

“Do-it-Yourself Justice”: Considerations of Social Media use in a Crisis Situation: The Case of the 2011 Vancouver Riots

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ABSTRACT

In June 2011, during the ice hockey Stanley Cup, as the Vancouver Canucks were losing, riots started in downtown Vancouver. Social media were used to communicate between authorities and citizens, including the rioters. The media reporting on these events framed these communications within different narratives, which in turn raised ethical considerations. The authors identify and reflect upon ideas of justice, fairness, responsibility, accountability and integrity that arise in the media stories. In addition they investigate (1) the “institutional unpreparedness” of the Vancouver police department when receiving such quantity of material and dealing with new processes of inquiry such material requires; (2) the “unintended do-it-yourself-justice”: the shift from supporting crisis responders to social media vigilantes: citizens overruling authorities and enforcing justice on their own terms and by their own means through social media and; (3) the “unintended do-it-yourself-society” supported by the potential-of social media’s use for prompting people to act.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Crisis Situations, Ethics, Media Narratives, Riots, Social Media, Vigilante Justice

INTRODUCTION

On 15 June 2011, the ice hockey Stanley Cup final took place between the Vancouver Canucks and the Boston Bruins in Vancouver, Canada. Riots started downtown as the Vancouver Canucks were losing the final. The riots lasted all night long (Furlong and Keefe 2011). At the same time and following the event, different

people (mainly rioters, local authority officers, and Vancouver citizens) used social media to ‘cover’ the riots: first, the rioters took pictures and video of themselves and uploaded them; second, local authorities used social media to communicate with fellow citizens¹; third Vancouver citizens used social media to help local authorities identify rioters² (by sharing and tagging pictures of rioters) as well as to take justice into their own hands³. The use of social media during the riots has raised issues in the

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Figure 1. Canadian Sport History of Riots. Source: City of Vancouver Internal Review of the 2011 Stanley Cup Riot - Appendix A - Part 1, p.6. Retrieved from: <http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/2011-stanley-cup-riot-CoV-internal-review.pdf>

Canadian Sport History of Riots		
City	Events	Year(s)
Toronto	Sofball	1933
Montreal	Stanley Cup	1955, 1986, 1993, 2008, 2010
Edmonton	Stanley Cup	2006
Vancouver	Grey Cup	1963, 1966
Vancouver	Stanley Cup	1994, 2011

media, such as the quality of legal processes in which such media are used to provide evidence; mob behaviour; and vigilante justice.

In this paper we look at the Vancouver riots story from the point of view of the news media, i.e. what the media coverage echoed and commented on at the time of the riots, in order to gain insights into the imaginaries behind the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter in situations of crisis. In particular, we will be looking at how ethical considerations are portrayed by the news media in order to discuss the pros and cons of the use of social media in crisis situations.

THE VANCOUVER RIOTS: A SOCIAL MEDIA CASE

Context

Riots associated with the Stanley Cup playoffs are not new. As mentioned in the Internal Review of the 2011 Stanley Cup Riot, over the past eight decades, "Canadian cities have seen 11 major sports-related riots, with hockey riots relating to the Stanley Cup outnumbering all other sports riots" (see Figure 1).

Prior to the Stanley Cup final, giant truck-mounted television screens were set up across the city so fans could watch it. The live site was cordoned off from vehicle traffic with barricades where seventy-five private security guards performed bag searches and pat-downs.

At 4 p.m. the live site was at full capacity, so the boundaries of the fan zone were extended. Police, fire and rescue services were involved in the security operation. Throughout the day, various measures were taken, such as increasing the number of CCTV cameras to monitor the crowd. People were also asked to celebrate the result of the finale responsibly.

Chronology of Events

According to Furlong and Keefe (2011), by 4:40 p.m. trouble was already reported and "at 5 p.m., as the big screens go live, police and security can no longer physically make their way through the crowds to deal with problems" (p. 17). The police helicopter, Air One, was asked to fly over the site. When Boston scored 3-0, more uniformed officers from the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) went to the fan zone as trouble was beginning beyond the perimeter of the live site. By 7:30 p.m. trouble had been detected, with calls about rioting coming in to the emergency telephone number 911: "The tempo [was] changing. Chaos spread. By 7:37 many people [were] being thrown out of Rogers Arena and a fire alarm [was] activated inside, more large-scale fighting [erupted] outside. Firefighters who [wanted] to send rigs into the live site [were] told they would have trouble getting in" (p. 19). At 8:26 p.m., a police negotiator, using a long-range acoustic device, read the Riot Act informing citizens that they were taking part in an unlawful assembly and had 10 minutes to

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