BEHIND THE NEWS
Social media, riots, and revolutions

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Abstract
This article analyses the mass media's claims about the role of social media in the 2011 UK riots and the Arab Spring, arguing that social media has become a new fetishism of technology that distracts from the contradictions of capitalism underlying contemporary societal changes and conflicts. Understanding contemporary capitalism, its contradictions and the role of the media requires a dialectical and critical analysis.

Introduction: 'Twitter mobs and Blackberry mobs'

The shooting of Mark Duggan by the London police on 4 August 2011 in Tottenham triggered riots in London areas such as Tottenham, Wood Green, Enfield Town, Ponders End, Brixton, Walthamstow, Walthamstow Central, Chingford Mount, Hackney, Croydon, Ealing and in other UK areas such as Toxteth (Liverpool), Handsworth (Birmingham), St Ann's (Nottingham), West Bromwich, Wolverhampton, Salford, and Central Manchester.

The mass media and politicians advanced the discourse that social media and the mobile internet had caused the riots. Prime Minister David Cameron said, 'Everyone watching these horrific actions will be struck by how they were organised via social media' (*Guardian*, 2011d). The British Home Secretary Theresa May said social media 'have been used to co-ordinate criminality and stay one step ahead of the police' (*FT*, 2011). Newspaper headlines and reports told a similar story:

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- 'How 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' (*Telegraph*, 2011a).
- 'London riots: how BlackBerry Messenger has been used to plan two nights of looting' (*Telegraph*, 2011b).
- 'Destruction' was 'fuelled by the use of Twitter and other social media' (*Express*, 2011a).
- 'The Tottenham riots are thought to be the first in the UK so heavily orchestrated using BlackBerry Messenger' (*Guardian*, 2011b).
- Twitter and BlackBerry Messenger 'brought hordes of teenagers together to attack neighbourhoods throughout the weekend' (*Mail*, 2011a).
- 'Thugs […] used social media to organise and encourage the sickening scenes of violence' (*The Sun*, 2011a).
- 'Young rioters pick BlackBerry to organise looting' (*Daily Mirror*, 2011b).
- 'Thugs and looters are thought to have sent messages via the BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) service to other troublemakers, alerting them to riot scenes and inciting further violence' (*Daily Express*, 2011b).

The BBC also took up the social media panic discourse on 9 August, reporting on the power of social media to bring together 200 people to form a rioting 'mob'.

The media and politicians created the impression that the riots were orchestrated by 'Twitter mobs' and 'Blackberry mobs'. They employed language implying that the riots had technological causes, and that there is a one-dimensional cause–effect relationship between media and technologies: availability of new communication technologies => riots, violence and uproar. The claim was that social media organised, coordinated, fuelled, orchestrated and planned criminality, riots, looting, violence and attacks. These claims could be found both in right-wing media (such as the *Express*, the *Mail*, the *Telegraph* and the *Sun*) and in more liberal media (such as the BBC, the *Mirror* and the *Guardian*), and in both tabloids and the so-called quality media.

The second common discourse, connected to the first, held that the riots could be controlled by surveillance of mobile phones and the internet, the switching off the BlackBerry messenger service, and banning rioters from using social media. Cameron said: 'And when people are using social media for violence we need to stop them. So we are working with the police, the intelligence services and industry to look at whether it would be right to stop people communicating via these websites and services when we know they are plotting violence, disorder and criminality' (*Guardian*, 2011d). *The Guardian* carried out a survey that showed that 70 per cent of respondents were in favour of the shutdown of social media and BlackBerry Messenger in riots, and that three-quarters held that the government should have access to all data from social networking sites. The British police published pictures of rioters recorded by CCTV and asked the public to identify the people, and the mass media published these pictures. The *Sun* (2011c) called on readers to 'Name and shame a rioter' and to 'Shop a moron'.

The 'Twitter broom army'

The third common media discourse stressed the positive effects of social media in the riots. It argued that a citizen army armed with brooms organised itself with the help of Twitter (#riotcleanup) and Facebook in order to reclaim and clean the streets of London. 'Co-ordinated online on Facebook and Twitter, volunteers mobilised in the worst-hit parts of the capital to sweep streets' (*Guardian*, 2011c). 'Communicating on Twitter – the same social network used by the rioters – hundreds gathered in riot-ravaged neighbourhoods equipped with a mishmash of household cleaning brushes, gardening gloves and rolls of bin bags' (*Mail*, 2011b). 'The capital's big clean-up after three nights of rioting, arson and looting was sparked by calls for action on Twitter and Facebook' (*Sun*, 2011b). 'London riots: Twitter-organised riot clean-up starts after 3rd night of violence' (*Daily Mirror*, 2011a).

Claims about the Twitter broom army resemble those about 'Twitter revolutions'. Blogger Andrew Sullivan wrote after the Iranian protests in 2009, 'the revolution will be twittered' (*Atlantic*, 2011), which contributed to the myth of Twitter revolutions. This myth has also been reproduced in the Arab Spring. The Egyptian blogger, Google employee and political activist Wael Ghonim argued after the spring revolution, 'it started in June, 2010, when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians started [adding] content. We would post a video on Facebook, it would be shared by 50,000 people, on their walls, within a few hours. I always said that if you want to liberate a society … if you want to have a free society, just give them the Internet. And the reason why is that the Internet [helps] you fight the media war, which is … a war that the Egyptian government, the Egyptian regime was playing very well' … 'This is Revolution 2.0,' he said, 'Everyone is contributing to the content' (*Technorati*, 2011).

Whereas the first discourse focused on blaming the riots on social media, and the second focused on surveillance technologies and censorship as crisis solutions, the third claimed that social media caused courageous citizens' counter actions.

The fetishism of technology

In his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, first published in 1972, Stanley Cohen shows how public discourse tends to blame the media and popular culture for triggering, causing or stimulating violence. 'There is a long history of moral panics about the alleged harmful effects of exposure to popular media and cultural forms – comics and cartoons, popular theatre, cinema, rock music, video nasties, computer games, internet porn' – and, one might add today, social media. 'For conservatives, the media glamorize crime, trivialize public insecurities and undermine moral authority; for liberals the media exaggerate the risks of crime and whip up moral panics to vindicate an unjust and authoritarian crime control policy' (Cohen 2002 [1972], xvii). Social media panics are a new element in the history of moral panics – they are an ideology that abstracts from the societal causes of problems and inscribes these problems into technology. Thereby, discussions about the structural changes in society that need to be taken in order to overcome social problems can be avoided, and easy-sounding solutions (surveillance, censorship, control, policing, law and order) that underestimate the complexity of soci-

ety are advanced. Techno-deterministic ideologies neglect the structural causes of riots and how violence is built into contemporary societies.

Focusing on technology (as a cause of or solution for riots) is the ideological search for control, simplicity and predictability in a situation of high complexity, unpredictability and uncertainty. It projects society's guilt and shame onto objects. Explanations are not sought in complex social relations, but in the fetishism of things. Social media and technology-centrism, both in its optimistic form ('social media will help our communities to overcome the riots', 'social media and mobile phones should be surveilled by the police', 'Blackberrys should be forbidden'', 'more CCTV surveillance is needed', 'CCTV will help us find and imprison all rioters') and in its pessimistic form ('social media triggered, caused, stimulated, boosted, orchestrated, organized or fanned violence'), is a techno-deterministic instrumental ideology that substitutes thinking about society with a focus on technology. Societal problems are reduced to the level of technology.

Whereas the notion of a Twitter revolution is a belief in cyber-utopianism and in the power of Twitter to strengthen the political public sphere, the notion of the Twitter mob is an expression of techno-pessimism – the assumption that the internet in all contexts has necessarily bad consequences for society, and that it is the internet or specific platforms that are the cause of negative phenomena. Both are expressions of technological determinism (see also Fuchs, 2011, ch. 3).

One of the reasons why critical theory is important for analysing media, technology, and information is that it allows us to question and provide alternatives to technological
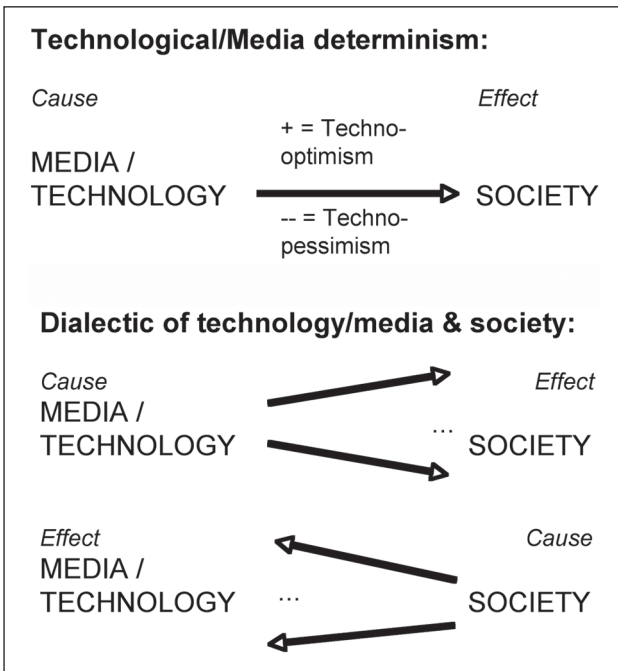

Figure 1. Two logics of the relationship between media technology and society

determinism, and to explain the causal relationship of media and technology on the one hand, and society on the other, in a complex way that avoids one-dimensionality and one-sidedness. Technological determinism is a kind of explanation of the causal relationship of media/technology and society that assumes that a certain media or technology has exactly one specific effect on society and social systems (see Figure 1). When this effect is assessed positively, we can speak of techno-optimism. When the effect is assessed negatively, we can speak of techno-pessimism. Techno-optimism and techno-pessimism are the normative dimensions of technological determinism.

The problem with techno-optimistic and techno-pessimistic arguments is that they are only interested in single aspects of technology, and create the impression that there are only one-sided effects (see Figure 1). They lack a sense of contradictions and the dialectics of technology and society, and can therefore be described as technological deterministic forms of argumentation. Technological determinism is a fetishism of technology (Robins and Webster, 1999): 'the idea that technology develops as the sole result of an internal dynamic, and then, unmediated by any other influence molds society to fit its pattern' (Winner, 1999 [1980]: 29).

Technological determinism overestimates the role of technology in society. It ignores the fact that technology is embedded into society, and that it is humans living under and rebelling against power relations, not technology, who conduct unrest and revolutions. The rise of new technologies often creates an 'eruption of feeling that briefly overwhelms reason' (Mosco, 2004: 22). Technological determinism ignores the political economy of events. Social media determinism is an expression of the digital sublime – the development that 'cyberspace has become the latest icon of the technological and electronic sublime, praised for its epochal and transcendent characteristics and demonized for the depth of the evil it can conjure' (Mosco, 2004: 24).

An alternative that avoids technological and social determinisms is to conceptualise the relationship of technology and society as dialectical (see figure 1): society conditions the invention, design and engineering of technology, and technology shapes society in complex ways. Technology is conditioned, not determined by society, and vice versa. This means that societal conditions, interests and conflicts influence which technologies will emerge, but technology's effects are not predetermined, because modern technologies are complex wholes of interacting parts that are to certain extents unpredictable (Perrow, 1999). Technology shapes society in complex ways, which means that frequently there are multiple effects that can stand in contradiction with each other. Because society and technology are complex systems, which means that they have many elements and many interactions between these elements, it is unlikely that the interaction of the two complex systems technology and society will have one-dimensional effects. Technology is a medium (enabling and constraining) and outcome of society.

A critical theory of media and technology is based on dialectical reasoning (see Figure 1). This allows the causal relationship of media/technology and society to be seen as multidimensional and complex: a specific media/technology has multiple (at least two) potential effects on society and social systems that can co-exist or stand in contradiction to each other. Which potentials are realised is based on how society, interests, power structures and struggles shape the design and usage of technology in multiple ways that are also potentially contradictory. Andrew Feenberg says in this context that critical theory 'argues that technology is not a thing in the ordinary sense of the

term, but an "ambivalent" process of development suspended between different possibilities' (Feenberg, 2002: 15).

In chapter 1.4 ('The fetishism of the commodity and its secret') of *Capital, Volume 1,* Karl Marx discussed ideology as an immanent feature of the commodity. The 'mysterious character of the commodity-form' is that human social relations that create commodities are not visible in the commodity, but appear as 'the socio-natural properties of these things'. 'The definite social relation between men themselves [take in ideologies] … the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx, 1867: 165). Ideologies legitimatise various phenomena by creating the impression that the latter exist always and naturally, and by ignoring the historical and social character of things. Georg Lukács's (1972 [1923]) notion of reification, which is a reformulation of Marx's (1867) concept of fetishism, means 'that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires "phantom objectivity", an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people' (1972 [1923]: 83). Technological fetishism is an ideology in the sense of Marx's fetishism concept and Lukács' notion of reification: in the explanation of aspects of society, the social relations underpinning contemporary capitalism are ignored, and technologies are presented as causes. The focus on technology reifies the human social relations that embed technology and so the social character of phenomena like violence is concealed. As an alternative to technological fetishism, Marx saw modern technology as dialectically entangled into the contradictions of capitalist society: 'The contradictions and antagonisms inseparable from the capitalist application of machinery do not exist, they say, because they do not arise out of machinery as such, but out of its capitalist applications!" (Marx, 1867: 568).

Social media and the antagonisms of capitalism

In giving an explanation of the UK riots, one should decentre the analysis from technology and start with the analysis of societal structures that frame and condition social action and the use of technology. We therefore have to talk about the society in which these riots took place. Is it really a surprise that riots emerged in the UK in a situation of deep economic crisis and in a country with high socioeconomic inequality and youth unemployment? The UK riots were not a Twitter or Blackberry mob, but related to the societal structure of the UK. The country has a high level of income inequality, with a Gini coefficient that was 32.4 in 2009 (0 represents absolute equality, 100 absolute inequality), a level that is only topped by a few countries in Europe and that is comparable to the level of Greece, at 33.1 (Eurostat). In 2009, 17.3 per cent of the UK population had a risk of living in poverty (Eurostat). In early 2011, the youth unemployment rate in the UK rose to 20.3 per cent, the highest level since these statistics started being recorded in 1992 (Guardian, 2011a). The UK is not only one of the most advanced developed countries today, but it is at the same time a developing country with many structurally deprived areas. Is it a surprise that riots erupted especially in East London, the West Midlands and Greater Manchester? The UK Department of Communities and Local Government reported in its analysis, 'English Indices of Deprivation, 2010 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011), 'Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Manchester, Knowsley, the City of Kingston-upon Hull, Hackney and

Tower Hamlets are the local authorities with the highest proportion of Lower Layer Super Output Areas amongst the most deprived in England,' and 'The north east quarter of London, particularly Newham, Hackney and Tower Hamlets continue to exhibit very high levels of deprivation' (pp. 1, 3).

Decades of UK capitalist development shaped by deindustrialisation and neoliberalism have had effects on the creation, intensification and extension of precariousness and deprivation. Capitalism, crisis and class are the main contexts of unrests, uproar and social media today. People living in conditions that deprive them of economic, political and cultural opportunities are likely to express their discontent in various forms. If there is a trigger, such as police violence, then collective discontent can turn into collective action, such as rioting. Collective action is the emergent outcome of a combination of objective stratification conditions and subjective feelings of discontent that is triggered by certain events. It can spread and intensify itself. A relatively large level of uptake and use of internet and mobile phone technologies shape contemporary Western information societies. There is today a generation that has entirely grown up with the use of these technologies. In such a society, communication technologies do not cause riots, revolutions, or rebellions; but rather discontented people will make use of all means necessary and available, including communication technologies, in order to achieve their goals. The antagonisms of society manifest themselves in the use of technologies that in an antagonistic society have antagonistic potentials.

Similarly, the revolution in Egypt was not a Twitter revolution, but related to the context of a highly stratified society. Real wages have been decreasing over twenty years, strikes were forbidden, there was repression against the political left and unions, and the gap between the rich and the poor has been large, with poverty constantly increased. Wages in industry have been low; the global economic crisis has resulted in mass lay-offs and a food crisis; Mubarak, together with the Egyptian army, has controlled politics and bureaucracy since 1981; the illiteracy rate has been high; and there has been a contradiction between Islamic traditions and the values of modernisation (Björklund, 2011). Pierre Bourdieu (1986) distinguished between economic capital (money), political capital (power) and cultural capital (status, skills, educational attainments). Egypt under Mubarak was a society with a highly stratified class structure: there was a class that controlled the political-economic-military complex and accumulated economic, political and cultural capital at the expense of the masses of Egyptian people. The Egyptian revolution was a revolution against capitalism's multidimensional injustices, in which social media were used as a tool of information and organisation, but were not the cause of the revolution.

Calls for more police, surveillance and crowd control and the blame-laying of popular culture and social media are useless. It is too late once riots erupt. One should not blame social media or popular culture for the UK riots, but the violent conditions of society. The mass media and politics's focus on surveillance, law-and-order politics and the condemnation of social media will not solve the problems. A serious discussion about class, inequality and racism is needed, which also requires a change of policy regimes. The UK riots are not a Blackberry mob and not a Twitter mob; they are the effects of the structural violence of neoliberalism. Capitalism, crisis and class are the main contexts in unrests, uproar and social media today.

Crisis is an immanent feature of capitalism. The history of capitalism is also a history of its crises. Discussions about the role of technology in riots are not new, as Marx's (1867, ch. 15) discussion of the Luddite machine-breaking movement shows. What happens in a crisis is never just or fair, but an expression of the structural violence built into the system. The right alternative in political terms is a surveillance society that is based on a law-and-order regime and advances fascist potentials of politics. Such a society can, however, never overcome the structural causes of violence. The right alternative in moral terms strengthens the commons of society, including the communication commons: it is the left alternative.

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