THE INTERNET IN THE PARIS RIOTS OF 2005

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Abstract

The riots in the suburbs of Paris (and across the country) in October and November 2005 lasted for about three weeks. The degree of violence and anger of the riots astonished an entire world. While the mainstream media, both in France and internationally, covered these events 'as usual,' some became aware that the internet seemed to play a role in the youths' involvement and engagement in the events. This paper attempts to answer some important questions regarding the role of the internet: Why and how was it important? Did the web-only-publications, such as online news-sites and blogs, have any function for the people participating in the riots, or for those who were trying to put an end to them? What is more generally the potential of the internet, outside of the established media that also operate online, when 'hot social issues' catch fire and become explosive happenings?

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Introduction

In October and November 2005, the world became astonished by the events that took place in Paris, France. The media reported violent, destructive riots that were triggered by, and seen as a response to, the death of two teenage boys who, after running from the police, literally were electrocuted as they hid in an electrical substation. Over a period of three weeks, the riots spread throughout many suburbs of the French capital, generating a lot of media coverage and public debate concerning the causes behind the youths' reactions. What the media coverage did not pay attention to, however, was the actors in the riots themselves, a rather diffuse group termed ''the youths'.' They did not get to take part in the public conversation concerning themselves and their actions as they were being (mis)represented in the mainstream media coverage. Instead, they chose to participate in an alternative conversation, which only got the media's attention when three young boys were arrested for inciting rioting through online blogs. This is the topic of this paper: Why and how was the Internet important in the riots in Paris in 2005? Did the web-only-publications, such as online news-sites and blogs, have any function for the people participating in these riots, or for those who were trying to put an end to the riots? What is the Internet worth, as a purely digital medium, when 'hot social issues' catch fire and become explosive happenings, such as the riots in Paris in 2005 – outside of the established media also operating online?

Following Bennett (2003a) who states that it is in the interaction between 'online' and 'offline' actions that the power of new media is found, I will try to understand the available facts on the uses of the Internet during the riots in light of the wider social and historical context of the events. I will, however, also focus on the young rebels, the police, the French authorities, and, last but not least: the media. The 'media' in this context includes the mainstream media and their coverage of the riots, as well as the Internet platforms employed by the youths. It is important not to assume that activists' use of the Internet may be understood independently from the mainstream media. The opposition and competition between the mainstream media and the Internet as an alternative media power seems to be fundamental in order to understand the Internet's role in the riots.

The Riots in Paris in 2005: A Contextualisation of the Events

The world became astonished by the events that took place in France in October and November 2005. The media reported on the most violent and destructive riots in France since 1968, and the riots of 2005 came to be regarded as the culmination of the so-called 'suburban riots' that started in the 1970s (Sauvadet 2008).[1]

On the 27th of October 2005, two teenage boys were literally electrocuted in the Parisian suburb Clichy-sous-Bois when they climbed over a wall and into an electricity substation in an effort to escape from the police. The initial official explanation given by the French authorities was that the boys had been caught committing a robbery, and that this was the reason for the police chasing them. Later on, the police explained it as a routine happening: the boys simply ran as other youths ran from the police. A friend's version was that they had all been to a football match, and as they did not have their papers of identification (which they are required to carry

at all times), they chose to run when they saw the police in order not to be arrested (as anyone not carrying their ID may be). A few hours later the riots were a fact, when crowds of angry young boys attacked the police, threw stones, torched cars and smashed buildings in the area. An especially delicate situation took place when a canister of tear gas was thrown into a local mosque during prayer (see Sauvadet 2008). This further escalated the riots.

The riot police moved in but the fighting escalated, and the numbers of rioters grew from 100 to 400. The fighting and vandalism took place at night. The gangs of young men mostly torched cars, but they also directed their rampage toward private companies (buses and a McDonalds were harmed) as well as public institutions (schools and other public buildings). Over the next few weeks, the riots spread to other suburbs of Paris and other big cities in France. The spread was mainly due to the existence of established gangs. The most active of these consisted mainly of the toughest boys from the poorest families in these largely low-income suburbs. These boys were teenagers, mainly 15 to 18 years of age, who see the streets as their home (Sauvadet 2008). According to Sauvadet (2008), the youths with higher education, who are better integrated into the working life, kept their distance from the actual riots. However, they were engaged otherwise – through online discussions of the events.

Nobody seemed able to take control and handle the riots, and the politicians' efforts certainly did not do any good. At least one person was killed and a number of police and fire officers were injured. After 10 days, 258 arrests had been made (*The Guardian* 5/11/2005). On November 8, Dominique de Villepin, the French Prime Minister, declared a state of emergency, and introduced a curfew in the Parisian suburbs while at the same time invoking a law from the Algerian War from 1955. On November 17, de Villepin declared that 'normality' had been reinstated (Sauvadet 2008, 153, my translation).

Wieviorka (2008)[2] attempts to dissect the most immediate and important causes for the riots and why they escalated the way they did by explaining what he calls three dimensions, which are determined by time: firstly, a historical dimension; secondly, a political dimension involving changes in the French political landscape during the last five years ; and finally, the dimension of the 'situational attitude' towards the Interior Minister Nicholas Sarkozy. In order to explain the causes for the riots, Wieviorka goes back to the 1970s and examines the diverse and complex mechanisms that have led to the present day "total crisis of integration" in the French Republic. Among them is the establishment of the so-called HLM (*habitation ŕ loyer modéré*) housing projects after World War II, which were mainly located in the suburbs and at the time were seen as a great social improvement, providing housing to a diverse population. In the 1970s, however, the most resourceful people started to leave the housing projects, and gradually the areas become totally dominated by immigrant families. It was at this point, according to Wieviorka (2008), the "suburban problems" started to become visible: some of these areas increasingly appeared as ghettos. From the early 1980s through the 1990s, there were "hot summers" with riots that lasted for a day or two. These factors prompted a political debate that did not end until the late 1990s, with the political left and right largely agreeing on what the problems were, but advocating different solutions.

The riots in 2005 were a result of these mechanisms, although in combination with a range of political decisions following the election of Jaques Chirac as

President in 2002. Wieviorka argues that these choices led to a "degradation of the suburbs" following significant political decisions regarding the social life and initiatives for the youths in the suburbs from 2002. These contributed, according to Wieviorka (2008, 149; my translation) to "a radicalisation of the feeling of exclusion among the inhabitants in the suburbs, and especially the young." The suburban youth were basically stripped of the positive initiatives that might have helped include them in French society, instead of leaving them increasingly isolated, with high unemployment rates, poverty and few real possibilities to improve things for themselves (Sauvadet 2008).

The third dimension mentioned by Wieviorka is the situational attitude towards the then Interior Minister, Nicholas Sarkozy. His choice of language during a visit to the suburb a few days prior to the death of the two kids in the electrical substation got substantial media coverage and provoked an intense rage among young people. Calling the youths 'riff raff' and 'scum' that should be hosed away using a Kärcher "confirmed their feeling of having a state power that stigmatized their hometowns" (Wieviorka 2008, 147). Initially the riots came to be viewed as a spontaneous reaction to the way Mr. Sarkozy talked about the youth, as well as the way he later defended the police work that generally among the suburban youth was perceived as another incidence of police brutality.

In addition to this, and in close connection to the representation of the events, was the reporting done by the French mainstream media, here seen as a fourth factor contributing to the riots. When Mr. Sarkozy defended the police actions that led to the death of the two teenagers in Clichy-sous-Bois, the media presented the events in a "distorted caricature of the young 'rabbles' and 'the police officers who only did their job.'" This was perceived, according to Sauvadet (2008, 153), as "an unforgivable provocation among some of the young people in the suburbs." The role of the mainstream media in relation to the riots is important, and it is also relevant with regard to the role of the Internet, which became the medium the youths used to communicate about the riots. This leads to another interesting dimension, namely that of *media visibility* (Wieviorka 2008, 150): how the youths went about making themselves visible through the mainstream media in France – not only for the rest of the society but also among themselves as a measure of success (see Wieviorka 2008). It is necessary to regard this in close relation to both the events themselves and the role of the Internet in the riots.

Theoretical Foundation

Theoretically, the current account is rooted mainly in two perspectives, perceived as being closely connected to each other. The first is the understanding of the Internet as a source of alternative media power. Based on Couldry and Curran's (2003, 7) definition of 'alternative media' as "media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations," the different uses of the Internet among the French youths are highlighted. This recognises the importance of media power and the understanding of this complex phenomenon. The second theoretical perspective is that of participation in a social event through the use of the Internet as an alternative channel for communication; the antiglobalisation networks and their usage of the Internet has inspired this part of the theoretical foundation for

the paper (see for example Bennett 2003a, Bennett 2003b). The connection between these two perspectives, or sources for inspiration, in order to understand the role of the Internet in the Paris Riots becomes clear when related through theories on groups or social movements understood as subcultural forces or counterhegemonic groups challenging the established order – or Public Sphere – as presented by, among others, Fraser (1990) and Kahn and Kellner (2004). Rather than understanding the use of the Internet as the role of the digital platform, it is here seen as being of societal importance.

Kahn and Kellner (2004) explicitly relate the Internet to an alternative channel for activists to communicate their cause and organise protests to enhance their understanding of themselves as a subcultural force. Fraser (1990), on the other hand, relates what she terms as 'subaltern counterhegemonic' groups to groups or movements which by themselves, or in the perception of the dominant public sphere, are understood as being in opposition to or on the outside of the Public Sphere. In this position, their communication through alternative media challenges the representation of a cause or an event given by the mainstream media as these media normally are recognised as having the power to define what is the common good in a society.

A brief terminological clarification is needed when it comes to the use of the label 'the youth,' which refers to the younger generation living in the Parisian/French suburbs. Interestingly the mainstream media (both French and international) were careful not to use any other labels to describe the rioters, probably in order to avoid using ethnic or racial terms. But even 'the youth' or 'the young people' may be seen as problematic, since it covers a whole age group and not only the young men who were actually rioting, torching cars and damaging property. Suburban youth in general did not necessarily participate in the rioting, but participated for instance in debates online and had a more undecided role in the events. When using the label 'the youth' I refer to all young people in the suburbs; the label 'rioters' refers to the young men performing the actual rioting in the streets.

The main method in collecting the empirical data has been what may be called online 'snowballing.' A broad search on the Google.com search engine produced extensive information on the riots from the online editions of the mainstream media. It did not immediately provide any information about how the rebels were using the Internet. It was, however, the mainstream media coverage that provided the first clues on where to start further investigations. Especially useful were the blogs and postings on the French social network site, Skyrock. A problem here, however, is that some of the most provocative ('inflammatory') ones have been blocked, while others have been closed by their creators. Consequently, the present account relies heavily on what was said in the media coverage. It is not difficult to find blogs with postings about the riot. What is interesting though is that many of them have not been updated since the second week of the riots; in fact, Skyrock seems to be a bit like a blog graveyard. Furthermore, there are some language difficulties involved here as the youths use heavy slang, which – even for native French-speaking people – may be hard to understand.

The empirical foundation for the research is thus an online search, structured through the pursuit of links and clues deemed relevant for the research and leading to both mainstream media coverage and also to the blogosphere – the weblogs

(blogs), comments on blogs and other content published online by the youths, in a sphere alternative to the mainstream media (electronic, print or online).

Explaining the Role of the Internet: "It's Old Guerrilla Tactics with Modern Technology"[3]

It took well over a week before the mainstream media paid any attention to what was being posted online; that happened only after two teenage boys were arrested for inciting riots on the Internet. On November 4, 2005, the German magazine *Der Spiegel Online* used the term "cyber-rioting" to describe the second arena of the riots (Rahir 2005). It stated that even though the riots were going on in the streets, "the real debate about the nightly riots is taking place far from the halls of power. It's taking place on the Internet" (ibid.).

How did the youths make use of the Internet? The online activity took different forms and presented very different content: hacking, 'Google bombs,' a campaign of fake e-mails, blogs and short videos were among the methods used to get their message across. The youths made use of the Internet in different ways, and "people who would normally never come into contact with each other" (Rahir 2005) exchanged views on the riots and the violence in the streets.

Creative Venting

Quite soon after the death of the two boys in Clichy-sous-Bois, a number of short videos with names along the lines of "Dead for nothing" and "Tribute to Bouna and Zyed" found their way to sites such as YouTube and DailyMotion.[4] Many such videos also portrayed the daily life in the suburbs, with normal events as police fighting youngsters and the like, while others gave a short version of the history of the housing projects in the suburbs.[5] They are quite well made short films, mainly with French rap music accompanying them.[6] The videos are important in that they can be understood firstly as a part of how the youths communicate their experience of the world in which they live, and secondly that they use the Internet as a way to vent their feelings about their living conditions. As such, the production and posting of their videos online may be understood as a political activity. This is true with regard to the other ways the youths made use of the Internet during the riots: although it was mainly a tool used for internal communication, the youths nonetheless made use of the Internet as a way to protest and thus use it as a political tool.

Blogs

In relation to the violence and the debate on the riots online, the blogs were in a special position, as there were so many of them. It started out with a blog created in honour of and as a tribute to the two boys whose deaths triggered off the riots: bouna93.skyrock.com. The blog showed pictures of the boys, and people were invited to post their comments about them on the site. Some of the entries were blocked because of their content, which the blog's creator said were removed because they did not follow the rules. Many such blogs were created during the first few days after October 27. Other blogs were more like news blogs, where the creators posted news items, pictures from the riots and gave his/her comment on the day's – or rather the night's – happenings (for one such blog, see ramzi77.skyrock.com).

The blogs were used mainly in two ways, each with a very different outcome: On the one hand the blogs functioned as sites for debate among people who did not know each other, but nevertheless felt the need to discuss the ongoing events. The youths seemed to be divided in their views on the riots, as some tried to calm them and others tried to inflame the situation (Plunkett 2005). According to a French web monitor, the comments were very violent on both sides; those "who are calling for the rioting and the people who are anti-riot are very radical in their ideas" (Moore & Williams 2005).

On the other hand were the blogs calling for 'offline' action, which most often entailed the torching of cars. Two teenage boys were at one point arrested and put under judicial investigation on charges of inciting riots on the Internet on the grounds that such activities are against the French law; they were accused of "provoking wilful property damage that posed a danger to people via the Internet" according to French prosecutors (Moore & Williams 2005; see also Carrel 2005). They supposedly encouraged people to take part in the riots. One of the blogs was called "Sarkodead," an explicit reference to the Minister of Interior, Sarkozy (Plunkett 2005).

"What Google Giveth, Google Can Taketh Away"

On the side of the riots, "a group of cyber-savvy French political opponents" planted a so-called 'Google bomb' against Nicholas Sarkozy (Reinhardt 2005), attacking official web sites. 'Google bombing' is a way to manipulate the search engine of Google through a coordinated effort to put a certain site at the No 1 ranking (Kahn & Kellner 2004). Whenever users entered the name 'Nicholas Sarkozy' into the French homepage of Google, according to *Business Week*, "the first result to pop up [was] a promo for a recent film called *Iznogoud*." The film's title was a play on the English phrase 'is no good' pronounced with a French accent, and made a rather explicit reference to the minister's stern approach and rather bad choice of words in a meeting about the conditions in the suburbs a few days earlier (see Wiorkieva 2008). Also, the *New York Times* reported that for a while "the French version of Google returned the home page for President Jaques Chirac's political party when users typed in a search for Paris and the words riot or suburb in French" (Crampton 2005b). Hackers also overtook the official web site of Clichy-sous-Bois, the suburb where the two teenagers died and the riots started. The group "dispatched thousands of fake e-mails announcing the mayor's resignation" (Moore & Williams 2005).

However, the hackers were not the only ones to use Google.fr as a way to communicate political views. The very target of the Google bomb, Nicholas Sarkozy, also deployed the search engine as a tool in his efforts to handle the riots. *Business Week* reported that ads on Google directing web surfers to "a petition supporting hard-line Interior Minister Nicholas Sarkozy" ignited a political storm (Reinhardt 2005). Through a so-called Google AdWord campaign, Internet users who typed in the French words for 'riots,' 'burned cars' and 'violence' in addition to the free links normally provided by the search engine, also got a small ad which, when clicked on, according to Reinhardt (2005), directed them to a "special Web site for the ruling French party, the Union pour un Movement Populaire, or UMP. There, surfers were presented with an electronic petition expressing support for Sarkozy and his

tough stance towards the rioters." The online response to this move was, according to Reinhardt (2005) "fast and furious;" among the reactions was the denouncement that this was propaganda, and another stated that it was "an enormous and superclever media tactic." Reinhardt (2005) then states somewhat ironically with reference to the already mentioned Google bomb that hit Sarkozy, that the Interior Minister "learned that what Google giveth, Google can taketh away."

Skyrock.com

It can be said, without doubt, that Google was an important site for the cyberbattle of Paris. So was the online social network, Skyblog.com. This network is a part of the online platform of the radiostation Skyrock, which targets the younger teen population, unlike other online social networks such as Facebook. In February 2008, it was reported that Skyblogs counted more than 22 million subscribed users, had 14 million active blogs and 5.3 million profiles, all established in a period of 6 years (it was launched in 2002) (Chainon 2008; see also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skyrock_blog). It is incredibly popular among French youths (see www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Skyrock), and the founder, Pierre Bellanger, has stated that he intends to "develop a dialogue with and among young people in France" over the Internet and through SMS messages (Crampton 2005b). Because of this popularity, Skyrock got a somewhat unwanted role in the riots of 2005, as the youths chose it as their platform for communicating to one another and the rest of the world about the riots.

Although the two youths who were arrested in relation to the riots did not know each other, they both used the Internet society of Skyrock.com (see Crampton 2005b). Because of the character of the content in some of the blogs posted at Skyblog.com, Skyrock saw it necessary to "block any blog content deemed too inflammatory" (Crampton 2005b), as the youths used it openly to encourage others to partake in the riots, to burn cars and to hurt the police. The censorship of Skyblog "became severe enough … to become a major topic of conversation on the most popular blogs;" in fact, the spokesman for Skyrock begged the media not to use his name in relation to the statement he made, as he feared for his life. He was quoted as saying, "You can imagine from what is happening in the suburbs that if someone finds out that we deleted their blog, it could mean a bullet in the head" (Crampton 2005b).

The Internet as the 'Unknown Factor' in the Riots

For the French authorities the vast online activity of bloggers that incited riots through posting 'inflammable' (Plunkett 2005) material on the Internet seemed to be a factor they did not know how to handle. The riots in 2005 were the worst riots experienced in France since the 1960s, although smaller incidences have occurred throughout the years. Car burning and police chasings are no news in France. However, the extensive use of the Internet to communicate in different ways among youths who already seemed to be isolating themselves from the rest of the society (Sauvadet 2008) was new to the authorities. They invested large resources in order to track online movements and to find out what the rioters planned so as to prosecute the ones who were inciting rioting online (see Carrell 2005). The rioters increasingly made use of mobile phones and SMS messages in order to organise their attacks and to warn each other of the police movements

(see also Wieviorka 2008), and as such the police knew about this. Although the online activity was coordinated in any way possible, the youths still had a common node in the Skyrock system. They easily connected with people who were willing to follow up on the encouragements posted online. For some youths, the online activity spurred offline actions, and as such the Internet had become an alternative channel of communicating both internally – if the youths could be understood as a collective 'we' on the basis of their belonging as previously discussed – and externally, as the whole Internet population of the world was a possible audience for their messages (Bennett 2003b).

Although Wieviorka (2008) states that the rioting youths were not organised, that there was no active principle that structured their rage, the youths can be seen as forming a network, a possible protest movement, which used the Internet as an alternative media of communication. The connection to the well-known online anti-globalisation protest movement is maybe not that far-fetched, as some pointed out during the riots: "Young French rioters are using blogs to incite violence and mobile phones to organize attacks in guerrilla-like tactics they have copied from anti-globalisation protesters" (Carrel 2005). One security expert claimed that "the rioters have learnt from anti-globalisation protesters, some of whom used mobile phones to coordinate riots at meetings of the Group of Eight industrial nations and the World Trade Organization in recent years … I think they learnt from what they saw at television. I think anti-globalisation movements and rioters have the same way to organize, or to disorganize the police. … It's old guerrilla tactics with modern technology" (Carrel 2005).

It seems obvious that some of the rioters participated just for the fun of it (see Crampton 2005b). It also seems obvious that they have a tense relationship with the mainstream mass media, which they feel presents the wrong impression of them (Sauvadet 2008). As Wieviorka (2008) points out, the mainstream media coverage gave privilege to certain actors and as a result, mainly two perceptions of what happened dominated the public sphere. The other side of the story, the youths' own version of the reality, was not represented, because no one asked them. This may of course have something to do with the fact that some rioters at one point attacked a team from the France 2 state television and torched their car (Cobbe 2005). On the other hand, the long history of unrest in the suburbs, the tension between the youths and the authorities (who the youths feel have failed them) and the media (who gives false representation) may be seen as a case of 'us versus them' on the part of the youths.

The torching of cars is nothing new as stated earlier, and here the aforementioned 'media game' comes into play. The authorities saw the inciting through the blogs as the youths' effort to meet the rioters' goal of torching the highest number of cars possible (as well as public institutions such as day-care centres and schools). True to their goal, the rioters torched as many cars as possible with the goal of making the evening news. As the riots spread throughout France, it seemed as though a competition was running among the gangs in different cities as to who torched the highest number of cars (Moore & Williams 2005). Wieviorka tells of the youths in Strasbourg and how proud they were of their 'traditional' burning of cars on New Year's Eve; as Wieviorka describes, "the largest broadcaster in France, TF1, usually comes to the scene after they have torched the car, and the youths compare them-

selves with youths from another suburb who 'only' got visited by the district channel, FR3" (Wieviorka 2008: 149, my translation). Wieviorka states that the torching of cars in the 2005 riots definitely may have as clear a dimension of media visibility. During the 2005 riots, the largest television network decided to stop reporting the number of torched cars in an effort to calm these activities. This spurred a storm on the Internet inciting more violence (Moore & Williams 2005).

Alternative Media, Alternative Media Power

What may be called 'the media game' is one of the central characteristics of protest movements and their use of the Internet as an alternative media, and of an alternative media power that challenges the traditional mass media power in contemporary society (see Bennett 2003b, Kahn & Kellner 2004). Because of the distinctly different organisation of online social networks, and the possibilities of access to the technology and the relative easiness with which one can set up and maintain a blog online, the Internet has become a major contestant to the established mainstream media (see for example Bennett 2003a, 2003b). That is, content presented in alternative channels by alternative actors (the normal citizen?) challenges the representation of the events as they are presented in the traditional mass media, which will be forced to take these alternative voices into consideration.

What happened during the Paris riots was that the mass media covered the immense online activity as an event in itself, especially because some youths were arrested for using the virtual world of the Internet to incite riots in the real world. This event made the media – at least the foreign media – aware of the vast activities online and the importance of the Skyrock social network. At the same time, the major media actors in France chose to move away from their traditional angle of coverage in an attempt to calm the rioting (i.e. the car burning) (Moore & Williams 2005). Also, the mainstream mass media in France recognised their position in the battle of the streets, which can be seen as a consequence of the coverage of riots and the suburbs in a historical perspective. Making the evening news on the major television network was one of the primary goals of the rioting bands – as a form of competition, but also as a kind of political statement. It was an easy way to get attention, and they kept on rioting until the President, the Prime Minister and the Interior Minister could not ignore them any longer and ultimately had to take action to solve the problem.

The blogs gained special attention in the Paris riots. As a socially interactive form of media, they are immensely popular among French youths and also among the population in general. Kahn & Kellner (2004, 90-91) argue that an 'Internet sub-culture' has erupted around blogging, and that the "bloggers have demonstrated themselves as technoactivists favouring … democratic self-expression and networking." The reaction towards what was perceived as "inflammable material" (Plunkett 2005) among all the other blogs on the subject, and the fact that Skyrock censored and removed blogs and content, created an intense debate online. The youths had a sense of belonging to a special group or network; even though many of them did not know one another, their need for both an arena for debate and information about the events that they were not getting through the mainstream mass media impelled their sense of unity. As Kahn & Kellner (2004, 91) put it, "the blogs thus make the idea of a dynamic network of ongoing debate, dialogue and

commentary central and so emphasize the interpretation and dissemination of alternative information to a heightened degree."

It seems obvious that the Internet as a new form of media impacted, or maybe even changed, the flows of information in both the French and the foreign mass media during the riots in 2005. According to Bennett (2003b), this created a public sphere based in both micro media (such as e-mails, lists and SMS), and middle media (blogs, organisational sites, e-zines). This offered the activists, in this case the 'youths' – as both the rioters and the young inhabitants of the suburbs that adhered to the conflict in general – "an important degree of information and communication independence from the mass media" (Bennett 2003b, 13). He claims that this public sphere created by the Internet and the World Wide Web is "more than just parallel information universes that exist independently of the traditional mass media" (Bennett 2003b, 28). Rather, Bennett says, the Internet is changing the way in which news is made. This implies that the Internet, as a new or alternative media, offers alternative spaces for communication. According to Bennett (2003b, 30-31) this weakens the gate-keeping capacity of the traditional press "when information appears on the Internet, presenting new material that may prove irresistible to competitors in the world of 24/7 cable news channels that now occupy important niches in the press food chain."

As for the press coverage of public demonstrations, these are generally receiving rather negative coverage (Bennett 2003b), which is part of the press pattern or logic as these challenge the traditional mass media's power to define a society's moral conceptions. This generally tends to be maintaining of the existing status quo, which disruptive public demonstrations threaten (Ettema & Glasser 1998). Bennett (2003b, 31) further argues that due to the press pattern, and "beyond the characterizations of the activists, the predominant news framing of the overall protest movement is also negative." The French authorities clearly saw the online activities as a threat, as they could not control them and no previous experience with this kind of activism. In their eyes, the youths of the suburbs were making up some kind of "subcultural force" (Kahn & Kellner 2004, 90), and thus were a threat to the French values and belief systems. The combination of the symbolic representation of the youths and the riots in the mainstream media and the way the French politicians, first and foremost Nicholas Sarkozy, possibly made the feeling of belonging to a more or less abstract community stronger among the youths in the suburbs . Their ability to communicate their views over the Internet may have further strengthened this feeling.

Tentative Conclusions

Through my contextualisation of the riots, I have provided a description and discussion of the relationship between 'the youth' and the French authorities and media (both national and international); the importance of the relation between authorities (law and politics); the portrayal of the rioters by the mainstream mass media (both electronic and digital); and the crucial role the Internet played as an information disseminator in the 2005 Paris riots. The use of the Internet provided youth in the suburbs with access to the public debate concerning themselves even though they had not been explicitly invited into this debate by the mainstream media. As Couldry and Curran (2003, 5) state, the Internet provided "access by

all sides in a conflict to the … means of self representation" through the linkages into traditional media.

One of the conclusions of this analytical discussion of the Internet's role in the Paris riots of 2005 is that the youth's blogging efforts were not organised in such a way that could be termed a 'movement' or a 'network' used to incite riots. In fact, if one can call it a 'network' at all, it was a spontaneous network that arose on the youth's own premises as a result of using the means of communication that was easily accessible to them and which they had mastered – thus it was a natural way for them to communicate.

More importantly, however, is that it was established through this paper that the Internet played a bigger role than the mainstream media and social scientists have so far have been willing to admit, at least openly. This is clearly shown by the way the youths took the use of the Internet to new levels in the riots that occurred in Paris in 2007. These riots once again were incited by events that triggered responses in a way that was very similar to the 2005 riots, but that seemed to be all the more coordinated and organised. However, as the case of the Paris riots has shown, the Internet gained its importance and position through a close connection with the mainstream media, which shows that in order for the Internet to be regarded as important in relation to 'hot' social topics, such as the Paris riots of 2005, it is still dependent on its position as possessive of a power alternative to the mainstream media. Even though the alternative discourse communicated through the Internet is challenging the dominant Public Sphere, and the participants may use the Internet solely as a means for internal communication, the impact of this discourse on the broader society seems to be dependent on the established mainstream media's portrayal of the events and the Internet's role in them.

Notes:

1. The case outline is based on a preliminary survey of the following newspaper articles:

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Phillips, Trevor. 2005. A Burning Issue for Us All. *The Observer*, November 6, 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/france/story/0,,1635431,00.html>

2. The contextual explanation provided here is largely based on Wieviorka (2008, 142-149).

3. Reinhardt (2005) quoting a security expert on the Internet activity and the riots.

4. The posting of such videos continued in the aftermath of the events for a long time. In this respect it seems there has been a process of coming to terms with what happened involved here, possibly reinforced by later, similar events – such as the riots in 2007 following the deaths of two other teenage boys in a sequence of events almost identical to what happened in 2005.

5. For an example, see http://www.dailymotion.com/relevance/search/%25C3%25A9meutes%2B2005/video/x9by8_ma-societe-va-craquer_shortfilms

6. See for example Sauvadet 2008 on the role of French rap music in the suburbs.

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