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What we did when it happened: A timeline analysis of the social disorder in London

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Abstract

Purpose

Over the course of the early part of August 2011, we saw revolving images of social disorder in London yet very thin explanations for the events; I think the Home Secretary called them ‘pure criminals’ engaged in ‘sheer criminality’. The disorder continued, and it each time it spread to different areas, the media sent reporters to the frontline with their cameras. Then the politicians came back from holiday and all the usual suspects were thrown in the mix: ‘gangs’, ‘problem youth’, ‘dysfunctional families’, ‘single parents’, the underclass; the list went on. The debates which followed revolved around the violence, victims, effective policing and sentencing but rarely went into depth about the causes or how the disorder developed so quickly and why. This is the aim of the paper.

Design/methodology

In my spare time since the events, I have tried to speak to as many people as possible who were involved in some capacity (instigators, fringe participants, spectators, local residents, professionals) because collectively, they hold the clues with regard to how and why this occurred.

Findings

In this paper, I try to place the events in London in context by using their testimonies to show a) why the social disorder unfolded when it did and b) how it spread so quickly. My early analysis indicates that relations between the authorities and the public in certain urban communities are extremely fragile and it doesn’t take much to stimulate public action on perceived injustices. I also show that social networking played a significant role in the way the disorder started and spread, by suggesting that the reasons for involvement in the social disorder were collective as well as subjective. Lastly, I show how the media depictions were one-sided and the government response was knee-jerk, hard-line and blatantly disregarded established criminal justice processes.

Originality/value

The timeline analysis allows for a contextual and situational understanding of how and why people got involved, and what their role was during the social disorder in London.

Keywords: Social disorder, London, ‘riots’, timeline analysis.

Paper type: Research

Introduction

I wonder if you remember early August 2011. You know, when there was that social chaos in London which then seemed to be mirrored in other parts of the country? I can recall it although I have to confess it is a little difficult now; even Libya has come and gone. It all seems like a blur...come on, be honest, it does. We've all gone back to our normal lives as autumn approaches. The pleasantries continue: *"Did you have a nice weekend?"* a commuter asks her friend; *"nice weather today"* says a dog walker; *"did you see the footie"* says one young chap to his friend as they meander down to school together. Such a relief that social order has been restored. Phew, that was close. Why then has it died down as fast as it developed? Perhaps it was the way in which David Cameron galvanised massive law enforcement advances to quash it which was followed up by stiff sentencing procedures to resolve the situation? Perhaps it was the way in which the events were depicted by the media – after all, by mid August 2011 the debates on the social disorder had all but vanished and Libya had returned to the agenda again.

In this article, I would like to take the reader on a journey through those days, explaining what happened and placing in context accounts of those with whom I have managed to talk. Since the social disorder, and in my spare time, I have had consented discussions with those who took part, those who witnessed, those who were called to participate, those who sat on their bums watching it on TV (including myself) and various professionals who had to deal with the consequences of it. First, I discuss my methodology then move on to describe events in a timeline and present accounts of what people did at the time of those events. While I acknowledge I still need to continue this work and develop it conceptually, I try to disaggregate the reasons 'why' different groups took part in the disorder. At this early stage of my work, I offer no theoretical analysis preferring to develop my empirical data first.

Methodology

I have had consented discussions with 30 participants in this research, undertaken some field visits to the affected areas and made notes from the comfort of my sofa (watching TV). When people have not felt comfortable in meeting me face to face, I have undertaken telephone interviews. To recruit potential participants, I exhausted numerous existing contacts in London probation, Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), charities and social media networks. I recorded a videoclip about my research and its intentions, and used my contacts to send the clip to potential participants. Those who were interested and felt comfortable, then contacted me.

My research efforts gained clearance from the University of East London Ethics Committee. For ethical reasons, I anonymise the boroughs from which my professional contacts spoke and restrict information which may expose details of those who took part in the social disorder; that is, I anonymise their professions, precise places of residence, ethnic origins and any other information which may make them identifiable. To take part, participants gave verbal consent or signed tick box consent forms. To reassure them, notes were taken and no formal process of recording interviews was undertaken. Once the notes were written up, they were destroyed. These were the ethical principles under which I had to agree to undertake this work. This is because, at the time of our discussion, some of these people had not yet come to the attention of the authorities and were extremely worried about being caught. Unfortunately for this author's research, some who initially expressed interest (but more of a passion) to convey their thoughts and experiences have since been

arrested. I cannot help but feel that because of this they may think otherwise in participating in any kind of study which may seek to document their view on the social disorder as my contacts tell me they are now extremely paranoid about with whom they talk.

Findings: The timeline

Thursday 4th August

Having had a very busy schedule at work for the last 11 months, I was looking forward to a month off work in August. I didn't pay much attention to Mark Duggan's killing because it seemed like another every day occurrence – you know, the type which prompts those media reports where there is someone in the community who says *'I can't believe it has happened here on our doorstep'*. The painful irony is that this sort of thing happens in some communities in London. A day before the media attention had been predominantly directed at Libya so when Mark Duggan was shot by the police, to the outsider there seemed nothing unusual. However, for minority ethnic communities in the local area where Mark was from, it seemed to stimulate very raw feelings of discrimination and maltreatment.

In fact, the way Mark's death was reported on Thursday seemed to insinuate that it was *he* who was wanted by the police and it was *he* who fired first, and that officers acted in response to the threat of his firearm. We await to find out what happened through the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC). However, it seemed social media played a significant role early on by stimulating attention towards this particular event as Shawn, a friend of Mark's said:

Shawn: *The day Mark Duggan was killed, before the news went out, a friend put his picture on Facebook saying 'this picture speaks a thousand words' and it was a picture of the police standing over what looked like to be Mark Duggan. This was minutes after it took place, so someone had recorded it and put it online and this person was saying like 'looks like the police are trying to get their story straight'. The picture was posted on Facebook four minutes afterwards.*

Resentment continued to be stimulated through this posting until after only a few hours, it was deleted. However, the fact that thousands had seen it meant it was not forgotten.

Friday 5th August

The next day, news reporting seemed contradictory. It wasn't headline news; the tabloids played on the image of Mark as a 'gangsta', while the broadsheets and independent media were a little more cautious with the wording:

- 'Gangsta shot dead by police' – Daily Mail
- 'PC hit as cops kill gunman' – The Sun
- 'Man shot dead and officer injured' – BBC
- 'Man shot dead by police in north London during attempted arrest' – Guardian
- 'Cab passenger shot dead by police' – Independent

The ambiguity in reporting seemed to stimulate anger in Mark's local neighbourhood – yet some members of the local community said they had seen evidence of a potential injustice, as they perceived it, through Facebook. They spoke of Mark as a 'family man' who was coming to terms with the death of his cousin some weeks earlier. Local criticism quickly started to build against the police at the manner of the killing as it was largely perceived as unjust despite the reporting. Nadine, a local resident, said this:

Nadine: *On Friday the police was confusing it and that they both fired but because of the Facebook, people in Tottenham knew he didn't discharge his gun or didn't believe that he discharged his gun. The police shot another officer and Mark Duggan already knew he was followed and put out a BB [Black Berry] message. They agreed that there would be protests on Saturday and we were all invited, my partner and my friend.*

Unsatisfied with the police action and lack of clarity on Mark's death, Nadine and Shawn said that online forums and BB messages were sent around to make people aware that a protest would take place on Saturday, calling for transparency in the process.

Saturday 6th August

Prior to 5pm, the IPCC reported to Mark Duggan's family and then the body was identified. Shortly after that, late in the afternoon, around 300 people gathered outside Tottenham Police Station after marching from Broadwater Farm Estate. The crowd said they wanted 'justice' for Mark Duggan's family and wanted answers. Dave and Dev, who attended the protest, said this:

Dave: *For the black community, there was a message which was about treatment. A lot of black guys die in custody, a lot are poorly treated by the police but that message got lost. The peaceful demonstration was not getting through, it was getting lost in the fact that the 'look at these gangs, look at these blacks, gangs or whatever'. Lost.*

Dev: *Questions aren't being answered. So much frustration. They could have just come out and said 'we hear you and we are looking into it'. They could have nipped this in the bud. All the people wanted to know was that they wanted to be heard. It does look like there is something to cover up if the taxi driver suddenly isn't available.*

When the police failed to materialise, the crowd started to get agitated. By around 8pm, there were reported confrontations with the police and two police cars are vandalised and set alight. From 8.30pm until 10.30pm, the social disorder exacerbated and a double-decker bus was burnt out and petrol bombs were thrown at police and buildings. Shops and businesses started to get sacked. Here Jamie rationalises his looting of a commercial store that Saturday evening, early into the social chaos:

Jamie: *Basically, the government are stealing things all the time, so why can't we steal from them. It is justice. They can't say one thing and do another. When you did your election, you promised jobs, equality, benefits for families. I don't see anything like that in my area. There is no 'we' in the community. The government were talking about building a better community but how can you take away from the community and expect us to stump up for it when we are suffering as well. What is the point?*

It was around this time, just before 11pm, that unemployed Ahmed returned to his home in north London after seeing his son at a birthday party. He seemed mildly happy apart from the fact he was worried about how to support his family, who were now in different parts of London. The family had started to struggle a few years ago when his small business collapsed and they had to move in with other relatives in other parts of London. As he drove into north London, he started to encounter the violence and social disorder but instead decided to stick around. After parking the car out of the area (to avoid it getting trashed), he walked around where he saw people looting commercial properties and damaging buildings. He seemed to relate to the disorder, feeling bitter that large companies had put him out of business and gets involved:

Ahmed: *Small businesses are being hit and we have had a generational thing [business passed down through generations] and we have not got money to fund our small businesses. I had a business. I am not looting for the sake of saying 'I want a pair of trainers' because I can buy trainers any time I want. I am trying to make a point. I looted Currys, Argos, JD because we are the small people and we need help.*

Ahmed almost certainly was involved in the criminal damage as reports confirmed that places like Vision Express, Boots, Argos and JD Sports were among the shops affected in north London. By midnight, Jamal was persuaded to take part in the disorder. In fact, he said it 'didn't take much' for him to decide to get involved; after all, he was pretty upset that he couldn't get work and was treated like 'dirt' at the job centre - which was where he took action:

Jamal: *I am no rude boy, no road boy, I carry no gun. I am not into rap music or being on road. I went to school but this government is making me think that the road is the only place for me because I have done everything they have asked of me. I have good GCSEs, A levels, university 1st degree but there is nothing for me. Since graduating I have been a cleaner. There are no opportunities. Down the job centre, they treat me like dirt and accuse me of not trying but look at what I have achieved. I have been on the dole for so long and they tell me I need a job but I have no experience, and can't get it because no one is taking anyone on. Three guesses where I took my frustration out – job centre.*

Shops and businesses continued to get set alight in the area and by 1am there was some evidence that other groups had got involved; groups who may not necessarily see eye to eye on a daily basis but united to send a message to the authorities, particularly the police. This young man who claimed gang affiliation said that some 'gangs' decided to fight side by side against the police:

Paul: *Obviously yeah there is serious rivalry between Tottenham and Hackney and no one generally goes from one area to the other, there would be bloodshed. But on the riots, there was no gang war. The gangs was in the same area on Saturday night, came together against the police and I thought 'wow, it would have been nice if it had been a better situation but they are coming together for a cause they thought worth fighting for as a unit'. I was impressed, nah what I mean?*

Dan: *So even though there was beef between the gangs, they wanted to unite against something which was repressing them collectively.*

Paul: *Yeah, BB messages were sent out to cool it, saying like 'its not about a postcode war, it is 'us' against 'them' and 'forget our beef with each other and lets get the police'.*

By 2am, Nadine was ready for her night out in north London. There were about 20 people or so in her house and there was a party atmosphere. However, everyone there was receiving texts, Facebook notifications and BB messages about the social disorder. The messages were a mixture between offers for goods people had acquired and invitations to take part. None of her close friends left her house party but a few 'friends of friends' made an exit to claim some 'free trainers'. Later that night Nadine said:

Nadine: *We were being told prior to what was being shown on the news what was happening [through the BB messages and Facebook]. I left the house at 2am and we arrived in Hackney and the club only had 16 people because they were all at the riots. When I left at 3am there were army trucks, never seen anything like that in Tottenham. I wanted to see the excitement but I had high heels on, so I couldn't really. I wanted to see the atmosphere, to see what was happening!*

Sunday 7th August

From the early hours of the morning into Sunday, Fire crews continued to get the blazes under control and police made 55 arrests. Local MP David Lammy said it is "*mindless people who had come from outside Tottenham.*" That morning a local resident went down to assess the scene after feeling quite frightened in his flat.

Resident in Tottenham: *I live a stone's throw away from where it all kicked off, three minutes walk from my house. Now I live in Tottenham and I always shut my window and then the next thing I see on the news that this is going on on my street. They were smashing up my street! After the night, I was so frightened but I went down because I am a nose person, and it was stomach churning. It was like a doomsday film.*

The clear-up operation began, but as the afternoon drifted into the evening, there were reports that three police officers were injured after intervening in an altercation in Brixton, south London. Missiles were reported to be thrown. At around 8pm, there were other reports that 100 youths had gathered outside Enfield Police Station. By 10pm, there were reports of shop windows being smashed, riot police and mounted police patrolling the streets of Enfield. Paul, who attended Saturday's events in Tottenham and claimed some trainers, was feeling otherwise about getting involved in another night of 'riots'; however, the pressure to participate and the potential for handsome rewards did not disappear. His friend Shawn, although equally attracted by the booty, was drawn to potential participation for other reasons:

Paul: *We was getting BB messages about the next destination, who has got this, if you want it, we can get it. There was like loads of adverts. I was with my mates and we was all getting similar messages of people getting stuff: 'This is what we have got', 'these are the goods if you are interested'; bags, trainers was a big one, paintings, computer things, games, clothes, anything really designer.*

Shawn: *I was getting messages as well but it wasn't all about tiefing [stealing]. Like if I was there, I would have got involved but not really with the looting but say if a police station was*

being done over, I would like get involved because I have bare [lots] problems with the police. Anything to do with the police, I would have got involved.

Throughout the night, disturbances were reported in Islington, Ponders End, Brixton and Walthamstow where, in the main, commercial properties continued to be the main targets. However, the media obsessively restricted 'riot' coverage to the 'innocent victims' and showed revolving clips of young people in hoods. The behaviour was being branded 'copycat criminal activity'.

Monday 8th August

On the morning of the 8th, I returned from annual leave. I switched on the television where the BBC news reported that the police had made 100 arrests and charged 16 in relation to disturbances in London. I spent the day switching between internet coverage of the disturbances and trying to catch up on university administration duties. I noticed that the BBC had introduced a 'live feed' online so one could see tweet updates from reporters, residents or victims: 'LIVE CRIME AND SOCIAL DISORDER'. By 5.20pm, skirmishes had broken out between police and young people in Hackney; reportedly starting when a man was stopped and searched by police, but nothing was found. It was also around this time that a young man from East of London called DJ received a BB message from his friends. He was 14, has been in this country since the age of 8 but moved around, staying in different cities. He and his family had struggled to settle, and DJ, in particular, had long been looking for cultural acceptance. Still, it seems, that the disorder appealed to him and his friends:

DJ receives several BB messages from his friends early on Monday evening. The 25 of them agree to meet and go from East London to Hackney. Hearing of the disorder, they say '*it will be a laugh*' and want to '*see what's going on*'. They walk along the road in a large group, but are then chased by the police. DJ and two friends leap into an old lady's garden and hide while most of the others scatter in other directions. The old lady calls the police but there is no answer and she panics in her home. Although DJ leaves, he is later apprehended by the police and arrested. [Field notes]

We'll come back to DJ later. By 6.45pm, reports indicated that vehicles had been set alight in Lewisham and Peckham. Yet conversations with a few people undertaking these specific acts seemed to indicate that there was some quite deliberate decision making going into what was torched, who was robbed and who was left alone. Here Wez, who said he used to 'roll with a crew' [gang], gives some insight into how some properties were avoided while others were targeted over the weekend:

Wez: *Like on my road there is a really popular chicken shop, like on a Friday night everyone is there. It is ram, bruv [very busy, man]. Then to the side, but not next door, there is a kebab shop. Proper nice kebabs, init. Now, the owners were called before the riots came that way and were told not to worry, init. But the businesses either side got torched or robbed. So I think there was some like loyalty in it because like the chicken shop looks out for us, but also there was this opportunity to settle beef, carry out revenge attacks and all the rest of it. But today is the best opportunity to burn down somewhere which we have beef with.*

By 9pm, most of the country was witnessing live aerial footage of several fires burning in south London; perhaps the most poignant one being the blazing inferno of a family business in Croydon. I watched the television feeling quite intrigued about what would happen next and, coincidentally so, it is announced that Boris and Dave are coming home from holiday early.¹ Again the social disorder continued into the night and there were reports that phone shops were looted in Woolwich by ‘several hundred youths’ and Tesco was looted in Ealing.

Tuesday 9th August

On the morning of the 9th, David Cameron got serious about the violence, and this was reflected in his tough words:

“These are sickening scenes - this is criminality, pure and simple, and it has to be confronted and defeated...We will make sure that court procedures and processes are speeded up and people should expect to see more, many more arrests in the days to come...And I have this very clear message to those people who are responsible for this wrongdoing and criminality: you will feel the full force of the law and if you are old enough to commit these crimes you are old enough to face the punishment.”

The rhetoric is was heavy, and although I was sure there will be an almighty hunt of those involved, I started to feel the governmental and law enforcement response had been completely disproportionate. Since the events began, there had been an overemphasis on the victims, complete downplaying of the causes, never-ending discussions of effective policing (again) and increased ‘hard-line rhetoric’ on how the protagonists were going to feel the full force of the law. I started to phone the few contacts I have at BBC London to see if I could cancel out some of the propaganda through a TV appearance. Firstly, the BBC told me they had if covered and they’ll contact me if they need someone to commentate. I concede to myself that the expert commentators are probably lining up to speak about what is going on. Later that day I was in London Bridge station:

A glass smashes outside the station and everyone turns around. There is constant caution. Is a riot breaking out? Burly policemen guard each exit of the station, arms folded and they mean business. No sign of the smaller, friendlier community support officers. The burly policemen talk about the violence and look around periodically, making image-driven evaluations of potential problem-makers; they express particular caution of young people in group denominations of three or more. On the trains, the commuters turn the newspaper pages frantically, tut to themselves and shake their head every few seconds. ‘*What’s wrong with these people?*’ one says to his friend who replies ‘*if it was me, I would just shoot the cunts*’. [Field notes]

That evening Stevie and 20 of his friends finally agreed to avenge some ‘beef’ they had with another youth in their area. They were not part of a ‘gang’ they said, but just didn’t like this person. They meet and torch his house. They justified their actions, reasoning that the social disorder and chaos made it possible.

¹ Here I refer to Boris Johnson and David Cameron.

Wednesday 10th August

Cameron's words started to ring true as the arrest rates start to increase by Wednesday. At this time there seemed to be so much pressure on the police and evidence from my participants indicates that while they were managing social order and balancing prevention, other areas of what they were required to do didn't seem to be done with the same precision:

Policeman: *If we have CCTV footage and we can identify someone, we will nick them. Its to say, if we have five people on CCTV and three are known, we go for the three and put pressure on them to reveal others but there isn't much time so sometimes we have only had time to nick who we know. We are under pressure as well.*

Youth worker: *The problem is we had a lot of people from deprived backgrounds in the court and many of them already had some sort of conviction. Whether or not they were targeted because they were known, I don't know but in an absence of an informed background, everybody seemed to be talking out of their backside. Everybody is just making anything up. The statistics are just rubbish.*

Thursday 11th August

When the green light was given to licence 24 hour courts, my contacts in the youth justice industry indicated it was mostly district judges, professionally trained who took the stand - as opposed to lay magistrates. YOT workers, youth workers and probation officers told me the people (both young and older) who came before the court were being denied bail; that there was little, if any, consideration of their welfare or background circumstances, or even seriousness of the offence with which they were charged. Because their actions came under the banner of the social disorder, there seemed to be blanket procedures which were being orchestrated by the political chiefs, messers Cameron and Clegg. This YOT worker spent four hours in one London 24-hour court and was quite shocked at what he witnessed:

YOT worker: *They were professional judges. They are more likely to follow professional advice and they think they know it all. I was witnessing aggressive discussions and even a fight between probation officers because the National Standards require a certain number of days for a probation report to be made and they [the judges] were like 'no I want you to do this' and they were pulling ranks on everybody. It was all about rank and you couldn't argue with them [the judges] so we weren't able to provide services to them. It was not what you should expect for justice in this country...it was mostly young people coming in who had picked up t-shirts or trainers from stores, perhaps picking up sticks but they were all charged with violent disorder. That carries more and the judge can do more if they have more serious charges. The judges were trampling all over the law and acting on Cameron's whims, they were not acting on their principles.*

More of my contacts in the youth justice industry lamented at the treatment of those who were shunted into and through the court system. One voiced concerns that young people were being treated unfairly but feared losing his job as we were having our discussion. He quickly closed our conversation and abruptly hung up.

Over the following weekend

As the following weekend approached, the coverage of the social disorder started to slip down the order of play on the BBC and ITV news channels; probably because there was no 'LIVE CRIME AND SOCIAL DISORDER' to report. Consequently, the online feeds vanished. I travelled to some of the areas affected to speak to some residents to get their opinions. It seemed that although the coverage had dwindled, there was still evidence that the social disorder had empowered some people, while making others, like this resident in Enfield, more fearful:

Resident in Enfield: *Two days after the riots in London, I was in Tesco and there were two 12 year old kids coming in on their bikes. They stormed in and overpowered the big security guard, they pushed him around and they seemed to feel invincible. They had it on their mobile, recording it and they were saying to the security guard 'what are you gonna do about it?' It was like the kids were in control.*

There were some political discussions of increasing regulation of social networking sites and this was met with online protests. However, this local resident and schoolteacher seemed to recognise that although there may have been initial attempts to make political and social statements through social disorder, those messages were lost somewhat and social media enabled a greater proportion of chaos to ensue – for various reasons:

Resident in Lewisham: *Look, it happened in Libya, Egypt all these places and the networking sites were bringing the people together and we were applauding them. Modern day technology has helped them communicate and has amplified it, it has empowered them. It is happening here, and now it can happen so quick.*

Schoolteacher: *This young lad we have had trouble with in the school was showing us stuff on Facebook, YouTube and it spread so quickly, all their mates had the link and all of the kids knew where it was, mostly on mobile phones and the guy we were with was showing all his mates, he seemed to be quite proud of it.*

I tried my BBC contacts again but there was no answer.

Wednesday 17th August and beyond

By Wednesday, the courts were continuing to process people at an alarming rate. In the main, disproportionate sentences were given out and the media clung to the most severe or most petty. Sentencing was definitely on media's agenda and when I received a call from BBC London, I was excited by the prospect of talking about the sentencing procedures. I was firstly screened for my views in a short telephone conversation and what I said seems to pass the test and I am invited to the studios:

At 4pm I arrive outside the studios. As we wait, the reporter feeds me stories and statistics as if he wants me to talk about them in my interview. I know that I will only be a sound bite but don't include any of them. He turns to me after and says 'I just want a story'. Later that evening, I appear for 15 seconds or so saying: **Dan:** *What we need to do is slow down. These events are only a week and a half old and to be honest these kinds of sentencing procedures reflect typically paranoid, knee-jerk reactions to the problem at hand.*

The next day, the coverage of the social disorder took another hit and Libya started to headline. As I started my clearing duties at the university on Friday 19th August, I started talking to those who were temping and had just finished their studies at UEL. They all know people who were involved in the disturbances but say those people were reluctant to talk to anyone for fear of arrest. One young woman I sit next to all day, quickly gets bored of her temp work and looks for entertainment on the internet. Unfortunately, there are no 'riots' to keep her amused:

Lizzy sits at the computer waiting to receive calls from prospective students. She is on clearing duty with me and is not long out of higher education herself. She sighs and has a kind of empty look on her face. She logs into Facebook for potential stimulation but despite the 5 unread personal messages and 45 notifications, it only entertains her for a matter of 30 seconds. She logs out, turns to me and says *'Man, its so boring now. At least when the riots was on, there was something to follow.'* [Field notes]

A few days later, I finally got through to another friend who used to be in a gang. He told me that the social disorder was *'not a gang ting'* but the reason why some 'gang members' took part in the riots was because of constant discrimination, racism and lack of social mobility. He said me that young minority ethnic groups were continually dismissed by politicians and the local authority, as well as antagonised on a day-to-day basis by police who treated them as 'the suspects' and 'offenders'. He also said that those he knows who took part in the riots did so to voice frustration and anger because they had 'no voice'. This seemed to be reiterated when I later met with another youth justice worker:

YOT manager: *1 or 2 offenders of 40 arrested for riots in one London borough have gang connections and they weren't there for gang reasons, it was not gang driven.*

The manager tells me of case they are dealing with; someone who is now being processed through the courts. It is a young 14 year-old boy who has been charged with criminal damage – it is DJ:

With no pre-convictions, DJ is charged for criminal damage and receives a five month referral order. Although his mum sits in court and shouts *'he is innocent'* in native language, there is little she can do. She thinks the court hearing is just a meeting. This is *'not the son she knows'* his YOT worker tells me. He relays how in interviews when his mum was present he was 'a different person'. I guess she has only seen one side of him at home. He couldn't be someone who was about to participate in the social disorder. [Field notes]

Discussion

This article has been put together based on evidence I have gathered from consented discussions with a range of people who participated in (to some degree) or were affected by the riots (either personally or professionally). I realise that, at this early stage, there are some gaps in my analysis. Unfortunately, I cannot go into too much detail in terms of biography as I would be breaking the conditions of ethical approval which was granted in this case. Of course, there is more to what I offer here but I have done this in my spare time and will continue to develop what I have started. Despite this, I think the article highlights three important areas. I discuss these areas in this final section.

1) Relations between the authorities and the public in certain urban communities are extremely fragile and it doesn't take much to stimulate public action on perceived injustices; I think that the initial cause of the social disorder in London was connected to Mark Duggan's death. I find it difficult to believe that it was only 'criminal others' whom 'invaded Tottenham' and were responsible for the social chaos which ensued. People, it seems, are tired of day-to-day mistreatment by the authorities, discrimination, lack of social mobility and successive governments which have not listened carefully to pressing issues in these communities. Couple this resentment and frustration with austerity measures which some in my article are saying have significantly affected their everyday lives. How do these people therefore make their point? A peaceful protest? And what good does a peaceful protest do? Hundreds of thousands peacefully walked against the War in Iraq...and we went to war. Then we all peacefully (most of us) walked against increases to student fees...and the fees went up. The role of peaceful protests doesn't seem to resolve much, and people know it. So when the protest following Mark Duggan's death failed to get any recognition or response from the police, some took it into their own hands, having seen or heard about the incident. I think some people knew that they had to convey their point, and they had to initiate action through disorder.

2) Social networking played a significant role in the way this started and spread, and the reasons for involvement in the social disorder were collective as well as subjective; A few in my small sample said photos of Mark Duggan were uploaded on Facebook minutes after he died. Therefore news of his death travelled quickly across cyberspace and resonated with others who had been in similar positions with the authorities or know people who have suffered similar consequences. Such is the intimate way these networks are connected that, quite quickly, the local community knew something was not quite right (again). The ambiguity of media reporting and lack of clarity from the police did not satisfy them over the next 24 hours and a protest was quickly organised. It was the same networks which played a role in the disorder started in Tottenham. People quickly learnt of what was taking place – BB and Facebook messages were sent of what was being targeted, what was available to loot, what people had got, and then followed the invitations. Once this started to travel across cyberspace, it became something subjective for the receiver. Suddenly, the receiver had the opportunity to counter deep subjective feelings of frustration with the authorities and the government; to claim the prizes which people perhaps thought they were being starved of/wanted in any case; to carry out 'beef' or vendetta against someone/people they had problems with; or perhaps excited by the carnival of it all, to go along for a laugh or to see what was happening – perhaps to participate or just to witness (after all, some people leave their house not knowing what they will do that day). Therefore, participation in the social disorder in London seems to be for various reasons (and not one of 'sheer criminality') but one of collective reasoning with subjective intentions (Figure 1).²

² At this stage, I have drawn these conclusions but what I have produced is only provisional. Academics and policymakers may want to take forward what I have produced or modify it.

Figure 1 – An early conceptual matrix to account for the reasons for those who participated in the social disorder in London. ‘Sheer criminality’ is highlighted in bold because this is David Cameron’s reference. The other labels are those which have surfaced from this small-scale research study.

<i>Label</i>	‘Sheer criminality’	<i>‘Rioters’</i>	<i>‘Looters’</i>	<i>Measured attackers</i>	<i>Fringe participants</i>
<i>Rationale</i>	Insanity = random acts and ‘senseless violence’	Political message and/or social statement	In the main, opportunism, economic/financial gain but could also be political message and/or social statements	Targeted and calculated attacks on certain people/properties/businesses	Curiosity /opportunism
<i>Population</i>	Young people	People of all ages and in all circumstances, but predominantly minority ethnic communities	Mostly young people but some in 20s and early 30s	Mostly young people – perhaps some with ‘gang beef’ or individual vendettas	Mostly young people
<i>Victims/targets</i>	Random victimisation	Mostly symbols of the State (police cars, stations, courts, job centres, etc)	Mostly commercial properties and businesses	What, to the outsider, may seem to be everyday people/companies and/or small businesses	Mostly commercial properties and businesses (if they participated)
<i>Blame</i>	Usual suspects = gangs, dysfunctional families, deprived communities, etc	State, State processes, capitalistic processes, those in power or politicians, crime control agencies and/or the wealthy		No blame but personal/collective vendettas	Little understanding of actions other than to ‘have a laugh’ or to ‘see what is happening’.

The authorities weaknesses were quickly exploited by social networks which is why for the first four days of the disorder, the police were ‘playing catch-up’.

- 3) The media depictions were one-sided and the government response was knee-jerk, hard-line and blatantly disregarded established criminal justice processes.

No doubt my efforts to appear on BBC London were a little lame but I did so because I was frustrated at the manner of how this was all being projected. I think in one scene the BBC were showing revolving images of the infernos in Croydon on a split screen with hooded youth titled ‘Gangs responsible for riots in London’ thus making the inextricable link for those on their sofas that this was a ‘gang problem’. In fact, I am sure David Cameron made a direct association with the social disorder and ‘gangs’. Another amusing one was when politicians and police announced that 75% of those arrested had criminal records and it suddenly turned into a circus discussion about the

effectiveness of prisons! What I am saying here is that the social disorder was given extremely one-sided coverage. The media messages briefly entailed a) support and commendation of the police; b) empathy for the 'innocent' victims and c) condemnation of the offenders – whoever they were but no one seemed to care; certainly not the commuter when he said 'best shoot the cunts.' Suddenly, the commuters read and empathised with the story of the lost family business in Croydon; the sofa surfers connected with moving figure of an old man trying to tidy up his DIY store in north London; and the worried parents heard the brittle voice of an onlooker with her family, scared to come out of the house. The commercial targets were not getting half the coverage. By neglecting the hidden messages, the media generated bigger stories by playing on emotive reactions to what went on but also missed a significant point. By not acknowledging that there was something deeper at fault here, the insanity of all became more believable; that is, this was something unexplainable.

So when the disorder did not naturally desist, in came David Cameron to flex his political muscles and promised hard-line action on those responsible. This certainly seemed to be the case but the pressure got too much for the police and courts to handle. Given the testimonies of my participants, I think the police had to get who they could (or perhaps who they knew – those already with convictions), process them as quickly as possible and give them the most severe penalties for their participation. This means the supposed 'law abiders' or the people who had jobs who took part were not represented in the police figures which probably bolsters an argument that it was 'sheer criminality' because the 'pure criminals' were the ones responsible for the bulk of the disorder. Still, criminal justice processes and procedures were conveniently overlooked just so law and order could be restored.

However we proceed now, what I think is most important is that we continue to speak to the people involved in this to work out their modus operandi. Normally, I work backwards and see what everyone else thinks about them and what is being done for/against them – and this is what I have tried to do in this article. However, as we will see in this edition of *Safer Communities*, access to these groups is distinctly difficult; people have either been dealt with or are too afraid to come forward. We are in danger of allowing their message – whatever it was – to be lost. This is frustrating because I have come to learn that, the greater the distance from the essence of the social problem, the more authoritative the label on what the problem is and what it represents, but unfortunately, the more inaccurate the diagnosis of it. I think finding out what is going on here is about how close you can get; that's when you learn about the essence of the problem because you discover the people behind the stereotype and the meaning they attach to their actions.