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SECURITY Aug 12, 2011 2:10 pm

# If the Riots Resume, Will the UK Try to Block Social Media?

By [Jeremy Kirk, IDG News](#)

Scrambling to deter future violent rioting, the U.K. government is [considering shutting down social networks](#) such as Twitter and Facebook during civil disturbances, but the heavy-handed proposal is already drawing criticism.

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Social networks and services such as the BlackBerry Messenger application were employed by some rioters to communicate, which lead Prime Minister David Cameron on Thursday to propose "whether it would be right to stop people communicating via these websites and services when we know they are plotting violence."

The approach is similar to measures taken by governments such as Egypt and Tunisia, both of which sought to restrict Internet access and services to quell anti-government



demonstrations.

"Nobody can believe the government is serious," said Jim Killock, executive director of the Open Rights Group, a nonprofit technology watchdog organization. "Clearly Twitter and BlackBerry and other tools have been used for good purposes as well as ill."

The popularity of Research in Motion's (RIM) BlackBerry devices with U.K. youths is centered around its Messenger program, an encrypted chat program that allows users to send mass messages at no charge. It has been blamed for enabling youths to quickly mass in key neighborhoods in London and other U.K. cities hit with looting and arson earlier this week.

## Protests Devolve

The unrest started with the fatal shooting of a 29-year-old man in Tottenham on Aug. 4. On Sunday, protesters marched in the neighborhood, but the scene devolved into violence that spread into several London neighborhoods by Monday night and throughout the country into Wednesday.

At least 11 people have been detained or charged with trying to incite violence on Facebook, [according to the BBC](#). Some of those who allegedly participated in the riots bragged on Twitter about their looting.

The U.K.'s Home Secretary Theresa May said she intends to meet with Facebook, Twitter and RIM officials soon to discuss how the companies can work with police, according to a Home Office spokeswoman on Friday.

The spokeswoman said the Home Office is not suggesting to shut down social media outlets as it would not be "realistic." "There are a large number of people who are not rioters out there, and it would have huge consequences on business as a whole," she said.

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But while the Home Office appeared to slightly retreat from Cameron's statements, some within the Conservative party support a harsher approach.

Louise Mensch, a Conservative Member of Parliament, [wrote on Twitter](#) on Thursday that "we'd all survive if Twitter shut down for a short while during major riots."

"Social media isn't any more important than a train station, a road or a bus service," she tweeted. "We don't worry about police temporarily closing those."

But shuttering a service punishes people who haven't done anything wrong, said Katheryn Wynn, a privacy expert and senior associate at Pinsent Masons, a law firm. Rioters could turn to other services to communicate, or watch news reports to see where the action is, she said.

"There's no clean solution," Wynn said. "It's the innocent people who would be prejudiced. It's all about proportionality."

## Police Pressure

Social networking users already face challenges that deny them due process. Police have in the past [put pressure](#) on companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Yahoo to close accounts of people suspected of criminal activity but who have never been convicted or charged, Killock said.

The situation could become further blurred when, for example, criminal types are mixing with legitimate protesters, and tweets or Facebook posts are misinterpreted or taken out of context.

"It's a very untransparent sort of procedure," Killock said. "Account suspension could easily become a political tool used for political policing."

RIM said on Friday that it would consult with the government and will comply with U.K. privacy laws. Facebook said it has taken steps in recent days to remove "credible threats" of violence. The social networking site also claimed that because people are required to use their real name, police were able to get people into court more quickly.

"We look forward to meeting with the Home Secretary to explain the measures we have been taking to ensure that Facebook is a safe and positive platform for people in the UK at this challenging time," according to a statement.

*Send news tips and comments to [jeremy\\_kirk@idg.com](mailto:jeremy_kirk@idg.com)*

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I'm doubtful they will unless the riots escalate or do not start to calm down. In that case, they will. And they will justify the block by calling national security to play. How the world responds to that will dictate our future in that regard. If, like with Egypt, people get angry about it, then perhaps next time a country suffers from riots or political protests they will think better. If we say, "Oh hey, it's fine as long as it was in the interest of national security", then next time the government doesn't agree with political protests, they will call up that age old excuse and do what they want knowing that the rest of the world will justify it for them. Personally, in the U.S. I think we'd be hit by military curfew by now.

### TheOldTopkick posted Fri Aug 12 15:27:00 PDT 2011

The cure is as bad as the disease. I am opposed to censorship in any form. I am also aware that a few people of very limited intelligence are using the Internet in ways that will surely bring about censorship.

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