

# Protest, Revolt, and Reform: Examining the Erosion of Stability in the UK

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## **Introduction: The Fragility of Stability**

The United Kingdom, a nation long regarded for its stability, democratic resilience, and political control, is known for its power to withstand centuries of social, political, and economic upheaval. Yet, the riots of August 2024 shattered British perceptions, exposing deep cracks within the system of society and governance, one full of unrest, disorder, and inequality. What began as a localised tragedy in the town of Southport, Merseyside, rapidly escalated into national unrest and chaos, initiating the start of one of the United Kingdom's most destructive periods in modern day. Although seemingly isolated, these riots were not simply a spontaneous outburst, but a result of long-standing tensions within the UK, from political instability and social inequality to the dangerous influence of misinformation and digital media. This article examines the erosion of stability in the UK through the lens of these 2024 riots, analysing how a single event ignited such revolt, with the fuel of social media and political ramifications that followed.

The Southport Tragedy, the heart of the revolt, took place on July 29, 2024, when a mass stabbing at a children's dance class took the lives of three young children, leaving the community mourning. The attacker, who was identified as a mentally unstable British national, was falsely alleged to be a Muslim asylum seeker, owing to misinformation that spread on social media. Suella Braverman, then home secretary, used her Tory Party conference speech to brag about making sure Prevent, an anti terrorism organisation, was focusing its resources on Islamic extremism (Cooling, 2024). The blame hit the Muslim community and was amplified by far-right groups and foreign actors who used pre-existing sentiments to create rage. This quickly turned into false narratives based on the dangers of immigration and non-christian religious beliefs, and within days, major cities such as Manchester and Birmingham held full-scale riots characterised by arson, looting, and violent police clashes (His majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2024). The unrest spread across the UK, resulting in what can be considered a trail of destruction and division.

Drastically reshaping the UK's social and political landscape, the riots hold a stark reminder of the fragility in cohesion in an epoch defined by polarisation and misinformation. Digital propaganda took this event by storm, with platforms such as X, Facebook, and Telegram playing a central role in spreading false narratives, while AI methods such as deep fakes further distorted the truth. Highlighted by the rapid spread of fake news was the government's failure to regulate digital media appropriately, with false narratives being used as fuel for the events that took place. The August 2024 riots were a disordered time in UK history, blatantly exposing the political instability and social fragmentation unfolding across the country. Additionally, Reform UK, a far right British political party, sent out the message that 'woke' policies are to blame just shortly after the General Elections occurred, where 4 million votes supported this polarising view. The Reform party capitalised on the riots, gaining support through the ignition of anger and emotion.

## **The Role of Misinformation and Social Media**

The eruption in the wake of the 2024 Southport tragedy underscored the overpowering role that misinformation and social media plays in modern day society, particularly as a method of escalating

tension, polarisation, and violence. The deeply tragic event that took place on July 29, however, was not the cause of violent upheaval that many believed, with the rapid spread of misinformation and deliberate distortion of facts being what truly transformed this event from grief to anger.

Following the attack, it took little time for false claims to begin spreading online, with the attacker's race and religion being the primary targets. Despite false claims being debunked by both the police and government officials regarding the attacker's status as a Muslim asylum seeker, far-right members seized the opportunity on social media and gained considerable traction. AI-generated images and videos, or 'deep fakes', were manipulated and posted, creating a distorted reality in a narrative that aligned with anti-immigrant sentiments. This concept is articulated by American academic Leonard W. Doob in his analysis of propaganda techniques, *Goebbels' Principles of Propaganda*. Among the principles he identifies is the 'Principle of Simplification and the Only Enemy', which entails the reduction of multifaceted issues to a singular, clearly defined adversary (Doob, 1950). In this instance, immigrants are being targeted by far-right groups as the only enemy in a simple 'them vs. us' method. Foreign actors, including Russian and Chinese state media, further exploited these narratives, using domestic UK issues as a tool for geopolitical manipulation and propaganda.

The demographic positioning of social media's role in radicalising individuals is key to analysing the UK riots. Over 40% of those arrested in the protests and riots were under the age of 25, highlighting how social media subjected young people to false information (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). In the context of summer 2024, these young individuals fell for a concept known as 'post-truth', where emotion and personal belief are more influential in shaping public opinion rather than truth and objective facts. A pivotal moment of the riots, and a clear example of post-truth being evoked, was through Elon Musk's infamous tweet "Civil war is inevitable" (in the UK). Influential far-right characters, both in the UK and abroad, brought out the emotions of these young people and older demographics alike through channels such as Facebook and Whatsapp. This cross-generational impact represents the dangerous influence which social media holds in shaping public opinion, particularly in moments of crisis.

Exacerbating the situation, tech companies and law enforcement failed to contain the spread of misinformation and fake news. Although the government 'threatened' fines for platforms sharing this content, it was slow and ineffective, giving social media companies the opportunity to slip around it. These large corporations, driven by profit-making motives, prioritised engagement over accuracy, allowing false narratives to flourish with "media manipulation" being welcomed (Lewis and Marwick, 2017). Algorithms that are designed to maximise user interaction promoted extremist content within 'filter bubbles', a state of intellectual isolation, giving no room to view opposing ideas. This lack of regulation can be analysed as one of the key drivers of the 2024 riots, highlighting the urgent need for heightened oversight of digital platforms.

The role of digital media is central to the 2024 riots, as they would not have taken place without it. From deliberate distortion of the Southport tragedy to algorithmic amplification of polarising content, social

networks acted as a tool for radicalisation and manipulation. To address these issues, one would require a multifaceted approach, both with stronger regulation and greater transparency from tech giants such as Meta.

### **Political Outcomes and Governmental Response**

The Riots of August 2024 saw the most significant civil unrest in the United Kingdom since 2011, highlighting the deeply-embedded societal issues that afflict the country. From economic inequality to racial tension and political dissatisfaction, these disruptions affected not only daily life but also the political landscape, triggering a knock-on effect influencing the 2024 general elections as well as governmental responses.

The 2024 general elections acted as a seismic shift for both British politics and citizens. The Labour Party, centre-left on the political spectrum, secured its position winning over 411 seats, just slightly over 63% (Baker and Cracknell, 2024). This victory was the party's largest since 1997, which was largely attributed to significant public dissatisfaction with the Conservative Party, the UK's centre-right. Under the leadership of Rishi Sunak, the nation was consumed by economic struggle, leadership challenge, and internal divisions. This equated to result in the Conservative's worst electoral defeat, retaining just over 120 seats, down from 244 in 2019 (Baker and Cracknell, 2024). Yet, amid this political upheaval, Reform UK, a far-right party led by Nigel Farage, gained an impressive five seats, up by 5 since 2019. This is roughly equivalent to 14.3% of the popular vote, with over 4 million people (Election Analysis, 2024), meaning that the narrative of blaming mass migration and 'woke' policies for the riots was followed by nearly a quarter of the British voting population. Reform UK's breakthrough represented a growing appetite for populist policies and the rejection of traditional politics, which is further fragmenting the UK political landscape and can aid the explanation of why the riots developed.

As a response to the unrest, the government followed through with the implementation of various legal and law enforcement measures. The Public Order Act 1986, a method to create new offences relating to public order in an attempt to 'control public processions and assemblies' (legislation.gov.uk, 2019), was utilised to arrest over 1,200 individuals across the country, with more than 700 facing legal charges (Downs, 2024). On top of this, the government expanded police funding and introduced harsher penalties for inciting violence online– sparking a major debate about the balance of public safety and digital free speech. Furthermore, criticism was amplified by the decision of the Ministry of Justice to prepare additional prison space in order to accommodate the increase of rioters. This was a controversial decision that fueled social unrest, as people believed the government was focusing on punitive action rather than addressing root causes of the riots.

The summer 2024 tragedy and uprising exposed deep-seated social and economic inequality in the United Kingdom. As of 2024, 85% of the *Ipsos Divided Britain Polling* voters believed that the UK is divided, a long-term trend that has remained relatively constant since 2018. In addition, over 80% are concerned with 'the state of British public services', and 'the state of the British economy' (Ipsos Divided

Britain Polling, 2024). This mirrors the need for policy reform, a pressing issue that is required in order to address systemic poverty, urban neglect, and social integration, which was a long-standing issue far before the 2024 riots.

### **Final Remarks**

The events of August 2024 represent a pivotal moment for the United Kingdom, exposing deep fractures within its social fabric, political stability, and governance. Central to this was the Southport tragedy, which highlighted the fragility of national cohesion in the face of widening economic inequality and political polarisation, on top of the rapid spread of digital misinformation. The unrest, initially catalysed by this tragedy, was intensified by the distortion of information, the proliferation of far-right propaganda, and systemic governance failures. Far from being an isolated or spontaneous outbreak, the riots reflected long-standing societal tensions that had been building over time.

These events represent a critical and far-reaching challenge across all demographics of British society: the influence of digital platforms in shaping public discourse and mobilising unrest. Moving forward, the United Kingdom must prioritise transparency, accountability, and inclusivity within its political institutions. In particular, there is an urgent need for comprehensive digital regulation and policies that promote social integration, both of which are essential in mitigating the risks of future outbursts. The August 2024 riots serve as a necessary reminder, not only for the United Kingdom but for the global community. They offer a stark warning of the necessity for unity, stability, and proactive governance in an increasingly polarised and digitally driven world.

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