

Television the & Riots

Howard Tumber



British Film Institute
Broadcasting Research Unit

Parminder VIRLOBE BLACK & ETHNIC ARTS ARCHIVE
GLC
1981-1986
Working for London
archive.parmindervir.com

TELEVISION AND THE RIOTS

A REPORT FOR THE BROADCASTING RESEARCH UNIT
OF THE BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE

HOWARD TUMBER



BFI Publishing



First published in 1982 by the British Film Institute
127 Charing Cross Road
London WC2H 0EA

Copyright © Broadcasting Research Unit 1982

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Tumber, Howard

Television and the riots

1. Riots — England
2. Television broadcasting of news — England

I. Title

942.085'8

HV6485.G72

ISBN 0 85170 120 5

Printed by Tonbridge Printers Ltd, Tonbridge, Kent

Contents

Preface by Richard Hoggart	v
Foreword by Michael Tracey	vii
1 The Television Coverage of the Riots	
INTRODUCTION	1
CHRONOLOGY OF THE JULY RIOTS OF 1981	3
CRITICISM OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE RIOTS	7
THE COMBATANTS	11
2 A Content Analysis of the Coverage	32
3 Conclusions	43
Notes	53
Bibliography	54

Preface

The Broadcasting Research Unit, which was set up just over a year ago, has three founding fathers: the BBC, the Markle Foundation (of the USA) and the BFI. The first two are providing funds, the third services in kind, such as accommodation.

The Unit's work is guided and overseen by a small Panel composed partly of representatives of the three establishing bodies, partly of others with specially relevant experience.

The Panel has several areas of interest such as, quite particularly, the implications of the new communications technologies (on which it has established a Working Party which will issue regular reports), the encouragement of joint enquiries linking broadcasters and external research workers, and the production of publications about issues on which urgent enquiries might be useful.

Howard Tumber's report falls into this last category. Happily, it was funded jointly by the BBC and IBA, as Michael Tracey explains in his foreword. This is the BRU's first publication, so we should take the occasion to lay out the ground rules on the relationship of such work to the BRU.

The report is not a BRU statement or position paper. We commissioned it and think the result worth publishing as a contribution to a confused current debate. The views it expresses are those of Howard Tumber, not of the BRU. We expect that much in our publishing programme will carry such a disclaimer, if we are to respond widely and urgently to some current debates; it is an enabling and liberating device. And from time to time no doubt we will be publishing in our own name.

For myself, I find the report very interesting. It contains valuable insights — for example the suggestion that there has been a change (to hostility) in the attitudes of those rioting towards television crews. It does not *prove* that there is no 'copycat' effect as between what is seen on the television screen and street violence. It shows that the main groups particularly involved deny that there is such an effect. There is no need to doubt their conviction in making such an assertion. Others have vehemently asserted the contrary. We still do not know who is right. A rapid study such as this could not have been expected to penetrate beyond the claims and counter-claims to that complex point at which it could say with reasonable confidence that there is or is not imitation.

Its value is that, quite soon after the events themselves, it gives a graphic account of what the main groups involved — rioters, police, journalists — thought was happening, what models they have in their heads, how they justify themselves to themselves as well as to others.

RICHARD HOGGART
Chairman, BRU Panel

Foreword

Howard Tumber had only three months in which to unscramble the many strands to the role of television in the summer riots of 1981. These events were by any standards traumatic. To see mobs burning and looting; petrol bombs flying through the air leaving a contrail of burning vapour; police with bloody faces, pale with fear and anger; streets, no more than a mile away from the Houses of Parliament, strewn with upturned vehicles and in effect becoming no-go areas: all this was shocking and frightening. We had, of course, seen it all before in Ulster, but that had become more akin to a foreign 'war' than a domestic issue. Brixton and Toxteth were well and truly a home fixture. Right at the heart of these events lay television.

Howard Tumber's task, with limited resources and time, was to try to put the role of television into some kind of perspective and to assess if there had been a 'copycat' effect in which young people were on the streets because of what they themselves had seen of other riots on television. His method was simple. He went and talked with those who were at the eye of the storm: film crews, journalists, news executives, police, rioters. He has been able to piece together a detailed picture of what happened in what he calls this 'Coronation Street of violence'. He has also been able to offer a series of portraits of how the role of television was seen by various groups. What comes through most revealingly is his view that no one actually involved felt that television's portrayal had the copycat effect. On this he found unanimity: 'the most obvious point of agreement between the police, the broadcasters and the young people was that wherever the rioters got their information it was not from television.'

The other arguments by both the police and the young people to the effect that television had failed to understand, or even be interested in, their views and problems should remove any complacency from television executives created by Tumber's rejection of the copycat thesis. There is in fact a network of problems of how television treats both the police and young people which should be addressed at much greater length and with far greater resources.

Howard Tumber's report should not be seen as an attempt to produce the final word on the role of television in social tension. It should be seen as a set of preliminary observations which successfully dismantle simplistic attempts to treat television as if it alone should be

blamed for all social ills. The report should also be seen as posing some important questions about the continuing role of television in rendering a view of a society to the members of that society. It is not what happened with television during those violent days that is solely important; it is also what happens when the petrol bombs are not flying that matters. It is in this sense that television may well have failed in that it has a tendency to ignore the complex and thereby, at least implicitly, to mistake simplicity for analysis. Television should not be regarded as the cause of social disturbance, any more than it should be expected to be a panacea for the ills which spawn those disturbances. But it can be expected to offer intelligent analysis to the rest of society *before* eruptions occur.

I should like to take this opportunity of thanking all those who made this study possible. The BBC and the IBA provided the necessary funds to complete the research. We must also thank the members of the broadcasting research departments of the BBC and the IBA. Howard Tumber talked to many people. Some of these would wish to remain anonymous, and so we will simply extend our general gratitude for all their help and co-operation.

MICHAEL TRACEY
Broadcasting Research Unit

1 The Television Coverage of the Riots

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the mass media and in particular television have come in for increased attention for the manner in which they cover various issues of public importance. It was inevitable, then, that discussion would take place as to television's role in the disturbances which occurred during the summer of 1981 in a number of inner city areas within mainland Britain.

First of all, perhaps, one needs to recall the sense of shock and dismay which greeted the flickering images of burning cars, looting and young boys throwing petrol bombs. Lord Scarman, who was asked by the Home Secretary to report on the April disturbances in Brixton, commented: 'The British people watched with horror and incredulity an instant audio-visual presentation on their television sets of scenes of violence and disorder in the "capital city" the like of which has not previously been seen in this century in Britain. . . . The petrol bomb was now used for the first time on the streets of Britain. These young people brought about a temporary collapse of law and order in the centre of an inner suburb of London.'¹

The 'riots' have become an important part of British social history, and will no doubt provide material for study for years to come. This research, despite limitations of resources and time, is an attempt to look into the role of television and its contribution to a series of events which shook the whole of British society. It also sets out to provide a springboard for further research and discussion on these and other related issues.

The original idea for the research came from a conversation between Mr Stephen Hearst of the BBC and Dr Michael Tracey of the Broadcasting Research Unit at the British Film Institute. Uppermost in Stephen Hearst's mind, as someone who well understood the concern and anxieties of every broadcaster in covering a difficult, delicate and dangerous situation, was the stark question: had some of the rioting been caused by a copycat effect induced by television? The Independent Broadcasting Authority was also interested in and concerned with this question. The BBC and IBA both therefore agreed to provide funds to support a piece of research.

As it was refined, the structure of the study became tripartite: (i) to examine the television coverage of the recent disturbances in the

summer of 1981 and to determine the amount and nature of the coverage; (2) to examine attitudes towards the image presented; and (3) to examine how the image was constructed.

(1) Since a specific intention was to determine the amount and nature of the coverage, a straightforward account was prepared of the actual television coverage of the disturbances. It seems highly likely that general public attitudes to the riots have been formed in part on the basis of the imagery offered by television. Thus it is essential to at least see again in a systematic light what was actually presented. The procedure adopted was to look at two comparative news slots and systematically to analyse them according to various themes. Tapes from local news programmes were also viewed and a more impressionistic analysis was made from these.

(2) Interviews were conducted with individuals who had been actively involved in the riots or who had been on the spot. These interviews sought to elicit these individuals' interpretation of the news portrayed.

(3) A preliminary analysis of newspaper articles suggested possibilities of over-dramatisation of the events, along with a number of other criticisms. It was, therefore, considered important to interview those responsible for the news programmes, e.g. journalists, camera crews, editors, in order to see how the image was constructed.

It must be stressed that there was no intention of relying solely on content analysis to demonstrate any particular thesis. To do so would be to have claimed preferential status for the researchers' interpretation of the 'meaning' of the coverage over other possible interpretations from such groups as newsmen or general viewers. To overcome this problem, which often afflicts content-analysis studies, it was proposed not to establish meanings in the television news independently of those 'making the news', nor from the meanings which viewers extract from the news. It was therefore proposed to focus on the producers of the news, the content of the news and the receivers of the news, who in this instance were limited to direct participants. This provided an understanding of the process by which news was encoded, structured and decoded.

The period with which this research was primarily concerned was that between 3 and 16 July 1981. The areas in which the research was concentrated were London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham. The Brixton riots of April 1981 are also discussed during the course of the report since in the minds of the police, rioters and television journalists they are clearly associated with the summer disturbances. The Scarman Enquiry's own terms of reference were originally the

April riots, but these were later extended to take account of the summer riots.

Putting together the exact sequence of events during the period of 3-16 July was not particularly easy. The big incidents, i.e. Brixton, Toxteth, Moss Side, are fairly easy to document. But some of the minor incidents, whilst reported in some newspapers, did not appear in others. It has in fact been difficult to establish whether some incidents actually took place. Rumour abounds during a riot and, as has been pointed out by many journalists and police, certain incidents were labelled a riot which in more normal circumstances would have been just a Saturday night incident. I shall return to this point concerning the manufacture of news later in the report.

People tend to forget the sequence of events which occurred during the summer. Indeed many of the interviewees could not recall certain incidents and had little idea of the order in which they took place. It is therefore important to document a chronology of the riots. The following is a brief guide, culled from the national press, of the sequence of events during the period with which this research is concerned.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE JULY RIOTS OF 1981

Friday 3 July, evening

Forty police were hurt as skinheads and Asians rioted in Southall. This was the first day of the riots but was not typical of what followed. The riot was sparked off by the arrival in Southall of skinheads who attacked the Asians. Cars and police vehicles were overturned and a public house was set ablaze as Asian youths reacted to the incidents started by the skinheads. There were twenty-one arrests. Seventy police and thirty civilians were injured.

Saturday 4 July

Rioting broke out in Toxteth. For nine hours Liverpool policemen faced petrol bombs, fires, stoning and looting which lasted until 7 a.m. the next morning. The police had to retreat as their lines broke down. Seventy police were injured. Both black and white youths were involved in the rioting and it was generally agreed that this was not a race riot, in the sense of Brixton or Southall, but was more the sudden fusing of elements common to black and white youths, e.g. unemployment, frustration, over-intensive policing and hooliganism. Shops were burnt and others looted as the violence spread. A BBC television team was attacked by a masked gang who destroyed their camera.

Sunday 5 July

Second night of rioting in Toxteth as youths battled with police. Buildings blazed as police were attacked with missiles, etc. Police used

CS gas for the first time on mainland Britain. Both police and youths were injured. Kenneth Oxford, Chief Constable of Merseyside, came in for attack from all sides over the use of CS gas and for his policing of the area.

Monday 6 July

More rioting in Toxteth for the third night running. This time police took up a more offensive position. There was more rioting and looting until police charged rioters. Over the three days more than 186 police were injured.

Tuesday 7 July

Rioting broke out in the London suburb of Wood Green. Gangs of youths attacked and injured members of the public and looted shops. The scale of violence, damage and police presence was much smaller than that in Toxteth. About 3-400 youths involved.

Wednesday 8 July

Serious rioting broke out in Manchester and Salford. Black and white youths went on the rampage. The most serious incident of the night was the attack on Moss Side police station by about 1,000 youths who attempted to storm their way inside. Serious damage was caused, vehicles overturned, fires started and shops looted and destroyed. Petrol bombs were also used.

Thursday 9 July

Second night of rioting in Manchester. Chief Constable Anderton ordered a very strong police presence in contrast to the low key operation the previous night. Police vans were pelted with rocks and bricks.

Trouble broke out in Woolwich in south-east London where police broke up 200 youths who were smashing up shops and overturning cars. In Lewisham eight youths were arrested after clashes. In Deptford 100 black youths threw bottles at a police car. Twenty youths were arrested in Stoke Newington after bricks and bottles were thrown at the police. In Balham several skinheads ran through the high road smashing shop windows. In Fulham fighting broke out with minor clashes between police and youths.

Friday 10 July

Rioting broke out in Brixton for the first time since the Easter riots. There was seven hours of violence including looting, stone-throwing, petrol-bombing and burning of police vehicles. Approximately ninety people were arrested. Police were issued with new riot helmets. There was also trouble in Southall where youths, black, white and Asian looted and threw stones at the police. There was also reported trouble

in Reading, Liverpool, Hull, Preston and Ellesmere Port. Some 500 people were arrested.

Saturday 11 July

Outbreaks of violence occurred in a number of places, described by police as basically incidents of hooliganism rather than serious rioting. These were quickly broken up. There was more trouble in Brixton, and to a lesser extent in Walthamstow in London. There were also affrays in Crewe, Leicester, Birmingham, Hull, Wolverhampton and Leeds.

Sunday 12 July

Trouble broke out in Leicester where 200 youths set cars on fire and threw petrol bombs. Police stressed that the violence was not racial but just plain hooliganism. Violence also took place in Huddersfield where 100 youths, black and white, broke one or two shop windows in the town centre.

Monday 13 July

Disturbances broke out again in Leicester but on a smaller scale.

Tuesday 14 July

Police raided a number of houses in Brixton thought to contain petrol bombs. None were found.

Wednesday 15 July

Rioting broke out again in Brixton following the police raids on a number of houses in the area. Hundreds of youths were involved. Criticism of the police raids came from a number of quarters. Earlier in the day Lord Scarman visited the scene of a police raid.

The scale and number of these incidents contributed to the 'shock and horror' felt by people all over Britain. But it would be wrong to assume that the July riots, along with those in Brixton in April, were isolated incidents in 1981 or in the last three hundred years in this country. In 1981, for example, the following serious incidents occurred:²

Monday 3 March Violence broke out between black marchers and police during a demonstration organised by the New Cross Massacre Action Committee to protest against the police handling of the Deptford fire investigation. Between 3,000 and 6,000 people, most of them black, took part in the march. A jeweller's shop in Fleet Street was looted, seventeen policemen were injured and there were twenty-three arrests.

17-20 April There were reports of mods, skinheads, punks and rockers going on the rampage at numerous seaside resorts. There were also a

number of 'fairgrounds riots'. At Finsbury Park a reported 500 black teenagers attacked shops and fought police outside a fairground. Eight police and twenty civilians were injured, forty people were arrested and some shops looted. At Ealing Common 300 black youths smashed shop windows and damaged police vehicles.

Saturday 23 May In Coventry violence broke out during a march by 8,000 Asians protesting against the number of racist attacks in the city. About 200 skinheads shouted fascist slogans. Paving stones and banner poles were used as weapons. Over seventy people were arrested. One policeman was stabbed.

Tuesday 2 June In Lewisham, police who arrested a girl at the shopping centre were attacked by black youths. Ten people were arrested. Later 100 youths gathered outside the police station shouting abuse.

There was also further rioting in Toxteth later in July and August. In the last decade major incidents have occurred in Lewisham and Notting Hill Gate in 1977, and in Southall in 1979 when the teacher Blair Peach was killed. In 1974 the student Kevin Gately was killed at Red Lion Square.

Major public violence is — to adapt a famous comment — as English as roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. It is indeed a fallacy to think that Britain has a long tradition of social harmony and that the events of July 1981 were isolated ones. Over the last two or three hundred years Britain has had numerous riots and street disorders.

As Stevenson and Quinault point out: 'One of the principal canons of the orthodox version of our history is the belief that the peaceful evolution of our national institutions has been the hallmark that has made Britain unique among the developed nations. But a variety of influences have tended to exaggerate the extent of such peaceful development.'³

This is reiterated by E. P. Thompson when he states: 'The British people were noted throughout Europe for their turbulence, and the people of London astonished foreign visitors by their lack of deference. The eighteenth and nineteenth century are punctuated by riots occasioned by bread prices, turnpike and tolls, excise, "rescue", strikes, new machinery, enclosures, press gangs and a score of other grievances. Direct action on particular grievances merges on the one hand into the great political risings of the "mob" — the Wilkes agitation of the 1760s and 1770s, the Gordon Riots (1780), the mobbing of the King in the London streets (1795 and 1820), the Bristol Riots (1831) and the Birmingham Bull Ring Riots (1839). On the other hand it merges with organised forms of sustained illegal action or quasi-insurrection — Luddism (1811-13), the East Anglian Riots (1816), the "Last

Labourers' Revolt" (1830), the Rebecca Riots (1839 and 1842) and the Plug Riots (1842).⁴

The work of later historians provided a new analysis for these disturbances: 'Historians in the past often used the term "mobs" to describe an unruly element causing trouble. It was not until the work of Rudé that a new dimension was given to the study of popular protest. In the first place the study of popular disturbances was rescued from relative obscurity by showing that crowd actions had an important influence on the course of political events. His work on the composition and motivation of popular disturbances showed that the stereotypes commonly applied to the "mob" by both contemporaries and later historians were highly misleading.'⁵ Rudé suggested that the term 'revolutionary crowd' may be a more useful description when discussing riots in late eighteenth-century England as well as in revolutionary France. As Thompson states: 'Too often historians have used the term [mob] lazily, to evade further analysis, or (with the suggestion of criminal elements motivated by the desire for loot) as a gesture of prejudice.'⁶ It is as important to be careful when describing incidents or rioters today as it is when analysing the past.

CRITICISM OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE RIOTS

There was little published criticism of the television coverage of the riots. The criticism that did arise came from a not unexpected quarter — Mary Whitehouse, writing in the *Daily Mail* on 14 July. She stated that she had sent telegrams to both the BBC and ITV asking them if they would please consider whether the televising of acts of vandalism and violence did not contribute to the spread of riots by creating excitement, encouraging imitation, and actually teaching the techniques of violence. She then went on to make more general points about violence on television. Milton Shulman writing in the *New Standard*, 16 July, also spoke about violence on television, a theme that he has talked and written about for a number of years. He did not criticise the coverage of the riots but concentrated on the fictionalised violence that appears on the screen. Other newspaper television critics took the opportunity to write about the riots but did not directly criticise the coverage. For example, Elkan Allan, writing in *The Times*, 25 July, asked whether television had responded as fully as it might have done, and whether there had been enough background material about the possible causes of the riots. Peter Taylor writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 July, Peter Fiddick writing in the *Guardian*, 25 July, Julian Critchley writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, 16 July, and Chris Dunkley writing in the *Financial Times*, 15 July, all discussed Richard Clutterbuck's book *The Media and Political Violence* but refrained from any strong criticisms of the riot

coverage. Instead they extended the debate posed by Clutterbuck's book to the whole area of free speech and censorship.

The major references to copycat imitations actually tended to come from individuals inside the BBC and ITN. Richard Francis, Head of BBC News and Current Affairs, in a speech to the Royal Television Society, stated that there might be force in Mary Whitehouse's objections, though he went on to say that there was no conclusive evidence that television coverage had had the effects she suggested. Mary Whitehouse herself has pointed out that the news editors of both the BBC and ITN had acknowledged, in their response to her telegram about imitation, that their news coverage had probably had some copycat effect. Ian Connell, in the *Morning Star* of 17 July, criticised the television coverage, saying that as the situation developed there were fewer references to unemployment and social conditions and more interviews given to the police, while the rioters were just called hooligans.

Margaret Thatcher, in a not very widely reported speech at the Parliamentary Press Gallery in London's Caledonian Club, suggested that the media may have been one of the causes of the present troubles. She spoke of the need to draw a line between reporting events and providing so much publicity that those events were amplified.

Peter Watson, in two articles in *The Times*, on the 10 and 11 August, believed that there were certain aspects of the recent riots which needed to be examined more thoroughly than they had been: their copycat nature; the coverage of the confrontations with police; and the looting. He asked if anyone could seriously doubt that there was a strong copycat element, and went on to discuss the influence of television on 10-13 year old working class boys and what could be done about it.

As far as specific programmes were concerned, most reviews praised *Panorama's* report on Brixton shown on Monday 13 July in which the programme had interviewed a number of youths in the area before the summer riots. It was the product of three months research and portrayed the way of life of young blacks in the inner cities.

Since the summer there have been numerous items both in the press and in the broadcasting media about the riots. Comments have ranged over a number of areas, but most space was taken up with the Scarman enquiry and speculation as to its findings. Since the media themselves became a subject for discussion as a possible factor in the disturbances, there was a certain amount of anticipation that Lord Scarman would comment on the media.

The Scarman Report into the Brixton disorders of 10-12 April 1981 was published in November 1981. However, very little of the Report was taken up with discussion of the media, and what references there were either dealt with supposition or Lord Scarman's own warning to the media on their responsibilities.

The first reference occurs on p.14, paragraph (3) 2.30 *The West*

Midlands, and I quote the whole paragraph to put it in its full context:

In the West Midlands, the relationship between the police and the local community seems generally, though not universally, to be more favourable. Nevertheless, disorder occurred in July in a number of parts of the county, including Handsworth, Wolverhampton, Smethwick and the centre of Birmingham. Again, the areas concerned were in many cases deprived and decaying. Evidence given to me during my visits to the West Midlands suggests that the majority view in the county is that disturbances were generally imitative of events elsewhere. Indeed it seems likely that there was a substantial 'copycat' element in many of the disorders which occurred during the summer, and that Brixton may have served in this respect as a model for others to follow. In some cases, it has been alleged, outsiders deliberately went into an area to foment trouble. Since I have not been empowered to conduct a detailed investigation into disturbances outside Brixton, I can make no finding on this. Nevertheless, I am unaware of any substantial body of evidence of an organised conspiracy behind the disturbances. The common strands in many of the major disorders, for which there is much evidence, are to be found in shared social conditions, in economic insecurity and perceived deprivation, in enforced idleness because of unemployment, and in hostility of at least a section of young people to the police.

The second and substantive part occurs on p.111, G—*The Media*, paragraphs 6.38–6.41:

6.38 I have discussed so far the social context of the disorders, with particular reference to the inner city environment, unemployment and ethnic minority needs and problems. There is, however, one other factor which I identified in Part II as figuring in the causation of the disorders following upon Brixton — the 'copy-cat' element. This raises the question of the role of the media, particularly the broadcasting media, in circumstances of major social disorder such as those experienced in Brixton and elsewhere.

6.39 The question raises difficult issues. On the one hand, there is the need to preserve the independence of the media from political interference and to recognise their important role in informing the public of current events. On the other, the media are under a duty to achieve balance and must be prepared themselves to recognise the possible social effects of their reporting. Is there not a Gresham's law of the press to be feared and resisted — that the bad drives out the good? The media, particularly the broadcasting media, do in my

view bear a responsibility for the escalation of the disorders (including the looting) in Brixton on Saturday 11 April and for their continuation the following day, and for the imitative element in the later disorders elsewhere. I do not propose legislation to curb the freedom of the media to report such events: that would introduce a potential evil far greater than the one which has to be remedied. The duty to publish (and 'be damned') is real, and never to be forgotten. But I do urge editors and producers to accept that there is also a responsibility to assess the likely impact on events of their own reporting of them, to ensure balance and coverage of disorder, and at all times to bear in mind that rioters, and others, in their exhibition of violence respond alarmingly to what they see (wrongly, but understandably) as the encouraging presence of the TV camera and the reporter.

6.40 There is one other matter concerning the media which I would mention: that is, the criticism made frequently to me that the media do not report fairly the problems of areas such as Brixton. I have heard this criticism made both by residents and by others, including police officers. There is a feeling that the media always focus on problems and difficulties, and ignore the good. It is believed by many that the bad name which some areas have got is itself a factor in preventing their regeneration and improvement. The criticism of lack of fairness is also made about the reporting of matters involving members of the black community, and the police. I cannot say whether the criticism is well founded or not. But I hope that over the next few months, it will be considered by those concerned.

6.41 To conclude, the matters to which I have referred deserve, if they have not already received, the fullest consideration by the Press Council, the Board of Governors of the BBC, the Independent Broadcasting Authority and newspaper editors.

I shall discuss later some aspects of the report, but here I only wish to deal with a few of the points that Lord Scarman raises. Lord Scarman states: 'Indeed it seems likely that there was a substantial "copy-cat" element in many of the disorders which occurred during the summer, and that Brixton may have served in this respect as a model for others to follow.' If Brixton did serve in this respect, why, the question needs to be asked, did the rioters wait three months from April to July? And what is the actual evidence for the copycat effect and in particular what is the evidence for television's part in it?

I think that it is important at this stage to discuss how the term copycat was first used during the riots. I shall discuss its merits as a term and explanation for the riots later, but since the question of imi-

tation has aroused interest in a number of quarters it is important to determine its origin as a description.

No mention of copycat was made at the time of the April Brixton riots and it was not until the 11 July — eight days after the summer disturbances began — that an indirect suggestion was made. Mary Whitehouse (on 11 July) sent a telegram to the editors of the BBC and ITN news saying: 'Please consider whether the current massive television coverage of acts of vandalism and violence is contributing to the spread of the riots.' The text of this telegram appeared on news bulletins on BBC and ITN on the same day.

The editors of BBC and ITN both replied in similar terms. Peter Woon, editor of BBC TV News, stated: 'It would be foolish to pretend that there has been no copycat effect.' David Nicholas, editor of ITN, stated: 'Media coverage of the disturbances last week has probably had some copycat effect.' This was then followed by a front page headline in *The Times* on Monday 13 July: 'Copycat Mobs in Petrol Bomb Attacks on Police'. No evidence, however, was forthcoming in the article underneath the headline for the description and presumably a different sub-editor might have headlined 'Violent Youths in Petrol Bomb . . .' ITN had used the term 'copycat' on one of their bulletins. Apart from these references, however, in which the news editors seem to have begun to chant *mea culpa* before anyone had substantially argued that the riots were, in part, their fault, there were no other mentions of 'copycat' except in resulting discussions and comments, the most significant of which was the Scarman Report. There was certainly no discussion before Mary Whitehouse sent her telegram. In a sense one is faced with a rather fine example not of any existing public concern, but of Mary Whitehouse's skill in setting an agenda for public debate and concern.

THE COMBATANTS

One of the central aspects in this research was to gather information on how the main participants in the disturbances themselves perceived the role of, and coverage by, the media. Discussion and criticism of the part television played in the summer events has up until now mainly rested with lobby groups, critics and to a lesser extent broadcasters. To try to broaden the debate and indeed to ascertain the protagonists' view it was essential to talk to rioters and the police, as well as broadcasters, and to discuss relations between all three groups.

The Rioters

Finding a 'rioter' is not easy. It is in fact very difficult, not surprisingly, to get anybody to admit that they were one. Those who were arrested and admitted guilt, or were found guilty, are in prison and others arrested protest their innocence even after conviction. Youths are often

suspicious of researchers and will not readily talk unless they are in a group. The majority of interviews for this part of the study were therefore conducted in groups, often with the personnel changing as the interview progressed. It should be pointed out that for the purposes of the report, particularly in the content analysis, youths have sometimes been referred to as 'participants', and not as 'rioters'.

A number of participants were interviewed ranging in age from fifteen to twenty, mainly from the Brixton, Toxteth and Manchester areas. One of the major problems faced when interviewing people and asking for their comments about the television coverage of certain events is that they do not remember it well. What they tend to do is comment on their impression of what was shown, or on what they can recall. But this is a problem encountered with the police as well.

The overwhelming impression gained from talking to these young people was that their anger was directed towards the police. The police and their actions, according to most of them, were the primary reason for their rioting. They were particularly anxious to counteract any myths about their reasons for rioting. In both Liverpool and Brixton the feeling against the police was extremely high.

In Brixton many respondents talked about a police vendetta, which they said had been taking place since April 1981. They were concerned that the media sometimes sensationalised events and that this gave ammunition to people like Enoch Powell to turn round and say 'I told you so'. A number of people commented that they were not antagonistic towards television. However, they were resentful that television and press only took notice of them when there was trouble. As one stated: 'The world only takes notice when there is a war.'

There was considerable anger at any suggestion that 'their' riots were copycat or imitative of others. This was echoed by people interviewed in Liverpool. A typical comment was: 'We're fighting for our rights — against the police — it's not copycat.'

One of the other main difficulties faced when interviewing participants in the inner city areas about the disturbances is that they tend to talk about the riots themselves. I had to constantly bring them back to the question of television coverage. They also tended to lump television and the press together when they were making criticisms of the media.

I asked why a number of crews had been attacked by rioters. In Brixton I was told: 'One press photographer was hit because he kept taking photographs all the time.' There was a good deal of suspicion because people believed that the photographs would be used by the police. The same point was levelled against television: 'They take photos or pictures and next thing you know the police are bursting in because the face was shown on television . . . it's so unfair.'

Many thought that people did not care about Brixton and they blamed the media alongside the Government. One youth accused the

media of using the April riot as 'A sensation, as a war — because it gave them a good story.' They complained bitterly that the media do not show police harassment; one youth said: 'They do not show people being stopped and searched in their cars, in their homes and whilst waiting at bus stops. Nothing has been shown about what was going on in Brixton before April. The public did not, therefore, understand what was going on or why there was trouble.' A youth leader commented: 'I'm in favour of law and order but also the right to walk in the street. That is why in April, when young kids said, "enough is enough", they decided to stand up for their rights.'

I was told on more than one occasion: 'People react when angry. If we were preparing for a riot we would have had snipers. Instead we are reacting to harassment — why don't the media show that? Instead the camera crews show things that are not happening.' There were many accusations made against the police. One youth told me that the police had been looting during the riots under the guise of clearing up and that this had not been shown.

I told them that broadcasters often find it difficult to get people or youngsters to talk. The answer I got was: 'Why should we talk now? When we wanted to tell them what was going on here they would not listen, and they always talk to the wrong people.' They complained that when they told the media the trouble was because of harassment they were not interested. Instead, I was told, journalists wanted to talk about unemployment and housing.

They were critical in Brixton and Liverpool of the way politicians are represented by television: in particular the 'visit to the area' story. In Brixton I was told that William Whitelaw, Timothy Raison and Margaret Thatcher came to the area but 'they only go to the police station — on television it looks as though they go everywhere.' The same point was made in Liverpool about David Steel. He was shown as visiting the area and talking to people, but, I was told, 'he came to the area at 9 o'clock in the morning, was shown a few damaged buildings by David Alton and then went home. The impression left with the viewer, though, was that of a concerned politician.'

I was told many times in Brixton that it was survival not 'copycat' which had led to people taking to the streets: 'We were desperate, fed up, and tired of being harassed — who were we supposed to be copying?'

In Liverpool more serious accusations were levelled at the broadcasters. Twice I was told: 'Crews had asked kids to throw petrol bombs', though it was not clear whether they were talking about British or foreign crews. There was constant anger that the media had not told the whole story of police tactics: 'We told them all about CS gas being used but they did not report it until later, only after an article by Rob Rohrer appeared in the *New Statesman* did they cover the story.'

then they all came back to talk to us.'

As in Brixton there was resentment at what they saw as the media's indifference to the root causes of the riots: 'If we tell them it's the police — they don't like it, they try to say it's a social problem.' Without exception the people I talked to refuted the idea of a copycat effect.

Complaints were made that the media did not put over their point of view, and that the media were only anxious to give coverage to somebody with credibility: 'That was why Wally Brown, a local community leader, always appeared.' One community leader who appeared on television, I was told, had only lived in the area for a few months. One person commented: 'The media tend to focus on one or two people, with the danger that these individuals begin to look like self-styled leaders; the media can have a damaging effect if they show the same person twice.'

Confidence in the media is not very high. There was a kind of implied cynicism in the comment I heard that film crews paid money to people to locate cameras in their houses.

It was also claimed by one youngster that the police were responsible for a lot of violence: 'Crews were beaten up by the police and not by the "rioters".' In Liverpool concern was expressed over descriptions used by broadcasters for blacks. In particular the word 'immigrant': 'We have been here for generations, we are not immigrants' was the common cry. Many of the youngsters were also keen to squash the idea of a race riot. They said that the kids on the streets were black and white: 'Brixton, Bristol and Southall are immigrant communities. We are not. That is why it was so severe in Liverpool.'

The Police

Criticisms by the police of the television coverage of the riots was not particularly strong. Kenneth Oxford, Chief Constable of Merseyside, thought that on the whole the coverage was fairly well balanced. This is from a person who figured prominently in the news during the course of the riots. He complained only about one interview conducted by Granada. According to Oxford the relationship between the media and the police was fairly good during the riots and is fairly good in general: 'We are not always going to agree — sometimes they do things we don't like — but I don't think it's any part of the police service and in particular Chief Constables to be censorious of the press and the media or whatever — but our relations are pretty good.' During the riots Kenneth Oxford gave a press conference every evening, but he never thought he was put in an 'invidious or uncomfortable position'. The police in the field, he added, gave every facility to journalists, and 'didn't find them intrusive'.

Oxford thought that the presence of a camera can be provocative, something which television journalists and editors showed concern for

during my conversations. 'Some people exploit the camera — not only in riots — they perform for it. I have seen it happen on so many occasions either wittingly or unwittingly. They perform for it, you see it at football matches, you see it at any crowd situation, that as soon as a camera appears people go through their own particular tribal dance.' But in Toxteth he did not think that this was a factor because the scenario was so broad and most people were not aware of the presence of the camera. He said: 'Those that were aware attacked them. A sort of contra approach to what is the norm; in football matches cameramen get people to wave flags, etc; in the heat of the riot the cameras are irrelevant.' Oxford also thought there was too much gratuitous violence shown in dramatic presentations such as westerns and crime series. 'It does not reflect real life — programmes like *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals* which are not real — if they are then I have missed out somewhere, but I do think, though this is very unscientific, that continual repetition of this must have an effect on the behaviour pattern of people who are easily influenced, who are perhaps lacking in self-discipline.'

In this view, of course, he would be rather close to the position expounded by Milton Shulman, who argues that it is not so much individual acts of violence which are 'caused' by television but an atmosphere of violence in which such behaviour becomes commonplace and accepted. In regard to the suggestion of imitative violence or other causes of the riots Oxford said it was very easy and simplistic to blame it on the police:

But in this area [Toxteth] violence is a way of life — boredom had something to do with it — police have always been seen in this area over the last seventy years as the army of repression. I think the riot started with some degree of spontaneity fed by twelve months of reading about Bristol and Brixton — but this is very theoretical. There is no hard evidence that these youngsters were fed by some subversive force. There were small outbreaks in other areas of this county like St. Helens and these were mainly unruly elements who saw this as an ideal opportunity for stealing because our force was stretched.

Oxford thought it possible that rioters had picked up certain methods of rioting from Northern Ireland. He thought the level of violence was a serious development. 'It was unique in our experience in dealing with public or street disorder — it was a completely new dimension, it is no good people adopting the stance that you [the police] must have known — we didn't know. We had no intelligence to suggest that it was going to develop in the horrendous way it did.' He still, however, thought that pictures of rioting should be shown on

television: 'If I was a blinkered policeman I would say no — but surely there is a danger then that rumour takes over — because throughout all the riots, the television coverage, the press coverage, rumour was rife, even among police ranks.' I was given the example of the policeman who had a railing put through his helmet. He was not hurt but a rumour had gone round that he had been killed: 'Supposing there was no television, rumour could be dangerously exploited by subversive elements.' This point was emphasised by Sir Ian Trethowan, Director General of the BBC, when he was interviewed on the BBC programme *Did You See* (5 December 1981). He stated: 'If we did not report events or could not report events there would be a great and serious danger of malicious rumour.'

Mr Oxford, on the suggestion that television should only show the aftermath of a riot, added: 'It's still got to be reported because that's the essence of our democratic free society, we don't have that sort of Government control of the media — there is a freedom to publish within the constraints of the libel laws and I think it could be counter-productive not to show events.' He did think, however, that 'there should be some facility for a longer, more balanced, more detailed presentation of events.' He criticised in particular the speculative reporting, which occurred later, by academics on issues of which they had no experience. In essence, Oxford was arguing a position which would be widely accepted by some who have in recent years studied the nature of news coverage: that it was altogether too superficial and inadequate in its treatment of root causes. On whether the media gave enough exposure or pinpointed the causes of the riots, Oxford said: 'I don't think they did — you always get politicians who pontificate and who put up smokescreens because the causes are many and varied.'

Oxford thought that the use of CS gas had not been portrayed clearly but criticism here was directed more at the press. 'A lot of people did not really understand what it was about. They did not understand that we were using equipment which was never meant to be used in those situations. According to which newspaper you read you got the impression that I ignored the directions on the box. The point that gets lost in the emotion that was engendered by the use of such equipment was the unique situation that we were in and according to what stance you want to take you can dismiss my report and say we don't believe it — you are making it up.'

As to the kids on the street, I was told that kids are always on the street in Merseyside. 'Violence has been going on here for years — it's a way of life, it's part of the historical inheritance of this area, they are prisoners of their own history.'

In London the police, because they were undermanned at the outset, did not have time for dealing with the media. They did not have complaints about the major television companies' operations, and

suggested that the BBC and ITN did quite well. One senior police spokesman who has been involved in the public order scene for many years said: 'I have never really had a problem with the major companies.'

A spokesman for Scotland Yard outlined the lines of communication between the police and the media: 'Uniquely in this country we have people called area press and publicity officers and when any sort of incident occurs, the public relations department of the police is told and these officers then get hold of the press. Therefore we endeavour to have someone available to service the press most of the time.'

The operational commanders like this arrangement because it takes the pressure away from them: 'There is somebody there who is not a policeman who knows the press and can deal with them.' In general they did not think the coverage of the summer disturbances was offensive or unhelpful, even though there was not much coverage in the summer except for the 'raids'.

As for the April riots, they were seen as a serious and major event, and therefore plenty of coverage was deemed necessary. A senior police spokesman commented: 'I think the coverage had to be what it was because it was the first major example of serious riots that we have had in London for a hundred years. It was of tremendous news value here and throughout the world. What I did see I thought was necessary.'

There were complaints, particularly in reference to radio, that some reports were based on conjecture, and that journalists had not checked with the local police station. With the introduction of Electronic News Gathering (ENG), however, television, it was argued, was also becoming prone to misinterpreting situations. It was said that journalists were not always aware of exactly what was happening, and that in the editing room only the most visually dramatic pictures were chosen. As one editor said: 'There is editorial selectivity because of the pressure of time.'

In particular concern was expressed about the coverage of the police raids on a number of premises in Railton Road, Brixton on 14 July. A senior police spokesman from Scotland Yard argued that, without exception, the television coverage from the start said that the police, at a time of high tension, had maliciously, leaden-footedly and deliberately undertaken this raid as a vendetta against the black community. Every corner of the media was arguing that not only had the police found nothing but that they also caused extensive damage. According to the police, whatever the truth may be, it would never be as extreme as had been implied by the media on the first day. Scotland Yard said that the decision to conduct the raid had been agonising but correct, considering that bombs were later found *in situ*.

A senior police spokesman said: 'The police had been set up by blacks and whites, and any objective observer looking at the alleged

damage could not fail to see that it was old damage.' He added: 'I have tried to tell the press but they are not interested. The media were willing to be used.' He felt that another of the reasons why the media were so wrong about the raids in the first stages was that Railton Road at that particular time was a 'no go' area. It was seen as the heartland of the West Indian population in Brixton and arguably the whole of London. The atmosphere was highly charged, and in fact, no white man, he said, would have wanted to walk down there alone. The local population was anti-media, even though they saw the advantage of asking journalists and film crews down to view the 'destruction' caused by the raids. The journalists and camera crews, the Scotland Yard spokesman continued, were nervous and therefore only filmed what they were shown, i.e. selective bits of damage. When the filming had finished they were quickly asked to leave the area: 'The media was led by the nose.'

Another senior police spokesman expressed the belief that 'the reporting of the raids was in keeping with the general reporting of the Scarman enquiry which was so biased as to be untrue.' He went on to say: 'The unfair reporting of the enquiry picked up every titbit and magnified it and never said anything about the mass of good evidence which came out — each day only a small part of a witness's evidence was reported.' Another spokesman said: 'The Scarman Enquiry was a media event and the media wanted good copy every day; the media had a preoccupation with the persona of the spokesman rather than the role he fulfils.'

On the subject of the general coverage of the police by television a spokesman for Scotland Yard traced the history of hostility back a couple of years: 'If you want to trace the origins of a lot of the aggro, that clearly ties in with "Swamp" — it goes right back to Southall and Blair Peach. The SPG have been used by the anti-police political lobby as a convenient label. "Swamp" didn't actually involve the SPG, and yet if an SPG van drives down Brixton High Street one gets the feeling that someone will pick it up in the media. The SPG have become the personification of muscle.' He added though that television was to blame to a lesser extent than the press.

Concern was shown about interviews conducted on television. The police felt they were given enough opportunities but were apprehensive over the type and style of the questioning. This was in part due to the constraints to which they were frequently subjected. A spokesman said: 'There is a word in the public relations department which says you have got 24 hours in which to fight and win the propaganda battle — as soon as the Home Secretary initiates an enquiry we automatically put the shutters up because we don't want to pre-empt our own evidence and more particularly we don't want to pre-empt the independence and balance of the conclusion to be reached by that enquiry.'

Editing, it was said, selects things from a much longer interview and therefore often misses important points. The police as a public service believe that they must be allowed to explain their actions: 'Television is looking for a précis. It is looking for potted versions and instant experts all the time. I do not know any problem that lends itself to that — certainly not this one. Television always goes for the protagonist-type interview. They put two people in the studio with diametrically opposed views and let them fight. Alternatively in the street they go for one interview and then another, and I suspect they are not too much bothered by accuracy and background so long as they can put two talking heads against a background on film.'

The police objected to television's concentrating on the extremes of the debate in their attempt to define the issue and leaving the middle ground unoccupied and unconsidered. In assessing the various current affairs television programmes, one senior police spokesman praised Brian Walden and *Weekend World* because he felt the police had been allowed to explain their position fully: 'He [Brian Walden] had been able to point out why the police had taken certain courses of action, why the police hold certain views and it was television at its very best.' This polarisation by television even extended, I was told, to the police force itself, where Chief Constables were posed by the media at different extremes, e.g. McNee and Anderton at one end and Alderson at the other.

The police felt themselves to be severely disadvantaged in any public debate. I was given the example that on a current affairs programme a policeman, probably in uniform, may be sitting opposite a politician. The danger in such a situation is that the policeman can be drawn across the border-line between explaining how the law stands at present and whether that law is 'acceptable'. The police cannot enter into a debate on the law which they are there to enforce, and therefore any occasion when they might be drawn into doing so potentially threatens their whole position within society. Almost inevitably then the police are frustrated at being unable to give their version of why events occur. For example, they were verbally attacked over Brixton but were unable to get up and say what they believe — which is that years of neglect were responsible for the troubles. Quite simply the police felt unable to defend themselves. As one police spokesman commented: 'How can I go on television and say that successive governments are to blame for Brixton and that we [the police] have only dealt with the manifestations of a deprived society? But the community would warm to that.'

One point where the media were given credit by the police was in their description of the riot. 'They [the media] were very quick off the mark to accept the fact that this was not a racial issue but a social one whose principal victims were black. This came out in Toxteth

particularly where a lot of coverage was given to the simple fact that there were as many white people present as black.'

The most consistent criticism of television was that, in documentaries and other programmes, it never explained what places like Brixton are really like. One police spokesman commented: 'There is a shallow approach to underlying issues — the root causes are not visual. The media have not investigated the real causes of the troubles in Brixton and Toxteth.'

With regard to imitative rioting the police felt that certain tactics may have been copied, perhaps from coverage of Northern Ireland, but, as one policeman said: 'With Brixton there are many causes. One, for instance, was the Deptford fire.' This, he believed, had a significant effect on the black people of South London: 'They found for the first time that they were able to organise 10,000 people on a march. The march went wrong but they gained confidence that in sufficient numbers they could take the police on. Black people felt they had won a battle and police officers on the ground felt there was a truculence from that day. Places like Toxteth were an extension of Brixton [in April] in that they saw the police could be taken on, unlike the army whose troops are not all committed to the field. But you cannot stop news-people from showing it — it would be wrong.' Another policeman remarked: 'There was not a widespread breakout of looting and rioting across Britain as was reported. Reports of trouble in places like Tunbridge Wells were just a fight outside a disco.'

A Scotland Yard spokesman went back to 1968 to illustrate the point that certain scenes can change opinions or have an effect: 'The difference between Grosvenor Square one and two. In the first demonstration the media were kept outside the police cordon, therefore all the pictures you got were downtrodden anti-war rioters and there was the massive phalanx of police. The next year as a matter of deliberate policy we let the media inside the cordon to offer them protection and so they could also get pictures from a police point of view. One shot of a police horse on the ground brought down by roller bags, one shot of a police officer being held and kicked in the face, and violent demonstration was discredited as a means of political expression for I think the next five years. Now the modern application is a simple one. One or two shots of a petrol bomb coming whistling through the air, police cordon with riot shields in silhouette, petrol bomb lands and a police officer jumps clear of the flames, the trousers of the officer behind catch fire, and therefore it can act as a deterrent.'

On the one hand the police felt that any coverage of events could often have a deterrent effect. At the same time, however, they also argued that the presence of cameras can be a disadvantage in that though they may act as a brake on the police and stop them going over the top, they could also prove provocative to the kids on the street. In

other words, the police are arguing that the presence of the camera inhibits the police but may encourage rioters, as already witnessed by the BBC in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, no one from the police suggested that the cameras in any way caused the riots, even though they may have possibly exaggerated them. In some instances the police even felt that television had not portrayed a graphic enough picture.

Broadcasters

Of prime importance to broadcasters getting access to information both at 'ground' level and on a day to day basis is their relationship with the police. The majority of journalists and news editors interviewed thought that their relationship with the police could be improved. There was no overt criticism but quite a few expressed reservations about present arrangements. One senior editor described co-operation as sometimes good and sometimes bad. In particular, he said, the police are so sensitive that they will only give information that shows them in a good light. They are reluctant to give information on race issues and have often concealed incidents.

Another senior editor also felt that their relationship with the police could be better: 'The police do not like certain scenes we put on but we must show it if the police lose control.' He added: 'The police assume that if you do not agree with everything they do then you must be against them.'

Of the actual disturbances one editor believed that the riots showed that the police in Britain are simply not capable of providing even basic information in a running story involving violence on the streets in the way television has become accustomed to in Northern Ireland. He thought that his organisation's information was often considerably ahead of and more comprehensive than that apparently available to the police. Generally it was felt that relations between television journalists and the police were better outside London.

One of the points which had emerged from the discussions with youngsters was that there was a lot of concern and indeed antagonism as to whether the police look at tapes of programmes transmitted and untransmitted and at photos taken by the press. All the television companies interviewed stated that they will never give material to the police except by subpoena, and then only transmitted material. The reason for this was that they had no wish for the public to see them as police agents.

An extraordinary situation did arise with Granada Television, who allowed some material to be shown to the police. After the initial riots in Toxteth the police made a request to Granada to see some of their film. Granada agreed to show them some transmitted material but refused any untransmitted material. In early August members of the Liverpool Eight Defence Committee heard that Granada had shown

footage to the Special Branch. According to the Defence Committee they asked Granada to show them the same material as seen by the police. They saw five minutes of film and did not believe that that was all the police had been shown. They then told Granada that if material was again shown to anybody, they would make sure that Granada would not be able to film in the area again.

The Unions, particularly the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT), felt that if footage was being seen by outsiders, whether it was the police or anyone else, then the Defence Committee would view Granada film crews as collaborators with the police. The word would get round the community and the film crews would then be in physical danger. The police when asked about the incident remarked they had hundreds of feet of film of their own and did not really need that shot by Granada. Similarly, Scotland Yard said they do not make requests for such film since they apparently had their own facilities. I was however unable to see any of Granada's footage of the riots because of the agreement between Granada management and the ACTT.

The Liverpool Eight Defence Committee was sympathetic to my request to see film for research purposes, but felt that if I was given access then anyone else must be given access too. Under normal circumstances Granada management allow people to see transmitted material if they write in and request it.

I encountered full co-operation from all television companies contacted, the only problem being that a number of them do not keep all film and most do not keep tapes of programmes as they go out on the air. This was particularly a problem with regional news programmes such as *Thames at Six* and *ATV Today*.

The riots certainly did not bring out the best in Granada Television. The Monday following Toxteth edition of *Granada Reports* was blacked by the ACTT. Its intended replacement, a studio discussion, was then blacked by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), because the Union felt this would not do the subject justice. As one member of the Granada staff is purported to have said: 'While Liverpool burnt we were showing the *Flintstones*.'

The dispute arose over Granada's alleged breaching of the local ACTT/Company agreements. The agreement under which they operate a 1 + 1 crew (2 man crew) was, in normal circumstances, that a maximum of 800 feet of film should be shot, no more than four minutes should be transmitted and that it should be shown within forty-eight hours.

According to a senior editor I spoke to it is understood that every so often these rules will be broken and one of the circumstances in which they get broken is if the story being covered breaks into something gigantic rather than something containable and transmittable at four

minutes length. On the Sunday in Toxteth two crews were operating and they shot more than 1,600 feet of film between them. Trouble broke out the next morning when the film shop found out about it, and all film due to be used for the Monday night *Granada Reports*, *World in Action* and ITN was blacked.

The Union were angry that they had not been consulted over the shooting of more than 800 feet and were only told about it on the following morning. Anger was also expressed over the fact that a freelance crew was sent out without permission from the shop steward. According to the programme's editor most filming for *Granada Reports* is with freelance 1 + 1 crews, and attempts had been made to give the work to staff crews. Broadcast of 13 July 1981⁷ stated that the Granada film shop was objecting to the fact that over the weekend there was no duty roster of staff crews to deal with emergencies such as Toxteth. They also objected to the fact that a freelance crew was permitted to go on for so long and shoot so much footage without staff people being brought in. They claim they never intended to black the film but were so taken aback by the aggressiveness of the management at a Monday morning post mortem and so enraged by the 'contradictory' stories told them that they decided to go ahead and black it.

In contrast London Weekend Television was praised for putting out a competent and well researched programme. During the summer two London Weekend programmes, *Weekend World* and *The London Programme*, go off the air. So if anything sensational happens, a riot for example, Londoners are unlikely to receive the same comprehensive coverage that they would get if it happens in the autumn. However, because of the extraordinary situation, LWT, very speedily, covered the Southall disturbance on Friday 3 July, with a half-hour programme put out at lunchtime on Sunday 5 July in the *Skin* slot.

One of the primary reasons the programme could be put out so quickly was that, apart from efficient editing and getting to the scene quickly, the *Skin* researchers had co-operative contacts in the area. Over a period of time the *Skin* programme has carefully nurtured relationships with members of the Southall community and has managed to get some feedback from their programmes on racism and the West Indian writer C. L. R. James. When trouble broke out on the Friday night the researchers and producers were therefore able to get interviews and assess the situation more quickly than the other journalists who had arrived on the scene.

It must be said that the incidents and their underlying causes at Southall were far easier to assess and put over in a systematic way than events at Brixton and Toxteth. Nevertheless, the staff of *Skin* feel that, after initial suspicion from people in Southall and Brixton, they are now regarded as something separate from other London Weekend Television programmes. This may be rather misplaced optimism since

I was told in Brixton that growing hostility and antagonism towards the media in general had also extended to the *Skin* programme. The jibe one frequently heard was: 'You only come and look at us when we throw bricks.'

Returning to the subject of freelances, both journalists and camera crews can cause problems in another context, particularly when riots are going on. One editor expressed a 'professional' worry about the system of newsgathering among freelances: that any major event is seen from the personal viewpoint of whether or not they can get a good story on it. During the riots one editor got calls from freelances saying that they thought there might be trouble in a particular area and asking whether he wanted them to stay there. The editor knew that there was no record of trouble in that particular area; however, a short while later a freelance cameraman rang to say that he had film of some smashed shops. It is remarkable what a film or photograph of a single broken window can evoke in close-up. It was suggested that some freelance crews were providing half the film of an incident to the BBC and half to the ITN.

BBC News used mainly experienced staff crews who had all previously worked in Northern Ireland. One editor remarked that the abundance of pictures from the scene close to bulletin time drove home to output editors the importance of having reliable reporters on the spot. This was a situation similar to that of other stations and programmes; for example, *ATV Today* had their three most experienced reporters working on the riots. As one news editor commented: 'You have to be careful you do not send out reporters who will over-react.'

One unique aspect of these disturbances was the hostility shown towards media personnel. There were many instances of journalists and camera crews being attacked, equipment being destroyed and cars being smashed. This has only rarely happened in Northern Ireland. One news editor said: 'The danger of working in certain areas was something even thirteen years of working in Northern Ireland had not prepared us for' — though he added that there are recent signs that in Northern Ireland too BBC staff are now often seen as representatives of the 'establishment' rather than disinterested observers. This hostility inevitably made the task of covering the riots harder, the editor pointed out, especially when trying to get an accurate picture of the feeling among the community involved, and above all where the community was predominantly black.

One journalist in Manchester said that he and his colleagues had been threatened several times by rioters. What struck him most, while he was covering the Toxteth riots, was that everybody was at risk, that there was no feeling of safety. One BBC stringer cameraman, Ken Ward, had his camera destroyed, and Ken Rees of ITN had his car smashed, ATV had a car full of equipment looted and there was a

distinct feeling amongst the rioters that the media were part of the 'establishment', and therefore the 'enemy'. Because of this problem of safety a lot of the riot film was taken from behind the police lines.

The use of ENG, which is now becoming more prevalent in outside broadcasts, also created security risks in that technical equipment was nearer the site of the disturbances. On one night the BBC had little coverage from Liverpool because an ENG crew had been attacked by rioters and their equipment smashed. ENG recorders are also bulky and camera crews are slightly less mobile. ENG does however, provide a sharper, clearer picture particularly at night without the use of lights.

The development of ENG has inevitably speeded up the decision-making process. Coverage can be obtained much nearer bulletin time but as a consequence there is now less time in which to assess film before showing it, with all the attendant risks that this can bring. In the days when a despatch rider had to deliver the film and a reporter had to call in by telephone, the editor would have time to assess the material. With ENG it is now possible to show material live, though the BBC did not show any live pictures without a reporter present.

Television journalists, editors and crew are all very concerned about the effect that the presence of a camera can have on a situation. In all the interviews this emerged as the prime concern of media personnel. One BBC news organiser commented that patterns have emerged from Northern Ireland and Notting Hill showing that the presence of the camera can be provocative. 'Crews are briefed not to walk up and down the street with cameras on their shoulders. In Toxteth they got out of their cars, walked around for a while and then went back to get the cameras.' They also try not to use lights. In most cases a senior editorial figure was sent along with the crew. John Humphrys, of BBC TV News, wrote in *Television* (and confirmed in conversation)⁸: 'I think most of us are acutely aware of the unique power of our medium and of its shortcomings, particularly in television news where it is not always possible to put fully into context the dramatic visual images. But we have learnt to tread warily — largely as a result of our experiences in Northern Ireland. In the field too, we learnt to be much more cautious. Camera crews voluntarily keep their equipment in their cars at the scene of a potential disturbance lest their very presence provokes the trouble'. Peter Woon, Editor of BBC News, stated that in the news department there is a continual process of discussion over the way events are treated, and that there is a standard understanding of the way to operate. These techniques had been learnt mainly in Northern Ireland, and crews were reminded of the traps before going out.

Apart from the potentially provocative presence of the camera there are two other worries. According to Peter Woon these are: (1) the need to edit the material so that it fairly reports what took place; and (2) to find out whether what is shown on the screen might exacerbate the

situation. For example, he said, 'we would never show how to make a petrol bomb'. Similarly an editor for ATV said that their coverage tailed off because they 'didn't want to rush off every time a brick was thrown and started to hold back — apart from everything else it becomes a bit expensive to put crews out every night for riot coverage. Regional programmes are a bit more budget conscious than the national news.'

ITN came in for criticism from journalists for showing on *News at Ten* an incident in Woolwich in which a small mob ran up the street and overturned two cars. The BBC news desk had received a telephone call about an impending riot and despatched a senior journalist to cover the story. On arriving at the scene he decided that the whole thing had been arranged and made a decision not to show the incident since it only concerned a small group of kids running up the road.

A number of journalists and editors commented that they thought it was scandalous for ITN to show this report, that it was irresponsible to put it on the screen and could possibly have escalated the situation. The ITN reporter on the scene was blamed and was said to be inexperienced. As one BBC journalist said: 'It was the same as having a rookie policeman on the riot instead of an experienced one.'

The question of predicting or forecasting events can also be a serious problem. One BBC spokesman commented: 'ITN will show a shop boarded up the day before a National Front march — we do not do that.' Editors constantly stressed their concern over danger of incitement. One senior editor of Thames said that there was only one incident which worried him and that was when a reporter had said that 'an ugly crowd' was gathering. The editor said that he had warned his staff about the dangers of forecasting and just to report what had happened. In this context the editor of BBC News said that on one occasion they were thinking of doing an item on why there was no trouble in Scotland. This was regarded as provocative and so it was not done. The editor of *Granada Reports* stated that they were careful not to have people on the programme saying there was going to be a riot.

Journalists and editors for ATV said that whenever they arrived on the scene the riot was well under way so there was no chance of their presence provoking the situation, and that most of their pictures were of the tail end of the riots.

Crews were also kept well away from areas unless something occurred. There was concern that, in bending over backwards to make it clear that the riots were not race riots and that white youths were just as much involved, this might encourage other white 'yobbos' to join in.

Even in the difficult circumstances of riot coverage there remained the germ of the competitive mind which frames all television coverage. It was in the mind of one senior editor as to who would come out of the riot coverage with his or her reputation enhanced. He pointed out

perhaps a little wistfully, that when looking at news for awards, 'It's the company that has had the better riot that wins because they have had visually more dramatic pictures. It's the quality of the event that wins and not its coverage'.

There was some comment made by broadcasters about explanations given by television as to the causes or reasons for the riots. ITN again came in for some criticism over the manner in which in a bulletin on Tuesday 7 July they suggested that the riots were organised. There was a shot of a motor scooter rider and pillion rider with an explanation from the reporter that they were warning rioters of police movements. One BBC news organiser thought this was a ludicrous picture, especially as the headline on *News at Ten* had been 'Was Someone Directing the Riots?' John Humphrys stated: 'A classic case, I'd have thought, of falling into the trap of promising something more in the headlines than you can deliver.'⁹ Michael McNay, assistant editor of the *Guardian*, wrote in the same edition of *Television*:

Alastair Burnet included in the introduction to *News at Ten* the promise of film of someone who may (and to do him justice, he stressed the word 'may') have directed the riots in Toxteth. The promise was followed by Jon Snow reporting from Liverpool in a bulletin extended to take account of the gravity of the rioting, burning and looting, and in which the Toxteth report filled the third of the programme up to the first advertising break. Snow said that the ITN crew had observed people on motor scooters tracking ahead of the police movements. There followed a moment of film of a motor scooter rider and pillion passenger. There could be many explanations for the presence of youths on motor scooters, though there is no special reason to doubt the one offered by Snow. But the clear implication of the stress ITN laid on this item is that something sinister was happening about which it might say a lot more if only it knew what. As it was, it produced no other evidence than a clip of film which was so brief that had you blinked you would have missed it. In itself this might not matter but the riots were so serious that their causes are a matter of deep importance nationally as well as locally. To ascribe possible causes without digging for evidence and, what is more, to ascribe causes that locate a particular enemy — political extremist — and distract from underlying social causes might be construed as a politically interested act. At the least it was chancy news judgement of the sort that a great news-gathering organisation like ITN ought not to indulge.¹⁰

McNay did add though that that edition of *News at Ten* was excellent and in practically every item it was livelier and more informative than the BBC's *Nine O'Clock News*.

One point made by a freelance cameraman was that the claim by the

Manchester police that the riots were organised, because they had seen people going round in cars, was a confusion on their part, since these were in fact camera crews going round in taxis. A number of editors said that crews deliberately used unmarked cars as it would be dangerous and might be provocative to use vans with BBC TV or ITN written on the sides.

On other possible causes and explanations for the riot ATV's local news programme did a programme about a month later about the sort of things the police were doing in the areas to heal the wounds. The editor expressed a concern over the difficulty in areas such as Handsworth in getting a spokesman of some kind of quality who represents the community: 'It's easy enough to get a Chief Constable who is articulate and can put over his point of view, but it's difficult to get a spokesman for the people. Often it's hard to sift out who are the community leaders.'

A number of editors also mentioned the difficulty of finding a representative 'black person', particularly in Brixton. One editor said: 'There are so many different factions that we have to talk to three or four people. There is no one who represents the whole community so we have to decide whether to use Paul Boeteng, Darcus Howe, Ivan Madre or Courtenay Laws. Whereas on the "other" side we always get a policeman — though not always the one we want.' Another feature of interviewing is that the police, or politicians, are invariably interviewed in the studio or their offices whereas community leaders and other local figures are filmed on the street.

During discussions with broadcasters one film clip in particular frequently came up in conversation. This was of an incident in Brixton, and probably throughout the whole of the television coverage of the riots this one scene, shot on Friday 10 July, caused the most debate. It showed a black youth kicking in a shoe shop window and then taking a pair of boots. It achieved notoriety because Mary Whitehouse, a day after this incident, decided to send a telegram to both the BBC News and ITN asking them 'to please consider whether the current massive television coverage of acts of vandalism and violence was contributing to the spread of riots.' This incident occurred a week after the rioting first started in Southall and over three months after the Brixton disturbances in April.

In the Autumn 1981 edition of the *Viewer and Listener* it states:

The now notorious sequences of young people kicking in plate glass windows and calmly helping themselves to goods were classic teaching experience — take a running kick, jump back as the glass falls, spring smartly forward over the debris and take your pick. No one will interfere, there is no danger of hurting yourself, there's loot in abundance and it's fun into the bargain.

Why Mary Whitehouse chose that particular moment to complain is not obvious. For a whole week prior to this incident television showed scenes of petrol bombs, police getting injured, fires, etc. but she did not say anything. From the moment of the telegram the broadcasting authorities allowed Mary Whitehouse to set part of the agenda for the debate. The response from both David Nicholas and Peter Woon, editors of ITN and BBC TV News respectively, shows this. They both tried to cover themselves by saying that there probably was or might have been a copycat effect. Woon stated that it would be foolish to exclude the possibility, but that the alternative of not showing the incident would seem to be much more threatening to society because one would then both be indulging in censorship and at the same time creating a situation in which fast-spreading rumours could lead people to believe that a situation was worse than it actually is. Another senior editor at the BBC said that it is generally conceded that there was a copycat factor, though possibly television news pictures simply speeded up an inevitable copycat process rather than engendered it. In any event editors felt strongly that the alternative of suppressing coverage would have been the worse of the two evils. This last point was a sentiment echoed by many of the broadcasters interviewed.

John Humphrys wrote:

I can assure Mrs Whitehouse that there was much discussion within the television news room as to the 'social effects' of our coverage long before her telegram arrived in the Director-General's office. I doubt whether any of us totally dismissed the possibility that televising acts of violence and vandalism might possibly contribute to the spread of the riots. The fact remains, if there is rioting in the streets of Britain we have an absolute duty to show it happening. The public's right to be informed surely demands visual coverage. What does Mrs Whitehouse say to the man or woman who has read about the rioting in the newspapers (with still pictures), heard them reported on the radio (with often blood-curdling actuality) and then does not see them happening on the screen? Might the public not ask what else is being held back 'for their own good'?¹¹

One editor of a local current affairs programme said that he could not see what all the fuss was about and that he would have shown the shot; 'our job,' he added, 'is to ease pressure — if you suppress material there is more likelihood of trouble.' Another editor said that he was 'bloody sure' that he would show such an incident as the youth looting if he happened to get film of it, but that he 'would make sure that it was genuine and that it had not been set up. I would defend it because it actually happened. I think it brings home to the passive audience what it's about.'

One journalist suggested that because it was a West Indian kid who was kicking in the window the film had more of an effect than if it had been a white youth doing it. In other words, it was liable to confirm or reinforce certain racist beliefs. He added though that he thought it wrong to show it again — that that would be gratuitous use of good footage.

Richard Francis said in a speech in July to the Royal Television Society:

There may be force in Mary Whitehouse's objections although frankly there is no conclusive evidence that the television coverage does have the effects she suggests. But who would prefer rumour and ignorance and a gnawing doubt about what the television people choose not to show of events you can hear all about on radio and which the newspapers will be describing in detail tomorrow? Not covering major events could lead to rumours and long experience in Northern Ireland had taught the BBC that rumour could be far more inflammatory than truth.

Francis cited as an example the Trooping of the Colour incident when blank shots were fired at the Queen:

A lack of information from the police and a failure of communication within the BBC meant that millions of viewers were left in doubt for the best part of an hour about an incident they had witnessed on television. If nothing else, the experience proved you cannot avoid the responsibility to keep the public informed, for anxiety becomes rumour and rumour can be more inflammatory than facts. If television pictures did contribute to the spread of disorder they would also assist by limiting public concern and inhibiting behaviour of those being filmed; one of the reasons rioters had sometimes attacked cameramen was because they feared recognition.

Generally the broadcasters to whom I talked were quite proud of their coverage of the riots. Some expressed reservations. One editor thought that he should have done a programme before the riots about the strained relations between the community and the police. Another senior editor said: 'We had no experience before of disorder — it unnerved us a bit — perhaps we didn't do as well as we might have.' The majority expressed views such as those of one news editor who, having worked on national, evening and local newspapers, felt that television broadcasters were far more responsible than the press because they do realise the impact which they have on the public.

The BBC were proud of their coverage and disagreed with Lord Scarman when he said that 'the media, particularly the broadcasting

media,' do in his view 'bear a responsibility for the escalation of the disorders (including the looting) in Brixton on Saturday 11 April and for their continuation the following day, and for the imitative element in later disorders elsewhere.'¹² Indeed Peter Woon, having looked at the broadcasts again, thought they were very good.

Discussing the overall coverage of the riots a senior editor at the BBC stated:

The coverage was about right — we neither under-reacted nor over-reacted to this important story. The dramatic pictures of rioting were adequately balanced by coverage of and interviews with local and national politicians, Westminster reportage, and interviews with local people affected. Background pieces were not perhaps as comprehensive as they might have been however and opportunities may have been missed as the riots went on to put the events more into context. But in this respect, it is fair to say that while television news did not itself appear to discover a root cause of the riots, neither apparently could anyone else reach firm conclusions. It is fair to say there is some pride among television news editors about the way the riots were covered. A confusing, worrying and unprecedented situation was coolly and accurately described, and critics can point to no instances of irresponsibility.

2 A Content Analysis of the Coverage

In the light of resources and time available I decided to concentrate on the main television news bulletins on BBC 1 at 9 p.m. and on ITN at 10 p.m. (*News at Ten*). A more impressionistic account was made of other material which was available. These included pieces of film and tape from local news programmes at London Weekend Television, ATV and Thames. As I mentioned before, most companies do not keep tapes of their local news and magazine programmes. Extracts are available in their respective film libraries, but these do not give an accurate picture of what was transmitted.

The days and times of the news bulletins looked at were as follows:

	BBC 1	ITN
Saturday 4 July	8.50 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Sunday 5 July	10.10 p.m.	9.45 p.m.
Monday 6 July	9.00 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Tuesday 7 July	9.00 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Wednesday 8 July	9.05 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Thursday 9 July	9.00 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Friday 10 July	9.00 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Saturday 11 July	9.25 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Sunday 12 July	10.15 p.m.	9.45 p.m.
Monday 13 July	9.00 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Tuesday 14 July	9.00 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Wednesday 15 July	9.00 p.m.	10.00 p.m.
Thursday 16 July	9.00 p.m.	10.00 p.m.

The weekend bulletins are always shorter and there was no exception to this during the period looked at, though some of the bulletins were extended because of the seriousness of the situation. These thirteen days comprise the period of the disturbances beginning with the riot in Southall and ending with trouble in Brixton two days after the police raids. Together BBC News and ITN news bulletins amounted to twenty-six editions. Each item coded included all the stories in the news bulletins which were concerned with the riot coverage, including House of Commons reports and other related stories.

Coding

The coding measurement was minutes and seconds. No pre-test was

made because a specific period and event was being analysed. This was not a sample of BBC Television News or ITN.

Aims

The primary purpose of the content analysis was to understand the images of the disturbances presented on the television and therefore the primary aim of the content analysis was to assess systematically the amount and type of news which appeared on the screen. Consequently the main efforts were concentrated on the amount of news devoted to riot coverage, the location of the report, the main themes and references involved, how rioters were described, the actors interviewed, causes and explanations given for the disturbances, and finally how BBC News and ITN compared with respect to these points.

Position of Item

The majority of riot items appeared as the first one on the news bulletin. On the two or three occasions when the disturbances were displaced it was by a story on Northern Ireland and the hunger strikes.

Location of Report

For each item the time spent in each location was measured and coded. The 'reports on' section included a different variety of stories including the Brixton raids by the police which although street action were not riots. Also included in this section were reports of riot equipment, race relations, a report on lead levels, House of Commons reports including speeches, reports on police injuries, a report on Liverpool and its decline, pictures of turn-of-the-century riots, council meetings, Durham Miners Gala rally and a speech by Father Joe Daly of Liverpool.

Time spent on studio pictures was almost twice as long as actual film of rioting over the whole period. But this proportion varied according to different days in that most of the street action was concentrated on earlier during the thirteen days, and in particular on 6 July when there were reports from Toxteth. As the two weeks progressed there were more reports on 'reaction' to the events with stories on riot equipment and Commons reports.

As time progressed emphasis shifted from just a purely descriptive narration of the violence to a consideration of the reasons behind it and of what could be done to stop it and prevent further disturbances from occurring.

The BBC devoted proportionately more time than ITN to street action and to aftermath pictures. Overall, however, ITN devoted more time to riot items than did the BBC, and this was the case for all but two of the thirteen days looked at. It was only on 4 and 5 of July that the BBC devoted more absolute time than ITN to riot coverage. The topics

TABLE 1

Comparison between channels in terms of location of report and percentage distribution of items on each channel by location of report

	<i>BBC</i> (%)	<i>ITN</i> (%)	<i>Total</i> <i>both channels</i>
<i>Studio</i> — includes graphics, maps, back pictures, etc.	25.13	23.96	24.46
<i>Street Action</i> — includes film of rioting; related incidents	18.2	10.41	13.74
<i>Street Action</i> — aftermath	11.77	5.26	8.08
<i>Reporter in Street</i> — no action, could be in studio	1.66	—	0.72
<i>Interviews in Street</i> — (1) against background of devastation	2.21	3.04	2.68
(2) against no background	4.85	1.75	3.09
<i>Visiting Dignitaries</i> — Whitelaw walkabout	5.88	3.39	4.46
<i>Reports on</i> — Commons, press conferences, race relations, interviews, riot equipment and training	30.39	52.20	42.77

NB. Percentages rounded so some totals in excess of 100.

on these two days were Southall and the first night of trouble in Liverpool. As more crews and journalists arrived in Toxteth on 6 July the coverage increased compared to the previous day.

Coverage on 15 July was fairly long because it included reports on the Brixton raids by the police. According to the police these were in connection with the riots, and certainly they sparked off new disturbances in the area the next day. For this reason they were included in the analysis, as was the manner in which both channels incorporated them into bulletins as part of the riot theme. Similarly stories concerning unemployment were also included.

On two occasions ITN used pictures from previous nights' coverage. In one instance a press conference given by James Anderton was interspersed with film of rioting and another time a sermon by Father Joe Daly of Liverpool had film put over his commentary.

TABLE II

Comparison between channels in terms of length of item; figures in minutes and seconds

<i>Date</i>	<i>BBC</i>	<i>ITN</i>	<i>Total</i>
4 July	3'02"	2'22"	5'24"
5 July	5'36"	4'45"	10'21"
6 July	14'11"	19'10"	33'21"
7 July	3'31"	7'28"	10'59"
8 July	6'17"	7'18"	13'35"
9 July	10'46"	11'38"	22'24"
10 July	9'22"	10'37"	19'59"
11 July	3'45"	5'19"	9'04"
12 July	3'19"	9'19"	12'38"
13 July	9'47"	12'25"	22'12"
14 July	7'53"	9'11"	17'04"
15 July	8'04"	11'23"	19'27"
16 July	7'43"	12'17"	20'00"
<i>Total</i>	93'16"	123'12"	216'28"

Themes and References

For each item as many themes as applicable were coded. Since each item was made up of many different parts it was difficult to distinguish one distinct main theme, though it can be argued that the first part of the item should be classified as a main theme. There was no limit to the number of themes that could be coded for each item.

Table III shows the themes and references in order of relative frequency, but since in a number of cases more than one theme is coded for a particular item the table indicates the number and percentage of different themes by multiple response; thus N = the number of responses.

A set of thirty-four different themes was devised for the analysis, and three of these were not identified for any item.

The largest category identified as a theme was Riot Equipment. This occurred twenty-one times out of twenty-six items. (One of the

TABLE III

Themes and references identified in order of relative frequency: percentage distribution of items by themes and references

	<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage of items</i>
Riot Equipment	21	80.77
Rioters' destruction of property	19	73.08
Causes; i.e. attempts to explain	18	69.23
Looting, theft	16	61.54
Race	15	57.69
Rioters' violence against people	14	53.85
Courts and sentencing	13	50.00
Age	13	50.00
Unemployment	13	50.00
Police injuries	11	42.31
Outside agitators	10	38.46
Skin colour	10	38.46
Social deprivation	8	30.77
Police harassment	8	30.77
Imitative — 'copycat'	7	26.92
Political extremists	7	26.92
Parents	6	23.08
Racist groups	6	23.08
Riot training	6	23.08
Compared to previous riots	6	23.08
Innocent people's injuries	6	23.08
Compared to Northern Ireland	4	15.38
Housing	3	11.54
Predicting events/future riots	3	11.54
Rioters' injuries	3	11.54
Poverty	2	7.69
Compared to soccer hooliganism	2	7.69
Drugs	2	7.69
Humorous items	1	3.85
Compared to violence in another country	1	3.85
Police violence	1	3.85
<i>Responses</i>	256	

NB. Percentage in excess of 100 because more than one theme could be coded for a given item.

'compared to Northern Ireland' themes included a comparison to riot equipment.) It was the largest category for ITN and the second largest for the BBC.

The fact that riot equipment received such a high profile followed from the importance given to this by the Government and the way in which this was taken up by the BBC and ITN. The Government was preoccupied with law and order and with the need for reinforcing the police with new equipment. On a number of days the theme of riot equipment could clearly be identified as the main one on both BBC and ITN. For example, on 14 July ITN devoted a large part of the riot item to the subject, with a report on riot training in Belfast and a report on equipment in the Midlands. On the same day the BBC's riot item led with a report on riot equipment and followed this by a report from the Commons on the use of CS gas and other equipment.

The highest recurring theme in BBC coverage was rioters' destruction of property and this together with looting and theft represented the preoccupation of both channels with the damage caused by the rioters and the way in which it could be stopped. Also a lot of the 'street action' shots were of burning buildings, and shops and cars being smashed. 'Aftermath' pictures also dealt extensively with debris of buildings, cars and burnt-out remains.

'Causes', i.e. attempts to explain the riots, was the theme achieving the third highest frequency. However, this category included explanations, such as hooliganism and lack of parental control, given by Margaret Thatcher and William Whitelaw, and as such represents part of the general preoccupation with law and order.

Description of Rioters

Coding was done by noting how rioters were described and the number of times each description was made during each item. The most popular description was 'youth', followed by 'rioter'. The third most frequent description was 'black' which occurred almost three times as often as 'white'. The term 'black and white' occurred nearly as frequently as 'black' but always as 'black and white', not 'white and black'. Some terms were used together, e.g. 'black youths'. The top fifteen descriptive phrases, in order of frequency, were: 'youth', 'rioter', 'black', 'black and white', 'mob', 'crowd', 'gang', 'white', 'skinhead', 'Asian', 'children', 'organised', 'hooligan', 'youngsters', and finally 'people'.

Actors Interviewed

In terms of absolute time (see Table IV) Government Ministers were allotted the largest amount of time in interviews during the period under analysis. Second were police spokesmen with almost the same amount of time and third was the Opposition front bench. The police

TABLE IV
Frequency and amount of time actors interviewed

	<i>Total no. of interviews</i>	<i>Total secs.</i>	<i>BBC secs.</i>	<i>ITN secs.</i>
<i>Police — senior</i>	15	367	158	209
<i> junior</i>	4	129	32	97
<i>Local Residents — shopkeepers, etc.</i>	13	190	119	71
<i>Community Leaders</i>	6	147	81	66
<i>Religious Figures — local</i>	1	25	25	—
<i>Local Councillors & Local MPs</i>	4	121	56	65
<i>Government Ministers</i>	7	373	155	220
<i>Opposition Front Bench</i>	3	282	—	282
<i>Other MPs</i>	3	70	15	55
<i>Camera Crews</i>	1	40	40	—
<i>Experts</i>	3	73	47	26
<i>Participants — active (rioters)</i>	3	52	27	25
<i> passive</i>	2	47	—	47
<i>Other</i>	2	93	79	14

as a whole, senior and junior combined, had, however, the largest amount of time given in interviews. The four junior policemen who appeared on TV were interviewed in hospital suffering from injuries caused in the disturbances. These figures do not include Press Conferences shown in the riot items and which were mostly given by the police and Government Ministers.

In looking at the number of interviews given, the police with fifteen were the highest group, followed by local residents with thirteen. Although this latter figure is relatively high and almost twice as large as that for interviews given by Government Ministers, all the interviews with residents were fairly brief and therefore do not amount to a large total in terms of broadcast time. Government Ministers' interviews were of much longer duration and in a studio setting most of the time. Local residents were always interviewed in the street and in the majority of cases against a background of devastation. A large propor-

tion of the police interviews were conducted in the street but not against a background of devastation. In half of the interviews the police were in uniform. Community leaders were the fifth highest group in terms of absolute time and all interviews except one were conducted in the street.

Opposition front bench spokesmen as a group achieved a relatively high amount of time but only on ITN and only towards the end of the period under analysis. Relatively little time was devoted to participants both active and passive in the disturbances. All the policemen interviewed were white. The majority of local residents talked to were white, the rest being Asian. The community leaders spoken to were black or Asian.

Causes

The purpose of this coding was to see what sense was conveyed of the disturbances. Was there some attempt made at explanation by which to 'frame' the happenings? The happenings were defined as a riot but was any attempt made to inform what type of riot or disturbance was taking place or why?

The number of causes, explanations and descriptions of the riots were numerous and changed throughout the thirteen days. Some of the reasons were contained in quotes stated by newsreaders and reporters, others were from interviews and press conferences.

On 4 July when the coverage was concerned with the Southall disturbances, the causes espoused as reasons for the trouble were varied. The police and local shopkeepers said that skinheads were responsible, but that there was no pre-planning. A local community leader said that the disturbances were the work of outsiders.

On 5 July, the first night of Toxteth, criminals and black hooligans were given as the cause by Kenneth Oxford, who added that it was a planned attack and not racial. Later in the items black community leaders talked of unemployment and police harassment as root causes.

6 July brought the first reactions from the Government Ministers and politicians. William Whitelaw talked of parents, Roy Hattersley blamed the Government and mentioned social deprivation and unemployment. Unemployment was also cited by Michael Foot, but denied as a cause by Richard Crawshaw, the SDP MP. The Lord Mayor of Liverpool called it organised insurrection. The Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality said it was not a race riot. Young males, black and white, interviewed on the street talked of police harassment, brutality and racism. Margaret Thatcher denied that the high level of unemployment had been the cause. This was also the first day that newsreaders or reporters implied causes in the commentary without quoting any person. An ITN reporter said nobody knows the cause. David Alton, the Liberal MP, blamed political extremists.

On 7 July William Whitelaw cited the skinheads as the cause of Southall troubles. In the case of the Liverpool disturbances both William Whitelaw and Kenneth Oxford blamed parents. Margaret Thatcher again said that unemployment was not the main cause of the troubles, in direct contradiction to Michael Foot's statement that unemployment was to blame. ITN stated that the riots were being organised by people on motorcycles, offering as evidence film of two people on a motor scooter. This headline was the first item on the news bulletin.

The suggestion that the disturbances were pre-planned was again applied with regard to the troubles in Moss Side on 8 July. They were described as being organised and orchestrated by criminals. Chief Constable James Anderton said that the disturbances were not a planned race riot but a serious case of crime, arson and looting. Front bench Opposition spokesmen Roy Hattersley and Eric Varley referred once more to unemployment as a main cause. It was a BBC reporter who stated that the motive of the mob apparently was to imitate the rioting in Liverpool, though he did not quote anybody as being the source of this view. Commander Jim Dickenson, commenting on Wood Green, said that it was organised and pre-planned.

Parents were again blamed on 9 July by William Whitelaw, along with the opinion that the disturbances had been organised and co-ordinated. James Anderton was also quoted as saying that there must be other people involved who were intent on causing disruption and anarchy. The first slight criticism from official sources of the police came from certain Labour MPs who expressed doubts about police methods. Roy Hattersley said that the police had to be more sensitive towards ethnic minorities. This day's news also brought the first and only quotation from the trade unions: Len Murray appealed to the Prime Minister to change her policies in the light of the violence of the past few days. A BBC newsreader stated that 'it has been widely suggested that recent riots have been fuelled by high unemployment.' An ITN reporter at Woolwich stated that the disturbance was pre-planned.

On Friday 10 July trouble broke out again in Brixton. The BBC reporter gave the cause as the attempted arrest of a black youth by the police. The Deputy Chief Commissioner was quoted twice as saying that the rioting was sheer criminal activity. James Prior, then Employment Secretary, was quoted for the first time as saying that unemployment was a cause, and Geoffrey Howe also said that he considered that unemployment was a contributing factor. Margaret Thatcher, however, did not agree that unemployment was a main cause, and during a visit to Southall she said that fascist organisations had caused a lot of trouble. Madav Sharma, a Southall community leader, spoke of racist activity, while in Liverpool community leader Wally Brown

spoke of police harassment. William Whitelaw admitted that he felt that young people were not getting a fair deal.

On 11 July, however, William Whitelaw returned again to the subject of criminal hooliganism. With regard to the trouble in the Midlands, the senior police officer for Handsworth said that it was not a race riot but an imitation of earlier riots. At the Durham Miners' Gala both Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock talked of unemployment. Mary Whitehouse blamed television for the spread of the riots saying that it taught techniques, created excitement and encouraged imitation.

On 12 July an ITN reporter talked of Luton having had a taste of imitative hooliganism. Father Joe Daly of Liverpool mentioned social deprivation. William Whitelaw again said that hooliganism and outside agitators were to blame. ITN devoted a part of the item to outlining the idea that the riots were organised and showed again the film of the motor scooter riders. They quoted the police views about people wearing balaclavas and about Brixton anarchists. Following this the Liberal Councillor in Liverpool, Trevor Bell, talked of organised riots and Labour Trotskyists. Professor Derek Bryce-Smith added the view that high lead levels in the atmosphere make kids more sensitive to stress.

On 13 July Margaret Thatcher and William Whitelaw said that hooligans, vandals and criminals were involved. Michael Foot talked of a background of unemployment. While in Toxteth, Margaret Thatcher mentioned the mistrust between the police and the community. The Chief Constable of the West Midlands talked of outside agitators and members of certain political groupings, and in Leeds the police were quoted as saying that professional agitators were involved in the riots, and that it was not a question of a race riot. A Leeds community relations worker also talked of outside agitators.

On 14 July James Wellbeloved, an SDP MP, said that there was a breakdown in respect for authority. Margaret Thatcher in Parliament said: 'it is not a time for detailed analysis, we are not going to be able to deal in practice with the economics and the social aspects of it until law is restored and seen to be restored'. David Steel talked of unemployment and extremists.

On 15 July ITN gave the results of its poll into the reasons for the riots. The results were:

Unemployment	36%
Breakdown of family discipline	27%
Criminal hooliganism	13%
Racial tension	2%
Bad housing	2%
Police methods	1%

On the question of who was to blame only 8% said they were copied from elsewhere. Other responses were:

Parents	26%
Rioters themselves	23%
Government	20%
Society	16%
Media	6%
Police	1%

The Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality said that the troubles were not racial, but that the Government was not taking race relations seriously enough and that youths were alienated. He did not consider, however, that lack of jobs was justification for recent violence. There were also suggestions made by John Fraser MP that the police behaviour over the Brixton raids might lead to more violence.

16 July brought more discussions about the Brixton raids and the implication of further violence. Enoch Powell talked of race and Roy Hattersley of social causes. Lord Scarman said that the riots were not organised and that unemployment, the fact that it was outside the football season, and kids looking for fights were contributory factors to the disturbances.

3 Conclusions

The riots which took place on the streets of England during the summer of 1981 have been labelled a media event by commentators, journalists, researchers and politicians. For the majority of the population the events were observed through television. Each day people saw petrol bombs being thrown, fires raging, buildings damaged, and police and youths seriously injured. It was a crisis, and the box in the corner of the room seemed to be bringing the message that civilisation was breaking down and that social order was disintegrating.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the summer riots was that they were not a one-off event like Southall in 1979, or Bristol in 1980, or a demonstration. This was a daily saga, a Coronation Street of violence. They were not an imported series like Iran or Northern Ireland where the natives were restless. These were the naked cities and mean streets of Liverpool, Manchester, Brixton and Birmingham. Local news programmes had to give up the trivia for a while and take a real look at their areas. Mrs So-and-So's singing hedgehog had to be shelved in favour of a report on the previous night's battleground. For two weeks the first item on the main news was rioting in England or hunger strikes in Northern Ireland.

The nation was shocked. What was happening? No one had been prepared for anything like this. The public were confused and demanded explanations, and it did not take them long to get them. People, in times of crisis and drama, seek reassurance and long for a return to normal; they relied on television to provide those answers. In such circumstances people fall back on what feels comfortable for an instant explanation. They were not disappointed.

The 'explanations' offered for the riots were many and varied — unemployment, bad housing, lack of parental control, racism, immigration, economic policy, saturation policing, the effects of the media, organised conspiracy and hooliganism.

The different exponents of these explanations could have been predicted without much difficulty. Powell on race ('you haven't seen anything yet'); Winston Churchill's call for an end to immigration; Roy Hattersley, Labour's shadow Home Secretary, citing bad housing and unemployment; Margaret Thatcher blaming it on parents; William Whitelaw blaming hooligans; Chief Constable Anderton blaming outside agitators; and Mary Whitehouse seeing the media as the chief culprit.

All these views could have been foreseen, as the riots inevitably produced entrenched positions and reinforced opinions. Politicians and other opinion-makers retreated in this time of crisis into their well-known ideological positions. They had to respond, the public was demanding explanations. What better way than on known territory — using the riots as justification for previous statements and predictions.

Margaret Thatcher would hardly blame the riots on her own economic policy; Enoch Powell would have to blame race; the police could not blame their own policing methods; and Mary Whitehouse again took the opportunity of blaming the media for society's evils. In the conclusion of an article in *The Times* of 25 September 1981 (which incidentally seemed to devote a lot of space to the 'blame it on the TV' lobby) Mary Whitehouse stated: 'Not only has television played a major role in undermining the social stability which Britain has enjoyed for so long, it has helped to destroy much of what our police force has achieved in the last 150 years.'

In times of crisis different spokesmen offer differing explanations for what is happening. They compete for the truth, prejudices being as readily accepted as reason and principle. Often the instant explanations for riots and social unrest are totally different from ones decided upon after longer and more detailed analysis. For example, during the Captain Siding riots against the farms of Southern England in 1830 and 1831 some official reports attributed the arson to such people as 'Jew-looking fellows' or 'distant and foreign incendiaries'. Subsequent enquiries concluded differently.¹³ In the USA the Kerner Commission and other research on the disorders and uprisings in the 1960s disagreed with many of the explanations first suggested to explain them. They scotched any ideas of conspiracy or that the disorders were organised by outsiders. They also could not uncover any significant differences between cities with troubles and those without.

Ironically the main explanation and reason given by the young people actually involved in the riots in England — that of police harassment — received little credence elsewhere. The Labour Party, with one or two exceptions, was reluctant to criticise the police and their actions. Lord Scarman seems to be the only person who can make comments about the police without suggestions that political capital is being made. Television feeds off the views of official and 'legitimate' spokesmen. Inevitably in the circumstances posed by the riots the screen would be employed to relay the profusion and confusion of those official views. The absence from the screen of the views of the rioters, due both to their inaccessibility and their lack of legitimacy, produced a profound imbalance in the coverage of the root causes: simply compare the 496 seconds of time devoted to interviewing police during the period covered, with the 52 seconds with those who had been rioting. With such a heavy balance in favour of the police view, the picture offered to

the viewing public of what was going on is rather like those pictures presented to participants on *Ask The Family* — a part of the whole, but not really sufficient to be true and recognisable.

All the given causes and explanations may indeed have some validity — but there are a number of contradictions inherent in them. Why, given Mary Whitehouse's suggestion of copycat or other suggestions of unemployment, inner city neglect, etc., did riots not take place in Glasgow, Newcastle or Sheffield? There is, however, a difference between suggestions of a copycat effect and suggestions that unemployment was the root cause. No one disputes that unemployment has serious social consequences, but to suggest, without any kind of research, that television coverage contributed to the spread of the riots seems like a cheap explanation for this and other examples of society's ills. Television in effect judges issues and closes minds; therefore what could be easier than to say that the mechanism by which the riots were brought into people's homes was also the cause of them.

Nobody, however, seems to give much credence to the copycat suggestion. Camera crews, journalists and editors generally dismissed the idea and always added the rider that the dangers in not showing certain events far outweigh any possible dangers of showing them. In fact the main concerns of broadcasters were the problems that the presence of a camera can bring to the situation, i.e. the dangers of incitement and provocation. However, experience in covering Northern Ireland and in reporting demonstrations has brought these dangers home and the BBC in particular were anxious always to have experienced personnel operating in serious incidents.

The youngsters interviewed were concerned primarily with getting over the message that it was the police who were to blame. They said they were only reacting to continual police harassment, and there was resentment at suggestions of copycat behaviour. There was also considerable anger at continually being labelled as 'immigrant' or 'ethnic minorities'.

The police likewise dismissed the idea that the violence was copied from television. They saw the causes of the riots as many and varied: social deprivation, frustration, hate. With regard to the media coverage of events one spokesman for the police stated: 'Although we have a substantial concern and commitment to servicing the short-term hard news coverage of events, it is the longer term influence of the major items of the news magazines, current affairs series and documentaries where we feel most at risk. They provide a forum for political debate in which we find it difficult to participate on equal terms because of all the constraints which surround the police as a public service.' These constraints are operational ones, they involve contempt laws, libel and a need not to pre-empt evidence for inquiries.

In fact the most obvious point of agreement between the police and the

broadcasters and the young people on the streets was that wherever the rioters got their information it was not from television. This is not surprising since the BBC daily survey of listening and viewing taken during the riots showed the proportion to 12 to 19 year olds viewing even the most popular news bulletin did not reach 10%.

The majority of young working-class kids within inner city areas hear about incidents or impending events through what one spokesman for the police described as the 'youth grapevine' and another as the 'bush telegraph — probably the most efficient means of communication in the business'. Inner city youngsters tend to be very parochial, rarely venturing away from home territory. Communication passes quickly from one to the other. The speed with which some of the incidents flared up suggests, in fact, that the kids were not sitting indoors watching television and waiting for encouragement to rush out and pick up a brick, but that they were already out there on the streets — often bored, resentful and waiting for trouble.

Obviously some youngsters do watch television and through television were informed of events that were taking place, but detailed information about trouble in their area, where it was taking place and at what time, was gathered in the classroom, the street and the pubs. It was in this way that the disturbances were able to spread throughout different towns.

The main effect of some of the scenes shown on television was in getting Mary Whitehouse to complain, rather than encouraging kids to put on their bother boots and rush out to the fray. A lot of these kids are out on the streets all the time and are bored, frustrated and unemployed. Incidents have been taking place for years in certain areas which before the summer disturbances would not have been labelled 'riots'. In some areas rumours of trouble were being circulated all the time, but the youngsters were getting them from each other and not from television.

In his report Lord Scarman states that 'the broadcasting media in their coverage of the April disturbances bear a responsibility for the imitative element in the later disorders elsewhere.'¹⁴ He does not elucidate on this point and it remains unclear and ambiguous. Why did rioters wait from April until July to imitate? Nobody has suggested that the Southall incidents were imitative. They were a direct consequence of skinheads moving into the area and the local community defending itself against racist attacks, with the police caught in the middle in their efforts to restore order.

The disturbances in Southall have more of a bearing on some of the following days' riots than has so far been considered, especially in the Midlands where a number of Asian kids were involved. Rumours were rife in the Midlands that skinheads were to be coming into the area. This brought many more Asian youths onto the streets in anticipation

TABLE V
TV News: proportion viewing

		Age	
		12-15	16-19
		(%)	(%)
BBC 2	Mid-evening	*	0.2
	Newsnight	0.5	1.0
BBC 1	Midday	0.2	0.5
	Evening	9.5	7.0
	Nine O'Clock	8.2	8.6
ITV	News at One	1.7	1.2
	Evening	8.0	7.3
	News at Ten	8.5	7.7

* = less than 0.05%

of trouble with the consequent, inevitable clashes with the police who were considered to have let down the Asian community in the past. It is true that a number of incidents in Brixton, Liverpool, Manchester and the Midlands were sparked off by rumours that the police had arrested somebody, that skinheads were around or that there was just going to be trouble. In the USA the Kerner Commission found in some cases that over 70% of the people present during a riot had collected on the basis of 'word of mouth' reports.

To return to Lord Scarman: no one is suggesting that the troubles in Toxteth happened because three months before kids had been watching the coverage of the Brixton disturbances. Lord Scarman's other point is a request that broadcasters 'bear in mind that rioters, and others, in their exhibition of violence respond alarmingly to what they see (wrongly but understandably) as the encouraging presence of the TV camera and reporter.'¹⁵ There is very little evidence that the summer or April disturbances were encouraged by the presence of cameras. Indeed quite the reverse occurred: the media experienced as much antagonism from the rioters as did the police. As mentioned before, cameras were smashed, crews attacked and cars looted. The rioters were not prepared to be filmed or photographed by the media for fear of later identification by the police. The media came under attack for being part of the establishment, with very little differentiation made between the reporter and the bobby.

The debate over the possible link between television and delinquency is one which still rages and is used by Mary Whitehouse and others to

support their ideological stance. Concern has been expressed over the last twenty years about the effects which violence on television programmes can have on the behaviour of viewers. Dispute still arises over the evidence for the amount of violence shown on television because of disagreement over measurement techniques.¹⁶ Research into the effects of television violence has indicated strong associations between regular viewing and aggressiveness among certain young adults. The Belson study of 1978¹⁷ is the one most often quoted to show a causal link between violence and television, but none of the studies exactly replicate each other, and most ignore other possibly more important factors. There are reported cases of people committing suicide after watching *The Deer Hunter* but that proves very little. Murdock and McCron in the discussion of the television and delinquency debate state: 'Belson concluded that a tendency towards violent behaviour in teenagers is primarily a characteristic of the individual which is formed in infancy rather than a product of current social circumstances, relations and experiences. . . . His findings indicate that while television viewing is relatively stable across class groups, the boys involved in "serious" violence tend to be concentrated in the lower reaches of the class structure.'¹⁸ Belson's findings also show that the boys who have watched most televised violence are not the ones who are most involved in 'serious' violence. His explanation is that boys with the highest exposure scores are 'too "satiated" with television, and their time too much taken up with it, to have the energy or the time for very much violence of a serious kind.'¹⁹

Ethnographic evidence on the other hand points to a strong connection between involvement in violence and immersion in the male street culture rooted in the working-class neighbourhoods. It also indicates that the impact of televised violence is relatively marginal. This does not mean that television has no impact but it does suggest, firstly that it is a subsidiary factor, and, secondly, that its effects are mediated through the pre-existing situational cultures.²⁰

As well as criticising Belson's methodology Murdock and McCron also take him to task for having a narrow conception of the problem:

Instead of asking 'what do we know about the causes of juvenile violence and how might television fit in?' he [Belson] concentrates on the possibility of a positive and independent link between television viewing and violent behaviour. Instead of assessing the relative importance of television *vis-à-vis* other relevant factors revealed by delinquency research and exploring the dynamic relations between them, he detaches television viewing from its social and cultural context and tries to isolate its impact.²¹

As Halloran *et al.* point out: 'Most of the psychologists, sociologists

and criminologists who have taken delinquency as their main topic of research or study do not appear to regard television or any of the other media as a major cause — or even as an important contributing factor to the development of delinquent behaviour.²² And Howitt and Cumberbatch²³ in their consideration of the available social scientific research state that anyone searching the social scientific literature for sound empirically-based proof of the disastrous effects of television and the other mass media on violence, sexual behaviour and the like will be disappointed.

The argument that the mass media have an effect on the level of deviant behaviour (or no effect) is based on several different sorts of research evidence: laboratory experiments, surveys and correlational studies. The experimental method is potentially the ideal form of research to evaluate the effects of television because it offers evidence of cause, but there are definite limits to its usefulness. Most experimental social psychologists who have researched the area are convinced of the media's adverse influence. However, this apparent unity glosses over a wide range of mistaken assumptions, dubious methodologies, empirical contradictions and wrong generalisations.²⁴ With survey or correlational studies which merely seek to establish whether delinquents and non-delinquents differ in their media behaviour none is in a position to offer proof or disproof about the possible causal relationships between media content and deviant behaviour. 'No case has been made where television (or the other media) could be legitimately regarded as a major contributory factor to any form of violent behaviour. At most they play a minor role.'²⁵

All this of course leads on to the question of censorship for which Mary Whitehouse and others have argued first in relation to fictional programmes but now it seems the news as well. Indeed there is even a swell in support of this position from some academics. Eysenck and Nias conclude that the evidence establishing 'that the portrayal of violence in the media can incite some viewers to violence' is sufficiently strong 'to justify the use of censorship.'²⁶ Belson reaches the same conclusion on the basis of his own work. There have already been suggestions that the news broadcasts should not show certain scenes and that bulletins should be delayed for a few hours to enable 'situations' to cool down.

Apart from refuting the notion of 'copycat' effect the research presented here has thrown up a number of more difficult problems which need to be considered very seriously by everyone concerned. There is an increasing alienation between young people and the police on the one hand and broadcasters on the other. Of course, the ways in which the young people feel about television and its treatment of their worries and problems, and the way in which the police feel about their own treatment by television, are very different. Both, however, in-

creasingly propose what any broadcaster would regard as a heresy: that television treats them in a superficial, unfair and distorted way.

The youngsters I talked to felt angry at the media for not dealing adequately in the past with the problem of police harassment. 'It is only now when there is big trouble, that they want to talk to us' was a common sentiment running through the conversations I had with them. Broadcasters and journalists should be deeply concerned with the fact that they were often physically attacked, along with the police. The youngsters I spoke to clearly identified broadcasters as part of the 'establishment' to which they were reacting. That was why film crews were attacked and equipment smashed.

It is also the belief of many youngsters that the broadcasters and journalists work very closely with the police. They assume that photographs taken by newspapers will be used as identification by the police and that news film is often shown to the police. The incident at Granada where film was shown to the Merseyside police has done a lot of damage to that company's relations with some of the people of Toxteth.

Television is seen as part of the white establishment, particularly amongst the black community, and even programmes such as London Weekend Television's *Skin* will have to work extremely hard to maintain credibility. One difficulty, as more than one editor pointed out, is that blacks do not complain either by phoning or writing. Their views are therefore not taken into account simply because they are not known.

On the other side of the barricade the police seem to be increasingly concerned with, and alienated from, the television coverage of their affairs. As with the youngsters, it was not the role of television in the riots that worried them, but what the medium did when there were no riots. The police expressed anxiety over the confrontational approach to issues adopted by many current affairs programmes. The apparent need of television to use the 'expert' or 'spokesman' narrows debate while fulfilling the desire for 'balance'. This tendency by the media to personalise issues as a convenient way of presenting a complex situation only serves — at least in some eyes — to trivialise and distort.

This tendency to personalise extends to the interview as well as the discussion. The majority of politicians and police are interviewed in the studio or in their offices giving them a position of authority (which they have of course) whereas community leaders are invariably interviewed in the street. (This is a point which has been taken up by the Glasgow University Media Group in relation to strikers and industrial news.)²⁷

The content analysis revealed television's preoccupation with law and order as an answer to the problem of the disturbances rather than as a possible cause. Riot equipment and training as a reference achieved the highest frequency and was the main theme in some of the

bulletins and twice the subject of lengthy reports. There was very little reference by television to the police as a possible cause of the disturbances; but this was possibly because no politicians or government spokesmen were making these suggestions.

Numerous explanations were given of the causes of the riots (see pp.39–42), but there was little attempt at placing the disturbances in some kind of context. As Philip Schlesinger points out when discussing the reporting of Northern Ireland:

In general, broadcasting presents us with a series of decontextualised reports of violence, and fails to analyse and re-analyse the historical roots of the Irish conflict. Such an approach is largely shared by the rest of the British media, and this cannot but contribute to the dominant public view of Northern Ireland's present troubles as largely incomprehensible and irrational. It is not surprising that many see 'terrorism' as the cause of the conflict there rather than as one of its symptoms.²⁸

One really must ask if the viewers of the summer disturbances knew of the anger and frustration felt by the young adolescents in Brixton towards the police. Did they know that violence in Toxteth is almost a way of life, part of the heritage of the area? In short did they understand that the kind of social violence that erupted in the inner cities in 1981 was a result of many factors? If there was sublime ignorance among the population and among the senior politicians, must not television take part of the blame? Though one must emphasise that to turn to television as a cause of the riots is meaningless.

There are many and varied explanations given as to the causes of the summer 1981 riots. Stan Taylor in a summary of the main approaches to the study of violence states: 'It is apparent that there is a plethora of theories available, most of which can be adapted to provide a *prima facie* "fit" with British experience.'²⁹ He points to a distinction that can be made between two types of causes of riots: namely, the long-term preconditions and the more specific accelerators or precipitants. In the former he identifies factors such as structural strain, class conflict, the role of unfulfilled expectations, the mobilisation of bias against disadvantaged groups, the inadequacy of political institutions, a local tradition of violence or a growing sense of cultural threat. With the latter category he points to such variables as the 'stirring' activities of political movements, perceived provocation by other groups, perceived high levels of coercion and media-induced demonstration effects. 'This distinction', he adds:

provides at least some basis for teasing out the various causes of rioting in Britain, and cautions against theorising purely on the basis

of social variables (e.g. levels of unemployment, the decline of the authority of the family) which are inadequate to explain the spatial distribution of the riots. Secondly, it can be argued that the diversity of theories is more than a reflection of schisms within the social sciences or the difficulties in obtaining adequate data; that it is in part a consequence of the fact that riots are multi-faceted phenomena with multiple causes. This would imply that the univariate analyses of the recent riots produced by many politicians and journalists are over-simplistic, and that policies based upon them may attack only one aspect of the problem.³⁰

Television must be aware that it should not become a conveyor of simplistic analyses of complex social problems. Hopefully this study will initiate debate between police, members of the community and broadcasters not only over the treatment by television of serious disturbances in the inner cities, but over its whole relationship with other forms of social violence.

Notes

- ¹ Lord Scarman: *The Brixton Disorders 10-12 April, 1981*, London, HMSO Cmnd 8427, p.1.
- ² Compiled from newspapers and the Commission for Racial Equality in *New Community* Vol. IX No. 2, Autumn 1981, pp.203-4.
- ³ John Stevenson and Roland Quinault (Eds.): *Popular Protest and Public Order*, George Allen & Unwin 1974, p.15.
- ⁴ E. P. Thompson: *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin 1978, p.66-67.
- ⁵ Stevenson and Quinault, op. cit., p.18.
- ⁶ Thompson, op. cit., p.67.
- ⁷ *Broadcast*, 13 July 1981, p.4.
- ⁸ John Humphrys in *Television*, September/October 1981, pp.15-16.
- ⁹ Ibid, p.15.
- ¹⁰ Michael McNay in *Television*, September/October 1981, p.13.
- ¹¹ John Humphrys, op. cit., p.15.
- ¹² Lord Scarman, op. cit., p.111.
- ¹³ Martin Kettle: 'Policing Without Consent', *New Society* 23 April 1981, p.138.
- ¹⁴ Lord Scarman, op. cit., p.111.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ For a review of this debate and suggestions for a new analytical perspective see Barrie Gunter: 'Measuring Television Violence', *Current Psychological Reviews* (1981) 1, pp. 91-112.
- ¹⁷ William A. Belson: *Television Violence and the Adolescent Boy*, Saxon House 1978.
- ¹⁸ Graham Murdock and Robin McCron: 'The Television and Delinquency Debate', *Screen Education* No. 30, Spring 1979, p.61.
- ¹⁹ Belson, op. cit., p. 393.
- ²⁰ Murdock and McCron, op. cit., pp.51-67.
- ²¹ Ibid, p.59.
- ²² J. D. Halloran, R. L. Brown and D. C. Chaney: *Television and Delinquency*, Leicester University Press 1970, p.28.
- ²³ D. Howitt and G. Cumberbatch: *Mass Media, Violence and Society*, Elek Science 1975, p.22.
- ²⁴ Ibid, p.34.
- ²⁵ J. D. Halloran: 'Mass Communication: Symptom or Cause of Violence', *International Social Science Journal*. Vol. XXX No. 4, 1978, p.827.
- ²⁶ H. J. Eysenck and D. K. Nias: *Sex, Violence and the Media*, Maurice Temple Smith 1978.
- ²⁷ Glasgow University Media Group: *Bad News and More Bad News*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1976 and 1979.
- ²⁸ Philip Schlesinger: *Putting 'Reality' Together: BBC News*, Constable 1978, p.243.
- ²⁹ Stan Taylor: 'Riots: Some Explanations', *New Community* Vol. IX No. 2, Autumn 1981, p.170.
- ³⁰ Ibid, p.172.

Bibliography

- William A. Belson: *Television Violence and the Adolescent Boy*, Saxon House 1978.
- Stan Cohen and Jock Young (Eds.): *The Manufacture of News*, Constable 1973.
- G. Comstock, S. Chaffee, N. Katzman, M. McCombs and D. Roberts: *Television and Human Behavior*, Columbia University Press 1978.
- H. J. Eysenck and D. K. Nias: *Sex, Violence and the Media*, Maurice Temple Smith 1978.
- G. Gerbner and L. Cross: 'Living with Television: the Violence Profile', *Journal of Communication* 26, pp.173-199.
- Glasgow University Media Group: *Bad News and More Bad News*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1976 and 1979.
- Barrie Gunter: 'Measuring Television Violence', *Current Psychological Reviews* (1981) 1, pp.91-112.
- J. D. Halloran, R. L. Brown and D. C. Chaney: *Television and Delinquency*, Leicester University Press 1970.
- D. Howitt and G. Cumberbatch: *Mass Media, Violence and Society* Elek Science 1975.
- David Morley: 'Industrial Conflict and the Mass Media', *The Sociological Review* 1976, pp.245-68.
- Graham Murdock and Robin McCron: 'The Television and Delinquency Debate', *Screen Education* No. 30, Spring 1979, pp.51-67.
- Dave Robins and Phil Cohen: *Knuckle Sandwich*, Penguin 1978.
- Philip Schlesinger: *Putting 'Reality' Together: BBC News*, Constable 1978.
- John Stevenson and Roland Quinault: *Popular Protest and Public Order*, George Allen & Unwin 1974.
- Stan Taylor: 'Riots: Some Explanations', *New Community* Vol. IX No. 2, Autumn 1981.
- E. P. Thompson: *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin 1978.
- Michael Tracey and David Morrisson: *Whitehouse*, Macmillan 1979.
- Jeremy Tunstall (Ed.): *Media Sociology*, Constable 1970.

Television the & Riots

This is the first detailed research to have been done on television coverage of the riots of summer 1981. Howard Tumber has talked to film crews, journalists, television executives, police and the rioters themselves and pieced together a picture of what he calls this 'Coronation Street of violence'. A major conclusion of his work is that there is no convincing evidence to support claims that television produced a 'copy-cat' effect in which people were incited to further acts of violence by watching pictures of the riots. But any tendency towards complacency should be tempered by the clearly documented criticisms that the media have failed to understand and report adequately the social situation out of which the riots developed.

ISBN 0 85170 120 5

