

# **We Predict a Riot? Public Order Policing, New Media Environments and the Rise of the Citizen Journalist**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the rise of 'citizen journalism' and considers its implications for the policing and news media reporting of public protests in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Our research focuses on the use and impact of multi-media technologies during the 2009 G20 Summit Protests in London, and evaluates their role in shaping the subsequent representation of 'protest as news'. The classic concepts of 'inferential structure' (Lang and Lang, 1955) and 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967) are re-situated within the context of the 24-7 news mediasphere to analyse the transition in news media focus at G20 from 'protester violence' to 'police violence'. This transition is understood in terms of three key issues: the capacity of technologically empowered citizen journalists to produce information that challenges the 'official' version of events; the inclination of professional and citizen journalists to actively seek out and use that information; and the existence of an information-communications marketplace that sustains the commodification and mass consumption of adversarial, anti-establishment news.

**Keywords:** citizen journalism, G20, hierarchy of credibility, Ian Tomlinson, inferential structure, news media, police violence, public protests

## **Introduction**

Public protests, by their very nature, have the potential to provide dramatic newsworthy images of violence perpetrated by protestors, counter-protestors, police officers, or all three (Ericson and Doyle, 1999; Bessel and Emsley, 2000, Button et al, 2002; Della Porta and Reiter, 1998; Della Porta et al, 2006; Noakes et al, 2005; Waddington, D. 1992, 2007;

Waddington, P. A. 1991, 1997; Waddington et al, 2009; Rosie and Gorringer, 2009). Protests may descend into full scale riots, be policed in a heavy-handed, paramilitarised manner, or pass peacefully and without incident. Yet decades of research have demonstrated that there is no necessary correlation between events happening on the ground and the subsequent reporting of those 'events as news'. Moreover, any disconnect between news media representations of public protests and 'actual' events has been shown to favour a police perspective (Halloran et al, 1970; Chibnall, 1977; Ericson, et al, 1989, 1991; Reiner, 2000; Lawrence, 2000; Mawby, 2002a, b). In this article, we develop an analysis of the changing nature of news media reporting of public protests as evidenced in coverage of the G20 Summit in London on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009. Rosie and Gorringer's (2009: 36) recent examination of 'mainstream' newspaper coverage of G20 is based on the assertion that 'protest events need to be contextualised by reference to how they are reported as well as how they are policed'. We shed further empirical light on this process of contextualisation by analysing the representation of G20 'as news' across a range of online and offline media. We foreground the changing politics of reporting protests, and situate the coverage of G20 within the wider context of socio-political, technological and economic transformations. Central to our argument is the rise of the 'citizen journalist', both as a key player in the news production process, and a key indicator of the changing contexts within which 'news' is generated, disseminated and consumed. Our discussion draws on two classic conceptual frameworks – Lang and Lang's (1955) 'inferential structures' and Becker's (1967) 'hierarchy of credibility'. We seek to demonstrate the continuing usefulness of these frameworks by employing them to examine the transforming nature of police-news media-protester-public relations in the contemporary information-communications environment.

First, we summarise the existing research on police-news media relations and the reporting of public order situations. Second, we discuss the rise of the citizen journalist as an important and developing feature of a transforming news media landscape. Third, we map the 'events' of the G20 protests in London 2009, and consider the initial inferential structure used by the news media to make sense of the policing of the event. Fourth, we analyse the news media maelstrom around the death of Ian Tomlinson at the G20 protests, and examine how the initial inferential structure and flows of communication power were

disrupted by the intervention of citizen journalists. Finally, we return to our core conceptual framework to consider the wider implications of this case study.<sup>1</sup>

### **Existing Research Findings: Police, Public Protests and News Media**

Lang and Lang (1955) developed the concept of 'inferential structures' to explain how audience interpretations of news media coverage of politics both reflected and were determined by 'unwitting bias' on the part of news reporters which, in turn, could be attributed to reporters' assumptions about their audience. They were interested to understand how the same manifest content could be constructed into multiple configurations, establishing selectively or partially representative frameworks of understanding – or 'inferential structures' – within which both newsmakers and audience could order and interpret the story, and which may subsequently 'influence public definitions in a particular direction' (Lang and Lang, 1955: 171). Four key variables are identified as significant: a) how interpretation, or lack of interpretation, of a particular incident affects the focus of attention; b) how the timing of specific information contributes to the frame of reference into which incidents are fitted; c) how this frame of reference crystallizes and tends to overshadow subsequent information to the point that even new information is ignored; d) how the tone or attitude toward the incident, both explicit and implied, affects cognition and interpretation even when critical faculties are exercised.

Lang and Lang (1955) did not consider the differential influence of news sources in establishing and maintaining 'inferential structures'. Becker (1967) offered a conceptual framework within which this problem could be addressed by developing the notion of a 'hierarchy of credibility'. His model proposed that in any community it is taken as given that 'members of the highest group have the right to define the way things really are' (1967: 241). Since matters of rank and status are contained within the mores of a society, this hierarchical belief has a 'moral quality'. Well socialised community members are therefore 'morally bound to accept the definition imposed on reality by a superordinate group in preference to the definitions espoused by subordinates' (ibid: 241). Furthermore, Becker argued, because institutions do not often perform as society would like them to, 'officials

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the Editor and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and suggestions.

develop ways of both *denying* their failures... and *explaining* those failures that cannot be hidden. An account of the institution from the point of view of subordinates therefore casts doubt on the official line and may possibly expose it as a lie' (ibid: 243; emphasis added). The situation is complicated further in overtly political situations because 'Judgements of who has a right to define the nature of reality... become matters of argument' (ibid: 244).

In the first substantive analysis of news media reporting of public protests, Halloran et al (1970) combined the notion of 'inferential structures' with Galtung and Ruge's (1965) analysis of 'news values' to explore news reporting of the 1968 anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in London's Grosvenor Square. They demonstrate how despite the commitment to 'balanced' coverage, the protests were defined early on in the news media as likely to involve violent confrontation between the forces of law and order (the police) and the forces of anarchy (the demonstrators). Though the protests turned out to be largely peaceful, the event was still reported in line with the dominant inferential structure – the 'framework of violence' – and thus it was the issue of violence, minimal though it was, that provided 'the news'. This work focused on news routines and the activities of journalists rather than sources and, echoing Lang and Lang's (1955) idea of 'unwitting bias', illustrated the role of the news media in 'defining the situation and in cultivating the assumption that *this is the way it is*' (Halloran et al, 1970: 315: emphasis in original). Building on this platform, Marxist studies of police-news media relations in the 1970s explored how the unequal distribution of media access and influence, the ideological orientation of news media, and the politicisation of law and order contribute to the reproduction of dominant ideology. In this context, Becker's (1967) 'hierarchy of credibility' provided a framework for developing a more explicitly ideological reading of just who gets to say '*this is the way it is*', and why. For Hall *et al* (1978), news reporting of crime and disorder was shaped by the virtual monopoly of elite sources who collectively represent and command institutional power – those at the top of the 'hierarchy of credibility'. The police were viewed as structurally and culturally advantaged in establishing the 'primary definition' – or dominant inferential structure – that subsequently set the agenda for future debate (Hall et al., 1978; Chibnall, 1977). Whilst the police perspective might be contested, it could seldom be meaningfully challenged, still less altered.

Subsequent research sought to develop a multi-dimensional understanding of news reporting of crime and disorder through deeper engagement with journalists, sources and audiences. Despite considerable variation in theoretical and methodological approach (see Greer, 2010), post-Marxist studies confirmed that the police are 'primary definers' at the top of the 'hierarchy of credibility', and that a pro-police perspective is structurally and culturally advantaged, if not necessarily guaranteed (Tumber, 1982; Schlesinger et al, 1983; Ericson et al, 1989, 1991; Schlesinger, 1989; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994).

More recent investigations have explored growing police awareness of the potential impact of media representations on public perceptions of the legitimacy and authority of police work (Mawby, 2002a, b; Lovell, 2003; Chermak and Weiss, 2005; Chermak et al, 2006). Sensitisation to the damaging consequences of adverse news coverage on the 'brand' has been a key driver of extensive investment in media and public relations work (Hohl et al, 2010). Police forces now have well-resourced communications offices to ensure that 'brand' image and message are accurately and/or positively represented to key stakeholder audiences. What McLaughlin (2007) defines as 'image-led policing' involves the development of proactive and reactive media strategies designed to maintain the police position at the top of the 'hierarchy of credibility', and thus to advantage the institution in establishing the dominant inferential structure in news coverage.

### **Limitations of Previous Research Findings: The Transforming News Environment and the Rise of 'Citizen Journalism'**

The contemporary reporting of crime and public protests takes place within a radically transformed information-communications environment. Yet even the most recent criminological research has paid limited attention to important changes in news gathering practices brought about by the emergence of a global, interactive 24-7 news mediasphere. Within media studies, these changes have been well documented (McNair, 2006; Fenton, 2009; Deuze, 2008). In a digital multi-media age, a proliferation of news platforms, sites and formats has been paralleled by 'an exploding array of news sources, or *producers of content*' (Pavlik, 2008: 79, emphasis in original), leading to the creation of an unprecedented amount of potentially newsworthy information, and a remarkable number of 'news spaces' in which

to broadcast/publish it. In the process, increasingly sophisticated, interactive news audiences are reconstituted as consumers.

The proliferation of news gatherers, sources and spaces places a premium on distinctiveness and interactivity, which can disrupt the *traditional* news media orientation toward the police perspective. Indeed, in certain instances, there is no 'perspective' as such. The police are increasingly enmeshed in a complex web of internal and external stakeholders and 'publics' with different agendas and needs who are willing and able to use the news media and Internet to represent their interests. Cottle (2008) has noted the extent to which protest groups and demonstrators have become 'reflexively conditioned' to get their message across and activate public support. The contemporary news media environment offers 'new political opportunities for protest organizations, activists and their supporters to communicate independently of mainstream news media' (ibid: : 853; see also ; De Luca and Peeples, 2002; Bennett, 2003; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2004; Hutchinson and Lester, 2006; Maratea, 2008). Protesters are aware that their activities have to compete proactively for space in the fast-moving, issue-based attention cycle that defines the 24-7 news mediasphere (Oliver and Maney, 2000). In addition, as Milne (2005) argues, there has been a notable shift in political perspective amongst sections of the Fourth Estate as they attempt to prise open the political process. Market-driven newspapers in particular are much more willing to initiate and/or support anti-government/establishment campaigns and protests, and in certain respects have become 'ideologically footloose'. Adherence to a deferential 'inferential structure' reinforcing a traditional 'hierarchy of credibility' does not boost readership sales. 'Manufacturing dissent' by combining the campaigning capacities of the press with popular protest does (see also Lloyd, 2004). Consequently, there is the increased possibility of highly damaging images and representations of state institutions such as the police materialising and circulating in the offline and online news media. Of crucial importance here is the rise of the citizen journalist.

Allen and Thorsen (2009) define citizen journalism as 'the spontaneous actions of ordinary people, caught up in extraordinary events, who felt compelled to adopt the role of a news reporter'. Peat (2010) provides a vivid description: 'Armed with cellphones, 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'. He demonstrates how a photo can be taken on a mobile phone, tweeted on Twitter.com, picked up by other users, and disseminated like a virus online. Internet monitoring by mainstream news media outlets means that dramatic amateur photographic, audio or video content can become headline news. In recognition of this unprecedented news-gathering potential, news organisations have established formal links to encourage citizens to submit their mobile news material (Pavlik, 2008: 81; Glaser, 2004; Reich, 2008; Wallace, 2009). Citizen-generated content, in turn, can generate other information and images, fuelling 'endless remixes, mashups and continuous edits' (Deuze, 2008: 861). Citizen journalism has been instrumental not only in providing newsworthy images, but also in defining the news itself – in shaping representations of key global events. The defining images of the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, probably the watershed in the emergence of a highly interactive and participatory contemporary news production process, were provided by citizen journalists (Sambrook, 2005).

The emergence of the citizen journalist carries significant implications for professional news gathering organisations and official institutions who would seek to control the news. As Castells (2009: 413) argues, 'The greater the autonomy of the communicating subjects *vis-a-vis* the controllers of societal communication nodes, the higher the chances for the introduction of messages challenging dominant values and interests in communication networks'. Novel forms of selecting, gathering, processing, and disseminating 'news' are transforming communication circuits. On the one hand, there are real issues of simulation, manipulation, partisanship and lack of accountability. On the other, 'right here, right now' citizen journalism can bring authenticity, immediacy and realism to news stories through the production of dramatic and visually powerful 'evidence' of events 'as they happen'.

## **Data Sources and Methods**

Given the sheer volume of available data, we have found it easier to theorise the 24-7 news mediasphere than to research it. To conduct this analysis we constructed a data set based on a range of online and offline news media, most particularly the press. The first stage of our data collection involved the analysis of mainstream newspapers representing a wide spectrum, from broadsheet to tabloid and from political left to right. Newspapers were

collected and read in hard copy for an eight week period – from 1<sup>st</sup> March 2009 until April 25<sup>th</sup> 2009 – to provide full coverage of the run up to and aftermath of G20, as well as coverage of the protests themselves. Hard copies of the *London Evening Standard*, London’s major newspaper, were also included in the analysis. Newspaper websites and the LexisNexis database were searched to ensure the comprehensiveness of the data set. In addition to sorting via date, location, extent of coverage and visual imagery, G20 items were researched for story focus, sources, perspectives, editorialisation and commentary. Supplementary material from television news broadcasts were analysed and, where possible, recorded on April 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, with some key news programmes being sourced via Internet ‘on demand’ broadcast services. Since internet materials are less perishable and frequently exist in perpetuity, for example content uploaded to *YouTube*, these were examined as the research developed. The second stage of our data collection involved analysing the transcripts, final reports and press releases generated by the official inquiries into the policing of the G20 Summit. We also used the Ian Tomlinson Family Campaign website ([www.iantomlinsonfamilycampaign.org.uk](http://www.iantomlinsonfamilycampaign.org.uk)). In addition, both authors were present for specific time periods during the G20 protests in the City of London on 1<sup>st</sup> April and the Excel Centre on 2<sup>nd</sup> April. This enabled first-hand observation of the initial policing operation and the preliminary interactions between the police, protestors, bystanders and the news media. Primary photographic evidence was gathered in the City of London on the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> April.

It is not our intention in this article to present an in depth discourse or content analysis on the full corpus of G20 news coverage. Rather, we examine the dominant themes and patterns we have identified across reporting of the policing of G20. More specifically, we seek to analyse the dramatic re-orientation of news media attention, following the death of one citizen, and to explain this re-orientation sociologically in terms of wider transitions in the contemporary information-communications environment.

### **‘We predict a riot’: the Inferential Structuring of Policing the G20 Summit**

The G20 demonstrations in the City of London on 1st April 2009 provide an important insight into the disruptive impact of citizen journalism upon routinised police-news media



relations. They also illustrate the shifting nature of definitional power in the 24-7 news mediasphere.

### *The Initial Inferential Structure around 'Protester Violence'*

In the countdown to the G20 protests, both the police and the press drew from a well established or default news frame in order to interpret and explain the unfolding events. This default news frame was 'protester violence': that is, there was a clear sense that the demonstrations would be marred by violence, and that this violence would come from the protesters (Gorringer and Rosie, 2009). An initial inferential structure developed around the news frame of 'protester violence', and it was this framework – reflecting and reinforcing the police perspective – that shaped newspaper coverage in terms of 'what the story was' and 'how it would develop over time'. Though the inferential structure took a number of different forms across the press, all could be traced back to the original constitutive news frame of 'protester violence'.

In February 2009, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) had warned that a violent G20 Summit could herald a 'summer of rage' (*Guardian*, 23 February 2009). In mid-March, in what might be understood as the 'modal article', constructed from a detailed Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) briefing, a number of 'unique' factors were identified as having the clear potential to generate problems for 'Operation Glencoe' and the policing of G20. First, an unprecedented number of public order events were taking place simultaneously across London, including: the arrival of G20 delegations, including US President Barak Obama, all of whom would have to be transferred from official residences to the G20 forum and to official receptions; a state visit to the UK by the President of Mexico; and an international football match at Wembley. In addition, on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> March, a TUC co-ordinated G20-related 'Put people First' rally composed of 150 charities and unions would take place in Hyde Park.<sup>2</sup> Since any one of these high-profile events could present a target for a terrorist strike, the logistical pressures on police resources would be massive. Second, the number of protestors, and therefore the potential for trouble, could be swelled significantly because of public anger at the handling of the financial crisis. And thirdly, a coalition of anarchist, anti-

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Put People First' march passed off without incident and, as Gorringer and Rosie (2009) note, with little substantive reporting.

globalisation, anti-war and environmentalist 'direct action' groupings had declared their intention to 'take' the financial heart of the City of London and to capture the news agenda. These groups were using a range of media to communicate their plans and exchange views on how the days of protest would develop, where the 'flashpoints' would be, and the likelihood that the police would over-react. MPS Commander Simon O'Brien clarified for reporters how the police would respond to different kinds of protest:

There are groups that by their very ethos won't talk to us. The groups which enter dialogue with us, we will facilitate [throughout their events]... We will not tolerate anyone breaking the law, be it by attacking buildings, people or our officers... We are looking to police peaceful protest. We don't talk in terms of riots. If anyone wants to come to London to engage in crime or disorder, they will be met with a swift and efficient policing response (BBC, 30 March 2009).<sup>3</sup>

The MPS briefing also provided the press with a temporal framework for predicting how events would unfold. The critical flashpoint for violent confrontations would not be the 'Put People First' rally, nor the actual G20 Summit on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, but 1<sup>st</sup> April. According to the MPS, April 2<sup>nd</sup> would not be a problem because they had created a 'sterile environment' at the Excel Centre in Docklands, making it impossible for large numbers of protestors to gather there. In contrast, a variety of 'direct action' events were planned for 1<sup>st</sup> April: a 'Fossils and Financial Fools' Day'/G20 Meltdown march on the Bank of England; 'Climate Camp' establishing a base outside the European Climate Exchange in Bishopsgate; a 'Stop the War Coalition' march from the US Embassy to Trafalgar Square; and various other protest events.

Thus for several weeks before G20, newspapers ran in-depth stories about the 'cat and mouse' tactics of both police and protest groups. They were interpreted and ordered

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<sup>3</sup> The MPS expressed their determination to avoid the chaotic scenes of the May Day 2000 'Reclaim the Streets' demonstrations in London, the City Riots of 1999, and the G8 in Genoa in 2001, where one protester was killed and hundreds more injured. All police leave had been cancelled in London for Wednesday and Thursday. Some 84,000 police man-hours across six police forces had been allocated to the £7.5 million 'Operation Glencoe'. The MPS would be supported by the City of London and British Transport Police, with Bedfordshire, Essex and Sussex police securing the arrival and transfer of G20 delegations. In addition, City firms were employing their own private security consultants. However, little information was released on how the MPS would police G20.

through an explicit initial inferential structure built around the default news frame of inevitable 'protester violence':

'The new activism: the voices in G20's chorus of protest' (*Observer*, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2009: 28)

'Biggest police operation for a decade to be launched at G20 Summit in London' (*Daily Telegraph*, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2009: 2)

'Anarchists plan City demo for Day G20 leaders are in London' (*Daily Mail*, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2009: 5)

'Police try to forestall 'innovative' G20 summit protestors' (*Guardian* 21<sup>st</sup> March 2009: 11)

'£7 million to police G20 Summit: 'We have to be innovative to match protestors', says officer in charge' (*Daily Mail*, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2009: 7)

'Office staff warned of confrontation as City braces for mass G20 protests' (*Observer* 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2009: 7)

'Flashpoint London' (*London Evening Standard*, 27<sup>th</sup> March, front page)

'Police tactics queried as Met says G20 protests will be 'very violent' (*Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2009: 1)

'We predict a riot; meet the anarchists plotting to overthrow capitalism' (*Independent on Sunday*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2009: 10-11)

'There still may be trouble ahead' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2009: 4-5)

'G20 protestors face police with tasers' (*Sunday Times*, 29<sup>th</sup> March: 3)

'Cops to be given tasers' (*Daily Mirror*, 30<sup>th</sup> March: 6)

'Anarchists planning to storm City banks' (*London Evening Standard*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2009: 2)

'London braced for G20 Onslaught' (*Financial Times*, 31<sup>st</sup> March: 4)

'Activists dig in on the fringes of the city for direct action protests (*Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009:6-7)

Several news stories disclosed protest groups' concerns that the MPS was 'talking up' the possibility of protestor violence to justify a heavy-handed paramilitary policing operation. Nevertheless, when, as predicted, protesters clashed with police on 1<sup>st</sup> April, the inferential structure crystallised and now explicitly set the context for newspapers' interpretation of events at G20. This, in turn, determined which 'meanings' around policing, protest and disorder were fed via the press into the public sphere. The *London Evening Standard* led that evening with a front-page story, dominated by a full-colour photograph of riot police surrounding a protestor as he lies injured on the road outside the Bank of England, headlined 'Violence Sweeps City on Obama's Big Day'. This dramatic interpretation was reproduced with remarkable consistency across the press the following day, as coverage foregrounded the actions of 'hard core' anarchists and extremists (Gorringer and Rosie, 2009). The police, in contrast, were portrayed as the 'thin blue line' and victims of inexcusable protestor violence. Visual quality and dramatic impact were enhanced with images of 'anarchists' attacking the Royal Bank of Scotland and of demonstrators clashing with police at the corner of the Bank of England. The collective press position was that police lines had come under siege from violent demonstrators:

'Anarchy in the UK: rioters blitz city' (*Sun* 2 April 2009, p.6-7)

'Anarchy does not rule the UK' (*Daily Express*, 2 April, front page)

'Police battle rampaging city mobs' (ibid)

'Baton charges as protesters break into RBS branch' (*Independent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2009: 4)

'Love and hate' (*Daily Mail*, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2009)

'Undercover with the anarchist mob' (ibid)'Protesters clash with police at RBC office'  
(*Daily Mirror*, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2009: 9)

'The mob tamed' (ibid)

‘Carnival atmosphere turns ugly after demonstrators storm into RBS branch’  
(*Guardian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2009: 2)

Equally important was the press consensus that ‘Operation Glencoe’ had been a success for the MPS, involving limited disruption and damage to property, and the arrest of 93 troublemakers. A few journalists expressed reservations about what was viewed as the police’s disproportionate, heavy-handed treatment of peaceful protesters. There was wider criticism of the MPS tactic of ‘kettling’ that kept protestors contained in tightly controlled sites for hours. And some stories were accompanied by dramatic colour images of blood soaked protestors. But it was the police perspective on protestor violence that dictated the news agenda.

At 11.30pm on 1<sup>st</sup> April the MPS released a statement disclosing that a man had died in the area of the Bank of England (MPS statement, 1<sup>st</sup> April):

A member of the public went to a police officer to say that there was a man who had collapsed around the corner. That officer sent two police medics through the cordon line and into St. Michael’s Alley where they found a man who had stopped breathing. They called for support at about 19.30. The officers gave him an initial check and cleared his airway before moving him back behind the cordon line to a clear area outside the Royal Exchange building where they gave him CPR. The officers took the decision to move him as during this time a number of missiles – believed to be bottles – were being thrown at them. LAS (the London Ambulance Service) took the man to hospital where he was pronounced dead. The IPCC [Independent Police Complaints Commission] has been informed.

Partly due to the timing and context of the statement, the press situated the death within the existing inferential structure, and reproduced the police narrative that the man had died in the midst of chaotic protester violence. Journalists’ reports and protest group websites conflicted over whether or not the dead man, Ian Tomlinson, was a protestor, and where he had collapsed. On 2<sup>nd</sup> April the IPCC confirmed that it had been asked by the police to review Tomlinson’s death. An immediate post-mortem examination established that he had suffered a heart attack and died of natural causes. Whatever Tomlinson’s G20 protest connections, the police position was that he had not come into contact with officers prior

to collapsing in the street. The official statement on the cause of death seemed to make sense when details of Tomlinson's life emerged. He was a newspaper vendor in poor health, coping with a drink problem, living alone and apart from his family in a hostel in the East End of London.

What is important to establish here is that early press coverage both reflected and reinforced an explicit inferential structure built around the default news frame of 'protester violence' that prioritised the police perspective on the events of G20. The police were portrayed as the 'thin blue line', the protesters as the violent mob. Coverage of the G20 protests thus developed into a story of unqualified and intentional protester violence against the forces of law and order and respectable society. Initial reports on the death of Ian Tomlinson, though presented as a story in its own right, were ordered and interpreted within this inferential structure. Portrayed as a tragic and unavoidable death by natural causes, a position confirmed by the IPCC and coroner's report, news reports promoted the image of violent protesters hurling bottles at dutiful police officers who were doing all they could to help a critically ill man in extremely difficult circumstances. The police perspective was quickly established and seemed stable. It was further reinforced when, on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, journalists were allowed to join follow-up police raids on squats used by the alleged 'ring leaders' of the groups accused of orchestrating the violence. However, the MPS's position on Tomlinson's death began to unravel as alternative information came to light. It would be the reinterpretation of the circumstances of Tomlinson's death, on the basis of citizen journalism, that would critically destabilise this initial inferential structure and radically transform how the policing of G20 was interpreted and understood.

*Caught on Film: the Destabilised Inferential Structure and the Transition from 'Protester Violence' to 'Police Violence'*

One of the most noticeable characteristics of the 1<sup>st</sup> April protests was the sheer density and variety of recording devices being used by professional and citizen journalists, private businesses, demonstrators, the police, and passers-by. Furthermore, because of police containment tactics, police-news media-protester-public interactions took place in extremely close spatial proximity, which simultaneously created a captive audience to surrounding events. The policing of G20 was also being scrutinised by independent monitors

in attendance because of concerns about recent public order policing tactics such as those deployed at the Climate Camp in Kent in August 2008. The result was a hyper-mediatised, high-surveillance context within which control of the information and communication environment would be difficult to maintain.

As photographs of Ian Tomlinson appeared in the news media and online, witnesses began to emerge, claiming they had seen the man interacting with the police on several occasions. Their testimonies, significantly brought first to the news media rather than the IPCC, challenged the official line that bottles had been thrown at police while they were attending to Tomlinson after his collapse. It soon transpired that Tomlinson, in attempting to make his way home from work, had in fact come into contact with the police on several occasions prior to collapsing at 7.30pm. In a pivotal news media intervention, on 3<sup>rd</sup> April *The Guardian* informed City of London Police, who were responsible for conducting the IPCC investigation into the death, that it had obtained timed and dated photographs of Tomlinson lying on the pavement at the feet of riot police. On 5<sup>th</sup> April *The Guardian* published several of these photographs, along with the testimony of three named witnesses who claimed they had seen Tomlinson being hit with a baton and/or thrown to the ground by officers. The next day the IPCC confirmed that Tomlinson had come into contact with officers prior to his death, but continued to contest reports that he had been assaulted.

Serious concerns about the policing of G20 were aired across the weekend news media on 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> April, accompanied by the first calls for a public inquiry. Ian Tomlinson was becoming a *cause célèbre*. Further concern was expressed over allegations that riot police had used violence to clear the protestor squats and the Climate Camp at Bishopsgate, and that numerous officers had concealed their identification numbers. News attention was starting to shift, and the inferential structure established around the default news frame of 'protester violence' was destabilising. The decisive moment came on April 7<sup>th</sup>, when *The Guardian* website broadcast mobile phone footage that appeared to provide clear evidence of police violence against Tomlinson minutes before he collapsed. The footage had been handed to the newspaper by an American fund manager who said, 'The primary reason for me coming forward is that it was clear the family were not getting any answers' (*Guardian*, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2009). It shows Tomlinson walking, hands in pockets, seemingly oblivious to an adjacent group of officers, some dog handlers, and others in riot gear. He presents no

discernible threat to public order. Without warning, an officer in helmet and balaclava pushes Tomlinson forcefully from behind, knocking him to the ground. When slowed-down, the footage captures the officer swiping at Tomlinson's legs with a baton, and then pushing him hard in the back. Police stand and watch as passers-by help Tomlinson to a sitting position, where he appears to remonstrate with the officers in question. He is then helped to his feet, again by passers-by, and is seen walking away. Soon afterwards he will collapse beyond the view of this camera. The footage does not show any extenuating circumstances that might justify the police officer's actions.

*The Guardian* shared the footage with the news channels of the *BBC*, *Sky* and *Channel 4*. It was also added to various online news sites, and to *YouTube*. The footage was picked up globally and was by far the most read story on *The Guardian's* website, with about 400,000 views. It initiated intensive blogging and a letter-writing campaign to parliament.

Authenticated, real-time footage of events surrounding Ian Tomlinson's death provided a focus for the growing body of complaints, led by the Tomlinson family who had now established a campaign website (<http://www.iantomlinsonfamilycampaign.org.uk>), about (a) the overall policing of G20, and (b) the actions of officers attached to specialist units.

On 8<sup>th</sup> April new footage shot from a different angle, retrieved from a broken *Channel 4* camera, showed an officer striking at Mr. Tomlinson from behind with a baton and then pushing him to the ground. This combined footage set the agenda not only for other news agencies, but also for the response of the MPS and the IPCC. The MPS subsequently confirmed that four officers had come forward in relation to the investigation into the death of Mr. Tomlinson.

The initial inferential structure – built around the news frame of 'protester violence' and reinforcing the police perspective on the G20 protests and Ian Tomlinson's death – was destabilising and in transition. The focus of rolling news media coverage, now extending well beyond the press, was shifting from 'protester violence' – the actions of hard-core anarchists – to 'police violence' – the actions of official state representatives tasked with public protection. Fuelled by a combination of professional and citizen-generated content, an increasingly critical news media highlighted two major issues that challenged not only the police handling of the G20 protests, but also the credibility of the MPS:



- (a) the problem of police violence as indicated by the sheer number of videoed incidents and witness statements that were coming to light.
- (b) the possibility that the MPS statement was intended to mislead on the events surrounding Ian Tomlinson's death.

A collective realignment had taken place – a press campaign was underway for the MPS to account not only for the actions of 'rogue officers', but also for the policing of G20. On 8<sup>th</sup> April, both the Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, and the MPS Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson, acknowledged the need for an independent inquiry, and confirmed that one of the officers shown in the footage had been suspended. The IPCC reversed its decision to allow City of London police to investigate Tomlinson's death and called for more witnesses to come forward and to hand over any footage. A second post-mortem was carried out at the request of the Tomlinson family. The case featured heavily across the news media on the weekend of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12 April.

The IPCC had initially claimed that there were no CCTV cameras near the assault. However, on 14<sup>th</sup> April the *London Evening Standard* identified several cameras in the immediate area. On 15<sup>th</sup> April the MPS agreed to an inquiry by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) into its public order policing tactics and also to re-examine its own G20 video footage. The next day *The Guardian* was handed more photographs showing Ian Tomlinson interacting with police approximately 15 minutes before he collapsed. By now it had been confirmed that, of the 145 complaints lodged with the IPCC, 70 related to claims of excessive police force.

On 17<sup>th</sup> April the second autopsy established that Tomlinson had died from abdominal haemorrhaging and the MPS confirmed that a Territorial Support Group (TSG) police officer would be questioned on suspicion of manslaughter. The MPS's problems intensified when footage uploaded to *YouTube* showed further police violence against a woman attending the 2<sup>nd</sup> April memorial vigil for Mr. Tomlinson. In this footage, Nicola Fisher is seen arguing with an officer before he back-hands her in the face and then, when she protests, hits her on the legs with a police baton. The officer's shoulder identification number appears to have been obscured. Fisher was able to amplify her side of the story by selling it to the *Daily Express* and *Daily Star*, who on 17<sup>th</sup> April published front-page photographs of her injuries.

She was represented by the PR agent, Max Clifford. On 19<sup>th</sup> April the *Sunday Times* broadcast fresh footage of police officers using batons and shields on protestors.

During the following week, as the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into the policing of G20 began to hear evidence, the police attempted to defend their tactics. Sir Ken Jones, the head of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), Sir Paul Stephenson, the MPS Commissioner, and Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, all complained about unfair news coverage of the police. However, these statements had marginal impact on the transforming news agenda. In the course of the week both Nick Hardwick, the Chair of the IPCC, and Denis O'Connor, the Chief of HMIC, expressed concerns about the G20 policing tactics. On 21<sup>st</sup> April *The Guardian* presented the IPCC with five new citizen-generated videos of police aggression. On 22<sup>nd</sup> April *Channel 4 News* broadcast a frame-by-frame analysis of events leading up to and including the moment when Ian Tomlinson was struck by a police officer and fell to the ground. The IPCC tried unsuccessfully to secure a court order preventing the broadcast on the basis that it could be prejudicial to its investigation. That same day *Sky News* released new footage, taken by a photographer from the top of the Royal Exchange, that appeared to show still further police violence in the form of punching, baton strikes and elbows to the face of protestors who had been 'kettled'. And a third post-mortem examination was carried out on Ian Tomlinson, at the request of the lawyers for the officer being questioned in relation to the death. On 24<sup>th</sup> April, *Sky News* published a photograph of Ian Tomlinson after his collapse, which appeared to show bruising to his forehead. It was consistent with video footage that captured Tomlinson's head hitting the pavement after being pushed by the police officer. This evidence contradicted the findings of the first inquest.

By this stage, then, the initial inferential structure around 'protester violence' – so routinely and un-controversially established in the run up to the G20 protests – had disintegrated, and a new inferential structure – initiated and driven by the raw content of citizen journalism – had crystallised around the news frame of 'police violence'. The emergence of this *dominant* inferential structure was evident in the shifting focus of news media interest, and how the 'story' of G20 was re-ordered and re-interpreted within that context. But further, and crucially, this dominant inferential structure was evident in the extensive and highly public official response that asked probing questions about the MPS's public order

policing strategy, and foregrounded the importance of two media-related phenomena: the need for the MPS to develop more positive police-press relations, and the implications of the rise of the citizen journalist for the policing of public events.

### **The Aftermath of G20**

The impact of citizen-generated content around the death of Ian Tomlinson extended well beyond establishing the dominant inferential framework that shaped news coverage and public understanding of the G20 protests. It also resulted in numerous official inquiries into 'Operation Glencoe' and raised wider questions about public order policing and the news media in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (IPCC, not yet in public domain; HMIC, 2009; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2009; Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2009; Metropolitan Police Authority, 2010). The resulting reports acknowledged a successful operation, where upwards of 35,000 protesters were marshalled by several thousand police officers largely without incident. Nevertheless, they all expressed concern that the high-profile exposure of police violence, however isolated, could seriously damage public confidence in the police. The reports queried the appropriateness of the MPS's public order policing tactics, highlighting the deployment of untrained officers in combustible situations, the concealment of police identification numbers, the use of indiscriminate heavy-handed 'containment' (especially 'kettling') and 'distraction tactics', and the role of the Territorial Support Group (TSG). The changing media environment also featured prominently in discussion of: the poor state of police-news-media relations, which generated tensions, frustrations and conflict between professional journalists and on the ground officers; the rapid and sophisticated use of multi-media communication technologies by protest groups, which by far surpassed the static communicative capabilities of the police; and the significance of the citizen journalist for intensifying public scrutiny of individual and collective police action, and in shaping public perceptions of the police. At the request of the Tomlinson family, an IPCC investigation was established specifically to consider the way the MPS and City of London Police handled the news media in the aftermath of Ian Tomlinson's death.

The sheer level of institutional soul-searching and operational reflection that followed G20 is in itself highly significant. That the official inquiries and the issues they raised were disseminated and debated so widely, and that the MPS was so heavily and universally criticised in the news media, presents a direct challenge to previous research findings that the police are superordinate commentators in the 'hierarchy of credibility', and foregrounds the rise of the citizen journalist as a key definitional force in the production of news. The nature and intensity of news coverage of the Ian Tomlinson case, substantiated by real-time citizen journalist footage of this and other incidents of police violence, and reinforced by the internet, made the MPS public order policing strategy a live political and policy issue that had to be addressed. Were it not for the incendiary 'visual evidence' handed to the news media by citizen journalists, the 'story' of Ian Tomlinson may never have taken off, the MPS may well have succeeded in denying or defusing allegations of police violence, and the policing of G20 may have ended up in MPS 'Greatest Hits' portfolio of how to police public order events in the capital. Because of citizen journalism, the operational integrity and institutional authority of the MPS was first of all questioned, and then successfully challenged. An official consensus emerged out of the various reviews that, whether the MPS agreed or not, a fundamental overhaul of its public order policing strategy was necessary (HMIC, 2009).

### **Understanding the News Reporting of G20: Citizen Journalism, Hierarchies of Credibility, and the Market in Anti-Establishment News**

In the concluding section of this article, we seek to develop a sociological understanding of the news media's collective transition from 'protester violence' to 'police violence' in the reporting of Ian Tomlinson's death and the policing of the G20 Summit. To do this, we return to the core concepts of 'inferential structure' and 'hierarchy of credibility' and situate them within the context of the rapidly changing information-communications environment. Our discussion concentrates on three key issues: the capacity of technologically empowered citizen journalists to produce information that challenges the 'official' version of events; the inclination of professional and citizen journalists to actively seek out and use that information; and the existence of an information-communications marketplace that sustains the commodification and mass consumption of adversarial, anti-establishment news.

Citizen journalists are neither automatically nor naturally imbued with cultural authority: they are not 'authorised knowers' (Ericson et al, 1989), who can command access to mainstream news media 'as of right'. Their position in the 'hierarchy of credibility' is precarious and contingent. News media access is not granted because of who citizen journalists are, but rather because of where they are and what they have. Their credibility and authenticity as news sources derives from their capacity to provide 'factual' visual evidence of 'live events' which, in a multi-platform news media market, constitutes an important and cost-effective resource for 'making news' (McNair, 2006). The technological ability of citizens to generate news has been accompanied by an equally important attitudinal shift as a new generation of news producers and consumers comes of age: where once citizens were content to be told what the news is, they are now increasingly interested in being part of the production process (Gilmour, 2004; Deuze, 2008).

The citizen-generated 'proof' of police misconduct at G20 presented grave *potential* problems for the MPS. However, the dramatic and collective realignment of news media coverage that followed was by no means guaranteed. We have suggested throughout this article that understanding the transition between inferential structures – from 'protester violence' to 'police violence' – requires consideration of the wider environment within which both news media reporting and political protest currently exist and interact. As Cottle puts it (2008: 858), analysts must be sensitive to 'the political contingencies and dynamics at work in contemporary protest and demonstration reporting'.

The rise of the citizen journalist has been accompanied, and perhaps encouraged, by a decline in deference to authority and a deterioration of trust in official or elite institutions (Fukuyama, 2000; Seldon, 2009). Public scepticism and outrage is reflected and reinforced, and arguably amplified, across a market-driven news media faced with increasing competition and the acute need to generate audience interest in order to survive. Certainly, the escalating adversarialism of British political coverage has been acknowledged by academics and journalists alike (Lloyd, 2004; Milne, 2005). In what Barnett (2002) calls the 'age of contempt', a prominent characteristic of political coverage is its 'negativism and wilfully destructive attitude towards authority' (McNair, 2006: 71). This 'attack journalism' is manifested routinely in a news media stance that is more antagonistic toward institutional authority and more likely to take seriously or treat as legitimate complaints against it. In the

extreme, it can translate into a 'feeding frenzy' (Sabato, 1993; Protesse et al, 1991) involving the relentless pursuit of senior public figures with a view to 'naming and shaming' them to force them out of public office. Whilst editors may justify such aggressive journalistic practice as being 'in the public interest', a contemporary realisation of the news media's historic Fourth Estate duty, it also has obvious market value. The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, benefited from a considerable sales boost and increased web traffic during its reporting of the House of Commons expenses scandal of 2009: the paper also won a string of plaudits at the 2010 Press Awards, including 'newspaper of the year', 'scoop of the year' and 'journalist of the year' (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8584356.stm>). *The Guardian's* in depth coverage of the G20 protests and Ian Tomlinson's death likewise resulted in increased sales and web traffic, and Paul Lewis, who led on that coverage, won 'reporter of the year' at the same awards (*ibid.*). Thus, the widespread decline of deference to authority and the escalation of news media adversarialism have contributed to the creation of an unstable communicative space within which direct and high-visibility challenges to the institutionally powerful have gained cultural, commercial and professional currency. If citizen journalism has created a new source of cost-effective and newsworthy information, wider shifts within the news industry, journalistic practice and society have created a context within which that information can be profitably commodified and consumed.

In addition to these macro-level changes, the MPS were experiencing particular problems of their own; most notably, deteriorating relations with the news media and the lasting legacy of previous scandals that weakened its operational integrity and institutional authority. In the immediate aftermath of the G20 protests, the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) received multiple complaints about alleged police assaults on reporters, the use of cordons, and refusals to release journalists from areas in which demonstrators were being contained. Police officers also used public order and counter terrorism legislation to stop reporters taking photographs (JCHR, 2009). What was perceived as a direct infringement of the freedom of the press did not sit well with many of those professional journalists present at G20. Nor was this the first time such police tactics had been used in public order situations and resulted in official complaints to the NUJ (JCHR, 2008). Thus, sections of the news media seem to have been primed for and receptive to information that challenged the MPS version of events surrounding Ian Tomlinson's death. Such conditions increased the likelihood that

any citizen-generated evidence of police misconduct would resonate immediately in news centres. They helped facilitate the collective transition between inferential structures and the corresponding shift in news media focus from 'protester violence' and 'police violence'.

Furthermore, the involvement of the police in the death of Ian Tomlinson, the suggestion of a subsequent cover-up, and the wider problem of public order policing were only the latest in a series of controversies that worked cumulatively to undermine the MPS position in the news media 'hierarchy of credibility'. A succession of high-profile institutional scandals, cover-ups and botched investigations – for example, the Stephen Lawrence, Jean Charles de Menezes and the Forest Gate cases – had damaged the MPS 'brand'. In all three cases, each heavily reported and debated in the news media, the 'official truth' disseminated by MPS statements had been found to be incorrect and/or misleading (McLaughlin, 2007; Cottle, 2005). Journalists and commentators also drew parallels between the death of Ian Tomlinson and that of Blair Peach in 1979. While the news frame of 'police violence' may not have been the default position of the news media, given the broader context, nor was it entirely unimaginable. The transition between inferential structures mobilised explanatory tropes and images that were already meaningful both to journalists and their audiences. Complaints of police violence and institutional cover-up at G20 were the latest manifestation of 'known' characteristics that could be projected against a familiar backdrop of institutional failure and professional incompetence. The reporting of G20, fuelled by the daily drip-drip of fresh video footage and witness testimonies and commentary, constituted an evolving and sensational exposé of police misconduct that simultaneously resonated with widespread public sensibilities and met the requirements for commercial success in a highly competitive, visually-oriented information-communications market place. Significantly, it was the citizen journalist and news media perspective, rather than the police perspective, that was assimilated into and validated by the official investigations and reports. Ultimately, it was this perspective that determined 'what the story was', structured the reporting of 'what had happened and why', and drove further journalistic investigation and criticism of the MPS.

Our analysis indicates that the rapid destabilisation of the initial inferential structure that reproduced and reinforced the police perspective, and the collective realignment of news

media attention from 'protester violence' to 'police violence', was sustained on a number of levels: at the macro level, by structural changes in the information-communications marketplace and the attitudes of both journalists and the public to authority; at the micro-level, by poor police-news media relations, and the immediate and historic problems of operational integrity and institutional authority facing the MPS. In this unstable and unpredictable news media environment, the role of the MPS as 'primary definers' can no longer be taken for granted, and their super-ordinate status within the 'hierarchy of credibility' no longer assumed. As our research has illustrated, the citizen journalist provides a valuable additional source of real-time information which may challenge or confirm the institutional version of events. However, it is when citizen journalism challenges the 'official truth', as portrayed by those powerful institutional sources who have traditionally maintained a relatively uncontested position at the top of the 'hierarchy of credibility', that it becomes most potent as a news resource.



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