Speaking and Listening: The 2011 English Riots

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges and opportunities for *political listening* (Bickford 1996) following the events of August 2011, with a specific focus on the role of the media and citizen responses to media coverage. While the aftermath of the riots hardly gives rise to starry-eyed optimism, I explore an interaction – a conference on media and the riots – where political listening took place and provided the possibility to break down binaries of 'Us and Them' that have dominated public debate during and after the disturbances. I argue that although incomplete in this particular instance, political listening can provide the possibility to break out of limiting, damaging binaries and generate alternative spaces to listen, speak and act differently which expand public debate and enrich democratic life.

Introduction

1.1 This article explores the challenges and opportunities for *political listening* following the disturbances of August 2011, with a specific focus on the role of the media and citizen responses to media coverage. The 2011 riots^[1] were sparked by the death of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old black man who was shot dead by police in Tottenham on 4 August 2011. Duggan's death was the initial catalyst for the unrest that followed in this area of North London and spread to other parts of England. While events surrounding the shooting of Duggan remain unclear, media headlines at the time suggested he was involved in a shoot-out with police, a statement that was later proved not to be true. The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) announced on 9 August 2011 that Duggan did not fire at police before they shot him, contradicting information the Commission had previously provided to the effect that shots were exchanged between Duggan and the police, which 'inadvertently' misled the media.^[2] At the time of writing (January 2013), a coroner had been appointed to the inquest into Duggan's death which was set to take place in September 2013 and a retrial of the man accused of supplying Duggan with the gun he allegedly held on the day of his death was beginning at the Old Bailey court in which the circumstances of Duggan's death were being further questioned.

1.2 Public discussion, reports and research have focused on the role of social media in the riots and whether and how they may have 'fanned the flames' and encouraged young people to participate.^[3] Relatively little sustained attention has been paid to the role of 'mainstream' broadcast and print media, particularly the way in which these 'facts' and events were reported, and how young people and riot-affected communities were portrayed.

1.3 The concerns of this paper speak to broader debates over the mediated politics of representation and how fair representation is not only an issue for the industry but for democratic representation in society as a whole (Georgiou 2010: 183). Stuart Hall famously described media as not only a powerful source of ideas about race but also 'one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated' (Hall 1982: 35). If the media system restricts access and participation of part of the population, and misrepresents some groups, causing inter-ethnic tension and mistrust (Georgiou 2011: 183; Downing & Husband 2005), then vigorous, democratic debate is required over how explosions of physical and symbolic violence around 'riots' are covered by different media. This debate is particularly timely when the culture, practices and ethics of the media have been publicly examined through the Leveson Inquiry and the relationship of the press with the public, police and politicians is under scrutiny.^[4] A window of opportunity is open to make the connections between this public soul-searching and the lessons that can be drawn from August 2011.

1.4 Such lessons might come about through the approach I advocate: *political listening*. While the aftermath of the riots hardly gives rise to starry-eyed optimism, I explore an interaction – a conference on

media and the riots – where *political listening* took place in partial form and provided the possibility to break down binaries of 'Us and Them' that have dominated public debate during and after the events of August 2011. I consider the challenges and opportunities of political listening and argue that, while incomplete in this instance, political listening can provide at least the possibility of breaking out of the limiting, damaging binaries and enable new forms of political communication.

1.5 I begin with a description of the methods and data used in this paper. Second, I discuss the problem of the damaging binaries that I seek to address and define the concept of political listening as a response. Third, I analyse a moment of political listening. I conclude by considering the challenges of this proposal and its practice and argue that these challenges and tensions are ultimately productive and generate alternative spaces to listen, speak and act differently.

Methods and data

2.1 I reflect on a specific initiative in which I was a key actor: I collaborated with the charity *Citizen Journalism Educational Trust* and the citizen journalism website *The-Latest.Com* to write a report about the role of media in the riots. This report, *Media and the Riots: A Call for Action* (that I will refer to as 'the Report' and as 'Bassel 2012'), shares the insights of a unique opportunity: the *Media and the Riots* conference that took place in November 2011. The audience was made up of activists, young people from riot-affected areas, students, members of the public, former police (e.g. a member of the Black Police Association, Metropolitan Police Authority), representatives from charities and trade unions, academics, and journalists.^[5]

2.2 The conference provided participants with the opportunity to react to media representations of youth culture, young people and their communities during and after the riots. The Report draws on the conference, in which I participated, conference notes I took including observations of interactions, my participation in a breakout group on 'Young Voices' and discussions with participants and the organisers. A follow-up survey was conducted for participant feedback. In the Report, I compared the key themes I identified with the findings of other reports on the 2011 riots.^[6] The Report has been reviewed and included as part of the Leveson Inquiry.^[7]

2.3 Following its release in August 2012, the Report received press coverage. It was cited by Roy Greenslade, media commentator for left-leaning the Guardian newspaper, who wrote a foreword to the Report, as well as the Voice, the Huffington Post UK, Journalism.co.uk, Info4Security, the Institute of Communication Ethics and Hold the Front Page. I was also interviewed for BBC Radio Leicester and Capital FM East Midlands. The final report of a public symposium that I co-organised with Gurminder Bhambra and Ipek Demir in Birmingham in October 2011 entitled 'English "Riots": Civic Responses and Sociological Perspectives' further informs this discussion.^[8]

Binaries & political listening

3.1 I propose that *political listening* can break down the binaries of 'Us and Them' that have dominated public debate about the events of August 2011. I first explain the nature of this binary, i.e., 'what we are up against', and then how political listening can serve as a response.

3.2 The 2011 riots raised new questions: were they 'just' race riots in which angry young black men took to the streets protesting police brutality, mirroring similar events of the 1980s? Karim Murji and Sarah Neal argue that race discourses have been 'there and not there' in the interpretation of the riots (Murji & Neal 2011). On the one hand, the riots have been racialised (Murji & Solomos 2005) because of who they most visibly involved in North London: young African-Caribbean men and the wider African-Caribbean community. They were also racialised through the use of the racialised disorders of the 1980s as a reference point rather than the culturalised disorders of 2001. Finally, 'race was explicitly made present in David Starkey's now notorious BBC Newsnight evocation of Enoch Powell – the oldest ghost of British post-war race politics – when he made his widely criticized claim that it was African-Caribbean culture and crucially its appeal to young people that was the root of the disorder' (Murji & Neal 2011; see also Harvey et al. 2013).

3.3 On the other hand, these older race discourses do not connect with the complexity of cultural difference and ethnic diversity in England (Murji & Neal 2011: 2.7–2.9). Murji and Neal also point to processes of *deracialisation* because of the ethnic composition of the riots and the visible participation of young white men. Indeed, 'some migrant and/or black and minority communities were valorised as responsible and moral while some white and black and minority groups were vilified as criminal and morally deviant' (Murji & Neal 2011: 4.3). What emerges from the riots, then, is the familiar racism of disorderly 'others' as well as new complications of super-diversity (Vertovec 2007) that result from contemporary formations of multiculturalism in England (Murji & Neal 2011: 4.3).

3.4 Binaries of 'Us and Them' may, therefore, have become more complex in 2011 discourses than in previous disturbances of 2001 or the 1980s. However, these histories are interconnected. Aisha and Ann Phoenix analyse particular examples of post-riot commentary, including David Starkey, and argue for the 'recursiveness of old racialised discourses and hence their availability to be drawn on (often in new ways)' (Phoenix & Phoenix 2012: 63). Starkey in fact 'gives recognition to the multiethnic nature of the riots and to the unacceptability of old ways of racialising social dissent while determinedly racialising them' when he says 'the chavs have become black. The whites have become black.'^[9] The behaviour of a section of the white working classes that he finds unacceptable 'have become black'. He thus essentialises whiteness as good (and English) and blackness as its antithesis' creating 'afresh an old racialised hierarchy of belonging' (Phoenix & Phoenix 2012: 62–63). He pathologizes blackness 'without addressing

the underlying political and socio-economic causes of the riots' (2012: 65).

3.5 At the conference on which the Report is based, 'Us and Them' binaries were identified and denounced by many participants. Keynote speaker Gus John, professor at the Institute of Education and long-standing activist in the area of race and education, summarised mainstream coverage as 'simply disgraceful' (Bassel 2012: 13). Journalism professor and conference speaker Sarah Niblock identified precisely this binary in media coverage, 'There was too much emphasis on law and order and an authoritarian stance, driven by too much reliance on official sources and the binary notions of good versus bad and us versus them' (Bassel 2012: 19). Conference participants were angry and dismayed by unhelpful, unbalanced media coverage of events beginning with the misrepresentation of the facts surrounding the death of Mark Duggan. For many, this was only the most recent example of complicity between state and media – where media are even perceived by some as 'being the mouthpiece of the police' (Bassel 2012: 12) – to misrepresent the facts surrounding the death of a black man at the hands of police, as well as the profile of the victim.

3.6 The Report discusses reactions to coverage (at the conference and documented in other sources) that was described as stigmatizing, a source of incorrect information that may have even disinhibited/incited rioting, overly reliant on official sources, a vehicle for consumerism, and a voice of moral condemnation where coverage took the form of what John referred to as a 'moral crusade' that was not colour-blind (Bassel 2012: 13). As *Times* sports journalist Tony Evans described it in a speech to the National Union of Journalists, some journalists [in this case Sky reporter Mark Stone] walked around 'as if they were headmasters' filming young people on their phones and asking them if they were proud of what they had done. For Evans:

That's not journalism. Journalism should be the pursuit of the truth and the pursuit of knowledge. And we weren't seeing knowledge there. We were getting the vicarious thrills of being in the middle of a riot...we have this situation where the government now is allowed to move the dialogue on and suddenly blame gangs. And the newspapers are rushing to report this, and agree with it... you don't need to get beyond the surface, you can just point fingers...there is an instinctive fear in some journalists – quite a lot of them – to actually confront the preconceptions of the mass of the British public...It's easier to go along with public perceptions. But that's not our role. Our role is to come up with the truth.

(quoted in Bassel 2012: 16)

3.7 Binary coverage also excludes the history of communities in which deep-seated anger and collective memory is attached to deaths in custody in a number of controversial cases that family members feel have not been satisfactorily investigated. John Solomos notes the ways in which connections were made in the wider community between Mark Duggan's death and other examples of police deaths in custody with highly charged rumours circulating 'more generally about the role of the police in relation to local black communities generally and black youth in particular' (Solomos 2011: 3.5; Benyon & Solomos 1987).

3.8 Tottenham community activist and conference speaker Stafford Scott showed conference participants a picture of a group of black people and asked that they identify them. The audience response demonstrated to him, 'We are only remembered when we riot.' By this Scott meant that while all the people in the photo had a family member who died in police custody, the (non-activist) members of the audience could only identify those around whose death violent unrest broke out.

3.9 This observation was not made by Scott to endorse these forms of violence, but to point to the connections made within collective memory which are a source of longstanding anger. These are connections only dimly perceived from outside and to which media coverage is, for the most part, completely insensitive. This history is often selectively invoked in media coverage, for instance to represent Tottenham, where the riots began, as a place with notorious associations of disorder (Murji & Neal 2011: 4.2).

3.10 Political listening can be a vital, creative practice that can crack open binary space that excludes these histories and enable collective memory and politics to emerge through adversarial engagement. This engagement must also be continuous and sustained because it is very easy for binaries to be unintentionally reproduced. For example, the 'Riot Clean-up' movement, the mop-and-pail brigade that was coordinated through social networking sites and assembled large numbers of people to clear debris in affected areas, was broadly acclaimed as a positive, civic response to disorder which evoked the 'blitz' and wartime resilience (Jensen 2013).

3.11 Yet its coverage did not necessarily counter more generally negative representations of young people in the media. Media reports did not reflect that more young people were involved in the clean-up operation than the riots and a submission to the Leveson Inquiry by the Youth Media Agency 'highlighted the "discriminatory attitude of the media towards children and young people during and following the riots"' (Victims Panel Final Report 2012: 84)^[10]

3.12 As Gus John argued in his keynote address at the conference, 'Riot Clean-up' coverage also arguably served to divide people into 'good' and 'bad' members of society, the latter of whom needed to be swept away:

The language used by the media typifies a process of 'othering'; a process which provides the nation and not least the police and the courts with a justification for treating that section of the community as the 'them' from whom 'we' must be protected, as the alien wedge against whom the state must act on behalf of 'us', the 'them' from whom every decent

citizen in Cameron's 'big society' must distance themselves, preferably armed with broom and pail.

(Bassel 2012: 14)

3.13 Even seemingly positive opportunities can be diverted into reproducing binary conceptions of 'Us and Them', and fail to enlarge the space in which riots, rioters and underlying inequalities and challenges can be identified and addressed. It therefore becomes all the more important to develop practices of resistance in which unheard people have the chance to oppose these discourses and represent themselves, to tell their own stories on their own terms.

What is political listening?

4.1 This is where political listening comes in. While it may sound obvious, the first step is to stop talking. My choice to shift from speaking to listening draws on the sociological reflection of Les Back that 'our culture is one that speaks rather than listens' (Back 2007: 7) and our capacity to hear is damaged in the clamour to be heard, to narrate and gain attention. As Back elaborates the 'art' of listening, a sociological ear can listen with humility, rather than charging in with a pet theory and fitting complex events within it. Listening with humility and ethical care can provide a resource to understand the contemporary world while pointing to the possibility of a different kind of future. As a careful listener, the sociologist can disrupt the easy essentialisms that dog public and academic debates and open up the false comforts achieved in absolute moral categories where society is written 'as if it were populated by Manichean camps of either good or bad people, angels or devils' which can make the people whose humanity one seeks to defend less than human (Back 2007: 60, 157–8).

4.2 A more explicit, public, political dimension is needed with this sociological approach. My proposal does not sit entirely comfortably with Back's 'art' of listening. This tension, which I think is productive, is the result of the struggles and inequalities that were identified and demonstrated at the *Media and the Riots* conference and the experience of trying to ensure that the message of the Report was heard. To further develop a concept of listening that is equal to the task of exploring this process, I shift from an 'art' to 'political listening' and draw on the work of Susan Bickford. She focuses on the role of struggle, conflict and inequality in the *process* of listening and being heard in formal, public, political exchanges. Humility and attention to complexity are invaluable moorings for sociologists in their own work and when entering the public realm but do not always translate into effective and immediate political action, a tension that Back acknowledges.^[11] Back's stirring and sensitive plea for the need to admit voices and pay them serious attention, challenge claims placed on the meaning of events, and hear voices not listened to answers his central question: what is sociology needed for? My concern is to reflect critically on how listening, as a form of politics, can be undertaken in adversarial, unequal and tense political moments such as the 2011 riots when complexity is an endangered species and action must take place here and now. This is not to suggest that the 'art' of listening is apolitical but rather that it eschews a politics of manifestos, privileging instead a commitment to interpretation without legislation (2007: 1) and indeed explicitly calls for 'unsettling dialogues with humility' rather than a 'stirring manifesto' (2007: 162). In contrast, my task is to explore how we might – and how in this particular case did – try to deal with conflict and inequality in the process of *ensuring others listen*, that unheard voices are listened to in moments of heightened tension and anxiety (Rogers 2013), and what the pitfalls and opportunities of this kind of action may be.

4.3 Susan Bickford aims to answer this question by focusing on the lack of attention to the practice of listening in political interaction because of the obsession with speech. 'Political listening', rather than the 'art of listening', makes explicit the context of conflict and inequality in which communication takes place; these are not the conversations of friendly associates (Bickford 1996). Politics means naming the social forces that deflect attention from particular voices, and is necessarily adversarial as well as active and creative. Drawing partially on the work of Hannah Arendt, she begins with the centrality of appearing in the world through speech and action:

the quality of the attention paid is central to that appearance. Just as speakers must reflect on how to speak (and what to say), listeners must be self-conscious about how they listen (and what they hear). Taking responsibility for listening, as an active and creative process, might serve to undermine certain hierarchies of language and voice...[and] create a public realm where a plurality of voices, faces and languages can be heard and seen and spoken.

(Bickford 1996: 128)

4.4 Drawing also on Aristotle, Gloria Anzaldúa and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bickford insists on the ways in which listening has often reflected social power resulting in the systematic distortion of some people's audibility (1996: 96). In light of the pathologizing discourses we explored and the ways media can be understood as both a source of ideas about race but also a place where these ideas are 'transformed and elaborated' (Hall 1982: 35), it becomes all the more important to consider how media spaces can be changed and what kind of process needs to take place in order to call for this transformation – who needs to speak, to demand that this happen, and who needs to listen?

4.5 This is a risky and uncertain business because of the role of reception; one cannot demand to be heard in a particular way. Communicating with others is struggle, and action is as unpredictable and uncontrollable as the other citizens with whom we necessarily engage (1996: 130). The crucial distinction is between being regarded as an object or otherwise not heard (which is antipolitical) – such as when young black men and 'chavs' who 'become black' are criminals 'pure and simple' – and being heard differently than we want to be. 'The latter is an unavoidable political possibility' (130) as we saw in the

case of Riot Clean up in the discussion above. The political challenge is to be heard when not conforming to the binary of 'Us and Them' and to insist on how it feels and why it matters 'not to be reflected back' in these binaries (Ahmed, 2012: 55 in Cooper 2013).

4.6 In order for political listening to take place everyone must participate as both a speaker and a listener with these roles shifting equally between peers. They are interdependent because 'neither of us has meaning without the other...I cannot hear you except against the ground of who I am, and you are speaking not in the abstract, but to me – to who you think your listeners are' (Bickford 1996: 147). The activity of political listening does not necessarily accomplish the resolution or transformation of conflict but does aim to create an 'us' by mutual effort (132). When intractable, the nature and meaning of conflict can at least be clarified 'we may decide what to do *because* of that revealed conflict' and are not therefore doomed to inaction (165). The objective is to act in a way so future action is possible, sustaining the possibility of actively making sense together (170–73).

4.7 This proposal is strongly normative with its requirements of willingness to listen, share the role of speaker and listener equally, create a mutual 'us', and recognise others as capable of recognising us (Bickford 1996:131). These are not characteristics of the harsh riots talk we sampled above, including but not exclusively the comments of David Starkey to which we should add the 'law and order' agenda that Prime Minister David Cameron was quick to establish with his characterisation of the rioting as 'criminality, pure and simple' (BBC 2011). Here Bickford is right to emphasise that entering public life is messy and the public realm is hardly only populated with emergent radical forces (2007: 161). However, Bickford's focus on conflict, inequality and struggle provide rich resources for unpacking the nature of public political listening and its uncertain but vital democratic qualities. She makes us realise why it matters to at least aim toward a different kind of democratic interaction.

4.8 This theorisation of political listening reminds us that we need it to break out of these binaries and, at the very least, make them visible. But how is this to be done? Bickford energises us but provides few concrete examples. I will now explore what I will suggest were the seeds of political listening that were sown at the *Media and the Riots* conference. I will then consider some of the challenges to making political listening happen and who can/should be the listener.

Political listening at work

5.1 Political listening now has large shoes to fill: to be a vital, creative practice that can crack open binary space that excludes complex histories, to enable collective memory and politics to emerge through adversarial engagement, and for this engagement to be continuous and sustained to avoid the inadvertent reproduction of pathologizing binaries. Political listeners must be willing to equally take on roles of speaking and listening as interdependent peers. They must be brave and ready to be misunderstood with no certainty of the outcome but with the conviction that the overriding objective is for the conversation to continue. This is certainly a tall order and Bickford's contribution is, as I state above, to make us think about why it matters to at least aim toward a different kind of interaction where people can be heard outside of binaries.

5.2 This was the aim of the Report. As its title indicates, *Media and the Riots: A Call for Action* is a programme for the future as well as a diagnostic of what went wrong. The bulk of the report is dedicated to making positive recommendations with specific steps to change media spaces to better reflect the complexity of current formations of multiculturalism in England (Murji & Neal 2011). I suggest the seeds of political listening were sown in interactions that took place at the conference.

5.3 In contrast to the static outputs of the Report, 'the bullet points', at the conference interaction took place that had the chance of changing perceptions and attitudes. While it did not necessarily create a passageway between its participants, or a mutual 'us', at least it clarified the nature of misunderstanding and misrepresentation with an attempt to actively make sense together. This happened through engagement that was adversarial but productive and even creative. If it was not humble at all times, it started to be more careful.

5.4 For the first time, young people from riot-affected areas were able to come face to face with working journalists and media professionals and hold a dialogue with them. In one session Tom Parmenter, a senior Sky News reporter, aired a clip from his extended interview entitled *Looters* in which he spoke with four young black men whose faces were covered and who were connected to/involved in the riots. His motivation, as he explained it, was that he could see that everyone else was having a say but no one was talking to those involved. He described a massive range of negative and positive response to the work, which received an enormous number of hits on YouTube.

5.5 In the discussion that followed communicating with others was a struggle, with the unpredictable and uncontrollable outcomes that Bickford warns us about. But the opportunity was to be heard rather than regarded as an object or misrepresented because of the underlying unequal distribution of social power that makes voices that do not adhere to the binaries discussed above inaudible. One participant took issue with the camera shots, which focused away from the men's covered faces to zoom in on their (black) hands. Others criticised questions he asked, arguing that they should have been better constructed to draw out the histories of the young men interviewed. Another participant pointed to the fact that young black faces are 'only on Carnival and Crimewatch' with another person echoing that 'there were never so many black people on TV as in the riots.' A young man in the audience at the conference explained to the journalist that when two police officers passed by and listened to part of the interviews, the reason why they did not arrest the young men who were speaking – a source of surprise and relief to the film crew – was because the camera was there.

5.6 In the view of one participant, with this heated intervention, the audience demonised a reporter (who is not a top decision-maker). Other feedback from participants emphasised that Parmenter was almost unique in giving these young men a voice, however problematic the way in which this was done. For example, one of Parmenter's interviewees explained that he had targeted a particular store because of the 'disrespect' shown to him when he approached its staff looking for work; another interviewee explained that he looted Boots to get things for his baby because without work he was unable to pay. These testimonies highlight what other reports describe as 'the gap between what was portrayed in the media as representing the "good life" to which people should aspire, and what young people in their communities could actually have, given the poverty of income and opportunity' (Morrell et al. 2011: 48).

5.7 While the exchanges were certainly heated, this intervention held the possibility for a journalist who was not part of the community that he covered to see his coverage through their eyes, to literally be 'read' in the presence of those whose experience he sought to represent (Back 2007: 151). Learning went both ways in that audience members also had the chance to think about what they expected from journalists, and to re-adopt the role of listeners but in a new key, not as consumers of mediated representations but as political actors equally engaged in adversarial communication (Bickford 1996: 156).

5.8 The role of asking questions was an important element of this engagement. For instance, the journalist did not know what the longest sentence for MP expense scandals was compared to that for rioting, which caused a very negative reaction from the audience. But as Bickford suggests, this practice also reveals the mutuality of speaking and listening, showing a willingness to take seriously what the other has to say and to work together to understand (laden with the risk of revealing deep differences and conflict that cannot be easily reconciled, as was the case here) (Bickford 1996: 157). Questioning is a kind of responsive effort that is part of collective work, even if everyone ends up disagreeing. This form of participation has transformative dimensions (1996: 163) (though we should not overstate their extent). New questions can be, and were, raised in the minds and discussions of participants: What can be expected of mainstream journalists who are aiming to represent typically unheard voices yet are not specialised in particular issue areas? How can they be held to account? Therefore even with the recognition of perspectives that will not merge, meaning is still recast by communication (1996: 165).

5.9 With the challenging discussion at the conference, participants demonstrated the gap between 'lives lived in passing' (Back 2007) and what appears on our screens, even with the starting point of 'good intentions' to create space for unheard voices. They did this themselves, in contrast to top-down proposals for the news media to regulate themselves (e.g. Victims Panel Report 2012: 138; Bassel 2012: 17). This was a bottom-up adversarial process that generated new proposals for ways in which they might be heard, and new spaces can be created. In an interview with Parmenter produced by young people from the Media Citizens Sutton group immediately following the conference debate, this exchange was recognised as useful but 'not the final chapter'. Instead the producers argued that this was a first step toward what should be 'not an investigation *into* young people but the opportunity for young people to express their views'.^[12]

5.10 These contestations were important in and of themselves, as political acts, but also because of the concrete areas for action that participants identified and that we could then build on in the Report. Two areas are particularly noteworthy because of the critical but constructive way participants sought to actively make sense together and recast meaning, outside of binaries, to demand change in media spaces: supporting local journalism and encouraging citizen journalism.

5.11 Instead of focusing exclusively on criticising individual journalists and making press complaints about stigmatising coverage, the need to support local journalism, in the context of cuts, emerged from the discussion. This support is needed to ensure local journalists can 'live and breathe' their patch, as Sarah Niblock described it. She clarified that her remarks were 'not any kind of attack on the professionalism of journalists' but rather identified 'a cultural sea change that has occurred when new financial priorities made local journalism remote from its readers' and which becomes a source of reactive rather than pro-active reporting. To the best of Niblock's knowledge:

No local journalist was apparently on the march by Mark Duggan's supporters at the police station on Tottenham High Road. I have not been able to find a single eyewitness journalism report of that event. If a reporter had been at the scene and reported on the exchange between the supporters and police on the steps of the police station then we might have more than rumour and speculation to go by. If the media didn't know it was happening, then why not?

(Bassel 2012: 19)

5.12 To address these challenges, we call for better and more teaching of local journalism, and establishing relationships with communities being covered so journalists too young to remember the 1981 Scarman report, as Stafford Scott described them (Bassel 2012: 19), are not just parachuted in. Strong local coverage can engage with local history and collective memory and reflect the variations in what took place in August 2011, i.e., the different issues at stake in different parts of the UK. Differences between rioting and local histories and dynamics in different parts of England did not surface until much later, long after national public perceptions had been shaped (Bassel et al. 2011: 9).

5.13 Strong local journalism can provide accurate and sensitive coverage that acts as a counterweight to national spin that paints all events with the same brush, though they were in fact diverse events with their own causes and histories (Bhattacharyya et al. 2012). Examples of good practice that we cited in the report as engaging with local actors include Paul Lewis's on-the-spot reporting published in *The Guardian* (along with the *Reading the Riots* project by *The Guardian* and *The London School of Economics* in which

journalists and researchers have built extensive local partnerships to enable 'unheard voices' to reach public spaces)^[13] and lesser-known initiatives such as *The Voice of Africa*, whose journalist Space Clotley reported at the conference on the ways in which this black community radio station sent their reporters to Tottenham to report on what was happening. This is not an exhaustive list and more work needs to be done to highlight alternatives to problematic mainstream media reporting.

5.14 A second direction for action that emerged was to encourage 'citizen journalism'. The promise in the idea of 'citizen journalism' is that people make their own news and tell their own stories through spontaneous actions of ordinary people who feel compelled to adopt the role of a news reporter (Allan & Thorsen 2009). Chris Greer and Eugene McLaughlin consider these possibilities in their discussion of news reporting of the 2009 G20-protests in London and the death of Ian Tomlinson, who died after being struck by a police officer and falling to the ground. As they discuss, because citizen journalists are independent of the systems of rules that professional journalists have to follow, this increased autonomy from communication nodes can increase the possibility of introducing messages that challenge dominant values and interests.^[14] They capture the (romantic) appeal of citizen journalism with the following quote:

Armed with cell-phones, BlackBerries or iPhones, the average Joe is now a walking eye on the world, a citizen journalist, able to take a photo, add a caption or a short story and upload it to the internet for all their friends, and usually everyone else, to see.^[15]

5.15 Citizen journalism is a contested concept and practice, particularly because of the way knowledge hierarchies and 'hierarchies of credibility' (Becker 1967 in Greer & McLaughlin 2010) are challenged. In the case Greer and McLaughlin analyse, they argue that it was actually possible to shift the news frame from 'protestor violence' to 'police violence' because technologically empowered citizen journalists were able to produce information that challenged the 'official' version of events (including a decisive moment when *The Guardian* broadcast mobile phone footage handed to the newspaper by an American fund manager that appeared to provide clear evidence of police violence against Tomlinson minutes before he collapsed).^[16]

5.16 Conference participants identified similar possibilities and concerns. While recognising differences in the way individuals and communities consume media content and that some do not believe the news published by citizen journalists until the same news is published or broadcast by big media, participants nonetheless identified this route as an opportunity for young people to tell their own stories. They felt that the original accounts of the experiences of those involved in the riots and the aftermath need to be published. Participants believed that these stories were 'out there' on social media but were being ignored in the mainstream media.

5.17 The Report documents agreement among many conference participants that the ability of ordinary citizens to take photographs and record video on mobile phones was a very positive development as it meant that, for instance, the public could 'film what the establishment don't want us (the public) to see'. Participants felt it was wrong that the veracity of citizen reporting was sometimes questioned while mainstream media reporting was 'filled with lies' but rarely scrutinised and held to account (Bassel 2012: 22).

5.18 These two positive directions that emerged from political listening at the conference demonstrate the transformative nature of participation in listening processes. While perspectives may not merge, the nature of conflict and of power relations can be clarified identifying more sharply what is at stake. Criticism is combined with knowledge and awareness of constraints and a positive alternative is articulated that can begin to pluralise public space.

Concluding thoughts

6.1 At the beginning of this paper I claimed not to be a starry-eyed optimist. Readers may be wondering at this stage if this claim can be sustained, and whether I have overstated the possibilities of political listening. My optimism stems not only from the process but also its outcomes. Our analysis of the conference demonstrated opportunities within media outlets as well as challenges. Media processes had what the Report referred to as 'many faces' during and after the 2011 riots: coverage acted as a disinhibiting and/or a protective force; a tool to incite rioting and/or to call for calm; a vehicle of consumerism and/or the voice of moral condemnation; a source of misinformation and/or a source of data;^[17] stigmatising and/or positive (Bassel 2012: 9–15). Reflection on the conference outcomes and triangulation with other reports and studies led to the conclusion that a balancing act is needed to use these opportunities to challenge inequalities of voice and participation but without reproducing negative preconceptions and binary frames.

6.2 Reading through Bickford's lens, we might say that the Report aims to continue the project of political listening and redistribute the roles of speakers and listeners to address the social forces that deflect attention from particular voices within media spaces. The report begins with a quote from Stafford Scott, 'Martin Luther King once said that riots gave voice to the voiceless; but the voices of those who felt moved to take to the streets in August are still very much unheard. The lessons from the '80s should tell us that ignoring them will come at a cost' (Bassel 2012: 1).

6.3 The Report concluded with five recommendations to learn these lessons: hold the media to account, including editorial decision-making; engage with journalists, to complain when coverage is stigmatising but also to support and engage with local journalism; communicate with decision makers, through youth engagement with decision makers;^[18] promote citizen journalism, including through social media use so

people can tell their own stories; (at the time of writing we are organising a 'Young Citizen Journalist' competition); ensure access to journalism, challenging 'all-white newsrooms' to address unequal representation in the *production* of media images as well as their content (Georgiou 2010).^[19]

6.4 These are modest proposals to enlarge media spaces as part of a plural public realm. But political listening is not an end in itself. The broader goal is to address inequalities within the mediated politics of representation that are so harmful to the quality of democratic life.

6.5 It would be naïve to ignore the resistance to this proposal.^[20] I highlight two challenges here that merit their own separate and careful scrutiny. First, the way to connect careful listening to politics is not self-evident when there is little public space for complexity. Are we asking journalists to be sociologists? Is there space for a more complicated version of events? And do these stories do good political work? It is not clear that the complexity that careful, humble listening renders does effective political work in the adversarial, unequal and binary space in which riots talk takes place. There is an appetite and a market for precisely this, binaries of 'Us versus Them', from news consumers. This is not just a matter of 'keeping it simple'; there is a reassurance in the process of boundary drawing that separates the civilized from the barbarians, which is in turn underpinned by its own financial logic. It would be foolish to ignore the public appetite to which media actors respond. But it would equally be a mistake to portray public opinion and journalists' motivations as a straightforward monolith. For example, Greer and McLaughlin argue that there is also a market for anti-establishment news that challenges institutions, fueled by journalists' distrust of institutional power who generate a 'press politics of outrage' (2012).

6.6 Second, who should listen? Bickford insists on the interdependence of speakers and listeners and the willingness to change roles, equally, as peers struggling with and against each other to create a mutual 'us'. I have indicated that this account is perhaps overly idealistic in the harsh post-riots climate. Who, then, can at least advocate political listening and participate in processes that are less binary and exclusive? Academics have long debated their implication in these forms of public debate, as the literature on public sociology demonstrates (Burawoy 2005). The danger is that the push from careful complex listening to mobilisation can quickly become undemocratic, authorizing pundits (including academics) as spokespeople who convey messages best delivered by those directly affected. The events of August 2011 should not generate a 'land grab' mentality where academics – including myself – scramble to appropriate these events, to take them under the particular umbrella of specific institutions and authors and 'own' the riots (see also Cooper 2013). A milder version is to say that many different people work on these issues in parallel, separate spaces when a little more collaboration and information sharing would generate better research and make for stronger political responses if and when like-minded researchers converge.

6.7 If sociologists, and academics more generally, are willing and able to take on 'public' rather than 'professional' roles (Burawoy 2005), information sharing may be a way to avoid land grabbing and appropriation and to mitigate the ways in which 'public sociology' can serve to both include and exclude (Taylor & Addison 2011). Process and method are, therefore, as political and as important as substance – political listening lies in the *how* as much as the *what*. Since the publication of this report I have had the opportunity to discuss the work with *Generation 2012*.^[21] Three members of this group of young Londoners – Eveline Mendes, Hakim Kay and Kieran Gordon – have produced their own citizen journalist report on the riots "'Voices of the Unheard" A Citizen Journalist Report on the Riots of August 2011 one year on' (Mendes et al. 2012). The discussion with *Generation 2012* is not only about comparing findings but also the strategies that we used to attempt to have an impact, to be heard.

6.8 The living legacy, then, is beyond the bullet points. For academics this could mean developing strategies to share university-based resources with non-academic groups who are often more creative and effective in generating new spaces for speaking and listening. For example, screenings of the documentary *Riot from Wrong*^[22] and the play *The Riots*^[23] provided opportunities for listening and discussion and have served as a public inquiry where none yet has been forthcoming from the government (see McGeeney 2013). Adversarial engagement needs to involve a varied audience. In the Report, recommendations are addressed to obvious candidates such as journalists and editors, but also to community organisations, youth groups, charities, journalism course providers, professional journalism bodies and educators. Conferences such as 'Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The Riots One Year On' are opportunities to generate these forms of engagement.

6.9 Our proposals in the Report were the result of political listening and aim to enlarge public debate. But they risk falling to the wayside without an active and continuous practice of political listening that can insist on the need to enlarge media spaces and pluralise democratic life. The challenges and tensions of this proposal, while real, can ultimately generate alternative spaces to listen, speak and act differently.

Notes

¹The term 'riots' should be understood as having scare quotes around it in recognition of debates over what is and what is not a riot (Bagguley & Hussain 2008: 5). One participant in the conference I discuss pointed out that for many present the term 'uprisings' may be more culturally appropriate. Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain situate this term historically as often used to refer to the riots of the 1980s 'in order to give them a common sense of collective political purpose, as if they were part of some co-ordinated assault on state power' though, in their view, 'clearly they were nothing of the kind' (Bagguley & Hussain 2008: 5).

²Mark Duggan did not shoot at police, says IPCC', *The Guardian*, 9 August 2011. 'London riots: the family of Mark Duggan says it has no trust in the IPCC' *The Guardian* 14 August 2011.

³See for instance Riots Communities and Victims Panel 2012, Morrell et al. 2011, and <Vis et al. forthcoming>.

⁴For the official Leveson Inquiry website: <<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/>>

⁵See Appendix 2 of the report for a full description of participants (Bassel 2012: 28–9).

⁶See 'Sources' section of the report (Bassel 2012: 27–8)

⁷See: <<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/evidence/?witness=citizen-journalism-educational-trust-and-latest-com>>

⁸For the summary report see: <<http://bsatheory.org.uk/2011/08/17/public-symposium-on-the-recent-disturbances/>>. For news coverage of the event see: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-15326444>>.

⁹See <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14513517>> for BBC clip of the programme as quoted in Phoenix and Phoenix (2012: 62).

¹⁰The Independent Riots Communities and Victims Panel was set up by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg to examine and understand why the August 2011 riots took place and their final report was presented to the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Official Opposition.

¹¹He discusses the 'precious slowness' of the pace of sociological research and cautions against the temptations of punditry (2007: 19). The tension is between the political necessity for intervention and sociological value in taking time to think carefully and critically (162).

¹²'Media and the riots: representation of young people' <<http://www.the-latest.com/media-and-riots-representation-young-people>>

¹³See <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots>>

¹⁴They draw on Manuel Castells (2009).

¹⁵Peat, D. (2010), 'Cellphone Cameras Making Everyone into a Walking Newsroom', *Toronto Sun*, 1 February in Greer and McLaughlin (2010: 1045).

¹⁶This information must combine with the inclination of professional and citizen journalists to actively seek out and use it and the existence of an information-communications marketplace that sustains the commodification and mass consumption of adversarial, anti-establishment news.

¹⁷In the Report this point is connected to *The Guardian's* data journalism initiative (Bassel 2012: 12–13).

¹⁸In 2012 through an Economic and Social Research Council Festival of Social Science event I worked with colleagues John Williams and Marc Scully to create connections between young people in Leicester and local government: the young people presented a Youth Manifesto for a multicultural city to Deputy Mayor Rory Palmer. These connections were made by working in partnership with BBC Radio Leicester presenter and journalist, Jim Davis, who I met as a result of the Report and who has a genuine interest in thinking about what went wrong as well as what was done well in media coverage of August 2011.

¹⁹A Sutton Trust report found that journalists increasingly hail from the most privileged demographics – private school and postgraduate courses – and are no longer trained on the job but have to shoulder the cost of pre-entry training themselves, meaning only those with affluent backgrounds can afford fees, living expenses and unpaid work experience (Sutton Trust 2006). See also Campion (2006).

²⁰I explore some harsh online responses to the Report in work in progress.

²¹Generation 2012 is a collaboration between the Open University's Tuning In and the BBC World Service in which young Londoners explore their own cultural and diasporic identity through the prism of international broadcasting and media training in the run up to the 2012 Olympic Games. See: <<http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/projects/generation-2012>>

²²See: <<http://riotfromwrong.com/>>

²³By Gillian Slovo. See: <<http://www.tricycle.co.uk/home/about-the-tricycle-pages/about-us-tab-menu/archive/archived-theatre-production/the-riots/>>

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