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Technology and disorder

The BlackBerry riots

Rioters used BlackBerrys against the police; can police use them against rioters?

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AS BRITONS ask themselves what has changed in their country that might have caused these riots, one obvious answer stands out: technology. The digital revolution allows people to organise against the authorities—not just in the Middle East, but also in Britain.

The communications tool of choice for rioters has been the BlackBerry. It has 37% of the teenage mobile market. Young people like its BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) feature, which allows users to send free messages to individuals, or to all their contacts at once. It was used to summon mobs to particular venues. David Lammy, the MP for Tottenham, has called for BBM to be suspended.

A double-edged sword?

The rioters use BBM against the police. But can the police use it against the rioters? Research in Motion (RIM), the firm behind the BlackBerry, and the mobile operators hold at least one, and probably two, sorts of useful information. The first is traffic data: who messaged whom, when and from where. Used in conjunction with CCTV pictures, that could well help police put names to faces—though if many of the r were using pay-as-you-go phones, it will prove less useful, as it is harder to track their owı down.

Security experts say it is pretty clear that the law empowers police to demand that phone companies hand over traffic information. The Data Protection Act, which normally prevents companies from sharing such information, has a get-out clause for cases where it is clear tl crime has been committed. The legal position is less clear when it comes to the actual cont messages.

BlackBerry messages are widely thought to be tightly encrypted. But that is the case only f
BlackBerrys tied to corporate networks. The security on BlackBerrys sold to individuals is n
tighter than for normal phones, according to Richard Clayton of the University of Cambridg
copies of the messages sent on them should still exist.

Handing content over could, however, cause problems for RIM and the phone companies.
Revealing such information to the police could be bad for business; they might be sued for
of confidentiality. The police could issue warrants, but it is not clear whether they have the
to intercept phone messages en masse.

But the biggest problem, says Ross Anderson, also of Cambridge university, is that police
computer forensics departments are chronically under-resourced. “All they can do is kiddie
terrorism and murder. They don’t even bother with bank fraud,” he says. “There’ll be petab
traffic data and CCTV data. They won’t be able to cope. If you want the surveillance society
become a reality, you’re going to have to increase budgets by an order of magnitude.”

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