst for the riots (Local Boy, 2011). A huge police presence was mounted to evict the squatters, which according to reports on social media included 'a huge police operation involving 160 armed officers' (Local Boy, 2011) and 'over a dozen wagons and hundreds of officers'(Miller, 2014). This eviction was tweeted by locals who were mostly curious onlookers of the large police presence: 'Squat on #stokescroft is being evicted. 'Copter above us for half an hour. 10+ riot vans. Road closed' (@pearcafe, 2011b). Tweets relating to the eviction were retweeted repeatedly. The eviction blocked the main road and caused disruption to the local area. The developing spectacle of a large police presence, a forced eviction, numerous protesting squatters and a gathering crowd of onlookers was being played out directly opposite the recently opened (and much opposed) Tesco supermarket.

Social media broadcasting

Social media was used to convey the evolving spectacle: 'tens of thousands of people from across the world watched unfolding live in the small hours of the morning as locals tweeted reports and uploaded video footage directly from their phones' (Penny, 2011). Social media became the frame through which people would follow the events real-time (Beleaga, 2011). People in the crowd were using portable devices to record the events: 'lots of pics and videos being taken on camera phones' (McCarthy, 2011). Individuals recorded the events using mobile phone devices and cameras. People broadcast through mobile devices on a variety of different social media channels throughout the events: 'from just before midnight, a local resident going by the Twitter handle @grantikins live-streamed a video broadcast of the events from his

mobile phone' (Penny, 2011). These broadcasts were followed by other people; some of whom were also present in the streets but most of whom were watching remotely: 'seems people rather interested in #stokescroft riot' (@bristol247, 2011); 'soon thousands of people, following the hashtag #stokescroft, were watching and discussing the action online' (Penny, 2011); 'this #Stokescroft riot is really kicking off. Twitter tells me there may have been one arrest, and possibly no injuries' (@BenPark, 2011). More people followed the events on social media, looking for information and updates on the emerging situation, often following the hashtag #stokescroft (@StokesCroftNews, 2011). 'Huge spike in traffic overloaded poor server - back up now' (@bristol247, 2011): the number of people following the riot online greatly outnumbered those present on the streets, to the point that internet servers struggled with this demand. Whilst there were several hundreds of people on the street - there were hundreds of thousands watching online (Taphouse, 2011).

The production of knowledge: who are the '*rioters*'?

Knowledge is produced by a variety of people and groups about the status and meaning of the violent events in the street. Different voices present and *re*present the events from alternative perspectives. The outcome of these producers of knowledge is heterogeneous. The depiction of events varies dependent upon who speaks and for whom they are speaking. These interpretations and narratives involve the production of knowledge. There was a lot of discussion and disagreement on social media about the make-up of the rioting corpus: who are the rioters and/or who are *not* the rioters? Many differing accounts emerged and these can be categorised into two groups: '*official*' and '*unofficial*'. The '*official*' production of knowledge includes the police account of events and those portrayed in mainstream media. The official version consists of a homogeneous, fixed account of the riots from a single-point perspective. The '*unofficial*' production of knowledge is polyphonic and includes a myriad of differing accounts of the riot, which mostly differ from the official view. One particular subset of the *unofficial* view provides an entirely inverse account to the formal, where the police are the rioters.

Official production of knowledge

The most unequivocal presentation of the events was provided by the police force. The police were very clear about the constituency of the rioters. Assistant Chief Constable Rod Hansen (cited in BBC, 2011a) describes the event: '300 people congregated and a small minority from that group started small fires and throwing bottles, stones and other items at officers'. The police categorized all 300 people in the street as constituting the 'rioting' crowd. This account of the event partly explains why the police carried out a 'robust operation' on this crowd: 'we used well-rehearsed plans, which involved the use of officers from neighbouring forces to control what had become a volatile situation' (Hansen, 2011) – i.e. using batons, shields, police horses, police dogs and riot vans against many of these 300 people. This account was not universally accepted as accurate: 'Police bullshit. Standard.' (@AaronBastani, 2011). 'The police then charged through the handful of bottle throwers all the way in to the main section of the "party" which seemed to be a disproportionate and inflammatory response that if anything I was surprised didn't elicit a harsher retaliation from the "party-goers"' (Neurobonkers, 2011). The police report itself referred to a 'small minority' engaged in violent actions, whilst accepting that the majority of the people in the locality were peaceful. According to eye-witnesses, the police did not target just the small minority of violent protestors, but instead carried out their 'robust operations' on some of the innocent bystanders and peaceful protestors. Whilst the vast majority of all comments on social media are critical of the police account of events, some on social media supported the police. 'I am delighted that the crowd seem to be aggressive and the Police not' (The Posie Parker, 2011); 'Lot's of footage saying things like "the police are beating us up and we are not doing anything" but there is no voice from the police saying "people are throwing bricks, stones and glass at us!"' (Ben, 2011). Irrespective of the validity of claim or counter-claims, the official view classified all of the 300 people in the street that evening as part of the riot corpus.

Unofficial production of knowledge

The majority of the commentators on social media rejected the notion that there was a group of 300 'rioters'. Instead the large number of people on the streets was reported to consist of 'Activists… bystanders and commuters… symbolic anti-capitalist protesters… local youth… squatters, local youth, besieged residents, students'

Clement (2012:86-89) as well as a small number of violent individuals. A common re-presentation, as related here by the local MP, rejects the official account and instead offers this account: ''The protestors' fell into three categories. There was those lobbing great big lumps of concrete and bottles at the police… Then there were what I'd call 'typical Stokes Croft' people, peacefully protesting … And then there was the vast majority of people who were there, like me, to see what was going on. Either on their way home… or locals who had heard the news and were curious' (McCarthy, 2011). There were three main cohorts of people in the crowd. The largest group and the majority of people were curious onlookers. 'Most, it seemed, weren't there to protest against anything in particular, but rather to see what was a huge police operation involving 160 armed officers' (Local boy, 2011); with 'the majority, just seeing what was going on' (Efergan, 2011). The groups of onlookers were formed from local residents, commuters passing through or people who frequented the area for its bars, cafes and pubs. Video footage of the events was used (post hoc) to corroborate claims on social media. The second cohort were 'peaceful protestors': individuals more actively involved in the event as part of protests or demonstrations. The constituency of this group is difficult to pin down precisely as it was such a diverse group of people with myriad interests and accounts, some of whom described themselves as 'masked up, clued-up activists' (Penny, 2011). These were people allied to the anti-Tesco protests, anti-police and sympathizers for the Telepathic Height squatters. These more politically motivated people were still overtly 'peaceful' in their intentions. This third cohort also included a corpus of individuals who co-opted the events into a moment for a carnival or festival. 'BEST PRE PARTY EVER!!! #stokescroftriot' (@sam_binga, 2011); 'pretty much felt like St Paul's carnival, but with less dub' (Efergan, 2011); 'The mood began to take on the feel of a small festival, the crowd cheered when somebody started playing some R&B music through a small sound system' (Local boy, 2011). With the roads closed to traffic, some in the crowd chose to be playful: 'We've been chanting 'you're sexy, you're cute, take off your riot suit!'' (@smasherkins, 2011); 'The saxaphone players on the bus stop are soothing - #stokescroft' (@rossoh, 2011b); with 'revellers'(@Cutl00se, 2011); 'laying their bicycles in the street, playing bongos, a trumpet' (McCarthy, 2011). This cohort appropriated the spectacle into an opportunity for revelry and non-productive activities. The unofficial production of knowledge is polyphonic in that many different voices portrayed these events. Whilst resisting an overall single

narrative, a loose consensus was assembled through the collective interpretations of the event from bystanders, onlookers (including onlookers accessing the event through social media) and protestors. The third cohort were the 'rioters'; people who engaged in violence towards the police and/or property: 'They're breaking into tesco again. police have driven off. #stokescroft' (@rossoh, 2011a). There was widespread agreement that there was a small minority of people who were actively engaged in violence: 'there were a few who seemed to be just trying to cause some shit… throwing bottles, bricks etc' (Efergan, 2011). The violence was directed sometimes at the police and the local Tesco store but also at other shops nearby as well as cars and other objects in the area (bins, doors etc).

Police riot

'The police are the rioters' was the message from some of the unofficial producers of knowledge. This discourse asserts that it was the police themselves who rioted. This account of the riot produced knowledge that inverted the official view. According to this view, heavy-handed policing techniques combined with indiscriminate use of force should be re-classified as a '*riot'*. There was widespread commentary relating to excessive police force that evening: 'hugely aggressive policing on #stokescroft - protester fleeing with head wounds' (@BristolFloozie , 2011); '#Stokescroft Friend hit across face with riot shield and struck with baton 1 metre from home. Ear stitched. Bad po' (@20thCFlicks, 2011); '#stokescroft police brutality is mental, saw a 16 year old boy beaten by batons whilst unarmed and on the floor' (@CasparBrown, 2011a). 'Police from higher up the road marched down with dogs and cornered the crowd between a row of riot guards and vans' (Taphouse, 2011) resulting in a 'seriously disproportionate and provocative police action' (Clement, 2012); 'did police heavy-handedness contribute to the riot?' (@StokesCroftNews, 2011b). The use of excessive force was also claimed to be poorly directed 'An officer I spoke to said that they didn't have time to work out who was a threat and who wasn't' (Legg, 2011) which implicated the police in the position of indiscriminate violence against innocent individuals. The police were accused of acting in a manner that met the legal definition of 'riot'.

The implication of police qua rioters was mostly attributed to incompetent or overzealous police tactics and practices. Some critiques went further and accused the police of being puppets of capitalism. 'If big-business capitalism weren't on its last legs, it wouldn't need to rely on police brutality and political corruption like this' (Flora, 2011). Part of the reasoning behind this perspective is that the police (qua government) collude with big business (qua capitalism/Tesco) and take action on their behalf, for example 'the country has gone insane when supermarkets are forced onto communities with riot police' (Laz, 2011). The corollary of this logic is that the violence meted out against the police is justifiable, the violence on the streets is a self-defense mechanism in response to the 'violence' caused by capitalism itself, i.e. 'Tesco... brutality' (@SirioCD, 2011); 'Aren't Tesco the bigger hooligans?... Or the Tories even bigger hooligans destroying the country?' (Scott, 2011). Justification of this riot was often linked to anti-capitalism: 'an important riot against capitalist oppression' (@CasparBrown, 2011b); 'Capitalist totalitarianism!' (Flora, 2011); 'DESTROY CAPITALISM #stokescroft' (@DSG_DSG, 2011). 'I am clear that the damage caused to Tesco's property last night is relatively insignificant compared to the damage Tesco has been able to inflict on this community' (Allen, 2011). These point to the 'violence' caused by Tesco/capitalism; i.e. the damage caused by multi-nationals on: the environment, local economies, fragile societies and equality (Stern, 2007). The riots in Bristol were interpreted not merely as a local protest or grievance, but part of a wider, global, anti-capitalist counter-movement. These critiques all shared an implicit (and sometimes explicit) subversive ideology.

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Definition of a riot

'A riot is the language of the unheard' Martin Luther King

The use of the term 'riot' and its application in relation to the violent events in Bristol was vehemently contested on social media. Part of the disagreement among commentators stemmed from the diverse meanings of the term *'riot'*. This subsection examines these multiple definitions and the purposive application of this language. The production of knowledge, official or unofficial, needs to be understood within the wider context of the term 'riot'. Three areas of controversy

surround the use of the term 'riot'. This confusion relates partly to the use of the term colloquially. These controversies relate to: the legal definition, the purposive use of the word and concern of the use for political reasons. The legal definition of a riot is: 'twelve or more persons; used or threatened unlawful violence; for a common purpose' UK Public Order Act 1986 (Section 1). A minimum of twelve people must be involved, which is rather smaller than a common conception of a riot (a game of rugby might constitute a riot according to these terms of reference)! All of these twelve or more persons must act for a common purpose, which might be political or for a particular cause. The same legislation goes on to state that 'others can commit this offence by aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring the use of violence, e.g. encouraging, planning, directing or coordinating the activities of those involved in violent action' (UK Public Order Act 1986 (Section 1)). The effect of this law means that members of the crowd can become designated as rioters even without performing any acts of violence themselves. Secondly, the police and regulatory authorities purposively replace the term 'riot'. Whilst the terms 'riot police' and 'riot van' are widely used in the UK by the general population; the police themselves refer instead to the 'public order minibus' and 'Police Support Unit'. In the UK, 'read the Riot Act' has become synonymous with a severe or violent reprimand. Similarly the legislation 'Riot Act' (repealed in 1967) has (effectively) become the much more solemnly titled 'UK Public Order Act'. Thirdly, many of those commenting on the events were reluctant to accept the term 'riot' as it was a term designated by the police and was both unwarranted in this situation and carried a negative connotation. Instead terms such as 'protest' or 'demonstration' were preferred as these were deemed to reflect more accurately the events as well as implying that these actions carried a political intent. For others, there was a desire to re-appropriate the word 'riot' from the policing/legal interpretation and instead use it in a positive way – taking the term to mean perhaps a carnivalesque event or a festival (Rice et al, 2011). 'Riot' can mean having fun or a highly amusing event. The three contested applications of the term partly explain the differing accounts of the events in Stokes Croft.

There were many alternative accounts of what happened during the riots, even those outlined above are an oversimplification. Whilst there were accounts in mainstream media that depart from the official account, they were rarely afforded such priority as

the official 'news' on the front of a newspaper; instead it came in the form of 'discussion' or 'debate' buried deeper into the newspaper. Equally, on social media, there were supporters of the official production of knowledge, but these tended to be posts within an unofficial representation. There were reports of: good police, bad police, violent protestors, peaceful protestors, passers-by, families, commuters, squatters, activists, frustrated residents, drunks wandering home, children, party-goers, musicians and local press. The categorisation into official and unofficial is intended to simplify (but not oversimplify) the complex and often conflicting accounts of the riot. This meta-narrative does not attempt to adjudicate on which production of knowledge is correct or not.

Representation of the riots

Many social media commentators made explicit claims about the role of social media and mainstream media in relation to the production of knowledge about riots. This section examines the perceived relationships between different forms of media and representations of the riot. There was a difference between mainstream media's representation and social media's representation of the riots. The representation on mainstream media tended to be closely aligned with the official production of knowledge; whereas social media's representation tended to convey the unofficial production of knowledge. The previous section examined how knowledge is produced and by whom; this section examines the role of how knowledge is disseminated and *re*presented.

Official representation: mainstream media

The morning after the riots, mainstream media published their version of events. Most national newspapers covered the events on their frontpages, and a similar level of prominence was given on online news agencies. The representation of the riot in almost all mainstream media accorded with the official re-presentation. These were mainstream media's frontpage headlines:

'Bristol riot over new Tesco store leaves eight police officers injured' The Guardian (Bowcott, 2011).

'Bristol mob wrecks Tesco store and attacks police' The Times (Bird, 2011).

'Eight police hurt during Bristol riot' The Telegraph (2011).

'Police hurt in violent anti-Tesco clashes in Bristol' BBC (2011a).

These headlines (and the stories that followed) elicited much reaction from many commentators on social medial. Social media commentators had a number of concerns and criticisms of mainstream media. The first criticism of mainstream media representation concerned the regurgitation of official police reports as their own - with little mediation, corroboration or editing undertaken. 'All I can find on the BBC, practically written by the police' (@paddywagon, 2011); 'BBC, the UK state and police PR agency… #stokescroft' (@b9AcE, 2011); 'It's really eye-opening to see the BBC just copy-paste the police PR. #stokescroft' (@mtdavies23, 2011); 'BBC copy and paste Churnalism from Police PRO's around #Stokescroft' (@soundmigration, 2011). Churnalism is a form of journalism where articles are created from press releases and repeated almost verbatim with little or not checking of veracity. Churnalism.com, a website that checks the degree of churnalism in a newspaper article, by comparing it to e.g. a police report, found that many of the mainstream media articles cut and paste the majority of their material directly from the police reports. The degree of churnalism was tweeted and retweeted about many times on social media 'BBC coverage of #stokescroft riots is a recycled police press release' (@GuyAitchison, 2011b); 'papers spout the police line unquestioningly' (Martin, 2011). The process of representation of unedited police reports as news can undermine credibility in the impartiality and independence of mainstream media (Davies, 2011).

The second criticism about the mainstream media representation of the riot was that it was biased and partial. It is self-evident that the mainstream media headlines (above) focused on the injuries suffered by the police. Whilst it was reasonable and justifiable for mainstream media to report on injuries to the police force, social media commentators argued that mainstream media did not sufficiently counter-balance their accounts with, for example, mention of the injuries suffered by the general public, innocent bystanders, nor injuries caused to the rioters. Social media commentators

questioned the BBC and mainstream media's impartiality: 'Wow, amazing that Twitter is actually a better news source than the BBC. It's all so selective and biased! #stokescroft' (@jennieloveday 2011), 'Fuck all about #stokescroft riot in the mainstream media. Thank god for Twitter' (@GuyAitchison , 2011a); 'while there was a proper riot in Bristol, folks from mainstream media were hooked on crack cocaine on the couch. #stokescroft' (@immorali, 2011); and 'so far the mainstream press has reported only the official line on these events' (Penny, 2011). Despite formal regulations governing impartiality and fairness ((Office of Communications (Ofcom) Broadcast Code, 2015; National Union of Journalists ethical code, 2011; BBC Editorial Guidelines, 2015)), some social media commentators do not believe they are followed. Critics of mainstream media pointed out that the definition of 'impartial' means to 'treat all disputants equally'; it was argued, for example, that all people who were injured be reported and not just a small subgroup (i.e. police officers) (Gallagher, 2011).

There was a broader criticism, that mainstream media was state controlled.. The concern was that mainstream media clandestinely operated as a state broadcaster – i.e. as a biased propaganda mouthpiece of the ruling elite and their interests. The notion of mainstream media *qua* state controlled media was exacerbated by the absence of coverage of these events. 'Looks to me like the media has been ordered not to run the #StokesCroft riot story' (@SDMumford, 2011); 'how are no news channels picking up this riot #stokescroft' (@CasparBrown, 2011c); 'Thank fuck for twitter #stokescroft' (@spooklouder, 2011); 'searching for info on #StokesCroft uprising in the absence of proper media coverage is like living in fucking China or North Korea,' (@meowist_gorilla, 2011). These echo the concern that state controlled media often blocks or bans reporting of certain events - a proposition that the UK government is considering (BBC, 2011b). All of the criticisms of mainstream media representation: churnalism, lack of impartiality, lack of independence and police collusion formed part of a wider theory that mainstream media was representative of those in power. That is, mainstream media was the mouthpiece of the ruling elite, capitalism and/or the hegemony in general.

Unofficial representation: the move away from mainstream media

'Fuck you mainstream media, we don't need you anymore' (@BrumProtestor, 2011)

The frustration with, and suspicions of, mainstream media led many to look towards social media representation for news. 'The lackluster (sic) reporting illustrates why more and more young people are choosing to reject the mainstream media altogether, as they turn to social networks for information perceived as more reliable' (Gallagher, 2011); 'I no longer trust our media reporting of these sorts of incidents' (Laz, 2011); 'Mistrust of the mainstream media has a long history in the protest movement, with good reason' (Martin, 2011). Some set up social media sites themselves in order to provide 'a balanced(ish) view of what happened last night (april 21th) in Bristol (since mainstream media decided it wasn't worth any coverage)' (@marc_in_london, 2011). Social media was used by some individuals as their portal through which to consume knowledge of an event such as this. 'Wow, with everything going on in the world it's awesome that the main story on my feed tonight was #stokescroft thanks to all #solidarity' (@ignite_magazine, 2011). '#StokesCroft tonight. watching it all now (on youtube)' (@HeinzJunkins, 2011). Twitter was used for accessing information about the events – rather than mainstream media. Social media was often more 'trusted' than traditional media in terms of impartial reporting. 'Those of us using Twitter were on top of the real breaking news' (Beleaga, 2011). Twitter feeds became perceived as the trusted news representation, in contrast to the 'state-media' news broadcast on mainstream media.

CONCLUSIONS

The Production of unofficial knowledge

Social media documents a number of alternative accounts of history as it unfolds. Myriad witnesses produce a variety of perspectives and interpretations that can be verbal or visual accounts. There were many unofficial 'reporters', several hundred people, at these riots who had first-hand experience of what was happening. These unofficial accounts are an important record of history as they provide a direct perspective as it is happening. These first-hand accounts, plus the additional narratives from social media commentators who access material online, produce unofficial knowledge of the event. Knowledge production is not exclusive to this

subculture, but a germane and integral aspect of riot subculture ethos. Production of knowledge empowers the author. This shift from consumer to producer challenges the existing power relations. Social media permits the production of knowledge that remains outside, or rejects the narrative, of mainstream media. In many of the posts and comments that follow photographs or films, a variety of differing views were expressed. The views presented and represented on social media were more heterogeneous, polyphonous and conflictual than on mainstream media.

Social media is yet a fragile archive for unofficial knowledge. Tweets and other posts were also difficult to retrieve as they are archived relatively rapidly (and require more than basic computer skills to retrieve) even major search engines like Google or Bing struggle or fail to find tweets and posts from this event. Tweets and images have been deleted or removed from social media sites after their original posting. Part of this is due to fear of recrimination (via the UK Public Order Act 1986) for the person posting or for fear of incriminating others identifiable in images.

Media subversion

Riot subculture perceives mainstream media representation as biased and partisan. Weakening the power of mainstream media (whilst strengthening social media) is part of a broader subversive ideology. One tactic for achieving this aim is the reduction of *'consumers'* of mainstream media. Fewer consumers of mainstream media diminish its power as a result of dwindling economic revenue streams from advertisers. The turn to social media *'instead'* of mainstream media is part of this subversive tactic. Another tactic for weakening mainstream media is to produce alternative media, in this instance: social media (although other forms of media are adopted such as graffiti and the act of rioting itself is another powerful medium). Taking to Twitter or posting on Youtube, for some, is an attempt to eschew mainstream media. There is a deliberate employment of social media as a means to produce alternative and unofficial knowledge. The more usage of social media, the greater its power.

(Social) media is the message

Representation operates in two ways, as in McLuhan's (1994) maxim 'the medium is the message' - both the medium and the message are modes of producing knowledge.

The portrayal by mainstream media of the riot mostly reproduces the official (but *not* the unofficial) version of events. Through this restriction, mainstream medium itself becomes associated with the message, i.e. *official knowledge*. Social media representation predominantly carries the unofficial (but *not* the official) representation. Through this representation the medium itself becomes the message; social media is the *unofficial knowledge*.

Riot and power

Social media is entangled with the riot subculture; enmeshed in the various shared practices, discourses and traits of the subcultural group. Social media provides an ideologically apposite apparatus for riot subculture expression. Social media becomes the representation of unofficial language. The adoption, use and promotion of social media increases its power to communicate unofficial knowledge. Simultaneously, the diminution of mainstream media and official knowedge subverts the existing power relations. Riot in the streets is the medium through which the unheard is expressed. The violent actions, destruction and aggression are the most obvious significations of this medium. Riots in social media share the same ideology - to subvert existing power relations.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

The research was based on an empirical study of a single case-study based in Bristol, UK. An ethnographic research strategy was used to gather data (predominantly from social media sources). The methodology unearthed some contentious issues and challenges concerning the research process. Three key methodological concerns around using social media as a data source, particularly in relation to riots, are set out below: the first is a result of the degree of '*mediation*' inherent in social media (Flick, 2009). For visual materials, the photographer or film-maker chooses where (*and when*) to point the camera and hence what the subject and content are (*and what is not*) and how to frame an event. Much of the online textual accounts are based on footage from secondary sources rather than first-hand experience, which embeds mediation into the data. Secondly, there is a methodological challenge of integrating visual material with textual accounts. Users of social media have few methodological

issues blending visual and textual data, however, there is less of a tradition of this in sociological research, as Rose (2007:xiv) points out '*there remain remarkably few guides to possible methods of interpreting visual materials*'. The meaning of textual accounts is relatively straightforward to convey and infer its meaning, however there is much less agreement when using visual materials. In this chapter, the interpretation of the meaning/s of visual data is derived from the commentary provided by posts on social media. Thirdly the data gathered is problematic due to the legally contentious nature of riots. In the UK, it is illegal to incite violence or riots using social media (or otherwise), and the boundary of legality is unclear. Posts or comments that incite riots can be censored by regulatory authorities. Some of the original posts, tweets and comments have been removed by the original author, often for fear of incrimination. This generates a void in the online data as comments in relation to the riot are skewed by legislation. This legal fuzziness also leads to concerns regarding the legality of some content and how data might be interpreted in the future. Only social media data that is public and openly available has been used in this research.

Finally, a note of spelling and grammar. The use of slang and colloquialisms are ubiquitous in social media. All directly referenced social media retains this argot to respect the communicatory intent in bloggers '*own'* language. The meaning in these communications remains intelligible, even when the full force of the Queen's English has not been applied ;)

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