Citizen–government collaboration on social media: The case of Twitter in the 2011 riots in England

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ABSTRACT

How social media can enable opportunities for collaboration between citizens and governments is an evolving issue in theory and practice. This paper examines the dynamic aspects of collaboration in the context of the 2011 riots in England. In August 2011, parts of London and other cities in England suffered from extensive disorder and even loss of human lives. Based on a dataset of 1746 posts by 81 local government Twitter accounts during or shortly after the riots, we explore how local authorities attempted to reduce the effects of the riots and support community recovery. Using Twitter's conversational and rapid update features, they produced a variety of informational and actionable messages with clear calls for offline or online action. In some cases, collective against the riots evolved in a mutual way: not only citizens were mobilized by local authorities, but also local authorities actively promoted actions initiated by citizens.

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1. Introduction

Social media include communication channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube which have been increasingly used by governments. While the rationalities behind the adoption of social media in the public sector are still emerging, current discourses tend to underline active citizen engagement enabled by the collaborative nature of social media (Henman, 2013). Previous work indeed suggests that social media in government have come along expectations to improve information sharing, create opportunities for collaboration and enhance government responsiveness (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010, 2012; Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, & Luna-Reyes, 2012).

Social media efforts essentially build on previous initiatives that used information and communication technologies to increase citizen engagement (Medaglia, 2012; Saebo, Rose, & Flak, 2008). Online engagement activities such as petitions, consultations and forums have now been complemented or replaced by social media, which open much wider opportunities to raise interest over the work of government. As adoption processes of social media evolve, there is the need to consider the changing nature of citizen–government interactions. A study of the U.S. federal government by Mergel (2013) reports on a variety of representation, engagement and networking tactics altogether forming elements of the social media agenda. There are also suggestions

about new forms of government-to-citizen and citizen-to-government interactions supported by social media (Linders, 2012).

This paper aims to demonstrate the enabling aspects of citizen–government interactions on social media in the context of the 2011 riots in England. For five days in August 2011, parts of London and other major cities in England suffered from extensive public disorder, violence, looting and even loss of human lives. Social media activity was prominent during the riots with a wide range of stakeholders such as media, citizens and public authorities attempting to make sense of the situation and intervene. Starting from a comprehensive examination of current sources about the riots, we focus our investigation on how local government authorities across the country used Twitter during and shortly after the events.

Amongst the whole range of social media applications, Twitter provides an immediate and flexible tool to disseminate information and communicate through brief public messages. As such, it has been used in the public sector to reach new audiences, build relationships with citizens and other stakeholders, as well as broadcast and share information across networks (Cho & Park, 2012; Waters & Williams, 2011; Wigand, 2011). Twitter's conversational features have specifically evolved to facilitate this kind of interaction as they allow networked audiences to engage in ad hoc conversations of one-to-one or many-to-many nature (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Honey & Herring, 2009; Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

In this study, an analysis of 1746 posts by 81 local government Twitter accounts shows specific mechanisms of collaboration that enabled the organization of anti-riot actions. In certain cases, the organization of

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anti-riot actions evolved mutually: not only citizens participated in actions initiated by local authorities, but also local authorities actively promoted and engaged in initiatives started by Twitter users such as cleaning the streets and identifying suspects. Hence, to an important extent, the riots illustrate how social media can enable new forms of collaboration where governments frame collective action around specific issues or become actors in networks of citizens that initiate their own actions.

The next section positions the role of social media within the context of citizen–government collaboration. This provides the background to introduce the 2011 riots and the important role of social media. Following the methodology, the study findings are presented and discussed in the context of the riots and beyond.

2. Citizen–government collaboration and social media

Callahan (2007, p. 1187) defines collaboration as one of the many forms of citizen engagement where "citizens and administrators collaborate with one another to solve problems and get things done" (p. 1187). Citizen engagement in collaborative actions might involve activities related to service delivery, planning, financing, responding to unexpected events or organizing other forms of partnership (Dawes & Prefontaine, 2003; McGuire, 2006). McGuire (2006) notes that collaboration is generally accepted as a positive element of public management, even though it can be challenging to effectively organize collaborative actions; challenges include extensive bureaucracy, lack of accountability or communication difficulties.

Departing from those challenges, information technology has been in many cases seen as an enabler of collaboration. For instance, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2012) describe collaboration as the highest level function of portals at the local government level, which however is rarely achieved, with the possible exception of emergency events. Further empirical studies suggest that online interactions between citizens and governments have remained mostly informational with little indication of collaborative problem solving, citizen involvement in system implementation or the organization of common actions (e.g. Brainard & McNutt, 2010; Olphert & Damodaran, 2007).

Collaboration in these contexts mostly presumes a top-down relationship where governments invite, administrate and guide actions. More recently, the use of social media offers new options where the speed, volume and new types of interactions can result in more bi-directional forms of collaboration. Despite the difficulty to specify how such actions can take place, public administrators in Mexico and the USA federal government report on collaboration with citizens as one of the main perceived benefits of social media (Mergel, 2013; Picazo-Vela et al., 2012). Linders (2012) identifies three models of collaboration and mutual value creation as: *citizen sourcing*, where the public helps the government be more responsive and effective (e.g. citizen reporting websites), *government as a platform* for citizens to propose and make improvements (e.g. crime mapping, open data initiatives) and *do it yourself government* where citizens self-organize and the government plays a more passive role as a facilitating framework (e.g. neighborhood self-organization).

Linders (2012) further explains that advancements in social media offer opportunities for collaborative actions where "the boundaries between the government and the public both shift and fade" (p. 451). These forms of collaboration are closely related to Castells' (2008) notion of the Network State where ad hoc mobilization and collective action can exist independently from political institutions and the mass media. Along those lines, previous studies have mostly focused on high-profile cases where citizen groups have used networking and social sharing features to challenge authorities and hold them accountable. Examples include student protests to oppose public policies in the UK (Theocharis, 2011), the Mexican movement "I'm number 132" (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2013) and revolutionary movements in the Middle East where the role of social media has been critical (Douai & Nofal, 2012; Lim, 2012).

Despite theoretical developments in the area, how social media can be used as platforms for collaboration between citizens and governments has not received equal attention. As such, the dynamic aspects of collaboration need to be examined and specified in practical settings. Studies of public sector interactivity on social media have mostly addressed the issue in an exploratory manner due to the novelty of the phenomena. For example, Waters and Williams (2011) identify engagement tactics such as tweets asking citizens to participate in polls or get involved with an agency. The riots of 2011 in England are an interesting case to examine the specifics of citizen–government collaboration due to strong indications that social media, particularly Twitter, were at the forefront of events with real life impact.

3. Study background: the riots of 2011 in England

In early August 2011, the widespread riots that took place in major English cities were characterized as the worst public disorders in the country for decades. First we describe the main timeline of events and then introduce the role of social media during the riots.

3.1. Timeline of events

Fig. 1 illustrates the main timeline of incidents for the period 4–12 August 2011. On Thursday the 4th, a London resident named Mark Duggan was shot dead by police officers in London Tottenham. Two days later, an initially peaceful protest was organized by Mark Duggan's relatives and friends. The rioting started when protesters were not satisfied with the response of senior officers and stayed outside the Tottenham Police Station hours longer than they originally planned. Few hours before midnight, a series of clashes started in the area when the Tottenham Post Office was burnt down and police cars were attacked.

By the early hours of Sunday the 7th, the riots spread to 12 areas in London and by Monday the 8th disorders spread nationally to more than 60 areas. On Tuesday evening, while London remained fairly calm, the riots escalated in other cities across West and East Midlands, as well as Greater Manchester and Liverpool. During the first three days of the riots, police numbers seemed insufficient to quell the increasing disorder. The extent to which the situation got out of control was also attributed to the absence of responsible senior officials on holidays, including the Prime Minister and the Mayor of London.

Eventually, the level of disorder is believed to have been reduced as a combination of three critical events. First, on Tuesday the 9th, the Prime Minister returned from his holiday in Italy after growing pressure to actively engage with the events. He immediately ordered 16,000 police officers to be deployed at the streets of London and prevent further riots. Second, on the 10th of August, Tariq Jahan, the father of a violence victim, gave a speech appealing for social unity and ending the violence, only hours after his 21-year-old son was killed in Birmingham. Third, on the 11th of August, a dedicated police Flickr website started to release Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) images of suspects involved in disturbances. In parallel, police forces launched a robust campaign to arrest suspected rioters through the rapid monitoring of over 200,000 h of CCTV footages and a public appeal for information.

Based on the official report by the specially formed Independent Riots Communities and Victims Panel (Riots Panel, 2011), 13,000–15,000 people were estimated to have been actively involved in riots across 31 different areas. They engaged in over 5000 crimes including 1800 incidents of arson, 1600 burglaries, and 350 incidents of public violence. Five people were killed and thousands lost their properties and businesses in a total estimated cost of over half a billion British pounds. Such extended and complicated phenomena cannot be simply attributed to the shooting of Mark Duggan or even a widespread manifestation of criminality; they seem to be more deeply rooted in the British society and a global context of social unrest (Briggs, 2012).