



Damian Hinds
MP for East Hampshire

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The Riots and the Media

We were all totally horrified by the recent riots – recreational violence and thieving on an industrial scale. They were followed, rightly, by a wide-ranging debate.

But one aspect which has had relatively little attention is the media.

Back in the 1970s when as children we watched Match of the Day on a Saturday night, there would often have been hooligan trouble, but they would say “We do have pictures but we aren’t going to show them for fear of encouraging other incidents.”

How the media has changed since then. From self-censorship of still photographs, to live blow-by-blow coverage on 24-hour rolling news channels. Meanwhile a million armchair Twitterers give their comment on the “hashtag-riots”.

The rioting we saw was criminality, pure and simple, not some kind of protest or spontaneous action. And most of it was ‘copy cat’ criminality. So it is right to ask how the media should act in these circumstances.

No one would suggest that news channels should not cover these awful events. Of course they must. It is vital for people to know what is going on. And it is important, too, for democratic accountability.

But we need to look at exactly *how* the coverage is done – and I hope that the media organisations themselves will take a lead in this.

Social media requires attention too. The Prime Minister has already announced that the government will work with social media organisations to look at curbing the perpetrators themselves using the likes of BlackBerry Messenger to co-ordinate their criminal activities.

But there is also a question about social media more broadly.

During the riots there were rumours that trouble was just ‘kicking off’ in this place or that, and the concern is that in some cases this may even have been a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Locally, Hampshire police did a great job in reassuring people (including via Twitter – their use of new media is really first-rate). But so much the better if the rumours aren’t being started and so don’t need to be quashed.

The media landscape has changed forever, and government couldn’t suspend the ‘citizen commentariat’ even if it wanted to. But it did seem to me wrong that the police, as well as

having to deal with the actual rioters, also had to cope with many bystanders and onlookers. True, some of those people will have contributed positively to identifying offenders, but on balance these 'extras' must have been an extra burden to our brave police.

Whilst 'reading the riot act' may be an old-fashioned phrase, the police should be able to clear an area to get on with their job.