

Case study

#riotcleanup

The well-publicised clean-up operation following the 2011 London riots was a spontaneous response initiated by a self-proclaimed “revolutionary” and coordinated using Twitter and Facebook.

Dan Thompson, who describes himself as a revolutionary artist, says the orchestrated clean-up was not driven by “anti-riots” sentiment, rather it was “pro-community”.

Shortly after midnight on the morning of Monday August 8th, Thompson published a tweet using for the first time the hash tag #riotcleanup. Despite living in Worthing, rather than London, he continued throughout the night to coordinate volunteers to take part in a major clean-up operation.

Thompson wasn’t alone, a number of other similar initiatives took place on Facebook. But by 10am on Monday morning, the #riotcleanup was the top trending topic on Twitter in the UK, and the second worldwide. Thompson estimates that up to 100,000 people received one of the tweets using his original tag.

In the days that followed hundreds of people wielding bins and brooms turned up to clean the streets in London, Birmingham and Bristol. In his blog, Thompson writes:

“The opposite of fashionable anonymous protest, #riotcleanup was a visible, public show of support for local community and was about real people. Even the iconic #broomarmy photo is taken from inside the crowd. It makes you part of the action, not a spectator.

“After #riotcleanup came a relief effort, fronted by Kate Nash, which saw vanload after vanload of clothes, food, toys and other essential items delivered to the families whose homes had been burnt down. #riotrebuild mobilised the building trades, and saw Siva’s grocery store in Hackney reopened within weeks.”

Key points

- #riotcleanup was a spontaneous grass roots response to the riots. It was not a top-down government coordinated reaction.
- The ability to “retweet” messages ensures that Twitter can be just as effective in terms of reach as some mainstream media, including newspapers, radio or television.

Opportunity

The 2007 floods affected more than 800 homes in the city of Hull. Hundreds of families were rehoused in temporary accommodation and some were unable to return to their homes for almost two years.

Researchers from Lancaster University, sponsored by the Environment Agency, ESRC and EPSRC, undertook a study of the recovery process. Their report, *Flood, vulnerability and urban resilience: a real-time study of local recovery following the floods of June 2007 in Hull (2007-2009)* used the diaries of flood-affected families to assess the impact of the so-called **recovery gap**.

Flood victims described the impact of losing their homes on their families and the wider community. The extracts from the executive summary illustrate some of the issues faced by residents:

Key to the findings is the identification of a 'recovery gap'.

This emerges during the longer process of recovery at the point where the legally-defined contingency arrangements provided to the community by its local authority diminish and where the less well-defined services provided by the private sector (e.g. insurance, builders etc.) start.

The nature of the gap means that residents receive little effective support during this time. As a result, they must step in to coordinate the actions of the different private and public sector organizations involved. Such project management is challenging, time-consuming and stressful.

Flood recovery is about rebuilding a sense of home and community as residents adapt to a new and altered set of circumstances. People's sense of the future also changes in different ways. For some, this means fatalistic attitudes towards rain, climate change and government bodies emerging. However, others are engaging in debates about public participation in how the built environment is managed, and are developing their own 'resilience' strategies for future floods.

The 2007 Hull floods occurred before the widespread emergence of social networks as a communications tool. The question for planners is whether a community-led response on Facebook would help ease some of the pressures identified in the Hull report.

How could Facebook help bridge the recovery gap?

- Through the creation of virtual communities
- By providing mutual support and encouragement
- By addressing the information deficit
- By involving communities in the debate about restoring affected communities
- By involving communities in the debate about new flood alleviation plans

Based on the experience of #riotcleanup, the creation of these virtual communities is most likely to take place as a grass-roots movement, and will be less successful if it is seen to be a top-down initiative. But it will require local; authorities and other agencies to

- Enable connectivity via 3G and the ready availability of wifi in all temporary accommodation
- Monitor what's being said on these networks
- And respond quickly using the same networks and an appropriate tone of voice.

The Hull report is at: http://www.lec.lancs.ac.uk/cswm/Hull%20Floods%20Project/HFP_home.php